

Painful journey into a lost past

Review

Michael Billington

The Old Neighbourhood
Royal Court Downstairs

DAVID Mamet constantly writes about the fear and fantasy that underlies male bluster. But his latest play, though deeply personal, sounds a wider, more universal note. It is about the mid-life sense of loss, about awareness of mortality and about abandonment of community in a deeply individualistic age. It is as poignant as anything Mamet has written.

Running only 80 minutes, it takes the form of three interwoven scenes in which the hero, Bobby Gould (Mamet's alter ego?) returns home in search of his roots.

In the first and most typically Mamesque encounter Bobby meets an old buddy, Joey. Beneath all the bullish backchat, what you hear is the sound of pain. Bobby laments that he has married a shiksa: Joey, who works in a restaurant, yearns for the active experience of a European shtetl. Filled with reminiscence and the corrosive sadness of missed chances, it is, if you can imagine such a thing, like a Jewish version of the Shallow-Silence scenes in Shake-

speare's Henry IV Part Two.

In the second scene, Bobby meets his married sister, Jolly, seething in her kitchen over her maltreatment by her inherited gentile relations. "One thousand generations we've been Jews," she cries. "My mother marries a shei-getz and we're celebrating Christmas."

Once again, the piece is suffused with a yearning for a lost past — in this case the sibling intimacies of childhood — and a resentment of the humiliations that have resulted from their late mother's marrying out.

What is astonishing is how much ground Mamet covers in three short scenes. Although he is writing very specifically about the loss of Jewish identity and the perils of assimilation, he is also dealing with the great Chekhovian theme of what-might-have-been. Bobby becomes the moving epitome of anyone who returns to his past and is confronted by age, change, lost time and missed chances. This is Mamet at his most autobiographical and yet his most universal.

Needless to say, he also shows his usual uncanny ear for the elliptical rhythms of everyday speech, something well caught in Patrick Marber's fine production played out against William Dudley's sepia images of a lost communal life.

Billington Guardian Mamet



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