

Metroland

The Capital Region's Alternative Newsweekly

Victor/Victorian

Boston Marriage

By DAVID MAMET, DIRECTED BY MARTHA BANTA
ADIRONDACK THEATRE FESTIVAL, CHARLES R. WOOD
THEATER, THROUGH JULY 4

DURING THE POST-PERFORMANCE discussion that followed the opening of *Boston Marriage*, Adirondack Theatre Festival director Martha Banta echoed the surprise expressed by the audience that the "vulgar" David Mamet wrote this rollicking drawing-room comedy set in Victorian Boston. The fact that the play features three female characters was not the least of reasons for the surprise: Mamet, author of testosterone-heavy plays like the Pulitzer-prize winning *Glengarry Glen Ross*, is noted for his verbal wit, staccato rhythms, and earthy diction as much as he is for the masculine competitiveness in his works. There's an old Broadway joke in which an arrogant star steps over a beggar as he walks into the theater where he is performing, fatuously saying to the street person, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be"—William Shakespeare." To which the beggar shouts, "Fuck you"—David Mamet."

So the refinement of a Victorian salon—nicely conceived by scenic designer Eric Renshler, with scrim fabric walls and 23 gold portrait frames of various sizes, and lit with a palpable sensuality by Matt Frey, who uses shifting cyclorama lights to change the background pastel hues to fit the mood of each scene—seems an alien setting for Mamet's gifts. Not to mention the all-female cast ("Boston marriage" is an old term for two women living together).

Yet the claws are out between the closeted former lovers, Claire (Megan Hollingshead) and Anna (Lise Bruneau). The two scale verbals heights with pseudo-Victorian verbiage and simile, piling on allusions worthy of Oscar Wilde; then Mamet exposes himself as the playwright with an as-funny-as-it-is-vulgar set piece about Claire's muff.

That's "a small cylindrical fur or cloth cover, open at both ends, in which the hands are placed for warmth," but during an exchange between Claire and Anna while the latter very pointedly holds the muff before her loins, the comic misprision is laid bare: "Is that my muff? You gave it to me years ago." Anna's sensuous eyes widen, and Claire's arched smile almost becomes a leer. And when Catherine the maid (played to guileless perfection by Marina Squerlati) almost moans with breathless anticipation, "While I was admiring your muff, the parts came," Mamet's face almost seems to smile from the divan.

Boston Marriage isn't for the prudish or the homophobic, but is hysterically funny and a delight to those who appreciate farce. Banta is a director who typically creates a clarity of stage picture and a tight pace to serve the plot, but here the plot is so archetypal that the production wisely centers on the characters' verbal flights, which the three actresses deliver with a breathtaking clarity and a sense of timing that lets the audience catch up with the laughs.

Banta and her actresses also bring a physical exactness to each character that is a marvel to witness. The three actresses place such finely crafted physical work into their scenes that the audience is sometimes stunned before bursting into laughter. Mamet has created a play that may seem atypical for his canon, but has his verbal rhythms, predation and theatricality.

—James Yeara