

David Mamet's *Race* in Toronto

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At Canadian Stage's Bluma Appel Theatre, Toronto, until May 5.

In David Mamet's *Race*, currently running in Toronto, a wealthy white man is accused of raping a black woman. He turns to a law firm run by two male partners--one white and one black--and asks them to defend him. Aided by a young black female associate, the lawyers reluctantly agree to accept the case. As the play progresses, hidden agendas emerge and clash.

Cara Ricketts is excellent as Susan, the young associate. Her progressive transformation from meek bystander to major player, burning inwardly with fierce conviction, is the highlight of this production. Nigel Shawn Williams gives a powerful portrayal of the black lawyer Henry as a man whose success and self-assurance are achieved at the cost of suppressing ideals and anger as intense as Susan's. The brief moment when the pent-up rage explodes is electrifying.

Matthew Edison as Charles, the wealthy white defendant, has a tough assignment, as Mamet does not give him much to work with. He could perhaps have aimed for more of an aura of self-satisfied wealth and privilege, rather than looking like a beaten man right from the start. The legal birds of prey, to whom he has turned for help, have too easy a job as they tear him to shreds.

Jason Priestley's return to Canada and the theatre after decades of successful work in television and film is something of a disappointment. In the role of Jack, the white lawyer, Priestley's performance is professional and workmanlike, but seems a little timid as a portrayal of one of Mamet's domineering egotists.

David Mamet sent shock waves through the literary world when he announced in an article in the *Village Voice* on March 11, 2008 that after decades of being a liberal he had now adopted conservative views on the virtues of capitalism and the American political system. At the time, the WSWS commented:

"One's first response is that it comes as something of a surprise to learn that Mamet until recently continued to consider himself, however vaguely, to be on the political left. The writer's morbidity and misanthropy, his vehement support for the Israeli regime and related views, have seemed to make him more naturally a figure of the right."

As the WSWS made clear, however, the work of an artist cannot be judged simply on the basis of his or her professed political views, nor can it be judged primarily on how it accords with a political program. Any worthwhile artistic venture is an attempt to shed light on unexplored areas of human experience--a "raid on the inarticulate" as T.S. Eliot put it. If Mamet's play speaks truths about racism that we have all been too cowardly to acknowledge, then he deserves our gratitude and our respect.

The program notes for the Canadian Stage production lead us to expect no less:

"Mamet ... prides himself on being a provocateur ... he expounds his ideas with a penmanship that rivals none, a razor-sharp wit and an acid sense of dialog. And he truly does succeed in making the theatre a space for debate, bringing polarizing ideas about our society unapologetically to the surface."

The opening of the play is peppered with one-liners about race and the justice system, aimed at deflating liberal illusions of the kind Mamet himself supposedly cherished at one time. It is spelt out for the audience that the justice system is an elaborate charade where truth is not so much a casualty as a non-combatant. "My clients pay me to win," crows Jack, the white attorney, capping his post-modernist argument that, as each person's version of the events is equally valid, no tactic for winning the case can be considered illegitimate.

(Some members of the audience may have recalled the 1982 film *The Verdict*, in which the lawyer played

by Paul Newman puts the demands of justice ahead of his immediate obligation to his clients. Mamet presumably now regards that screenplay, for which he received an Academy Award nomination, as juvenile silliness.)

Along with the justice system, Mamet's one-liners skewer the notion that anything fundamental has changed in race relations in America since the days of segregation. We are given a picture of black and white as separate ... well, races ... superficially tolerant of each other, but engaged in a constant war of attrition for power and advantage.

The Toronto audience laughed enthusiastically in all the right places at the well-written, well-delivered dialogue. But it would be hard to agree with the program notes that Mamet is bringing any polarizing ideas to the surface.

The fact is that Mamet is travelling over familiar terrain. Black stand-up comedians have been mocking sanitized illusions of racial harmony for decades, taking aim at the same targets as Mamet does. Mamet himself is fully aware of this. In a short piece published in the *New York Times* in September 2009, he justified the views expressed in his play by citing a monologue by black actor, film maker and comedian Chris Rock. According to the *New York Daily News* in the same month, Mamet at one point wanted Rock to play Henry, the black lawyer, when *Race* opened on Broadway.

So while Mamet's portrayal of race in America may possibly be a daring departure for mainstream theatre, it is quite at home in popular culture. It certainly does not take extraordinary powers of observation to know that racial animosity exists and that it is frequently exploited for personal gain. However it is not unreasonable to expect a little more from an artist of David Mamet's stature.

Two novels by Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) and *A Man in Full* (1998), address many of the same concerns as Mamet's play--primarily the distorting impact of race on American justice. The second novel is especially interesting for its portrayal of a wealthy stratum of black business and political leaders in Atlanta. Wolfe shows us an insular and self-absorbed coterie, contemptuous of the whites with whom they alternately compete and co-operate; but far more contemptuous of the impoverished majority of their black "brothers." The black elite are shown as

having a vested interest in perpetuating racism and poverty, which they manipulate adroitly to enhance their own privileges.

The fundamental dividing line in modern society is class, not race. Any attempt to understand race independently of class cannot penetrate beyond superficial appearances. And Mamet's play, while it intrigues and entertains, does not take us any further than we were before.

All in all, Mamet does not seem too upset by the issues and social situation he discusses in *Race*. Anger, such as there is, is reserved for those who foolishly imagine that the justice system could ever concern itself with justice or that skin colour could ever become irrelevant to a person's role in life. As he stated in his *Times* article of 2009, Mamet is pretty much OK with the way things are:

"We are bound to each other, as are all Americans. Bound though subdivided, not only by race, but by religion, politics, age, region and culture. And we not only seem to be but *are* working it out."

Comforting words for the upper 10 percent of society to whom Mamet is addressing himself. The super-wealthy 1 percent, according to the logic of his play, must be forced to share its ill-gotten gains or it will face the fate of Charles, the wealthy white defendant. The various racial and ethnic sub-divisions of the 10 percent must learn to accommodate each other's demands through an exhilarating duel of wits, making room gracefully now and then for upstarts who defeat the incumbents at their own game. Things could be a lot worse.

The excluded 90 percent could realize they have more in common with each other than with the affluent leaderships that claim to represent their interests.



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