

VARIETY

Sunday, June 7, 2009

Oleanna

(Mark Taper Forum, 724 seats, \$65 top)

A Center Theater Group presentation by special arrangement with Jeffrey Finn of a play in one act by David Mamet. Directed by Doug Hughes.

John - Bill Pullman
Carol - Julia Stiles

By **BOB VERINI**

In "Oleanna," pedantic prof John (Bill Pullman) kicks off a student-teacher conference by pontificating, "We can only interpret the behavior of others through the screen we ... create." But when the screen of student Carol (Julia Stiles) insists on interpreting his behavior as sexual harassment or worse, the result is akin to handling nitroglycerin on a potholed road. Brilliant acting and Doug Hughes' canny helming fully animate David Mamet's galvanic 1992 two-hander at the Mark Taper Forum.

The familiar campus setting and situation initially suggest a political-correctness movie of the week. Worried about tenure and interrupted by phone calls, John carelessly responds to Carol's academic anguish in ways she deems objectionable and even actionable.

"Who's right?" audiences may ask. "Is he a predator, or she vindictive? What college is this, anyway? And how can Carol be a milquetoast in scene one and an Amazon thereafter?" But such questions are no more relevant than asking where in London one can find Pinter's "The Dumbwaiter," or why Pozzo returns blind and helpless in act two of "Waiting for Godot."

"Oleanna" has something more postmodern and allusive in mind: dramatizing the confrontation between two diametrically opposed modes of human interaction, a clash which (Mamet would doubtless argue) lies at the heart of most of the world's ills.

John's mode is casual and inferential, his liberal-humanist self-image -- to which Pullman's rock-ribbed integrity is ideally suited -- granting him immunity from charges of malice, or so he thinks. It's absurd to take "I like you" as anything but sincere as uttered to a young lady, or to read anything sexual in a proffered helping hand. His students know how fine he is, don't they?



Julia Stiles and Bill Pullman topline David Mamet's 'Oleanna,' directed by Doug Hughes at the Mark Taper Forum.



Bill Pullman and Julia Stiles in 'Oleanna'.

But Carol's approach is literal, even fundamentalist: A quip about the wealthy's fornication practices is per se pornographic, and characterizing higher ed as "ritualized hazing" assaults every enrolled student, irrespective of what the professor "meant" to say.

Therein lies John's downfall when Carol reports to the tenure committee. What matters isn't what he "feels" but what he does, and her factual accounting condemns him on its face. "Don't you see? I'm right," she keeps insisting. Stiles achieves increasing majesty with each upercut. To Carol, the power he wields can't be left to ambiguous interpretation. Words matter.

This isn't a man/woman thing; it's a human thing. What do the debates over biblical inerrancy or Prophet Muhammad caricatures, George Bush's "Bring it on!" or Bill Clinton's grand jury testimony amount to but a conflict between literal and intended meaning? Given half a chance, "Oleanna" prompts excited chatter not about a fictional he-said/she-said, but about eternal miscommunication among individuals and cultures alike.

Hughes gradually whips the characters' slow flame into a wildfire, Donald Holder's lighting alternating brightness and shadow as events become murkier. Neil Patel's mechanical Venetian blinds wittily rise and descend, open and shut to mimic the revelation or concealment of "truth" (whatever that is).

No doubt bolstered by a 2004 London turn, Stiles slips effortlessly into Carol's chameleon skin, following the playwright's dictum simply to say the words with absolute conviction and all else will follow.

She's superb, but her antagonist is a revelation, disintegrating by inches as the most innocently intended remark turns on him dagger-like. "It was devoid of sexual content," John says of a shoulder touch. "I say it was not. I say it was not," she insists. Pullman's horrified stagger, upon looking into the heart of darkness to spew out the most hateful of epithets (yes, words matter!), is one of the spellbinding emotional exhibitions of this theatrical year.

Those willing to experience "Oleanna" on its own terms are amply rewarded with insight into our own ambiguous hearts.

Sets, Neil Patel; costumes, Catherine Zuber; lighting, Donald Holder; fight direction, Rick Sordelet; production stage manager, Charles Means. Opened, reviewed June 5, 2009. Runs through July 12. Running time: 1 HOUR, 20 MIN.