Erin Churchill is the reason to see the Curtainbox Theatre Company's current production, *Speed-the-Plow*. Actually, that's a bit deceptive, as it implies that she's the *only* reason to see the show. Curtainbox founder Kimberly Furness' directorial debut with her company is applause-worthy, as are the stellar performances of the play's other cast members, Mike Schulz (a *Reader* employee) and Daniel M. Hernandez. However, it was Churchill's sincerity, earnestness, and diversity that closed the deal for me, leaving me in utter awe during Saturday night's performance.

David Mamet's script is a behind-the-scenes look at the cold, heartless, shark-eat-shark film business, seen from the vantage point of a producer's office. Bobby Gould, played here by Schulz, has just been promoted at his film studio, and is deciding on a project to greenlight while also giving a book – a novel about radiation and the end of the world – a "courtesy read." His longtime colleague Charlie Fox, played by Hernandez, has just landed a deal with a much-in-demand actor that will lead to a surefire action-film hit and much success for Charlie and Bobby. Then Churchill's Karen arrives.

Churchill is actually first seen in silhouette, sitting behind a stage flat that's amusingly designed to resemble a large strip of film. When Bobby interacts with Karen, his temp assistant, on the phone, a light shines from behind Churchill, projecting her shadowy form on the set's film frame – an ingenious concept by lighting designer Chris Tilton. (During scene changes, Tilton continues this cinematic theme by employing a flickering effect, reminiscent of a film projector's strobe, that's well-paired with appropriate sound effects by designer Joseph T. Janz III.) Despite not uttering a single word, and without the benefit of facial expressions, Churchill makes quite clear her character's thoughts, confusion, and somewhat dimwitted nature.

She is not, however, seen in shadow for the entire play, and eventually, physically, enters the fray of the film business. Interjecting with innocent, perhaps naïve questions pertaining to a discussion she overhears while delivering coffee, Karen brings an idealism to the table that Bobby, condescendingly, finds intriguing. After giving the radiation book the "courtesy read" that Bobby was *supposed* to give it, Karen spends the evening at Bobby's home, trying to convince him to greenlight the project. And this is where Churchill begins her character's transformation,

shifting from a sweetly earnest and hopeful woman to a woman in control of the situation and, perhaps, of Bobby. Her metamorphosis continues, but I fear that detailing her impressive transformation would give away too much to those who haven't seen it. Suffice it to say, Churchill's effort is arresting for its variety, its nuance, and the performer's ability to portray such conflicting personality traits, all of them convincingly.

Schulz's Bobby goes through a similar evolution, though to a lesser degree. With his self-important, business-over-pleasure and pleasure-is-business attitudes, Bobby is hard to like, and Schulz excels at these sonofabitch characters, with his turn in last year's Curtainbox production of *Art* my favorite to date. He offers a similar take here, but differentiates it by removing the sense of intellectual superiority. Following his character's catharsis, Schulz effectively shades Bobby with confused, pained looks that reveal an internal turmoil as he wrestles between doing what would most certainly be successful and what could be morally right.

Hernandez brings a welcome intensity to the stage, while giving his Charlie a touch of likability. This, I think, comes mostly through some endearing tics that he incorporates into his performance, with quick, repeated wipes of his nose and swipes across the corners of his mouth. (It's clear that his Charlie is often stressed, and whenever his stress levels rise, they manifest themselves physically.) And Hernandez and Schulz work their way through Mamet's signature, rapid-fire dialogue with seeming ease, as if performing a well-danced verbal ballet.

As for Furness' direction, what struck me most were the tableaux she created. Over and over again, I wished I had a camera with me (and was allowed) to take snapshots of her staging, with the actors, placed in picture-perfect positions, artistically arranged against scenic designer Adam Parboosingh's grandly minimalist backdrop. Furness' *Speed-the-Plow* is one of the most aesthetically pleasing efforts, overall, that I've yet seen on a Quad Cities stage.

For information and tickets, call (563)322-8504 or visit TheCurtainbox.com .