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Entertainment

Review: A.C.T. does David Mamet proud



Janos Gereben, The Examiner

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SAN FRANCISCO -

At the end of the 1980s, penny loafers, Tone Loc, Nintendo, Garbage Pail Kids, Strawberry Shortcake cartoons, Koosh ball and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles ruled. David Mamet, on the other hand, was busy writing "Speed-the-Plow."

(Courtesy photo)

Matthew Del Negro, left, and Andrew Polk play cutthroat movie producers in A.C.T.'s production of David Mamet's "Speed-the-Plow."

All but the play now belong to the distant past; Mamet's Hollywood-style horror story of the movie business is still with us, opening in a splendid production at the American Conservatory Theater Wednesday night.

Mamet — with a dozen successful plays, some of them turned into "interesting" movies — lowers the boom on the greedy, nasty "whores" of Hollywood, mincing no words, giving no quarter to these wretched panderers to the worst in humanity. Elements of truth? Certainly.

Anything approaching the drama, humor, and relevance in "All About Eve" or "The Player" or many other insider films? Not at all.

Hollywood, Mamet says, offers cardboard figures and cheap thrills, in order to make money. In "Speed-the-Plow," Mamet offers cardboard figures and cheap thrills to make his case against the merchants of commercial crap. One wonders if those merchants would take an option on this simpleminded parable. (So far they haven't, proving how nasty they are... and of good judgment.)

Still, under Loretta Greco's direction, a brilliant cast of three makes the evening worthwhile, even as a few big names can make a stupid movie palatable. Tall-and-handsome Matthew Del Negro makes his A.C.T. debut as the newly promoted studio official with the power to greenlight scripts up to \$30 million. (Making movies was cheap 20 years ago.)

The exceptional, home-grown (ACT Young Conservatory grad) actor Andrew Polk is the sniveling, conniving, eventually overpowering assistant, sweating and lurching through the 100-minute intermissionless play, rising above its banalities. Jessi Campbell is foxy and mysterious as the temp secretary, who becomes an agent of possible change (don't hold your breath).

Here is the crux of the story and Mamet's self-betrayal: the assistant is pitching a "buddy film, a prison film" with a popular director who is willing to switch to the studio; the new exec is giving a "courtesy reading" to a high-minded, asinine book about the world ending in radiation, people decaying at a faster rate than they would normally do.

Which story to OK for production? The question is made more urgent and believable (caution: irony!) by the beautiful secretary's sacrifice on behalf of the book about radiation.

Such are the limited choices before our heroes. We'll stay clear of a spoiler here, no more of the plot, this much being sufficient to indicate the depth, so to speak, of this Hollywood "exposé."

All of which unfolds well on G.W. Mercier's fine sets, moved about speedily by the "ensemble" of Danny Wolohan and Yusef Lambert.

IF YOU GO

Speed-the-Plow

Where: American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco

When: 8 p.m. most Tuesdays-Saturdays; 2 p.m. most Wednesdays, Saturdays-Sundays; closes Feb. 3

Tickets: \$17 to \$82

Contact: (415) 749-2228 or www.act-sf.org

Examiner

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