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## Theater BY SUZI STEFFEN



Karen (Zoe Grobart), Bobby (Larry Fried) and Charlie (Richard Leebrick)

CRAIG WILLIS

# Maintain Consistent Speed

Mamet play doesn't gel

Let's get this out of the way: You should go see *Speed-the-Plow* at the Lord Leebrick for Richard Leebrick's performance. He nails the part of brazen, half-desperate movie producer Charlie Fox in Mamet's 1988 play, revived on Broadway last year.

One Eugenean posted on Twitter last week that she'd seen "the preview of *Speed-the-Blow*," which made me laugh heartily before I realized that Charlie Fox and his friend/boss, Bobby Gould, probably should have been speeding through a lot more drugs. This play's so precisely late '80s that a few lines on Gould's new desk would have been just the thing.

Richard Leebrick's performance wasn't scheduled: *American Buffalo* was on the calendar. Whatever the reason(s) for the switch, I'd have preferred to see Larry Fried directing *Buffalo* to his playing Bobby Gould in *Speed*.

Fried, probably because he himself is a nice guy, makes Bobby — a man who just got promoted to a plum, if highly pressured, spot in a Hollywood studio — too caring and thoughtful to match up with Richard Leebrick's manic, focused Charlie. Mamet's script carries some of the blame, for it asks the actor playing Bobby to make bizarre choices.

One of the major plot lines concerns Bobby's loneliness and desire for his temporary secretary Karen (Zoe Grobart). This powerful, wealthy guy — yes, mid-level in a studio, not the big kahuna, but still a successful predator — knows how to get that new office (the paint's only half-finished in Amy Dunn's set), but hasn't figured out how to bed the many willing Hollywood climbers out there? I don't think so.

Those issues aside, Bobby's sexual and existential crises (Art or commerce? *What should he do?*) occupy enough of his mind to leave room for the seemingly innocent Karen to slip her ambition into the place where Bobby's cold calculations should be.

Grobart, whose mellifluous voice and fearlessness enlivened *Shipwrecked!*, needs to roughen up her mannered movement and cadences for *Speed-the-Plow*, not to the level of Charlie's grunts and narrow-

eyed self-interest but at least enough to capture the attention of the audience. When Karen makes a seductive attempt to interest Bobby in greenlighting a literary apocalyptic book, Grobart needs to lose the wide-eyed look and beautifully modulated tone — and gain some slyness.

Sly: stock in trade for Mamet. So are *guys*, of course. *Speed-the-Plow*, no shock to Mamet fans or haters, concerns men jockeying for position and power using language as a weapon. Whether the weapons emerge blunt or deadly sharp, language and its pacing stand at the vital center of the play. What's Bobby paid for — to make art? No, and we know it, and so does Charlie, who never takes his eye off the ball.

Charlie's explosion of anger at Bobby's sudden and weird betrayal provides Richard Leebrick the chance to show his physicality. Although the fury serves Charlie's selfish purposes, it's Charlie, not Karen, who cares about Bobby and his future. Karen, a cardboard character (Mamet's not known for writing women, to put it mildly), plans climbing on and over Bobby. Charlie, who's been loyal to his friend for years, wants them to succeed at the Hollywood game together.

The plot's central question — Should Bobby take a sure-thing buddy movie or an end-of-the-world arthouse idea to a higher power at the studio? — would probably have meant more before movies like *The Road* or even the bleak *There Will Be Blood* hit the big screen. And no one now could be surprised by what perhaps appeared in 1988 an eye-opening behind-the-scenes look at the underbelly of getting a film made; we've got Nikki Finke, a constant stream of info on Twitter, celebrity cell photos, TMZ, Perez Hilton, all kinds of reality shows and even the website Smoking Gun to tell us about every last detail of every last deal.

That takes some shine off the play, but Mamet's depiction of interpersonal power relations could win through if Fried and Grobart found their footing in this production. I look forward to seeing the short, no-intermission play again at the end of the run. Meanwhile, Leebrick's burning up the Leebrick.

EW