

THE GUARDIAN
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NO PLAY in recent memory has affected audiences like David Mamet's *Oleanna*, in New York it divided husbands from wives. Since opening at the Royal Court in London last week it has already provoked fierce debate, often spilling on to the pavement outside the theatre. Is it misogynist or misguided? Is it an attack on political correctness or the unvarnished truth about modern relationships?

The play has two characters: Carol, a student, and her college professor, John. Carol has problems

with her course, which, in Act One, she discusses with John. He responds with advice and with physical gestures. In Act Two Carol accuses him of sexism, harassment and ultimately rape. He loses his home, job, everything — and finally retaliates by hitting her. The moment he attacks her has been greeted with cheers and applause at the Royal Court.

We asked a selection of men and women who have seen the play to report on their responses to the issues it raises . . .



David Mamet . . . fierce debate

Anne Karpf

Writer and Guardian radio critic who saw the play with her partner Peter Lewis.

IRONICALLY, *Oleanna* provokes audience hostility to women — on the night we went, John's attack on Carol drew applause. Mamet perpetrates the very thing he should be exposing. It reminded me of a Michael Winner vigilante movie — a sort of academic *Death Wish*.

Sexual harassment, political correctness — these are struggles over meaning whose definitions should prevail. Mamet's view is that feminists are deforming personal relationships. But personal relationships have always been infected by social norms. It's just that most men never noticed it before.

I went to see the play thinking Mamet had dramatised a debate between two viewpoints. What I found was the trouncing of one ideology by another.

Mamet is anything but even-handed in his treatment of the characters and issues. He utterly discards the student who accuses her professor of sexual harassment when we, the audience, saw that his behaviour was nothing more than an instinctive, if clumsy, attempt at kindness.

By linking political correctness with sexual harassment, Mamet trivialises real issues of power and domination. Carol is just an inadequate student, seeking revenge against the clever, her grasp on reality so tenuous that when John actually beats her up she scarcely reacts, insisting it's not different from daily verbal slights.

Peter M Lewis

A visiting fellow in Media Studies at City University.

BEFORE John put his arm around Carol I was shocked at his arrogant invasion of her verbal space, the way he put words in her mouth.

But then the lecturer touches the student. That was mistaken, even if it was done for comfort. He says it was "devoid of sexual content". She says, "It's not for you to say. I agree, the meaning of a message isn't totally controlled by its sender — the receiver's interpretation is equally valid. We are not just 'ourselves' — we cannot escape being also members of a social or ethnic group, perhaps a profession, certainly men or women. In that sense, it wasn't just John browbeating and touching Carol. It was an expression of patriarchal and institutional power that set a tragic conspiracy."

To be on the safe side, next day, before a female student called to our house for a tutorial, I arranged for Anne to come into my study on some excuse.

Sarah Dunant

*Novelist and *Last Show* presenter*

SAW *Oleanna* in its New York production before all the brouhaha started. I was a Mamet fan, admiring his intellectual and theatrical energy. Like many women I had my own questions about the correctness and wisdom of political correctness, and was looking forward to a journey through the fault-lines of gender politics, challenging both social versions of the truth. I couldn't have been more disappointed. What I got was a crude piece of theatre with little drama, grossly conceived against the female character. True, the male professor can be accused of intellectual vanity and a certain lack of sensitivity. But there is nothing in his behaviour

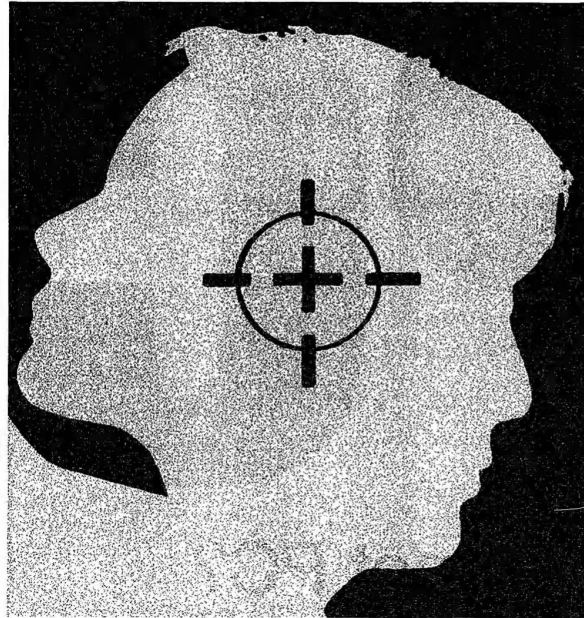


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Acts in a sex war

Oleanna Opinions

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