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## ENTERTAINMENT & CULTURE

**REVIEW: THEATER** | By Terry Teachout  
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### He Said, She Did

**D**AVID MAMET shocked a great many people when he declared that he was no longer a “brain-dead liberal.” What made him change his stripes? “I began to question what I actually thought and found that I do not think that people are basically good at heart,” he wrote in a much-quoted essay published last year in the *Village Voice*. That belated conclusion won’t come as a surprise to anyone who sees “**Oleanna**,” Mr. Mamet’s 1992 two-character play about a sexual-harassment case, in the incisive Broadway-bound revival now playing at Los Angeles’s Mark Taper Forum. Whatever else “*Oleanna*” is or isn’t, it’s definitely not the work of a playwright who takes a rosy view of human nature.

#### OLEANNA

*Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles (\$20-\$65), 213-628-2772, closes July 12*

Bill Pullman plays John, the self-important but well-meaning professor who tries to help Carol (Julia Stiles), a student who is floundering in one of his classes and comes to his office in despair. We see their meeting, at which nothing egregiously offensive happens. Then, in the second act, we learn that Carol has filed an official complaint of harassment by John in which she exaggerates and misrepresents everything that took place in the first act. At first it appears that the complaint arises from a genuine misunderstanding, but Carol turns out to be part of a “group” of female students “who suffer what I suffer.” She’s been collecting evidence against John on their behalf and in the third act hints that their real purpose is to control what he teaches in his classes.



Craig Schwartz

Julia Stiles and Bill Pullman in David Mamet’s ‘*Oleanna*.’

What we have here, then, is less a he-said-she-said drama than a quintessentially Mametian struggle for power—one that is further complicated by the fact that Carol seems to harbor doubts about the rightness of what she is doing to John.

Many feminists of both sexes were horrified by "Oleanna" when it opened Off Broadway 17 years ago. I doubt they'll have changed their minds since then. Though Mr. Mamet doesn't let John off easy, it's hard not to conclude that he regards Carol's "group" as the offstage villains of the piece and that he sees the head-spinning explosion of rage with which the play ends as at once unforgivable and understandable. What is most impressive about this revival, which Doug Hughes ("Doubt") has directed with an enthralling combination of force and subtlety, is that the actors give both characters their due: Mr. Pullman is so tightly wound that he all but quivers, while Ms. Stiles appears to have strolled directly into the theater from the nearest classroom.

It will be interesting to see how Mr. Hughes's production, which is being performed on a thrust stage that puts the players close to the audience, survives the switch to a less intimate proscenium stage when "Oleanna" transfers to Broadway in October. As it stands, it's a welcome opportunity to see a pair of unusually fine performers at the top of their game. And what of Mr. Mamet's play? Nowadays many critics prefer to interpret "Oleanna" as a Pinteresque study of language used for social manipulation, but I incline, rightly or wrongly, to read it as a parable of totalitarianism in action. Either way, it packs a knockdown punch.



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Bill Pullman and Julia Stiles in David Mamet's 'Oleanna.'