

## Dangerous Dave meets delicate David

WE THINK of David Mamet as the toughest kid on the block among contemporary dramatists, the street bruiser who uses choppy urban rhythms and ferocious obscenity like a knuckleduster.

But there is another side to the writer. As well as the macho chronicler of blue-collar lives, whom we might call dangerous Dave, there is also delicate David, who writes artily attenuated (indeed, downright irritating) novels and spare volumes of essays and evocative memoirs.

These two sides to his personality come together in *The Old Neighborhood*, the most autobiographical dramatic work he has produced with the exception of *The Cryptogram*, a painful account of childhood trauma. This time, however, Mamet is deep in the mire of middle-class, mid-life crisis.

When I saw the plays on Broadway last year they struck me as both self-indulgent and dramatically thin. In Patrick Marber's characteristically intense, exceptionally well-acted production, they seem more robust, though they strike me as interesting minor Mamet rather than great major Mamet.

The three short plays (together they last only 80 minutes) are united by the doleful presence of Bobby

### Theatre

**The Old Neighborhood**  
Royal Court at  
the Duke of York's

(Colin Stinton) — based on Mamet himself — who, as befits a dramatist, spends more time listening to others than talking about himself.

In the first play, *The Disappearance of the Jews*, he chews the fat with an old male buddy in a Chicago hotel room. In the second, *Jolly*, he visits his sister; in the third, *Deeny*, he is reunited with an old flame. As the trilogy develops, we also learn that Bobby's marriage has broken down and he has left his wife and children.

*The Disappearance of the Jews* is a lament for racial and religious community. As Bobby and his friend Joey rake over memories of childhood and old girlfriends, it becomes clear that they have lost, and lament, their Jewish roots. Joey, outrageously, even wonders if it wouldn't be better to be a Jew in Europe under the Nazis because at least "it would give a guy a chance to stand up". Bobby, rightly, accuses him of "pro-faning" what others endured, but the suggestion isn't shot down with quite the force one would wish for.

Nevertheless, Linal Haft, with his debauched cherubic



Stinton and Wanamaker

face, is genuinely moving as a restless mid-lifer who has a terrible fantasy about murdering his wife and family, and the piece superbly captures the dynamics of male friendship: the bluster, the banter, the awkward moments of intimate revelation.

In the second piece, *Zoë*, Wanamaker is in terrific form as the far-from-jolly Jolly, Bobby's sister. This is a fascinating modern companion piece to her recent, acclaimed performance as Electra for, as in the ancient Greek play, Wanamaker spends her whole time bitterly brooding on the perfidy of her mother and her stepfather. Bobby chimes in too — "swinish, selfish, goddam them" — and

the piece memorably shows how childhood trauma damages later lives.

What's missing from the script, though Wanamaker goes a good way to supplying it with her grieving, wounded performance, is the detail of their "abuse". Mamet has in fact covered the same territory far more movingly in his extraordinary memoir of childhood, *The Rake*, though the loyalty and shared pain of the siblings on stage is genuinely affecting, as is Bobby's guilt about his own abandoned kids.

The final play, in which Bobby rakes over the ashes with his old flame Deeny, is a poetic piece that remains tantalisingly elusive. Its images of gardening and frost are somehow both potent and opaque, though Diana Quick creates a powerful impression of hurt and transience, especially when she gently strokes her former lover's face.

*The Old Neighborhood* is a far more subtle and haunting work than I originally gave it credit for, but there remains something both self-conscious and self-pitying about it. It's a wistful, evanescent breeze of an evening, when what one wants from Mamet is the full-force gale.

Tickets: 0171 565 5000

CHARLES SPENCER

Spencer Telegraph Mamet



Clipped By:

ianlharris

Sat, Aug 5, 2023