

Richard Nelson

The American playwright has adapted his film *Hyde Park on Hudson* – about the President, the King & Queen, and the earthshaking hot dog picnic – into a new play *Springwood* and he's directing it too. Interview by Jarlath O'Connell & Michael Burland.



PHOTO: THEATER ON PODIL

Springwood is about an awkward, inexperienced, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth thrust into the maelstrom of geopolitics in 1939, to meet President Franklin D Roosevelt in what was to prove a pivotal moment in the 'Special Relationship'. Fast forward to now and the current King and Queen were recently sent on a state visit to the US to act as kind of 'horse whisperers' to the current, quixotic, occupant of the White House. It's being described as a pivotal moment too, as the UK is being castigated for not being supportive enough in the current war in Iran.

Richard, thanks for telling us about *Springwood*. It looks like the parallels between it and the current situation are unmissable. What are your thoughts on all this?

I think the play has found its time.

Springwood is based on your great 2012 movie *Hyde Park on the Hudson*; what encouraged you to dramatize it for the stage and in what ways is it different?

Colin Callender, a well-known and highly regarded theater and TV producer, saw the film on an airplane and called me. He said he thought this story would make an interesting play. Before I wrote *Hyde Park on Hudson* as a film, I'd written the story as a radio play for the BBC. So, to be honest, I wasn't very keen; and was moving on with other stories. But I met with Colin and he was persuasive. With his help, I rethought the story. Whereas the film is from Daisy Suckley's (Franklin's cousin and mistress) point of view, the play would focus on the Royals and Roosevelts and cover just the weekend of the Royal visit and the famous hot dog picnic. The play is quite different than the film, and that made it interesting to write.

Why the change of title?

Hyde Park on Hudson is the name of the town where Roosevelt lived and within which Daisy had her relationship with Franklin. *Springwood* is the name of Roosevelt's home in Hyde Park, and the location of the entire play. The play is set in various rooms and locations around the house. The change of title reflects the change of perspective mentioned above. To be clear, Springwood was actually Franklin's mother's home; he had a room there. And Eleanor lived in her own home, Val Kil, a few miles away, with lesbian furniture makers.

You got some criticism for the representation of the cousin/lover Daisy and how much or how little her relationship with FDR mattered vis-à-vis his other mistresses. What are your thoughts on that now?

There were three women at FDR's bedside when he died: his daughter; the woman he had the affair with which nearly

ended his marriage (she was Eleanor's secretary, and the woman FDR had promised his wife never to see again); and – Daisy. The first presidential library ever created was Franklin's, at his home in Hyde Park. This was created while he was still alive, and the first head of the library – Daisy. There is only one photo in existence of Roosevelt in a wheelchair, that photo was taken by – Daisy. When Daisy died (she lived in my village of Rhinebeck), a box of letters was discovered under her bed – letters to and from FDR. Their relationship was intimate and meaningful. And important to both of them.

What take do you have on Queen Elizabeth – 'the Queen Mother', as we came to know her? She cultivated a reputation later on for being fun and gregarious but in *The Crown*, for example, and in many books and articles she is presented as being a lot more calculating and much more than simply the dutiful wife. How have you presented her on stage?

I don't want to explain how I have presented these characters. That's for an audience to discover, and for me and my actors to discover in rehearsal. As a playwright I don't think I write 'characters,' rather I try and write relationships. So the Queen, like all the

other characters, is different based upon who she is with and talking to. So, fun and gregarious, and calculating, as well as vulnerable, lost, motherly, worried, proud, etc.

Stanley Tucci had to withdraw from directing this and you've taken that on yourself. Do you prefer having someone else direct your plays (to bring a fresh

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, King George VI, Sara Delano Roosevelt (the President's mother), Queen Elizabeth (later the Queen Mother), and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. This visit was the first time a reigning British monarch set foot on American soil.

PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN





Queen Elizabeth, King George, President Franklin D. Roosevelt with assistant, Sara Delano Roosevelt and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in front of St. James Church, Hyde Park, New York, June 11, 1939

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eye to it) or are you happier doing it yourself?

For the past 27 years I have been directing my plays; and by now I think I have directed some 25 or so productions. So I must be happy doing it, or I'd be crazy as it is a lot of work. Some plays, though, I am happy to watch others direct and *Springwood* is one of those. However, that isn't how the cards played out, so I'm the director. I try very hard in rehearsal to separate my two jobs and I am often very tough on the playwright, especially when he's given me a difficult problem to sort out. But I talk to him, get him to help me, to make changes if necessary, and that seems to usually work out okay.

You had a run of 10 plays produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company and are an RSC Honorary Associate Artist; is that a record for an American, and how did all that come about?

David Jones had been an Associate Director at the RSC; he then went to America to create the BAM Theater Company, the last great effort to found a classical repertory company in New York City. He hired me as his literary manager. I was already having my

plays produced at the time. When BAM Theatre folded, David directed my work in America; he then took a play of mine, *Principia Scriptoriae* to the RSC. He directed it there and it was very well received. The RSC then commissioned the next play which became *Some Americans Abroad*, then the next which became *Two Shakespearean Actors*, and so forth, until there were ten plays of mine produced over several years. It became a real home for me, and my collaborations and friendships which began there have been incredibly important and enriched my life.

***Some Americans Abroad*, which was an Olivier-nominated hit in 1989, was about a group of American professors who gather in London to teach a theater course and sparks fly as they squabble over academic politics. With the culture war issues in American and British universities of late would you tackle such a subject today? And would it be very different?**

I think *Some Americans Abroad* could easily be performed today. As with politics, social issues cannot be separated out from

the human being. Hopefully, if it's written well enough, those characters who are academics exist for far more reasons than to make points. There is much in that play besides academic squabbles. That's simply the world they live in. There's more there than that I hope.

You wrote a trilogy of plays known as *The Gabriels* that were set in the lead up to the 2016 Presidential election year and followed the lives of one family. Could – or would – you revisit that subject nowadays?

The Gabriels are actually part of a twelve-play cycle called *The Rhinebeck Panorama*, named after the village where they are set, and where I have lived for many years. The Apple Family plays are also a part of this series, and I do plan to revisit that family – as I did during the pandemic with a trilogy of Zoom plays. Though I can't discuss that yet, as it hasn't been announced.

Do you think we need the passage of time before we can get a handle on the two Trump administrations? Is there anything useful playwrights can say now that we're in the middle of it all?

I am not a political playwright. Politics for me is not something that can be separated from every other element of life – family, friendships, love, sex, death, loss, hope, career, ambition, etc. So should I write a play that happens to be set during these administrations, I would be writing about people, their lives; and of course the political landscape would be a part of this, but it wouldn't be the reason for the play.

This is the world premiere of *Springwood*; how come you gave it to the Hampstead Theatre instead of somewhere in the United States?

This will be the fourth play of mine produced at Hampstead, so it is certainly not unknown territory to me. Greg Ripley-Duggan (Hampstead Theatre's Producer and Chief Executive) has always been receptive to my work; and when Colin Callender and I thought of where might be the best venue for *Springwood*, we thought of Hampstead. I'm not sure whether he suggested Hampstead or I did. But it seems to be a very good fit.

What is grabbing your attention at the moment and what would you like to write more about?

I have spent 8 months out of the past 2 years working in Kyiv, Ukraine. I have directed three of my plays there; two of which I wrote for them, on Ukrainian subjects. It has been a profound gift to work there, during these challenging times. Never once have I questioned or doubted if my work mattered there. The theaters are full, often with young people. My plays are all still in the repertory. One week this month you can see all three over four days. In many ways my heart remains there.

Do you like directing, especially the classics, and does it feed your own writing craft?

I love directing Chekhov. I have directed *Uncle Vanya* and an evening of Chekhov one-acts, and I will direct a production of *The Cherry Orchard* next winter. He is challenging, thrilling, life-giving. And always, always



PHOTO: THEATER ON PODIL

surprising, if you just keep asking questions and don't make assumptions.

A pivotal point in the film *Hyde Park on the Hudson* was the King having to eat his first hot dog and drink beer in public. That may be hard to believe now. You've long been an Anglophile, we hear; how did you cope with some of our more arcane foods when you first came to the UK? Did you ever try 'pie 'n' mash', 'jellied eels', or 'spotted dick'?

Never. I don't know what any of those are. Fish 'n' Chips, of course. Bangers and mash, yes (before I became a vegetarian). Vinegar crisps – I fell in love with that. All sorts of lukewarm beers.

Finally, what is the best thing about being Richard Nelson?

I don't know how to answer that. It asks one to stand back and look at oneself in, I think, a rather unhealthy way. As I've said about my plays and its people, I don't think it's right to pull out one thing when everything is all entwined. People, including myself, are complicated, complex and hugely interesting. I hope I am like that. ★

Springwood, written and directed by Richard Nelson, is at Hampstead Theatre, London from June 19 to July 25, 2026.

www.hampsteadtheatre.com