A play with a somewhat misleading title—The Retreat from Moscow—made its way into New York from England this past season. The reviews were not particularly favorable, but the play did have a respectable four-month run. What originally drew the present writer to the Booth Theater was the presence of the distinguished actor Dame Eileen Atkins in the cast although the other two players—veteran Broadway performer John Lithgow and talented young British actor Ben Chaplin certainly have strong theatrical credentials. And then the play was written by William Nicholson, author of Shadowlands, a much admired play and then a movie about the late C. S. Lewis.

Granted all of the above, the play as play certainly made its mark on this writer as one of the best serious dramas he has seen in recent years, a drama with strong religious and tragic overtones. Set in contemporary England, it is, as its subtitle has it, “A Play About a Family,” even, I think, a post-Vatican II Roman Catholic family. And, given its plot and characters, it has the trappings of tragedy.

But, you may say, why has the play had such an impact on you? Maybe I was so struck by the power and sensitivity of the acting that I was not attentive enough to the story. Or maybe it was because I read with great interest the “Preface” to the recent paperback edition in which the playwright sees his own parents and himself as bases for the characters.

It is a three-character play. Alice, the wife, and her husband Edward are approaching sixty and have been married for some thirty years, although danger signs are notable from the early scenes. Both seem to be practicing Catholics with Alice the more dutiful—regular attendance at Mass, concern with the quality of the parish sermons and music, and a strong belief that her religion should be clearly and strongly articulated. At one point she expresses her impatience and amusement with recent changes in the Church. Recalling a sermon on women priests by a Father Conlon, she describes for Edward the priest’s puzzlement about the topic and his conclusion that “if the pope says it’s wrong then it’s wrong, and that’s why we’re in the Catholic Church. Wonderful.” As for
the liturgy, the building is “dreary” and “the language isn’t beautiful any more.” “There’s no sense of mystery any more, or the presence of God. And yet I always come away feeling better.” Edward is a high school history teacher very much interested in Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow and not particularly attentive to religious matters. Jamie, their thirty-two year old son, has said farewell to any kind of religion.

But religion as such seems less a force in their lives than their respective personal situations, especially the growing marital discord of Alice and Edward. As the play opens, Alice’s commitment to compiling an anthology of poems on “Lost Love” has been interrupted by a disabled computer and a rude repairman who finds her to be the real problem. Her response is that “middle-aged women have become invisible” and “have to be young, or rich, or beautiful, to be noticed at all.” As a result her only strategy is to get angry “which I do more or less all the time these days.” She has little patience with Edward’s concern with the by-now retreat of Napoleon “because it exposes the way human beings behave in extremis.” For her all of this is utter rot.” History is filled with martyrs, she says, and “What about Jesus Christ?” to which Edward replies, “Jesus was God . . . he knew he’d rise again.”

With Jamie home for a visit, family conversation turns to church matters, and Alice assumes they will go to Sunday Mass at eleven. Jamie’s comment that he hasn’t been to church for years is dismissed by Alice as “just a phase,” that she goes not out of need, but because it’s concerned with “what’s true.” Edward, not nearly as decisive, decides that he won’t be able to attend because of the student papers he must mark. The discourse of religion becomes more theological as Alice calls on Edward to simply refute Jamie’s atheism. Edward’s rather perfunctory reply is the familiar line that “terrible things” happen because God created us as “free beings,” hardly a comfort to Jamie who argues that since the world is a “frightening place,” “we invent God to reassure ourselves that it’ll all work out in the end.”

As the play develops, so does the tension between Alice and Edward. She would “will” the tension away. He stoically remarks that she wants “something I haven’t got.” She wants a direct answer to her “Do you love me?”, but Edward is “tired” and feels the question is unnecessary. For him it’s a matter of survival, and he feels that Alice simply doesn’t know who he is. Indeed he has fallen in love with another woman, Angela, mother of one of his students, and plans to leave Alice. “Me is who I am with Angela,” he tells Jamie. “If I were to go back to Alice, it wouldn’t be me going back.” Angela’s impatience now grows into a fury as she strikes Edward, follows him to his school and even disrobes on the nearby playing field to command his attention.

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