

MEDIA RELEASE

Soulpepper's 2011 Season opens with David Mamet's *Oleanna* directed by Master Director László Marton

Toronto, ON – January 6th, 2011 – **Albert Schultz**, Founding Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company, today announced that the company's production of David Mamet's *Oleanna* opens the 2011 Season previewing on January 29th, 2011 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts.

One of the most provocative plays of the twentieth-century, *Oleanna* by playwright David Mamet, examines gender politics and political correctness gone sour when an ordinary meeting between a professor and his student explodes into a debate on the abuses of power that threatens to turn the tables completely. When *Oleanna* debuted in 1992 at Mamet's Massachusetts-based Back Bay Theatre Company hot on the heels of the Clarence Thomas/Anita Bryant sexual harassment scandal, audience reaction was divided on Mamet's message but united in praise for his talent as a master playwright. Mamet's mastery of realistic dialogue and his uncanny ability to stir controversy is never more apparent than in this modern classic.

Master Hungarian director **László Marton** (*A Month in the Country*, *Window on Toronto*, *Platonov*, *Uncle Vanya*) directs Founding Member **Diego Matamoros** and Soulpepper Academy alumna **Sarah Wilson** in *Oleanna*.

Oleanna previews January 29, 2011 and opens February 3, 2011 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, located at 55 Mill Street, Building 49, in the Distillery Historic District. Tickets range from \$28 - \$60 and are available by calling the Young Centre box office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting www.soulpepper.ca. \$22 tickets are available for 21-30 year-olds at www.stageplay.ca. StagePlay is sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group.

Oleanna is sponsored by Blackheath Fund Management Inc. 2011 Soulpepper Lead Sponsors are: Sun Life Financial, Scotiabank Group and TELUS. Soulpepper gratefully acknowledges annual operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Soulpepper Theatre Company is an artist-founded, classical repertory theatre company with a three-tiered mandate: to present the world's greatest stories in vital Canadian interpretations; to train a new generation of theatre artists; and to inspire and enrich youth through mentorship and access programs.

BACKGROUND NOTES

Oh to be in Oleanna,
that's where I'd like to be
Than to be in Norway
and bear the chains of slavery ...
(translated from the Norwegian by Pete Seeger)

Perhaps the most controversial of David Mamet's works, and certainly one of the most controversial shows of the 90's, this play is said to have been inspired by the infamous confirmation hearings for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. A former employee named Anita Hill testified that he behaved, as we say now, inappropriately in the work place. Every moment of the hearing was televised and the country was shocked, appalled and riveted. It ignited a national debate: did Thomas' language constitute sexual harrasment or was that taking so-called political correctness too far?

In this unflinching play David Mamet presents three encounters between a professor and a young student who is failing his course and asks the audience to consider: what is sexual harrasment? Who in this situation is right? Or are they both right and both misguided, both blinded and both wounded? Is the professor guilty only of arrogance, or is he actually abusing his position? Is his student merely the confused puppet of an unscrupulous political group, or has she been ignored and marginalized by the man who was supposed to educate her? As the punchy tagline for the film version frames it: He said it was a lesson. She said it was sexual harrasment. Whichever position you take, you're wrong.

Typically for Mamet, power in this play is located in the language. No writer wields language with more deadly, pinpoint accuracy and here he uses it to sharply define the two characters – or combatants – and their positions. At first, John is a pompous bulldozer, parading his knowledge, barely even bothering to listen to Carol. She seems confused and inarticulate, sometimes painfully so, unable to express clearly what is troubling her, why she can't muster a passing grade. But in later scenes, she's a powerhouse, her language precise, her opinions forcefully stated. She's claimed her power and uses it, but she's no more skilled or compassionate in the exercise of it than he is.

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BACKGROUND NOTES CONTINUED ...

Like the political events it echoed, *Oleanna* rouses people. Some critics decried what they called a gross over-simplification of gender relationships and sexual harassment. Others lauded its fiery exploration of the abuse of power. Audiences were often so stirred that they called out during performances or burst into applause when the female character was "put in her place." Many felt that Mamet has stacked the deck in John's favour.

And yet. He wrote the role of Carol – generally regarded as his most well-developed female character – for his wife. The play's title – taken from an old folksong – refers to a failed utopian community in America in the 1800's. Is universal education a utopian idea? Is perfect gender equality a utopian idea? Everything in this exhilarating play resists easy resolution. It demands engagement (or is that enagement?). As Roger Ebert said, *Oleanna* "is one of the most stimulating experiences I've had in a theatre." Prepare to be provoked.

Tidbits

~ The title of the play comes from the eponymous name of a community founded in the 1800's by Norwegian dynamo Ole Bull. The song (translated and sung by Pete Seeger) is a critique of Ole Bull's vision of a perfect society in the backwoods of Pennsylvania. The community failed due to that same dense forest, which stubbornly resisted all cultivation. The immigrants moved away but the castle Bull commissioned for his residence still stands and hikers to Susquehanna State Park tour it to this day.

~ *Oleanna* had its London premiere in 1993 at the Royal Court Theatre. The play was directed by Harold Pinter and starred David Suchet (television's Hercule Poirot). Pinter said, "There can be no tougher ... play than *Oleanna*. The original ending is, brilliantly, 'the last twist of the knife'. The last line seems to me the perfect summation ... it is dramatic ice."

~ *Oleanna* was most recently revived in 2009. This production starred film actors Julia Stiles and Bill Pullman and was first staged at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. The production transferred to Broadway that same year and ran for 65 performances.

~ Clarence Thomas continues to serve as a United States Supreme Court Justice. In his 2007 autobiography he referred to Anita Hill as a mediocre employee whose only advancement came because of his patronage. Hill responded in a op-ed piece in the New York Times. She said, in part, "I will not stand by silently and allow (Justice Thomas), in his anger, to reinvent me."

~ Anita Hill is a professor of social policy, law and women's studies at Brandeis University.

Notes by

Soulpepper Associate Artist Paula Wing

PLAYWRIGHT BIOGRAPHY

1947 – On November 30th David Alan Mamet is born, the only son of Bernard, a labour lawyer, and Leonore Mamet. He will later have a younger sister, Lynn. e

1958 – The Mamets divorce and the difficulties of this decision make the next few years very unhappy ones for their older child. He and his sister become very close.

1962 – He is a busboy at Second City and works at Hull House Theatre, discovering his life's direction.

1964 – He studies literature and theatre at Vermont's Goddard College.

1969 – Young David earns his Bachelor's Degree and studies acting in New York at the Neighbourhood Playhouse School of Theatre.

1971 – Mamet begins teaching drama at Goddard and writes several plays.

1972 – The Duck Variations, an early one-act, displays features that will crop up again and again in his plays: a fixed setting, few characters, a simple plot, and dialogue that captures, in a poetic way, the sound of everyday speech.

1974 – Sexual Perversity in Chicago, his next play, gains him great notices and he himself later adapts it for the screen with a new title: About Last Night.

1975 – American Buffalo receives the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and goes on to be produced all over the country.

1977 – He marries the actress Lindsay Crouse and they have two daughters, Willa and Zosia.

1982 – Mamet scores with his second screenplay, an adaptation of the a novel, The Verdict, starring Paul Newman and Charlotte Rampling. It's nominated for an Academy Award for writing.

1983 – Glengarry Glen Ross, perhaps Mamet's most praised play, premieres at The Cottesloe Theatre in London England. It draws on Mamet's own real-life experiences working in the cutthroat milieu of a real estate sales office in the early 60's.

1984 – Glengarry opens first in Chicago at the Goodman Theatre and then transfers to Broadway where wins the Drama Critics Circle Award. It captures the Pulitzer Prize for Drama as well.

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PLAYWRIGHT BIOGRAPHY CONTINUED

1985 – With his close friend, the actor William H. Macy, Mamet founds the Atlantic Theatre Company, which continues to operate two small theatres in the Chelsea neighbourhood of New York City.

1987 – He directs his first film, *House of Games*, set in the world of con artists, a world he will continue to explore in his next two films, *The Spanish Prisoner* and *Heist*.

1988 – His next play, *Speed-the-Plow* goes to Broadway, where superstar singer Madonna makes her stage debut as a woman whose presence threatens a close and longstanding male friendship.

1991 – The divorced playwright meets and marries British actress Rebecca Pidgeon. Their family now includes daughter Clara and son Noah. He teaches over the years at various universities, including Yale, Columbia, New York and Chicago.

1992 – *Oleanna*, Mamet's consideration of political correctness becomes a huge, multiply produced hit. The role of Carol is created – and said to be written for – his wife, Rebecca Pidgeon.

1994 – His first novel, *The Village*, comes out. Mamet will go on to write two more novels and several warmly regarded books of essays. He's elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He adapts and directs a film version of *Oleanna*, with frequent collaborator William H. Macy.

1999 – His film of *The Winslow Boy*, starring Ms. Pidgeon, is well received. He writes a book on acting called *True or False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*.

2005 – He becomes a regular blogger on the Huffington Post. Many of his posts contain his own cartoons, all political satires laced with humour.

2006 – Soulpepper stages *American Buffalo*, starring Ted Dykstra, Michael Hanrahan and Jeff Lilico.

2008 – Mamet's latest film, *Redbelt*, comes out, a story about mixed martial arts.

2010 – His first graphic novel: *The Trials of Roderick Spode (The Human Ant)* comes out. He directs a new film version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and writes a screenplay, *Come Back to Sorrento*.

ARTIST PROFILE

Diego Matamoros is a founding member of Soulpepper Theatre Company and has been involved in many of our signature productions such as Uncle Vanya, Don Carlos, and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (for which he won a Dora Award for Outstanding Male Lead Actor).

Michael Murphy (MM)

What excited you about the possibility of doing Oleanna?

Diego Matamoros (DM)

The play seems to transcend its contemporary topic, raising ageless questions about how we (human beings) perceive each other, about our intellect, our fears, our misunderstandings, and the role that human aggression plays in all this. The audience will want to side with one or the other of the characters at different points in the play and this perhaps is what the playwright David Mamet intended.

MM

You've worked with director László Marton before, usually within the modernist period (Chekhov, Ibsen). How has that relationship shifted, if at all, working on a contemporary classic like Oleanna?

DM

Our relationship goes back some twenty-five years now and we work together as always to address the questions and challenges which arise during the rehearsal period. We've worked almost exclusively on Chekhov and Ibsen together and these of course are translated texts from their original language. With Mamet we have the advantage of having the original text before us though László had a Hungarian translation made for him back home in Budapest before coming here to start rehearsals. The work on this play has been, as with all my other projects with László, engrossing and very rewarding.

MM

I've had a glimpse of the set that Teresa Przybylski designed for Oleanna. But the first thing the audiences will notice is that it's askew, with a forced perspective. Were there discussions about how the design creates a kind of stylized environment?

DM

What Teresa has so insightfully designed is a set which forces you, at first sight, to question the world of the action you are about to witness. It helps the audience to understand that we are in a theatrical universe more than anywhere else where the metaphor of space works to elucidate the multiple meanings inherent in the play. The set is there to help you to think in a larger context than just the immediate one. It is a disturbing and "edgy" space. Mamet once said (I'm paraphrasing here): "I don't tend to write nice stories about nice people; they don't tend to make for good theatre..." Oleanna is good theatre, from the first glimpse of the set to the despairing actions of its two (convicted) characters at the end of the play. No doubt about it.