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THURSDAY, JULY 1, 2004

Stunning performance opens ATF's 10th season

By MAE G. BANNER

For The Saratogian

GLENS FALLS — Any playwright who can put the words "reticule," "etagere," and "solarium" in one sentence wins my gold medal in the Olympics of language as sport.

David Mamet makes language ricochet in "Boston Marriage," the brilliantly played Victorian-era comedy running through Saturday at the new Charles R. Wood Theater.

"Boston Marriage" is the first full-scale play to be staged at the Wood Theater, a 299-seat transformation of the town's old Woolworth Store into a modern professional theater. The Mamet play opens the 10th summer season of Adirondack Theatre Festival with great style.

Martha Banta, artistic director of ATF, paces the two-act contest crisply as a badminton game played with poisoned shuttlecocks. The opponents — former lovers who may or may not wish to re-establish their alliance — are Anna, played with broad strokes of desperation and histrionics by Lise Bruneau; and Claire, more practical but no less willful, played by Megan Hollingshead.

Stirred into the mix like a bit of thick porridge is Anna's maid, Catherine, a cruelly put-upon servant, reviled by Anna for her Irish peasant origins (She's actually Scottish, but no one cares). Catherine may seem dull-witted, but she gets the best of her master at unexpected moments. Marina Squerciati plays the maid bluntly, like a Shakespearean fool who tells truth to power.

If you associate Mamet with brutal language orchestrated in jazz rhythms (driving riffs, long, free-wheeling solos), you should know that he's written "Boston Marriage" in a different key than his "Glengarry Glen Ross" or "American Buffalo." Still, this all-women's game has much in common with Mamet's testosterone-laced plays: shifting alliances among characters, relentless linguistic rhythm and speed, and Mamet's signature plot twists. The first-act curtain line alone is a shocker that leaves you breathless right through intermission.

The term "Boston marriage," commonly used in 19th century New England, refers to an intimate friendship between two women who maintain a household together.

The plot of Mamet's comedy turns on whether Anna, now well set up in a charming house by a male "protector," should permit Claire to use her bedroom for the planned seduction of a much younger woman. What does true friendship require of Anna? What risk would she be taking if her protector discovered the assignment? How can Claire claim to love her and yet make her so fiendishly jealous? And, is the maid pregnant?

All this and more is lobbed back and forth with erudite wit and quick ripostes, some worthy of Oscar Wilde. An early exchange goes: "Men. What can you do with them? Only the

REVIEW



From left, Megan Hollingshead, Marina Squerciati and Lise Bruneau star in David Mamet's "Boston Marriage" at the Adirondack Theatre Festival.

one thing."

The actors articulate perfectly, so no jest is lost. They also move wonderfully in their constricting Victorian dresses — Anna in sea green, Claire in pink. Anna's neck glides to and fro horizontally, like an Indian dancer and, in an attack of the vapors, she subsides to the floor in a pool of silk. Claire strides about the drawing room or treats us to her fine profile in repose.

There are delicious digressions, like the shared fantasy of baking a pie, or the turban and scarf-wrapped preparations for a seance. Also, Mamet occasionally breaks the period conventions, having a character say, "I getcha," or spit out a four-letter word in crassly modern tones.

The production crew has framed the play stylishly. Eric Renschler's high-ceilinged drawing room is trapezoidal and foreshortened, suggesting Victorian social restrictions and plung-

ing the audience into the midst of the action. His translucent green curtains and rosy chintz speak of mystery and convention. Moreover, they pick up the colors of Sue Slack's elegant costumes. Matt Frey's lighting conveys the passing of time and the shifting of moods, while sound designer Douglas Graves uses parlor piano tunes — even a naughty ragtime piece — to lighten the tension.

"Boston Marriage," which opened in 2002 in New York City, is a well-chosen start to what looks like a fun season of professional theater in Glens Falls. Mamet is clearly enjoying himself in women's territory, and the production brings out all his colors.

"Boston Marriage" continues at 8 p.m. daily through July 3 at the Wood Theater, 217 Glen St., Glens Falls. Tickets are \$23. Call 798-9663 or visit www.ATFestival.org.