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Gender Roles

Defunkt theatre queers a classic with creative casting

BY ERIN ROOK

When David Mamet wrote the Pulitzer- and Tony-winning play *Glengarry Glen Ross* in 1984, his tale of a group of desperate real estate salesmen over two days emphasized the role of masculinity in success. The upcoming production by defunkt theatre company queers that narrative with creative casting that invites a reinterpretation of the original script.

"The original play as written, I would say, is a brutal examination of real estate salesmen vying for dominance and survival in a very competitive sales environment," says Matthew Kern, an artistic director for defunkt theatre. "It's not a nice story but it's fun to watch. [Mamet's] just a master of language."

The company is preparing a performance of the play that, through mixed-gender casting, adds layers of contemporary interest to the already timely, if rather macho, story. No changes have been made to the script or the setting, but the two main characters—ruthless Ricky Roma and old-fashioned Shelley "The Machine" Levene—will be played by women, Grace Carter and Lori Sue Hoffman.

Kern says he and Carter, the company's other artistic director, had considered an all-female cast, but felt that a mixed-gender ensemble would create more dynamic shifts in the relationships between the characters.

"This is still a world in which everything that is of value is described in a masculine way... so there becomes this issue [of] how would a woman survive in this environment?"

Would she have to act like a man, whatever that means?" Kern says. "We were really interested in what [it does] to have women using derogatory terms about women to attack men."

On the receiving end of most of those attacks is Kern's character, officer manager John Williamson. The salesmen see Williamson as less of a man because he doesn't go out on sales "sits" and has a quieter personality.

"They're constantly attacking Williamson, calling him fairy," Kern says. So he and Carter thought it would be interesting if the

actor playing Williamson was, in fact, gay. "It's not like I'm up there gaying it up, it's just sort of who I am. So we're not doing anything overt."

Still, aside from the insults, Kern says the original script makes it easy to imagine Williamson is gay, especially with a woman playing Levene, the salesman who most often derides the office manager.

Kern points to a moment in the script when Levene pleads, "John, my daughter..." in a final bid to garner sympathy. With a woman in the role, and Williamson reading as gay, the moment becomes an exercise in heterosexual privilege, as if Levene were saying to childless Williamson, "I have a daughter so I matter more than you," Kern says.

Williamson's response, fittingly, is "Fuck you."

In the 1992 film adaptation, Williamson (played by Kevin Spacey) talks about having

-MATTHEW KERN,
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, DEFUNKT

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