

The Power of Oleanna

by R. F. Knight

"There can be no tougher or more unflinching play than Oleanna."

– Harold Pinter, playwright

It was evident from its first performance that *Oleanna* was an explosive play – one throwing those who attended into a sea of anxiety and confusion, finding themselves both prosecutor and defender, and often part of an angry audience directing their hostility at the actors on the stage. David Mamet, the author, found himself in the middle of the controversy. It is not a play about sexism or sexual harassment, he proclaimed, "it's a play about power".

Power: a word defined by Webster as "the possession of control, authority or influence over others." Power, of course, can take many forms: the crying infant who realizes that his screams are the power to propel his parents into action; the rebellious teenager who finds countless ways to frustrate, confuse and control her parents; or the teacher and the student who each recognize both their own power and that of the other, but who cautiously avoid confrontation. But what happens when power is used *incautiously* – to intentionally or unintentionally destroy another person?

Oleanna takes place in the office of a college professor. The scenery, in keeping with Mamet's usual custom, is minimalist, with only a desk and chairs. The cold, stark stage draws the audience into the conflict; there is few distractions, just powerful words. The play confronts head-on the highly-charged feminist politics of the early nineteen-nineties, with the initially submissive student challenging the dominant male structure when she charges her professor first with sexism and then harassment. The action between the play's two characters increasingly becomes one of posture and manipulation.

Each performance of *Oleanna* generates a unique reaction in its audience. Mamet himself recalled that, "It first frightened me because I never imagined that kind of reaction to this play. People used to get into – literally – fistfights with each other in the lobby..." It was not unusual for someone in the audience to stand and confront the actors on stage for what their characters were saying. At the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, a blackboard was placed in the lobby, and exiting audiences were asked to vote: who was right, the professor or the student? The highly polarized results made clear that there simply is no "objective" reading of *Oleanna*.

The critics were equally divided. Some joined the author in viewing *Oleanna* primarily as an examination of the abuse of power. Others saw a postmodern tragedy of language. More than a few were outraged at what they perceived as authorial misogyny. But all saw a play that could not be ignored.

Mamet has said: "It is a play about two people, and each person's point of view is correct. And yet they wind up destroying each other." *Oleanna* suggests that each of us – within whatever personal and professional roles we inhabit – has a certain power to wield. But how we choose to *use* that power determines how our lives, and sometimes those around us, unfold.