

Teacher Pets: "Oleanna," at ComedySportz through February 4

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 31 January 2007 03:38

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(Warning: Specific details of - and potential surprises in - Oleanna may slip through. Proceed with caution.)



It's always heartening to see theatre directors making strong choices, and this is true even when those choices appear to be spectacularly misguided. Such is the case with My Verona Productions' presentation of David Mamet's *Oleanna*. I didn't necessarily agree with several of Tristan Layne Tapscott's directorial decisions, but I happily recognize that at least decisions were *made*; in its current incarnation, this 1992 play that has been acclaimed (and, in some circles, reviled) for its refusal to choose sides most definitely *does* choose a side. Yet what does that decision do for the work as a whole?

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As a study of political correctness and sexual politics, Mamet's drama has been designed to incite passionate discourse. In the play, university professor John (played here by Chris Browne), expecting the imminent announcement of his tenure, meets with student Carol (Jamie Em Johnson) to discuss her failing grade. What transpires over the next 30-plus minutes is subject to interpretation. But the result of the duo's extended conversation is a formal complaint filed by Carol, in which she accuses John of sexual harassment.

The beauty of Mamet's play lies in its refusal to see either character as solely "right" or "wrong." Yes, John is long-winded and condescending, and his behavior could easily be perceived as inappropriate, but do his actions warrant his eventual punishment? And yes, Carol is pedantic and dim, but doesn't she have the right to retaliate against what she feels is a blatant crossing of the line - don't her complaints have *merit*? *Oleanna* is endlessly debatable; you find your alliances continually vacillating between the two characters, until the play's politics grow thrillingly, unfathomably murky.

Ah, but not in My Verona's production they don't; by the end of that first scene, Tapscott and his actors have secured it so that we're unquestionably on Carol's side. Whenever John makes a statement that will resurface later in the play - whenever a comment could be read as misogynistic - Johnson's eyes widen and she looks at Browne with stunned disbelief; we're continually, too-obviously clued in to the remarks that will later bite John in the ass. When John mentions that Carol doesn't need to take such copious notes, she responds with a determined "I want to *remember* this," her insinuating, defensive tone suggesting that her sentence actually ends with "for the eventual court hearing."

But the most obvious example of the production's allegiance comes near the scene's end. Carol is visibly upset, and John approaches her from behind and puts his hands on her shoulders, ostensibly to comfort her. There is nothing, however, comforting about the gesture. Slowly, the professor begins to caress his student's arms, up and down, from shoulder to elbow, and the look on Johnson's face reveals something bordering on panic. That's nothing, though, compared to the look on *Browne's* face, as the actor's unflappable countenance and fixed gaze begins to seem deeply terrifying - this is not a professor attempting to console a student; this is an obvious sexual advance. By the scene's climax, we are firmly in Carol's corner, and John - with his blank expression and monotone creepiness - is a monster. (Carol begins to seem almost pathologically stupid for engaging in these one-on-one encounters without a lawyer present.)

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Seeing Carol as the injured party is a perfectly valid response to the play, but what does it do for the work *dramatically*? When John describes Carol's litany of complaints as "ludicrous," we haven't seen anything to suggest that they *are*; the more he argues his fundamental innocence, the more unpleasant he seems. By the time we get to

Oleanna

's final scene, all possible empathy for John has evaporated, and as Carol has seemed in the right practically from moment one, her empowered declarations come to seem strident and overbearing. Put simply, in this production of

Oleanna

, the deck is stacked far too neatly in the student's favor - the question isn't whether or not Carol is "right," but to what degree she

is

right - and Mamet's divisive play, one that can be enormous fun to fight over, starts to feel like a one-sided harangue.

Under the circumstances, the actors are probably giving Tapscott exactly the performances he wants. Browne, until he displays a welcome burst of anger at the finale, is passive and mildly unappealing - his John is the type of man you'd describe as *moist* - and Johnson is aggrieved and rather bullying; that she appears so much more vocally and physically confident than Browne comes to seem like

another

stacking of the deck. My Verona's production isn't an embarrassment by any means, and considering the style and frequent power of Mamet's script, audiences might easily leave enjoying

Oleanna

. I'm just not convinced that they'll have actually

seen Oleanna

.

For tickets, call (309) 786-7733, extension 2.