

Michael Billington hails David Mamet's dazzling new satire, *Speed-The-Plow*, which opened last night at the Lyttelton

Hollywood or bust

WATCHING David Mamet's brilliant *Speed-The-Plow* at the Lyttelton, I was reminded of a line from T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*: "I gotta use words when I talk to you." For Mamet's comedy is much more than an anti-Hollywood satire: it is actually, like all Mamet's plays, about the gap between language and feeling and about the way we use words as a vaporous smoke-screen.

Obviously Hollywood, where Mamet had a rough experience with *About The Night*, provides the mainspring. And in the beginning he gets some high-flying comedy out of a producer, Charlie Fox, delivering a gilt-edged package deal to an old chum, Bobby Gould, who is now a studio head of production. The project, a buddy-buddy prison movie with a major star attached, has everything Hollywood wants — "action, blood, a social theme."

But, just as in *American Buffalo*, Mamet showed us a group of petty heisters talking big, so here he shows us the new

studio-brats elevating their tacky deals through self-aggrandising language. A movie doesn't just get the go-ahead: now you 'greenlight' a picture. And Charlie doesn't just say a star has committed himself to a script: he says, "This morning a man came to me". The religious image is vital and is deliberately echoed at the end of the play when Bobby is about to junk the prison film in favour of a dire-sounding radiation movie.

Mamet is not simply settling an old score with Hollywood. What he is saying is that the seats of power are occupied by lonely, frightened, insecure men who use use bombast as a defence and who are comically prey to suggestion. In *Kaufman and Hart's Once in a Lifetime* the studio-boss promotes the first person to tell him the emperor has no clothes: so here Bobby is wide-open to attack by a temporary secretary. He gives her the radiation-novel to read as a means of getting her into bed, but his sense of self is so weak that when she finds in it echoes of modern angst he goes

down like a ninepin. Mamet's prime joke is that the big tycoons are scared witless.

But he captures their fear in dizzily funny and blithely accurate language. One minute Bobby and Charlie are telling each other they are in the "people business": the next they are gloating on success as a form of revenge. The worst insult Charlie can pay his old chum is that his name will become a punch-line in this town. And, when warned to watch what he says about the secretary, he replies, "It's only words, unless they're true." That is the core of the play: language as a form of camouflage rather than a means of communication.

What makes Mamet fascinating, however, is his sneaking regard for what he satirises. He found something heroic in the sales-pitchers of Glengarry Glen Ross; and here there is a residual sympathy for these valueless go-getters whose idea of making a movie is to repeat last year's formula. Mamet attaches to the play an epigraph from Penderennis which en-



Direct: Rebecca Pidgeon

PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFERY

dorses those who instead of standing aloof from life take some part in the contest. And he himself combines a built-in bullshit-detector with a very American admiration for those who get their hands dirty.

As a play, it whips along zipply for an hour-and-three-quarters. And, although it might have been even more effective in the Cottesloe, Gregory Mosher's production colonises the big Lyttelton space and gets excellent performances from the cast of three. Alfred Molina is a particular joy as the would-be big-time Charlie suggesting a mixture of elephantine greed and naked cunning. He brilliantly balances verbal bluster with, in the last act, a capacity to come up with truth-telling

zingers; and, like Dave King in *American Buffalo*, he shows how Mamet benefits from a vaudevillian sense of timing.

Colin Stinton is equally impressive as Bobby: he exudes the insolence of office and a brash sexual confidence while suggesting there is something hollow behind the bravura. And Rebecca Pidgeon (in what is now the old *Madonna* role) plays the secretary with just the right emotional directness. She is all spirituality with a hint of metal; and it is a wonderful Mamet irony that she is undone by a tiny verbal slip.

But then this is a play about the way we use words: a dazzling American comedy about a world where language is fatally out of synch with emotion.

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