

# Los Angeles Times

**CULTURE MONSTER**  
ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

## Review: 'Oleanna' at the Mark Taper Forum

June 7, 2009



When David Mamet's "Oleanna" emerged in 1992, it was as if a cherry bomb had been planted under the seats of progressive theatergoers. Written in the controversial wake of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill sexual harassment saga and smack in the middle of the bitterly divisive culture wars, the play took enormous delight in adopting a defiantly politically incorrect stance to the then-hot-button issue of political correctness.

Nearly two decades later, it has become possible to respond to this polemical two-character drama with a cooler head. Not that Doug Hughes' sleekly attractive staging of "Oleanna," which opened Friday at the Mark Taper Forum with Bill Pullman and Julia Stiles as the professor and student combatants, has lost its power to rile an audience. But the intense post-show conversation, which could be heard all across the Music Center at the end of this 80-minute prize-fight, is less bruising than it was in the polarized age that spawned the work.

"Oleanna" has never been one of my favorite Mamet plays, but this production opened it up in a way that allowed me to finally appreciate what must have attracted Harold Pinter to direct the 1993 London premiere at the Royal Court. At the time, I chalked it up to a long friendship between the playwrights. But Hughes' direction clarified that the real subject under investigation isn't the surface one of identity politics but rather the way in which language serves as a subterfuge for insecure power games — a Pinteresque theme if ever there was one.

Pullman takes on the role of John, a professor anxiously waiting for the university to sign off on his tenure. He's buying a house with his wife, who keeps phoning him with updates during his fraught meeting with Carol, a struggling student with a pressure-cooker temperament, played by Stiles.

Carol confesses that his seminar is beyond her. "I don't understand what anything means," she says. "And I walk around from morning 'til night with this one thought in my head. 'I'm stupid.' "

Identifying with her low self-esteem, John (who's loaded with neurotic tics by Pullman) proposes a private tutorial. "Your grade for the whole term is an 'A,' " he says, offering to bend the rules under the condition that she give him the chance to "awaken" her interest and satisfactorily answer her naive questions.

Let the accusations begin, but don't expect the ambiguity to be perfectly balanced. John may be an incoherent personality, but he doesn't act as though he has any inappropriate designs on this fetching (a word he eventually gets in trouble for using) coed.

His biggest shortcoming is his failure to be vigilant about appearances. He's unorthodox to a self-congratulatory fault. But then he's caught in a paradox: Although his scholarship poses a critique of higher education as a form of "hazing," he's climbing the academic ladder with an ambitiousness that would seem to contradict all his radical intellectual positions. John is guilty of something, and his unconscious mind (like anyone's) isn't clean, but the charges hurled at him are obviously trumped up.

Stiles deftly exposes one of the sources of Carol's vindictive anger — her lack of access to language and knowledge. Confounded by Ph.D rigmarole (she can't tell the difference between a "precept" and a "paradigm"), she becomes a demon of ideological jargon once her "group" (an unnamed body of presumably feminist rabble-rousers) empowers her to take action against her teacher's "paternal prerogative."

The most annoying aspect of "Oleanna" is the way the deck is so shamelessly stacked. Our noses are rubbed not just in Carol's distorting wrath but also in everything John has to lose by her allegations — his new house, his career and the future he's toiled for decades to attain. It's telling that during the play's original off-Broadway run, there were reports of men erupting with misogynistic cheer when John finally succumbs to his anger.

Thankfully, that response wasn't audibly in evidence at the Taper. Perhaps time has tempered our perceptions, but more probably the credit belongs to a production that makes this more a war over words than an inflammatory installment of the battle of the sexes.

Both actors find subtle ways of slipping out of stereotypical straitjackets. Pullman italicizes John's fragmented attention and halting speech pattern, so that even though his sense of entitlement is formidable, there's something inept about his presence. And if (like his author) he enjoys, as he says, provoking his listeners, Pullman's portrayal suggests it's because he's so easily provoked by the impossibly contradictory world around him.

Stiles refuses to let Carol be just a bugaboo of a belligerent male imagination. She's more than a propagandizing puppet. Even with her hair pulled back and her face frozen in frustration, she hints at secret sexual depths — a young woman who's as fearful about her vulnerability as she is her erotic possibilities.



Hughes' staging provides a modern gloss on the action. Neil Patel's stunning set turns John's office, with its backdrop of windows facing a majestic campus, into an elitist zone of academic privilege, complete with electronic blinds that move between scenes and phones that won't stop buzzing.

Donald Holder's lighting shifts the mood almost imperceptibly between public and private spheres. If Catherine Zuber's costumes seem at one point too posh for the characters, the choice is in keeping with the freshening coat of glamor Hughes' production bestows.

"Oleanna" still fills me with reservations — artistic as well as political. Yes, the debate is tendentiously rigged. But you can't argue with a play that retains the power to get theatergoers arguing with each other as they head home.

-- Charles McNulty

"Oleanna," Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sundays (Call for exceptions). Ends: July 12. \$20 to \$65 (213) 628-2772. Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes

*Photos: Bill Pullman and Julia Stiles. Credit: Barbara Davidson / Los Angeles Times.*

