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February 22, 2008

Theatre Review: "Speed-the-Plow"



Speed-the-Plow

By David Mamet

Presented By Bad Habit Productions

8:00 pm tonight and Saturday, 2:00 pm

Sunday

Factory Theatre, 791 Tremont St. \$12.

[Tickets and information](#)

They are the largely thankless theatrical roles, the parts that move a piece along but don't bring with them the promise of glory.

Take Hamlet in Tom Stoppard's

"Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead"

and Rose Maxson in August Wilson's "Fences" - both necessary characters, but parts designed as foils to the chief characters of each work.

And then there is Karen, the temporary secretary who wanders into the Hollywood movie industry in David Mamet's "Speed-the-Plow."

Mamet has rarely been kind to women of the stage, and debate continues about whether the playwright gains pleasure over portraying women poorly or simply doesn't understand them enough to give them their due. Compare the "naive" temp to "Plow's" crassly dynamic, fast-talking production team of Bobby Gould and Charlie Fox and the woman who steps into Karen's heels faces an uphill struggle from the start.

The basic need for a female actor to exert greater power and strength than her male counterparts in order to keep up in any Mamet play, but especially this one, is what makes Bad Habit Productions' "Speed-the-Plow," now underway at the Factory Theatre, such a pleasant surprise. Director Adam Sanders and actors Kate Bailey (Karen), Derek Fraser (Charlie), and Mikkel Raahede (Bobby) have created from Mamet's deck-stacked work a

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convincingly savvy three-member power struggle, one that blends the inner workings of the Tinseltown machine and the battle of the sexes into a sharp and skewering satire on the struggle between art and commerce.

Read the full review after the jump! Photo courtesy of Bad Habit Productions.

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"Life in the movie business is like the beginning of a new love affair," says Charlie, a lower-tier insider with a sense of desperation covered by a used car salesman sheen. "It's full of surprises, and you're constantly getting fucked."

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But things might finally be working out: a half-baked prison-buddy comedy flick with plenty of star power has somehow fallen into Charlie's lap, and it will start bringing in money almost as soon as friend (and superior) Bobby gives it the green light. "I am a whore," Charlie purrs, "and I am proud of it."

How the MBTA Stole Christmas (7)

It's a no-brainer, and the only thing standing between Fox-Gould Productions and payday is the book about radiation and impending end of the world that the lean, European-chic Bobby is giving a courtesy read. It is the antithesis of the Brown picture: a moral tale, no stars, full of philosophy, environmental discussion and doomsday. There is no way that such an adaptation will sell (it is important to note that "Plow" reaches out to us from a pre-"Inconvenient Truth" era).

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Enter Karen, the temp who begins on Bobby's phone and ends up in his bed. An attempt to flatter the secretary into sex backfires when Karen reads and promptly champions the book; the slick producer is forced to choose between of intelligent art (and the romantic rewards) with Karen or another lights-out blockbuster (and friendship) with Charlie.

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Fraser and Raahede are gleefully slimy as insiders who have clawed their way up the ladder from the studio mailroom. Fraser's stout, sweaty frame and over-eager approach creates a sharp, winning contrast to Raahede's cool and sleek composure, and the actors clearly relish the opportunity to fire off Mamet's barbs. The ease with which Fraser and Raahede bob and weave through their interaction gives credence to the notion that the men have been sparring since their younger days.

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Bailey steps into the fray with a quieter strength that manages to highlight the absurdity of the ongoing antics and hint at the tension to come. Her Karen says often that she is naive, but unlike others who have tackled her role, Bailey never quite lets us believe in her character's self-proclaimed innocence. There are layers to what is often a one-note role; when paired in scenes with Raahede, the shifting balance of power bolsters Bobby's ensuing moral dilemma.

Bostonist Mailbag: What About the Jews? (7)

How the MBTA Stole Christmas (6)

With "Plow," Bad Habit has succeeded in not only bringing Mamet's skewering take on Hollywood to Boston, but also in zinging the poison-pen playwright. Not only does an audience get to laugh at the movie biz, we also get to cheer over a woman taking her rightful place in the spotlight. Mamet, it's exciting to say, has finally met his match.

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