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In most major Hollywood films, it's easy to tell the good guys from the bad guys. In David Mamet's dark comedy "Speed-the-Plow," a cautionary tale revealing a seamy side of the movie biz, it's not so easy.

A year and a half after emotionally pummeling audiences with the poisonous, testosterone-fueled "Glengarry Glen Ross" (Mr. Mamet's Pulitzer Prize-winner), the Curtainbox Theatre Company brings another electric, edge-of-your-seat story from the playwright -- a favorite of company president and co-founder KimFurness.

The production's outstanding cast members -- Mike Schulz as movie executive Bobby Gould, Dan Hernandez as his best friend and subordinate, Charlie Fox, and Erin Churchill as sexy temp secretary Karen -- each bring a blazing intensity and thundering realism to their roles.

"Glengarry" is a scathing, bitter comedy about small-time, cutthroat real-estate salesmen pushing plots of land on reluctant buyers. "Speed-the-Plow" is a slightly warmer-hearted (but still cynical) look at the ruthless, cutthroat nature of how films get made. It's also filled with Mr. Mamet's trademark rapid-fire dialogue and profanity, though the obscenities aren't quite as frequent as in "Glengarry."

Ms. Furness -- a first-time Curtainbox director and veteran actress and producer -- says this is how real people talk. No, this is how male Mamet characters talk (and gangsters, criminals, Eminem, Cee Lo Green, etc.). Maybe I just hang out with the right crowd.

Either way, it's an alternately tense and terrifically entertaining way to spend 90 minutes; "Speed-the-Plow"'s three scenes are performed without intermission.

Mr. Schulz is a natural as the supremely confident, swaggering head of production, and he and Mr.Hernandez displayamazing comic timing. In theirfirst scene, discussing a new buddy film (taking place in a prison, with a big movie star), they are hyper, excited, talking over each other with furious momentum.

Mr. Hernandez -- who will graduate from St. Ambrose in May -- is excellent as the very nervous Fox, who's initially subservient to Gould and looks up to him as a mentor. You can tell they've been longtime friends, and the actors exhibit strong chemistry.

The road to a sure moneymaker is made bumpy when the boys bet over whether Gould can get Karen to go out with him. From a silent silhouette at the start of the play, Ms. Churchill emerges as a major wrench between these two monkeys as she's asked to read an "Eastern sissy writer" script about radiation and the end of the world.

A central scene at Gould's house turns the plot as Karen presents a fresh, idealistic outlook and pleads with Gould to make a film he never had any intention of considering. Ms. Churchill seductively shows untamed enthusiasm and reflects the confidence her naive character gains.

"Speed-the-Plow" -- named for an oldfarming phrase used to confer good luck ("God speed") on one's work -- raises questions of morality, corruptibility, and how to remain pure in a world of backstabbing and slime.



PHOTOS



Photo: Submitted
 "Speed-the-Plow" features Mike Schulz as a movie executive and Erin Churchill as his temp secretary.

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Karen argues that theprison film is degrading and despicable, filled with meaningless sex and violence. Gould says hisjob is not "to make a difference," but to make films the public will come to see, based on what they've seen in the past. Studios want to make "the thing everyone made last year," Gould says.

We see Mr. Schultz's Gould struggle mightily with his conscience as he wrestles with what to do, and the last scene shows a shockingly new side to Fox, embodied by Mr. Hernandez with arambling, nervous, stuttering and jabbering personality. Fox and Gould argue ferociously and come to physical blows. In Mr. Hernandez's mesmerizing portrayal, Fox turns frighteningly menacing and threatening, gaining his own confidence and bravado.

In the last scene, we see Gould's dilemma as the two others talk to him like an angel and devil on his shoulders.

Ms. Furness replaced Phil McKinley (director of last summer's "Wit" at Curtainbox), who flew on to Broadway last month to rescue the new "Spider-Man" musical. She is on sure footing here. She graciously credits Mr. McKinley for themovie-themed look of the play, and the talented actors for bringing the "rat-a-tat" script to surging life.

Ms. Furness, who previously directed "Speed-the-Plow" while a student at St. Ambrose, should be applauded for bringing another contemporary, challenging and explosively dramatic work to a professional Quad-Cities stage. You have to have a high-quality cast and crew to pull it off, but as an actor, Ms. Furness undoubtedly knows when the pacing, the staging and the relationships work.

In her capable hands, they do, thrillingly.

If you go

-- **What:** Curtainbox Theatre Company's "Speed-the-Plow."

-- **When:** 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and Tuesday, 3 p.m. Sunday; through April 23.

-- **Where:** Village Theatre, 2113 E. 11th St., Davenport.

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