

SUN STAR

Controversial play 'Oleanna' opens

October 24, 2006

By **KAY KOERNER**
Staff Reporter

A controversial play with an anti-feminist message opened Friday.

"Oleanna," written by David Mamet and directed by Anatoly Antohin, is an imposing story of power, manipulation and education, with the underlying cohesion of sexual tension that serves, at least initially, as one of the primary motivations of both characters.

John, portrayed by Andrew Cassel, is up for tenure at the university where he is employed. The setting of the play is exclusively inside his office. A female student named Carol, Anna Gagne-Hawes' character, shows up requesting that her grade be changed because she was having a hard time understanding the material.

Both characters have something they're trying to prove. John attempts to show his worth by garnering a permanent position, and Carol wants to be acknowledged for the effort it took her just to get to college, and to show that she belongs there.

This play is unique because the characters lack transparency. Their motivations are often unclear and as the story progresses it is impossible to tell who is really in the wrong.

The one flaw of the performance was the stilted dialogue; lines that should've been interrupted with intent trailed off, had long pauses or built up expectantly at the end.

The first act was jerkier than intended.

The set was well designed. While the dancers were relegated to the main stage, the actors were on the ground between the stage and the seats.

The props like the wife's portrait, the chalkboard, the telephone and the slide projector all were used to great effect. The muted grays, greens and yellows are the traditional colors of institutions and comprise a backdrop where the characters stand out in stark contrast.

Carol's red scarf proclaims her a harlot; the red is countered by her youthful naivete and innocence. In the first act she is unable to find the words to describe confusion.

"I don't understand," she says.

"What part?" John asks.

"All of it."

Both characters have despicable aspects and qualities that are universally relatable. Carol is young and pliant searching for guidance and John has crossed the line and now cares more about his accolades than he cares for the well being of his students.

The tension between the two actors was palpable and the members of the audience responded. They laughed and groaned when they related to a particular part of the story.

"I thought that a whole play with just two people would be boring, but it was really involved," said Patrick Bollig, a senior bioscience student.

Each play ended with a "movement" segment where two interpretative dancers, Adam Gillette and Jey Johnson, enact a sensual struggle as representative embodiment of their sexes. Antohin added the segments as explanative elements with the excuse of artistic license.

"The dancers were explaining what the actors were doing on stage," said Jamie Naffzinger who is taking classes in office management.



Rosie Milligan / Sun Star

Jey Johnson, left, performs a dance movement piece with Adam Gillette in between acts of "Oleanna" on Friday in Salisbury Theatre.

The Salisbury Theatre was partitioned so the audience sat in the first six rows.

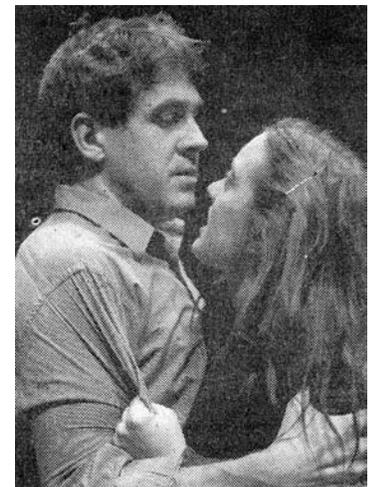
Almost 70 people showed up for opening night and many stayed after to talk with the director and cast.

"The story is the most important thing in theater, and there are several stories here," said director Antohin to the audience after the performance.

He describes the play as a postmodernist love story and explained that the "movement sections were there for the purpose of making sure the audience read the sexual tension between the characters.

"There is no Romeo and Juliet in our time because we are failing to even get to the point where we are in love," Antohin said. "This story is more tragic than Romeo and Juliet because they had their moment of connection."

"Oleanna" will play at Salisbury Theatre on Friday and Saturday at 8:15 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m.



Rosie Milligan / Sun Star

Andrew Cassel, left, struggles with Anna Gagne-Hawes in "Oleanna."