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Lingua Franca

Finborough, London

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Michael Billington

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Natalie Walter (Heidi Schumann) and Chris New (Steven Flowers) in *Lingua Franca*. Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian

Peter Nichols has always had a gift for turning a personal memoir into a political metaphor; and in this richly enjoyable new play he uses a Florentine language school in the 1950s as a means of exploring a fractious, war-haunted Europe in which the Brits are perpetual misfits awaiting American cultural colonisation. But, as always, Nichols gets his point across through acerbic comedy.

Lingua Franca

by Peter Nichols
Finborough theatre,
London

Chris New, Natalie
Walter, Charlotte
Randle, Ian Gelder,
Abigail McKern
Directed by Michael

Last seen in *Privates on Parade* as a naive national serviceman, his hero, Steven Flowers, is now a chippy radical who has arrived in Italy to teach English. Having instantly offended his students by calling them "bambini", Steven sparks trouble among the staff by arousing the romantic hopes of a lonely fellow Brit while having an affair with an antisemitic German. But what is

Gielata
 Until 7 August
 Box office:
 0844 847 1652
finboroughtheatre.co.uk

impressive is how many balls Nichols manages to keep in the air. He captures the hilarity of the language lessons, and provides a deeply critical self-portrait. Above all, he uses the school, whose tutors include a Russian-Jewish emigre, a sensitive Forsterian aesthete and a down-to-earth Aussie, to capture the cosmopolitan confusion of postwar Europe. Along the way, it exuberantly entertains while raising a host of issues.

Michael Gielata's production, aside from containing the sexiest seduction scene on the London stage, is also cast up to the hilt. Chris New as the selfish Steven, Natalie Walter as his Munich moll and Charlotte Randle as his discarded admirer make a perfectly formed erotic triangle. And there are excellent contributions from Ian Gelder as the liberal aesthete and Abigail McKern as the free-swearing Aussie. Too long ignored by the British theatre, Nichols is back on top form with a play that offers a Florentine room with multiple points of view.

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