

At the Public Theater in New York

“Sweet and Sad”: An honest, probing look at life on the anniversary of 9/11

Fred Mazelis
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“Sweet and Sad” is the second play in a projected trilogy dealing with ordinary events in the life of a family centered in the town of Rhinebeck, New York, not far from the Hudson River and almost exactly 100 miles north of New York City.

The family is the Apples, and the cast of characters includes four Apple siblings, their uncle, and the boyfriend of the youngest Apple sister.

The scene is the home shared by two of the sisters, second-grade teacher Marian and high school teacher Barbara, along with their uncle Benjamin, a retired actor who recently suffered a massive heart attack that has seriously affected his memory, but not fundamentally changed his personality.

Joining this trio for the day are three others who have come from New York City for the day. Brother Richard Apple is a corporate lawyer and Jane Apple, the youngest sister, is a nonfiction writer who lives with her boyfriend, Tim Andrews.

The time is the afternoon of September 11, 2011, which is the same day the play opened for its two-week run. Although it touches in some detail on the subject of the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the play is not focused narrowly on those events. Neither does it indulge in any of the phony sentimentality and patriotic platitudes that were so prevalent on that day.

There is not much of a plot, in conventional terms. A 9/11 memorial observance has been scheduled for the local high school that afternoon. Benjamin is scheduled to recite a poem. The family takes the time to catch up on things, mixing awkward conversation about family matters with discussion of weightier issues such as the Iraq war, Guantanamo, the economic crisis and the state of civil liberties in America.

There are few fireworks among the Apple siblings, and the action may not sound that promising as theater, but fireworks in the typical sense are not required. Playwright Richard Nelson is remarkably adept at weaving together the rhythms of everyday life and the larger political issues. The seamless shifting between personal and political is a hallmark of his work.

Last year the Public Theater presented his “That Hopey Changey Thing,” which used the phrase coined by former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin to deal with issues far bigger than Palin herself. For next year Nelson is reportedly working on a play that will coincide with the 2012 election.

What makes this play particularly refreshing, however, is the way it treats political questions. While the Apples are clearly Democratic voters (or have been up to now), this play does not deal with the issues as they are typically framed, superficially and dishonestly, in the mass media.

The playwright does not engage in the standard liberal handwringing—expressions of naïve bewilderment, or desperately holding onto illusions—such as the current talk about Barack Obama having suddenly “rediscovered” his inner fighting spirit and finally taking on the Republicans.

Instead, amidst the ordinary conversation and with a realism that seems utterly unforced, one gets the impression of a group of serious and intelligent people discarding, to one extent or another, illusions they have held onto in the past.

Having exchanged his job working for the state attorney general for one in a high-flying law firm, Richard (Jay O. Sanders in a marvelous performance) had aroused some suspicion among his sisters, as

depicted in the first play in this series. Now, however, he is the most outspoken of the group. It is perhaps a coincidence, or perhaps not, that he has the same first name as the playwright.

Barbara (Maryann Plunkett), the high school teacher, asks what she should tell her students about the fact that the victims of the 9/11 attacks are labeled “heroes.” Why are they heroes, and not victims of a crime? she asks. “Why did the government pay the families of those killed on 9/11?” wonders Jane (J. Smith-Cameron), observing that the relatives of those killed in the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995 were not treated the same way.

“I have never seen this country more brutal,” the lawyer exclaims. When someone comments on the assassination of Osama bin Laden earlier this year, the discussion turns to the question of extrajudicial execution and what it shows about the lack of respect for basic constitutional rights. “Do we even believe in trials anymore?” asks Richard. His siblings all agree that the question is a valid one.

Jane goes on to talk about Manhattan, where she and Tim (Shuler Hensley) live in Manhattan Towers, a high-rise development near the theater district that provides some affordable housing for actors and artists. “There seem to be more rich people every day. How is this possible?” asks Jane. “I’m so angry with these people. What some of them spend on a bottle of wine is more than a family has to eat for a week.”

“I don’t know where I’m going politically now,” says one of the characters. “What difference does it make?” says Richard. You’ve got the Wall Street Republicans and the Wall Street Democrats, he explains.

The political comments are intermingled with other issues. The Apples are worried about their uncle, and tentatively try to determine what he remembers and what he does not. They are even more nervous about their sister Marian (Laila Robins), who has recently separated from her husband under tragic circumstances. Their young daughter committed suicide, and her father blames Marian because she and her daughter were having problems and she refused to accept a phone call from the girl on the day she took her life.

Another important element in “Sweet and Sad” is its serious concern for questions of history. There are references to “history flowing down the Hudson,” and

to the hero’s welcome accorded to the Marquis de Lafayette, the French aristocrat and American Revolutionary War General, when he returned to America as an old man in 1824. Perhaps Richard Apple is suggesting a contrast between the proud early history of the United States and the current state of decay of American democracy.

The play closes with a moving recitation by Benjamin Apple (John DeVries), as he rehearses for his public performance later in the day, of Walt Whitman’s “The Wound Dresser.” This masterpiece of free verse tells the story of the poet’s experiences tending to wounded and dying soldiers in the Civil War. Its closing lines are, “Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad, (Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have cross’d and rested, Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips).”

Richard Nelson has had a prolific 35-year career as a playwright. He received a Tony Award for his work on the book for the musical *The Dead*, an adaptation of the famous James Joyce story, in 2000. His social and political concerns are indicated by his first produced play, “The Killing of Yablonski,” based on the assassination of the United Mine Workers official and candidate for union president in 1969.

Nelson has also worked on adaptations of Anton Chekhov, including “The Cherry Orchard” and “Three Sisters.” There are certainly echoes of Chekhov in “Sweet and Sad.” The Apple family of teachers, actors and lawyers is not, of course, identical to members of the Russian aristocracy mourning a lost past. What is Chekhovian about the play, though, is the serious way it raises moral and political issues, and how it seems to anticipate, even in the form of probing questions, great events on the horizon.

Nelson strikes an important chord in this work. While the ex-left moves to the right, jaded, cynical and hostile to the working class, in “Sweet and Sad” one detects a different mood, angry yet hopeful, and not ready to give up on the world.



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