

Between the Lines



Oleanna
by David Mamet
Directed by Doug Hughes
Mark Taper Forum
May 28–July 12, 2009

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OLEANNA

Between the Lines

Christopher Breyer
Writer

Rachel Fain
Editorial Manager

Laura Lee McKay
Proofreader

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A complacent and confident professor about to receive tenure.
A frightened and confused student desperate not to fail.
A conversation full of misunderstandings.
A devastating accusation.

These are the simple elements from which David Mamet creates an incendiary portrait of power exploited and abused in his intense and controversial 1992 drama, *Oleanna*. ●

OLEANNA



(L TO R) Julia Stiles, director Doug Hughes and Bill Pullman in rehearsal. PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS.

CAST (in alphabetical order)

John, a man in his forties; a professor **Bill Pullman**

Carol, a woman of twenty; a student **Julia Stiles**

Synopsis



“This is in the end a play about who shall be given the power of deciding what things mean.”

—Sheridan Morley, *The Spectator*, July 1993

One of the most interesting and exciting aspects of any production of *Oleanna* is how interpretive it is. The script provides few stage directions, and the dialogue is vague enough to allow directors and actors — and sometimes audiences, too — to decide just what did or did not happen between the two characters. With this in mind, *Between the Lines* offers you a synopsis free from interpretation.

The play’s three scenes take place in John’s office.

In the first scene, Carol, a shy, extremely anxious student who has struggled to get to college because she wants “to get on in the world,” seeks help from her professor, John, whose class she desperately needs to pass. John is impatient and distracted, however, and he repeatedly talks over his inarticulate student. Their erratic conversation is further interrupted by increasingly urgent phone calls asking John to come to the house he is buying — a house he is able to buy because he will soon have tenure — to deal with a problem. Eventually the distressed Carol confesses that she can’t understand what John says, the contents of his book (which seems to be about education), his vocabulary or, really, “any of it,” and that she feels stupid and “bad.”

What is Oleanna?

DAVID MAMET'S PLAY gets its title from a satirical 1853 Norwegian [song](#) about a community, New Norway, established in Pennsylvania in 1852 by Norway's first international "pop" star, the violinist Ole Bull. Oleanna was part of New Norway and in the song (as translated by Pete Seeger), a would-be immigrant to Bull's colony sings of how he would rather be in Oleanna than "bear the chains of slavery" in Norway, for in Oleanna you can stay in bed and rest while "The wheat and corn just plant themselves/Then grow a good four feet a day" and beer flows from the ground. Even better,

The women there do all the work
As round the fields they quickly go
Each one has a hickory stick
And beats herself if she works too slow

Because of the song, [New Norway](#) is now widely assumed to have been a utopian experiment, which it was not. The song was likely a politically motivated slander, for Bull was a passionate advocate of Norwegian political and cultural independence at a time when Norway was ruled by Sweden. Indeed, a few years earlier he established Norway's first Norwegian language theatre, a project that ultimately failed, although not before Ole hired a young, would-be playwright, 22-year-old [Henrik Ibsen](#), and provided the great dramatist his formative education in theatre.



Ole Bull

Ole Bull had no radical social or political ideas and the New Norway colonists were not slackers but hard-working farmers looking for opportunity. Unfortunately, the businessman who sold Bull New Norway included in the deed clauses that reserved virtually

all the tillable land for the original American owners and the Norwegians quickly discovered that they had no way to survive. By 1857, New Norway was finished, destroyed not by utopian dreams of harmony or by laziness but by good old American fraud.

John understands her feelings, for he, too, grew up believing he was a failure and came to resent anyone who judged him. Because he wants to help Carol, John suggests they start the class over. Telling her that she will have an A, he instructs her to "come back and meet with me. A few more times What's important is that I awake your interest, if I can, and that I answer your questions." Carol is surprised; aren't there rules? John says he can break the rules.

John explains his critique of higher education: we take for granted that college is good for everyone when it is really only a "fashionable necessity" for those aspiring to join the middle class. Listening to him, Carol becomes hysterical because John seems to be saying that she is wasting her time in college. John [as the play's stage directions read] "*goes over to her and puts his arm around*" the distraught student. Carol pulls away but quickly calms down. She is about to explain why she is "bad," revealing something she's never told anyone, when John gets another call. The "problem" at the house was a ruse to get John to a surprise party celebrating the announcement of his tenure.

In the second scene, Carol is again in John's office, this time at his request. She has filed a complaint with the Tenure Committee in which the events of the first scene are reported in a way that suggests John's behavior was sexually inappropriate. Carol's accusations will be dismissed, John insists, and she will be humiliated. But as the delay could cost John his new house, he would like to settle the issue with her now.

Carol, now assured and articulate and part of a group, will not withdraw her complaint. She asserts that John loves "the Power. To *deviate*. To *invent*, to transgress" and that he fulfills his own aspirations while mocking those of his students. When she starts to depart, John [as stage directions indicate] "*restrains her from leaving*" and Carol cries for help.

In the final scene, John, now suspended from his position, has again asked Carol to his office. He has re-considered her accusations and wants to apologize. But, Carol insists, these are no longer accusations; these are now facts. As their debate intensifies, Carol tells John that he believes only in a system that gives him the power "to *buy*, to *spend*, to *mock*, to *summon*. ... to *insult* me," even though it is a system he hypocritically scorns. And now he hates her because he thinks she has power over him. He is experiencing what it is like to be subject to the cruel system of judgment that Carol and her group suffer daily.

But Carol and her group might withdraw their complaint if John will accede to their demands, including banning certain books from his curriculum. John considers the offer. But when he sees his own book among the titles to be banned, the struggle between the teacher and the student escalates toward a catastrophe neither could have imagined. ●

Talk About...

What's in a Word?

David Mamet is one of American drama's great masters of language, having both his own distinctive style and an acute sensitivity to how people use language to manipulate and dominate. He is especially drawn to the jargon of particular groups, for instance the real-estate salesmen of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and the small-time criminals of *American Buffalo*.

Academia is notorious for arcane and obscure terminology, and knowing the lingo is an attribute that distinguishes the educated "elite" from outsiders. In *Oleanna*, Carol's difficulties in the first scene are in part due to her inability to understand the "terms of art" John habitually uses. As the play progresses, however, Carol becomes more confident as she becomes adept at using academic terms such as "protected hierarchy" and "paternal prerogative."

What is Mamet exploring about how we use language and why, and how it affects us?

In the first scene, John tells Carol, "I think you're angry." In the final scene, she says to him, "I understand your rage." Are there other ways in which John and Carol are alike or become alike over the course of the play? Ways in which they differ or trade places?

What's in a Name?

Titles often capture and distill a play's theme and purpose. Why do you think David Mamet titled his play *Oleanna*?



Playlist

Anything You Can Do

by Ethel Merman, original Broadway cast of *Annie Get Your Gun*
(I. Berlin)

Won't Get Fooled Again

by The Who
(P. Townsend)

Stand by Your Man

by Tammy Wynette
(T. Wynette, B. Sherrill)

Two Little Hitlers

by Elvis Costello & The Attractions
(D. MacManus)

Under My Thumb

by The Rolling Stones
(M. Jagger, K. Richards)

Woman Is the Nigger of the World

by John Lennon
(J. Lennon, Y. Ono)

Homage to Marat

— *Marat We're Poor*
by the Royal Shakespeare Company, production of *Marat/Sade*
(A. Mitchell, R. Peaslee)

It's a Man's Man's Man's World

by James Brown
(J. Brown, B. J. Newsome)

Get Up, Stand Up

by Bob Marley and the Wailers
(B. Marley, W. McIntosh)

Janie's Got a Gun

by Aerosmith
(S. Tallarico, T. Hamilton)

I'm Going to Tear Your Playhouse Down

by Ann Peebles
(E. Randle)



“Political Correctness” and the University: The Culture Wars circa 1992

“We can only interpret the
behavior of others through
the screen we create.”

– John in *Oleanna*, SCENE 1

David Mamet’s *Oleanna* is clearly one of the most controversial American plays of the last quarter century — although, as is common in such cases, it may be notorious for reasons that do not fully do justice to the play’s achievement. The reason for the controversy is the play’s treatment of sexual harassment, an issue that dominates virtually every review of or article about the play.

Oleanna premiered seven months after the astonishing televised Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings [see sidebar] made the issue of sexual harassment for the first time a matter for public, and very bitter, debate. Coming at a moment when many men were struggling with the rapidly changing standards of acceptable behavior toward women, *Oleanna* provoked some in the theatre to howl for the blood of the play’s female character. The play also inspired women to take to the streets in outraged protest over what they felt was Mamet’s denial of the sexual coercion that was an all-too-real aspect of their lives. And yet, the claims by the playwright and others that the play is not about sexual harassment are justified. *Oleanna* is, of course, about many things, but even on a basic level,



A Contemporary Harassment Code

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY'S 2008 *Rights, Rules, and Responsibilities*, a guide to University policy, writes concerning "Unlawful Forms of Bias or Harassment":

At Princeton University, unlawful harassment is defined as unwelcome verbal or physical behavior that is directed at a person because of his/her race, creed, color, sex, gender identity, age, national origin, ancestry, religion, physical or mental disability, veteran's status, marital or domestic partnership status, affectional or sexual orientation or other classification protected by applicable law, when these behaviors are sufficiently severe and/or pervasive to have the effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's educational experience, working conditions, or living conditions by creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment.



sexual harassment is less the play's subject than a synecdoche for what was then the battleground of America's perpetual Culture War — "Political Correctness."

As social and political power structures became more inclusive of diverse peoples, language and conduct needed to change to reflect these differences. What started out as a positive movement was soon given the derogatory label "Political Correctness." The term refers to an array of social theories or movements, such as feminism and multiculturalism, that called for changing "traditional" cultural values, behaviors, definitions, etc. to be more encompassing. Political Correctness also referred to the regulations against "hate speech" or "harassment" which, detractors believed, enforced these changes in America's colleges and universities in the 1980s and '90s.

The story actually starts a few decades earlier. In the early 1960s, minorities fought for access to higher education for the same reason that *Oleanna's* Carol has worked to get to college: economic advancement. But with the advent of identity politics and the increasing preference among young progressives for revolution over integration, college radicals turned to re-making the university. The radicals were not all students, however. The ascendancy of Richard Nixon prompted many Leftist activists to abandon "real" politics, refocus their efforts on academia and devote themselves to "cultural" politics and radical theory. (One is reminded somewhat of *Oleanna's* professor, John, with his "radical" critique of the very institution from which he hopes to receive power and security.) The actual result of this radicalism could be as modest as establishing programs in Black (or later, African-American), Latino and Women's Studies or as extreme as the propagation of theories that Western Civilization and traditional education, knowledge and culture are constructs that only serve the interests of wealthy, white males and so must be replaced.

It is unlikely that the administrators of America's universities sympathized with these more extreme claims but they were sensitive to the need to address the inequalities faced by minorities and women. There were very



The Clarence Thomas – Anita Hill Controversy

IN JULY 1991, President George H. W. Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to replace retiring Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. Marshall was a Civil Rights hero and the first African American on the high court but, while Thomas is also African American, he is judicially conservative, and his positions on many contested issues, such as affirmative action, are the opposite of those held by the liberal Marshall. Despite opposition from Civil Rights groups, Thomas' confirmation seemed certain until a leaked FBI report revealed that University of Oklahoma law professor Anita Hill had accused Thomas of sexually harassing her when she worked for him at the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Bowing to pressure from women's groups and women legislators, the Judiciary Committee investigated the matter in three days of bitter, lurid and widely watched televised hearings. Hill [testified](#) under oath that Thomas repeatedly asked her out and "spoke about acts that he had seen in pornographic films involving such matters as women having sex with animals and films showing group sex or rape scenes. ... On several occasions, Thomas told me graphically of his own sexual prowess." Thomas furiously denied the charges and [condemned](#) the process. "This is a circus. It's a national disgrace," Thomas declared. "And from my standpoint, as a black American, it is a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves." The hearings failed to resolve the matter satisfactorily, and on October 15, 1992, the Senate voted 52-48 to confirm Thomas' nomination.

The Hill-Thomas affair created an intense debate about sexual harassment, a subject women had hitherto been reluctant to discuss in public, and marked the start of a crucial, if anxious and acrimonious, period for gender politics. Some argue that the image of a lone Anita Hill facing an unsympathetic panel of all-male and all-white senators was partly responsible for an unprecedented number of women running for and winning congressional seats in the 1992 election.

good reasons, both moral and practical, for establishing harassment codes regulations to ensure a productive learning environment for minority and women students (or, to use the term of art, "historically disadvantaged groups"). Unfortunately, the regulations were often poorly conceived and even pernicious, offering nothing remotely approximating a "due process" by which those accused might defend themselves. Much worse, harassment was effectively defined as whatever the supposed victim experienced as harassment — a standard that essentially empowered the accuser to determine the guilt of the accused. It was a system that invited abuse. Among other things, the vague and overly broad regulations provided misguided, malicious or militant members of a protected class (such as the unnamed but presumably feminist "group" Carol represents) with a powerful and largely unrestrained means of restricting the free speech rights of everyone else on campus.

Carol: ... To lay a hand on someone's shoulder.

John: It was devoid of sexual content.

Carol: I say it was not. ... Don't you begin to understand? IT'S NOT FOR YOU TO SAY.

—*Oleanna*, SCENE 3

Many [Liberals](#) were aghast at the dangers harassment codes posed to free speech and civil liberties, but it was [Conservatives](#) who most eagerly publicized and exploited the real and imagined (and many were imagined) crimes of Political Correctness in order to delegitimize the "liberal" social changes of the 1960s. Ironically, many of the right-wing activists championing free speech in the face of Political Correctness had supported the blacklisting of Leftists in the 1950s and/or would, after 9/11, use "patriotic correctness" to intimidate critics of the War on Terror. By 1990, Political Correctness had become a hot enough topic to warrant a *Newsweek* cover story entitled, "Taking Offense: Is This the New Enlightenment on Campus or the New McCarthyism?"

The battle over Political Correctness was about power—cultural, political, economic, social, sexual, personal—and, as always with the Culture Wars, language was both the key weapon and the prize. Will we say "preserving a learning environment" or "censorship"? "Affirmative action" or "reverse discrimination"? "American Indian" or "Native American"? It's not at all surprising that David Mamet originally gave *Oleanna* the subtitle: "A Power Play." ●

Talk About...

What If?

In the first Los Angeles production of *Oleanna*, David Mamet chose an African-American actor, Lionel Mark Smith, to play John (the production was directed by Mamet's longtime collaborator, actor William H. Macy, who originated the role of John). For many in the audience, changing the professor's ethnicity altered in a very provocative way how they experienced the struggle between John and Carol.

Do you think that changing the ethnicity, gender or real or imagined sexual preference of the characters—say, if Carol were Latina or male or if the professor were a woman—would affect the story for you? If so, how?

Looking Beyond the Words

All plays are interpreted in performance, with the choices made by directors and actors altering and shaping the meaning of the raw text. This is even more true when, as with *Oleanna*, the written play is deliberately elusive and ambiguous. David Mamet's meticulously wrought, seemingly hyper-realistic dialogue doesn't reveal what (if any) hidden motivations the characters might have, nor do the play's minimal stage directions. This is especially true in the first scene and of the actions that Carol will later interpret as "sexual harassment."

Did you see anything in the first scene that you felt might have reasonably inspired Carol's later accusations? If so, do you think it was intrinsic to the dialogue and action or a matter of how the director and actors interpreted the characters and played the scene? Can you imagine other ways of interpreting the roles?

How Free, Exactly?

Some people see an inherent conflict between Political Correctness and free speech. Supporters of regulation liken these rules to exceptions like shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theatre: You're not allowed to say things that immediately endanger the lives of others. Is this a valid comparison?



David Mamet

Websites

etext.lib.virginia.edu/users/yitna/

Transcripts of Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on the Nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court

www.truveo.com/Anita-Hill-What-I-Described-Happened/id/3808572850

A 2007 interview with Anita Hill in which she reaffirms her testimony about Clarence Thomas

mamet.eserver.org/

Home of the David Mamet Society, which is dedicated to studies of Mamet's work

www.nytimes.com/1992/11/15/theater/theater-he-said-she-said-who-did-what.html

Six people, including feminist Susan Brownmiller and anthropologist Lionel Tiger, offer their thoughts on *Oleanna* in this New York Times article published during the original 1992 run of the play.

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_correctness

An overview of the history of and issues surrounding "Political Correctness"

Books

[*American Buffalo*](#) by David Mamet (Grove Press 1994)

Mamet's 1975 play

[*Glengarry Glen Ross*](#) by David Mamet (Grove Press, 1994)

The 1984 Pulitzer Prize-winning play

[*Speed-the-Plow*](#) by David Mamet (Grove Press, 1994)

Mamet's 1988 play about Hollywood film executives

[*Oleanna*](#) by David Mamet (New York: Vintage, 1993)

The 1992 play

[*Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*](#) by David Mamet (Columbia University Press, 1998)

In these three lectures delivered at Columbia University, Mamet talks about drama on stage and in life and the dramatic theory of his own plays.

Film & Video

[*Oleanna*](#) directed by David Mamet (MGM, 1994)

David Mamet's film adaptation of his play starring William H. Macy, who originated the role on stage, as John

[*Glengarry Glen Ross*](#) directed by James Foley (New Line, 1992)

The film adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play, with a screenplay by Mamet and an ensemble including Jack Lemmon and Al Pacino

[*Disclosure*](#) directed by Barry Levinson (Warner Bros., 1994)

Another controversial film that looks at sexual harassment in the work place

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