Mamet takes anti-feminist stance too far in Oleanna

OLEANNA
Written and Directed by David Mamet
Starring William Macy and Debra Eisenstadt.
Lornan Copley Place.

By Teresa Ensor
COPYRIGHT

This film begins quietly and slowly, with a male professor and a female student alone in the professor's office after hours. The student, Oleanna, has come to ask for extra help and to inquire about her grade. The professor agrees to give her some extra tutoring and promises her an A for her final grade if she will visit him in his office a few more times. Oleanna protests, asking why a professor would even suggest such an arrangement. "Because I like you," the professor says.

Exactly what the professor likes about Oleanna is left up to the viewer's imagination. She is neither attractive nor flirtatious, and her drab, bulky clothing is more maudlin than seductive. The only thing that Oleanna does in the professor's office is listen to him ramble, interrupting him every now and then to ask questions about his big vocabulary words.

This film is about the relationship between professor and student and their struggle for intellectual dominance. When the movie starts the professor is in control because Oleanna has come to him for knowledge. Oleanna lacks power and self-esteem: First, because she cannot understand what the professor is talking about; second, because she lacks a constructive outlet for her fear and anger. The one thing she can do is sit on the edge of her seat and scribble down as much as possible.

The film is meant to start out like a relatively typical interaction between teacher and student. Unfortunately, this relationship degenerates rather quickly. At some point between the first and second scene Oleanna starts to ask questions about his big vocabulary words. The group goes on to empower Oleanna to confront her professor with this accusation and eventually helps her bring a list of her complaints to the professor's tenure committee.

Needless to say, the professor does not end up getting tenure. However, writer-director David Mamet is not content to let Oleanna rest with nothing but the professor's chances of university advancement. By the third scene he has her crying rape.

It's strange to observe how Mamet manages to work a rape charge into a film that is utterly devoid of action. It is clear in the viewer that the professor never raped Oleanna; he merely hindered her rapid departure from his office. He put his arms on her shoulders and physically restrained her— that is all. Oleanna and his reasoning for this move is truly racy: The group hopes to contract a plea bargain with the professor in which in which he would agree to remove his own book from the required reading list. The movie is a veritable horror film for college professors.

Oleanna's war on her professor gives her strength and self-esteem, as well as status within her group. But Mamet goes out of his way to destroy any sympathetic connection with the viewer. Oleanna is a vengeful, nasty character who clearly enjoys turning the tables on her tormentor, talking down to him and interrupting him the way he once interrupted her. She has no reason to cry rape, and yet she does, because she can.

Clearly, Oleanna is a pawn in Mamet's dramatic war against feminism. Fortunately, however, his film is too slanted and exaggerated to be taken seriously. When Oleanna gloats and makes her professor admit that he saw her as little more than a weak woman of "questionable sexuality," Mamet's homophobic paranoia is brought to the forefront. By using exaggerated charges, fancy footwork and twisted language, it endeavors to reduce modern-day sexual harassment trials to the level of the 17th-century witch hunt.

Unfortunately, Mamet takes the point too far. His attempt to elicit sympathy for the perpetrators of sexual harassment fails because the professor is an unpleasant individual. Although some of the professor's philosophical points are quite interesting, his lecturing technique (and Mamet's writing style) is repetitive and annoying. It is made clear from the beginning of the film that he is interested in himself only, and that Oleanna is no different from Oleanna.

William H. Macy and Debra Eisenstadt in Oleanna.