

THEATRE

Oleanna

Royal Court

Michael Billington

NO ONE hissed, no one talked back to the actors, no one stomped angrily out. The first night of David Mamet's *Oleanna* at the Royal Court was greeted with a rapt attentiveness which is a tribute to the power of the acting, the writing and Harold Pinter's production.

On its simplest level, this is a play about an American college student who asserts power over her male professor. In the first act Carol is tremulous, confused, uncertain of her own intellectual status: her educationalist professor, John, is alternately paternal, patronising, intrigued. But he fatally expresses his concern through a physical gesture and by the second act the roles have been reversed. Spurred on by her unseen "group", Carol is now accusing John of sexism, elitism, harassment and, ultimately, rape. In consequence he loses his house, his tenure, his job and is finally goaded into an act of retaliatory violence.

Mamet is not simply writing about the excesses of political correctness. He is not even purely concerned with a transference of power in American life, from the teacher to the pupil. What he has created is a superb mythic drama about the breaking of the social contract that makes all education possible; when John approaches Carol as a now-vulnerable human being, he is angrily rebuffed and told to "stick to the process". Mamet's point is that once people resort to ideological jargon or legalistic devices, then the whole idea of intellectual freedom breaks down.

As always in Mamet, language is the key. In the first act, he brilliantly contrasts the suspect tenderness with which the professor addresses

his pupil with the vituperative, screw-you anger he uses on the phone when he thinks his house purchase is threatened: ironically, he too talks about recourse to law. And in the second act when Carol attacks his use of paternal prerogative and asks "what is that but rape?" we see how language is being used to distort reality. Mamet's point is that a world in which a physical gesture of frustration or concern is classified as "rape" is one in which the word itself is being devalued beyond meaning.

The danger with the play is that it can easily seem a one-sided attack on the student and on female solidarity in general. But Pinter's production scrupulously avoids that trap by giving equal weight to both sides of the argument.

The two actors are also exemplary. David Suchet in the first half is all intellectual condescension airily talking of higher education as "a fashionable necessity" and explaining his points in child-like metaphors: by the second half he has become a stricken victim finally goaded to a fury he bitterly regrets. Lia Williams makes Carol's transformation wholly convincing. Mamet has devised a fable that is not only topical and argument-provoking, but makes for a gripping evening, in which freedom of thought is the victim.

This review ran in late editions of yesterday's paper

THEATRE

TIE shows

South Wales

David Adams

Contrary to what the Anglo-centric media might suggest, there is artistic life the other side of Offa's Dyke and Wales has in particular a vibrant, exciting and

innovative theatre scene — which includes a theatre-in-education network which is held up to be the best in the world in terms of both quality and provision. It is a bitter irony, that the combination of enforced education cut-backs and local government re-organisation threaten to destroy this admired art form, and each of the country's TIE/community theatre companies is going public as part of a campaign to save the service.

Spectacle Theatre have already lost their grant from mid-Glamorgan and their current show (which I saw in Merthyr Tydfil before an utterly enrapt class of primary school-children). Moon River: The Deal is an intelligent, uncompromising play from Dic Edwards that raises issues from runaways to Third World exploitation with the central theme of the disempowering of young people.

Theatr Iolo have also had their funding axed by South Glamorgan. City of Dreams, is a beautifully performed and directed piece which follows the life of a young girl forced out of her village when the bombers came and who has to adjust to urban life, a metaphor with many resonances in a multi-cultural city.

Gwent Theatre are safe for the moment and their very different play, Body of Evidence, is as entertaining for an adult audience as for the young people it was made for. Its central theme being the social responsibility of science and the human moral dilemmas that remain.

Perhaps the most impressive argument for TIE is Theatr Powys's *The Present*, a gripping production about the rise of Nazism, personal responsibility and prejudice. A drama rich in ideas for its audience to discuss but a piece of theatre so detailed and imaginative in its performance and direction by Louise Osborne that it stands regardless of the educational value of the workshops and teachers' packs that accompany the work, as first rate theatre.

Billington's Review Of Oleanna

Clipped By:



ianharris

Wed, Jan 1, 2020