

Dragon elects to run Mamet's political farce, 'November'

Among many avid theatergoers, David Mamet is almost god-like. His best plays, like "Glengarry Glen Ross" (for which he won a Pulitzer Prize) and "Speed-the-Plow," are gems, albeit gems with a lot of profanity. But Dragon Theatre's production of Mamet's lesser-known (and seldom-produced) political farce "November" is not a jewel. It's more like an ugly rock.

Why offer up such an offensive piece, especially during the holidays? Dragon and "November" director Troy Johnson may have decided that something with some grit to it would be a counterbalance to offset the syrupy pabulum of many of the traditional holiday productions. Or perhaps they felt its story isn't far off from the politics of divisiveness now de rigueur in the U.S. Congress these days.

Unfortunately, "November" doesn't cut the mustard as a play, let alone a satire of Washington's current political quagmire. And, save for a few throw-away comedy lines, it really isn't that funny. That's partly the fault of the playwright, but some of the actors in this rendering don't make it any easier to enjoy.

As the inept, soon-to-be-booted out of office President Charles Smith, Peter K. Owen has the vacuous look of a younger Charles Grodin, but even his funny lines are arrogantly spewed out rather than said with a light, satirical tone. It's difficult to imagine someone as corrupt as Smith ever getting elected president, let alone holding that office for four years without being impeached. On Friday Owen seemed to forget a line or two here and there, although it's hard to know for sure, because most of them are full of obscenities and make little sense anyway.

His presidential adviser Archer Brown (a subdued, unexpectedly flat Fred Pitts) fares no better. Pitts says nearly all of his lines with the same intonation, whether he's calling someone out for not offering President Smith more bribery money or answering the incessantly ringing telephones.

But the worst offender is normally reliable Bill Davidovich, who plays his role as the representative of the National Turkey and Turkey By-Products Manufacturers as a man who has ants in his pants -- and they're mighty painful. From the moment he walks on stage, Davidovich grimaces, jumps, squirms and, most of all, overacts. Think about it: Davidovich has never met the president before, yet when he enters the Oval Office he immediately begins trembling and cowering. The audience never learns why.

The only sane person of the lot is Smith's bedraggled speech writer, who has just returned from China with a horrible head cold and a baby she and her lesbian partner have adopted.

Yet Stephanie Crowley makes Clarice Bernstein believable and genuine, all the while trying to appease her increasingly paranoid boss, the president. She is the lone character in this Mamet play who has any semblance of civility and niceness -- even when she's sneezing gigantic "achoos" and spreading germs all over the White House.

Speaking of that building, set designer Jason Arias has come up with a realistic facsimile of the Oval Office, although the furniture (especially the couch) looks a little rundown to be in that venerable room. But the presidential seal on the floor looks authentic, and the two flags behind the president's desk as well as the paned windows and draperies give the set a prestigious and recognizable look.

Linda Olbourne's costumes are about right for modern-day America, although the get-up on James Devreaux Lewis as an Indian chieftain who shows up in the last scene seems rather stereotypical and not representative of what most American Indians wear today. Although Lewis' part is minor, he, too, seems to have caught the overacting bug, which is strange, because he still comes across as two-dimensional.

Both the sound by Lance Huntley and lighting by Jeff Swan worked flawlessly.

Clearly "November" is not everyone's favorite kind of comedy. It's full of openly racist, xenophobic and sexist tirades, yet it's not really all that shocking or humorous. Long

scenes went by with the audience managing only a titter or two, with the few laughs coming when one of the characters comes up with a line Dave Letterman might say during his opening monologue. An example: When the Indian chief starts to attack him with a poison dart, the President asks Archer, "Where's the Secret Service?" Archer replies, "At sensitivity training."

This doesn't cover much of the actual plot of "November," which is so far-fetched it's useless to describe anyway. About the play, Dragon's own website explains: "A lesbian, a turkey lobbyist and a Native American walk into the White House."

If only the play was that simple to fathom.

Four stars, however, for the never-ending ringing of the two telephones. They were always on cue and relentless.

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Theater

What: "November"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-

Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Dec. 15

Tickets: \$15-\$30; 650-493-2006 or

www.dragonproductions.net