

Sorry at New York's Public Theater: American liberals on Election Day

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At the Public Theater, New York City, extended through December 21.

Sorry, the play by Richard Nelson that opened on Election Day at New York's Public Theater, is the third in what is now projected as a series of four plays on the Apple family of Rhinebeck, New York.

Rhinebeck is a small village almost exactly 100 miles north of New York City. Nelson himself lives there. Although his plays are fiction, he is writing about subjects and people that are undoubtedly very familiar to him.

Each of these Apple family plays is set on the very day on which it opens, in real time. Nelson has set himself the task of exploring social and political themes of American life as refracted through the daily concerns and problems of a fairly typical family.

The first installment, *That Hopey Changey Thing*, was set on the date of the 2010 midterm elections, and took its name from the sarcastic anti-Obama slogan used by former Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin.

Next in the series came *Sweet and Sad*, which was set (and opened) on the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and which we reviewed last year ("*Sweet and Sad*: An honest, probing look at life on the anniversary of 9/11").

Sorry is set on Election Day 2012, taking place while the voting is going on nationally, and before the outcome is known. And Nelson has announced the date of his fourth installment in the series of plays: November 22, 2013—the 50th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

This technique of placing the works in real time is an interesting one, and opens up the possibility of investigating historical and political questions in a fresh, living way. Indeed, one of the playwright's strengths is his ability to write dialogue

about the elections, war, the economy and other issues that are not set speeches but rather effectively interwoven with the concerns of daily life.

Nelson works on the plays until the very last moment, literally hours before the opening performance. In the case of *Sorry*, lines were inserted on Hurricane Sandy and its aftermath, up to and including a reference to "another storm tomorrow," the northeaster that hit the New York area the day after Election Day.

The cast of characters has been almost the same for the first three plays. Much of the plot revolves around retired actor Benjamin Apple, who lives with his unmarried niece Barbara, a schoolteacher in Rhinebeck. Another member of the household is Marian, Barbara's sister and a grade school teacher in town whose marriage disintegrated after the tragic suicide of her daughter.

Visiting once again in *Sorry*, as in the earlier plays, are the other Apple siblings, who live in New York City. Jane is a writer and Richard a corporate lawyer, who has doubts about whether to continue in his job. The actor who plays a sixth character, Jane's boyfriend, was unavailable for *Sorry* and so the latter has been written out of the script by sending him to an acting job in Chicago.

The cast is uniformly excellent, including Jon Devries as Benjamin, Maryann Plunkett as Barbara, Laila Robbins as Marian, J. Smith-Cameron as Jane and Jay O. Sanders as Richard.

One of the main plot lines in *Sweet and Sad* involved the preparation for a school commemoration of the 9/11 anniversary, and much of its dialogue dealt with the "war on terror" and the concomitant war crimes and attacks on civil liberties. At the same time, alongside these broader themes was the condition of Uncle Ben, who had suffered a massive heart attack and whose memory was now beginning to fail.

Sorry has a somewhat different emphasis than *Sweet and Sad*,

and it is a revealing shift. Here the main focus, for most of the play, is the dilemma facing the family as they prepare that very day to place their uncle in an assisted living development. Barbara in particular is wracked by guilt, accusing herself of abandoning her uncle, while her siblings insist that there is no choice and that Benjamin, losing inhibitions as part of an Alzheimer's-like decline, is becoming more difficult to live with.

Although the action is set on Election Day, there is virtually no discussion of this until the last 15 minutes or so. The siblings talk about Benjamin's role in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* many years ago. They look at the journal he has been keeping, even as his faculties decline. There are passing references to the election, but they amount to very little.

Then Richard suddenly announces that, while he is not home and unable to cast his ballot, he would have voted for Barack Obama. Jane wonders, "Do we know what we're rooting for?" The conversation turns to Billy, Jane's son, in his early 20s, who compares the political situation to two divorcing parents screaming at one another.

Richard announces that if he had one minute with Obama, he would ask him "Why did you begin appealing to our hates?" One sister adds that she would ask Romney "if you really are just out to help your rich friends? Then God have mercy on your soul."

This is, frankly, pretty weak and a far cry from the angry oppositional sentiments offered in *Sweet and Sad*, where the characters spoke about inequality, "the Wall Street Republicans and the Wall Street Democrats," the militarization of American life and the attacks on basic civil rights.

What has happened to the Apples, and to the playwright, in the 13 months since *Sweet and Sad*? This is a question worth examining, because Nelson has not lost his touch at writing about daily life and making his characters quite real.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Nelson reaffirms his liberal stance, talking about friends "who had misgivings and worries about Obama and other Democrats." These misgivings, however, take a very different form than they did only a year ago. What begins to emerge from a comparison of *Sweet and Sad* and *Sorry* is the political trajectory of a certain fairly privileged layer of academics and intellectuals.

It would seem that *Sweet and Sad* reflected what might be termed an "Occupy moment." Last year the characters and their creator were reflecting some of the anger that found momentary expression in the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations that quickly spread all over the world. This was far more of a

moment than a movement, however. With no coherent political perspective and dominated by an assortment of anarchists and liberals, the demonstrations dissipated fairly quickly, to the point where local Democratic politicians were able to remove them by co-option or police action.

This set the stage for *Sorry*. Some of the angry Democrats of 2011 are now resigned to support for Obama as the lesser of two evils. They are not merely discouraged, but perhaps also not that angry after all, and now the twin parties of Wall Street are instead described as resembling bickering parents.

The themes of family relations, of the sorrows and difficulties in caring for older relatives are no less important than they were previously, but in *Sorry* Nelson seems to be retreating into these rather than explaining the connection between daily life and broader issues. One journalist writing about the play summed it up by referring to a moment of reconciliation in *Sorry* between Barbara and Benjamin, observing that "it points up what truly matters to people: making peace with a loved one, not who wins Ohio."

Of course who wins Ohio is not important when the choice is Obama or Romney, but posing the question in this way is another way of saying nothing can be done about politics and we might as well simply turn to family and friends, "what truly matters"—as if the issues of daily life can be divorced from the fate of humanity as a whole.

What next for Richard Nelson? The half-century anniversary of Kennedy's assassination certainly provides a good deal of food for thought. Will the next play deal with the confused and contradictory legacy of the 1960s, and with the virtual disappearance of the Democratic Party liberalism represented by Kennedy and Johnson? *Sorry* is not the most promising indication of what might come in this next and presumably final chapter.



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