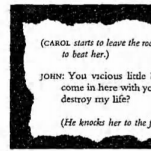


(which we the audience, all witness and judge) to justify the hysterical McCarthyite torrent of hatred, abuse and censorship which the woman, in the name of political correctness, soon unleashes upon him. There is no real serious attempt to analyse the issues of gender and power, or even the complexities (and, yes, sexuality) within the traditional co-dependent relationship. The play's conclusion — that somehow political correctness is a weapon for the damaged and insecure (that is certainly how the woman was played in the New York production) — is so unhelpful as to be downright harmful, since rather than encouraging debate it polarises it. At a time when the term political correctness is deliberately and viciously being misused by government ministers in an attempt to penalise single mothers and undermine the welfare system, plays like David Mamet's become even more important. And even more disappointing.

Lord Longford

Lord Longford, 87, is a writer and campaigner for penal reform.

THE PLAY certainly gripped me. Towards the end I was suffering with the professor. I have been a university teacher and taught young women, mostly in the days of political correctness. As an authoritarian, I was described as "a sweet old gentleman". I am less alive to the gender issues than younger men and women. I rec-



(CAROL starts to leave the room. JOHN grabs her and begins to beat her.)

JOHN: You vicious little bitch. You think you can come in here with your political correctness and destroy my life?

(He knocks her to the floor.)

ognise, of course, the passionate interest in that aspect of the play. Personally, the issue of power and power relationships comes home to me more forcefully. I ask myself afresh whether it is possible to help people without patronising them. Having begun to visit prisons half a century ago and still trying to keep up an average of one a week, I ask myself whether my relationship with some prisoners involves the same dangers as those which destroyed the professor in the play. I am not in any sense their boss — nevertheless we are forced by this play once again to re-examine our motivations. When we try to help our fellow human beings whose position is much weaker than ours, our own self-interest may well be enhanced by the virtuous exercise. Are we making sure that we balance we are enhancing theirs?

Nigella Lawson

Evening Standard columnist and freelance journalist who saw the play with her husband, John Diamond.

I EXPECTED controversy. I found occasion. Of course, it is the fate of Oleanna to be discussed in polite society. It falls into it. But where is the controversy, where really is the room for argument? A smug, paternalistic professor is

accused of attempted rape by a resentfully dim student, and we actually are witnesses to the falseness of the charge because we have no choice but to collude with him, with Mamet, in confirming her. You'd have to be a mad woman to do otherwise, and that's the crucial message. There aren't sides you can take up: he is right, she is not right, she is wrong, end of story. But that's how it is in this drama. To choose to infer from this that the debate is now won up, that the claims of feminism have been proved to be universally misguided at best, at worst a vindictive force for evil, is patently absurd.

But manipulative though Oleanna is, as manipulative in its way, which is much the same way, as Fatal Attraction, it's not agitprop. Its failure as polemic is its saving grace: it can work only as drama. It's over the top, it's savagely exaggerated, and yet Mamet — or I rather suspect, Harold Pinter, who directs it here — and the actors blow life into it. Art exists to make its audience uneasy, I suppose, but still, it's hard not to clap at the end without feeling taken over by someone else's ideology.

John Diamond

Times columnist and freelance journalist.

COMING OUT I felt the sort of emotional slapping about the faces I last suffered when I saw The Merchant of Venice for the first time. One cheer, was stung by the magnificence of the writing, the acting, the direction; the other by

their respective genders. The male lecturer is recognisable as a type — he's ambitious, self-centred, domineering. But he's not a minor, his female student is initially insecure and frustrated. But by the end she's a doctrinaire, cold-blooded bitch. A monster of Mamet's making. I won't deny that any such women exist. But by making such an extreme character the mouthpiece for perfectly sane feminist principles, such as non-sexual language, Mamet seriously skews the story. You give a woman an inch, he implies, she'll dig the ground out from under you. And so you're quite within your rights to thump her.

The changes of the last 20-odd years have thrown up all sorts of difficulties for men and women. But rather than meet the challenge head-on and find a new, fair way of communicating with each other, Mamet falls back into age-old prejudices. He may not hate women, but he certainly fears them.

Andrew Anthony

Deputy editor of FHM magazine.

THE PLAY seemed to me to be concerned much more with the current American bogeymen of political correctness than it was sexual politics per se. The two characters were not sex warriors, and Mamet's verbal sparring served to render the debate more abstract than immediate.

Did I feel a surge of testosterone when the professor attacked the student? No. I didn't clap, cheer or get hatched. Both characters were in different ways equally culpable. What was striking was the fact that they did not share the same language. And, ultimately, it was Mamet's echo of Orwell's warning — that the abuse of power lies in manipulating language — which proved more thought-provoking to me than questions of gender and guilt.

Rosie Boycott

Editor of Esquire magazine.

IT IS a riveting bit of theatre in terms of tension and it's extremely damaging to women because the complaints in the play that Carol makes to John are obviously untrue. She believes like that because of long years of frustration and put-downs at the hands of men, sexism in education, women denied promotions etc. But although John is an unympathetic shit who represents the unpleasantness of the educational elite, the final scene where he beats the hell out of her had me on his side. Looking from the outside I was thinking: God I want to slap her around and shake her — it's part of the play's choreography.

It throws up much about men's frustration, the fact that men are puzzled over women right now, and had a woman written the play you would have got nowhere. The whole thing is very frustrating, and it presents great complexity for the libel-minded person. The point of any legislation must be to protect the weak and if women are told that they'll get no protection unless they sleep with a man it must be legislated against, but there are all sorts of shades in between.

It is important for women to make sure feminism and equality work. Men are frustrated now because all that they used to depend upon has gone up in the air. The man in a job until his 50 supporting his wife and children is now out the window. I'm not sorry about that but I am sympathetic and it provides tremendous ground for debate. It is very dangerous to throw those accusations around and people will become ferribly dismissive to women's complaints.

Louise Chunn

Guardian women's page editor who saw the play with her partner, Andrew Anthony.

I AM NOT one of those women who always had David Mamet down as a misogynist. I loved both Gregory Clark Ross and American Buffalo. But they didn't have any woman characters, so perhaps it was Oleanna that only one man and one woman and because of that these characters come to stand for

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