

Oleanna

STUDYGUIDE FOR THE SEATTLE REPERTORY theatre

cast

Angie Phillips

Carol—a woman of twenty,
a college student

Peter Gerety

John—a man in his forties,
a college professor

Some Important People at The Rep

Director:

Mark Wing-Davey

Scenic Designer:

Andrew Jackness

Costume Designer:

Rose Pederson

Lighting Designer:

Christopher Akerlind

Sound Designer:

Steven M. Klein

Fight Choreographer:

David Leong

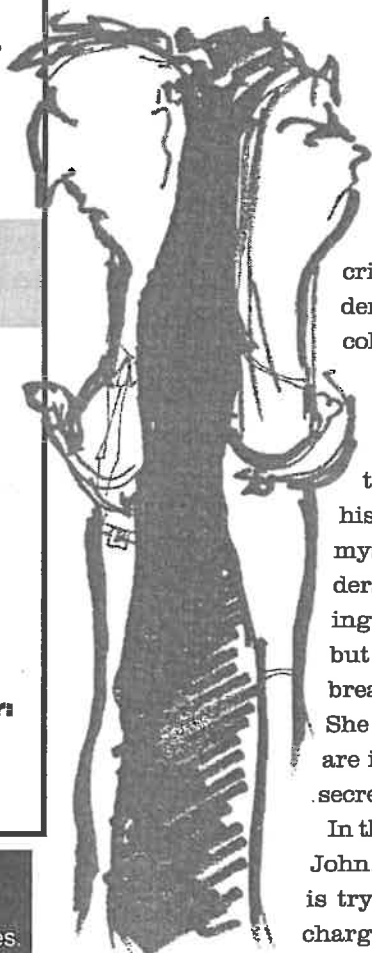
Stage Manager:

Michael Paul

Oleanna contains adult
language that may not be
suitable for all young audiences.

TEACHERS

Please plan on attending the
POST-PLAY DISCUSSION
immediately after the play. In
order to participate in dialogue
between actors and students
(lasts approximately 20 minutes),
you should remain seated
and stay tuned!



What is sexual **HARASSMENT**?

What is Carol **ANGRY** about?

Why does John become **VIOLENT**? Read **MORE**
and **FIND OUT!**

Synopsis of the Play

The play takes place in John's office.

In *Oleanna's* three acts, John, a college professor and outspoken critic of higher education, calls three conferences with Carol, a student in his class. John is on the verge of being granted tenure at the college, and as a result, he and his wife have negotiated to buy a house.

The first act begins with Carol waiting in John's office while he talks on the phone with his wife; there seems to be some difficulty with the final arrangements for the house. After some negotiation, he hangs up and turns his attention to Carol, whose work in his class is, he feels, less than adequate. She acknowledges that she is mystified by the class and frustrated at her apparent inability to understand. John tries to come up with solutions to her problems, including a guaranteed "A" in the class if she will work with him privately, but his attempts only seem to upset her further. When Carol finally breaks down, he tries to put his arm around her, but she walks away. She seems to be on the point of confiding some secret to him when they are interrupted by the phone. John has to go; Carol never reveals her secret.

In the second act, Carol has brought sexual harassment charges against John. His tenure has been held up pending an investigation. He says he is trying to come to some understanding of why she has brought the charges, but she believes he is only trying to intimidate her into dropping them. When she tries to leave, he restrains her. He says he just wants to talk. She calls for help.

The investigation has been completed in the third act. John, found guilty of harassment, is about to lose both his job and his new home. He makes a plea for Carol to reconsider her charges, but she refuses. As far as Carol is concerned, the issue stretches far beyond her own case. She and "her group" think John and his work sexist, elitist and generally offensive. However, she professes herself willing to make a deal: she will drop the charges if he will agree to ban several "questionable" books, including his own, from the curriculum. He tells her to get out. Then the phone rings: John learns from his lawyer that Carol and her group may bring attempted rape charges against him. Outraged, John begins to beat her and stops himself just short of seriously injuring her.



My plays are about people trying to become connected. People who are confused . . . trying to do good. . . . But no one knows *how*. No one ever quite makes it.

—David Mamet, playwright

In writing a play that hinges on a volatile contemporary issue, sexual harassment, David Mamet has made *Oleanna* the center of fierce political controversy. And yet Mamet has said that he does not write “political” plays. What can this mean?

“The political urge,” Mamet has written, “which is the urge to control the actions of others...is in direct opposition to the artistic urge, which is to express oneself regardless of consequences.”

In the political world, the point is to resolve conflict—whether through compromise or conquest. The theatre, by contrast, is a place to examine what creates the conflict in the first place. It is a place to give voice to the unreasoned, the uncalculated, the unconscious—or as Mamet puts it, the “soul.” And in Mamet’s view, division, separation, the inability to connect with one another may be, tragically, the one thing we have in common.

John and Carol are not meant to be models of correct behavior. They do not represent party lines. We are not being asked to choose between Democrats and Republicans here. The question is not whether it is “right” that John does what he does or that Carol does what she does. The question is: *why* do they do what they do? Where does this conflict come from? Why are these people tearing one another apart?

Ironically, though the play itself is not intended as a political statement, the characters themselves behave in a most political manner—each attempting to convince or force the other to change their opinion. Perhaps John and Carol are, in some way, striving for mutual understanding. But, failing to achieve understanding, they strive for power. In their efforts to drive to a common destination, both seem unable to resist the temptation to grab the wheel. And so the only peace they seem to be able to achieve is a balance of terror—a mutually assured destruction.

Mamet is not optimistic about achieving any kind of armistice in the battle of the sexes. Relationships in his plays, especially between men and women, are uneasy at best. (Relationships between teacher and student of either gender—also frequent in Mamet’s work—are no better.) At heart, we are uncivilized, in the grip of antisocial, even homicidal, forces beyond our control. And what is beyond our control is beyond the rational world of politics. It is the stuff of plays.

photo: David Mamet (left) and Joe Mantegna on the set of the film *Homicide* in 1991.

What Is Sexual Harassment?

Legal Definitions

There are two basic legal classifications of sexual harassment. In the first, a person in a position of power (an employer, for example or, in this case, a teacher) demands sexual favors in exchange for job benefits (such as a promotion or a good grade) or in return for job security (i.e., not getting fired). This type of situation is what most people think of when they hear the term "sexual harassment." This is also the easiest type to identify and therefore to prosecute.

However, there is another type of harassment which has been the focus of many recent court cases. Comments or inappropriate jokes, offensive posters or other materials may contribute to what is known as a "hostile work environment." Although the victim is not being denied any obvious benefit or promotion, she or he is being denied a tolerable place to work.

The Reasonable Woman Standard

Early in 1991, a court in San Francisco established the "Reasonable Woman Standard." The ruling demands that cases of sexual harassment be viewed from the victim's perspective. Further, the court stated that an analysis of the victim's view requires understanding the "different perspectives of men and women."

"For example," the court stated, "because women are disproportionately victims of rape and assault, women have a stronger incentive to be concerned about sexual behavior."

Thus, according to this legal standard, when John says that putting his hand on Carol's shoulder was "devoid of sexual content," his intentions are irrelevant. Carol responds "I SAY IT WAS NOT...Don't you begin to understand? IT'S NOT FOR YOU TO SAY?" How Carol felt, not what John meant, is the issue.

However, the court also states that the employee must prove that the behavior was such that a "reasonable woman" would find it offensive. But, an employer "does not have to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of the rare hyper-sensitive employee."

Isn't this unfair?

Theatre audiences are concerned with motivation in a way that juries can never be. In this sense, as theatre critic Frank Rich has remarked, the play "stacks the deck" against Carol. If John's motives seem clear, hers are mysterious. In the first act, she seems frustrated at her own inability to understand; she is confused, inarticulate. At the start of the second act, she has found her voice and her anger is no longer directed at herself or the situation but is entirely focused on John. Her transformation is left unexplained.

One way of accounting for Carol's relative ambiguity is that Mamet is expressing a com-

mon contemporary male fear of being blindsided by false accusations of sexual harassment. If a woman, for whatever reason, is truly "out to get" a man, she can use a sexual harassment claim to utterly ruin his life. Perhaps this is so.

Some would argue that, on the balance, this scenario is rather speculative; it is something that *might* happen. Its very ambiguity, the random violence of it, leaves it more the stuff of nightmares than of clear and present danger. As such, from this political perspective, the significance of such a scenario shrinks to insignificance.

The Cast



Angie Phillips, who comes to The Rep from New York City, will play Carol. Ms. Phillips is a 1990 graduate of New York University's graduate acting program, and was last seen at The Rep in the 1993 production of *Eye of God*.



Peter Gerety, who will play John, is an actor and director. He works primarily in Rhode Island at the Trinity Repertory Company, where he has played more than 100 roles. This summer, he filmed "Return to Lonesome Dove."

What Is Carol Angry About?



CAROL: Do you know what you've worked for? Power. For power. Do you understand? And you sit there, and you tell me stories. About your house, about all your private schools, and about privilege, and how you are entitled. To buy, to spend, to mock, to summon . . . Don't you see? You've worked twenty years for the right to insult me. And you feel entitled to be paid for it.



Mamet has written that men, in their quest for others' approval and acceptance, are "the puppydogs of the universe." Yet, in nearly every way possible—physically, financially, materially, linguistically, culturally—men completely dominate this society.

But the boss or teacher who says, "We're all just family here," and at the same time retains all the privileges of power may be indulging in a kind of deceptive, even abusive behavior. He may be trying to have it both ways. Is it any wonder that when John tries to erase what he calls "the artificial distinction between teacher and student," but then keeps on using five dollar words and monopolizing the conversation, Carol is at first bewildered and ultimately despises him for it?

Language

In the first act of the play, Carol expresses her frustration with John's teaching style, saying "It's *difficult* for me. . . . The *language*, the 'things' that you say."

One of the ways in which power relationships are played out in our society, especially in academia, is through the use of language. Historically, the victor in a war forces the invaded country to give up its language. Losing one's language is a profound symbol of disenfranchisement and the loss of power.

The English language is often referred to as "male-centered." Since men have had access to the public arena much longer than women (remember women were only given the vote in this country in 1920), they have unconsciously formulated the style and articulation of public speaking and writing.

This is nowhere more obvious than in the use of the "generic he." When gender is unknown, the male pronoun is assumed. In the first act, when John refers to a random student, he says: "If you are told...Listen to this. If the young child is told he cannot understand. Then he takes it as a description of himself." But Carol, the student he is talking to, is a woman. How can she relate to this story when she is implicitly excluded from it?

In the second act, as John attempts to reason with Carol, he refers to the tenure committee as "All Good Men and True." Carol reacts angrily, but John finds his slip trivial. What John cannot understand is that this type of "trivial" injustice builds over time. While it may seem harmless in a single incident, the "generic he" keeps women at a disadvantage, constantly asserting that "she" is not included in the world of men.

Tenure

A tenured professor has, virtually, a guaranteed job for life.

For a college professor, life before tenure (full status on the faculty) is uncertain. Her or his employment contract is generally reviewed on a yearly basis, at which time it may be renewed or it may not. Most college professors who want to hold on to their jobs and apply for promotion need constantly to engage in some kind of recognized scholarly activity (books and articles published, awards received). After a number of years of service, a college professor usually becomes eligible to apply for tenure. The application is reviewed by a committee of professors (usually professor who have themselves been granted tenure) who if they deem the applicant's level of scholarship to be sufficiently advanced, accept him or her into the ranks of the tenured.

There are several reasons for granting tenure, but perhaps the most important is academic freedom. A tenured professor is free to speak his or her mind without fear of retribution. In fact, tenure allows certain faculty to be openly critical of the college as an institution.

Critics of tenure have argued that a tenured professor no longer has any incentive to continue his or her scholarly activities or to pursue excellence in teaching. It has been pointed out that the tenure process is extremely hierarchical in form and often elitist, sexist and racist in practice. Further, the binding legal nature of tenure makes it more difficult to dismiss a professor who engages in sexual harassment or other form of immoral or abusive conduct.

Why Does John Become Violent?

It has been said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. All three of the conferences between John and Carol are at his invitation. After the first two conferences have cost him his job and his house, one would think John would know better.

After his first conference with Carol, John fails to recognize that she no longer regards him as a human being but as an opponent, a political force, a faceless representative of the worst offenses of his class and gender. He has been labeled, fixed in his position as oppressor. By the second act, Carol is openly at war with John.

Somehow, even into the third act, John still seems to believe that if he and Carol can just sit down and "talk as human beings," all will be well. The conflict still seems personal to him. By the end of the play, however, Carol's actions will prompt John to identify her as the enemy, part of political forces that he regards as beneath contempt, inhuman and to be defeated by any means necessary, even violence.

The Canon

When Carol and her group attempt to blackmail John to remove several books, including his own, from the reading list for his classes, John expresses his outrage at what he sees as an attack on "academic freedom." But Carol responds, "Someone chooses the books."

Why does Carol's group feel the need to use such terrorist tactics to change a reading list? The extremity of their approach to the situation reflects the intensity of the current debate in academia about the "canon."

When academics refer to the canon, they mean those books which have been deemed masterpieces or classics—works like *Moby Dick* and the plays of Shakespeare. Through the teaching and study of certain works, they become institutionalized. They become mandatory for survey courses in literature, history, politics, etc.

On a practical level, since a student can only read so many books in a given semester, any time a book is added to a class reading list, one must be removed. This raises many hard questions about who should make these decisions and on what criteria.

When universities were still the nearly exclusive province of the white male upper class, there were relatively few challenges to the canon. Times have changed. Now that significant populations of white women and people of color have arrived on campus, they have begun to question the dominant culture of the university. Why, for example, are there not more courses in Latino history?

As a result, higher education, for good or ill, has probably lost some of the coherence it had as a perfectly male institution. It is difficult to establish coherent educational standards when the standards of the dominant culture have been called into question.

In a system that has been run by upper-class white males for centuries, how does one evaluate the "merit" of anything outside the dominant culture? Shakespeare, a dead white male playwright, has a track record that, for example, Ntozake Shange, a live black woman playwright, clearly does not. Does that mean that Ntozake Shange's work shouldn't be taught?

Some academic traditionalists dismiss any challenges to the elitism and patriarchy of universities as "political correctness." They see efforts to build an inclusive curriculum as a kind of affirmative action or "quota" system for works by women, homosexuals and people of color. They see the people who try to introduce such reforms not as people with legitimate concerns, but as unquestioning adherents to a predetermined, fashionable political agenda.

A Violent Debate

Both sides, frustrated and enraged, are increasingly unwilling to engage in an open, civil and productive exchange of ideas. Instead, people have stopped listening and have taken instead to yelling at each other to "shut up." At best, extremists on both sides attempt to ignore and dismiss books that do not fit with their pre-conceived notions of "proper" literature, history, political science, etc. At worst, they try to ban each others' books.

When Carol, with the backing of her group, hands John the list of books she wants banned, she draws the battle lines:

CAROL: You have an agenda, we have an agenda. I am not interested in your feelings or your motivations, but your actions. If you would like me to speak to the Tenure Committee, here is my list. You are a Free Person, you decide.

JOHN: ...You're dangerous, you're wrong and it's my job ... to say no to you. That's my job. You are absolutely right. You want to ban my book? Go to hell ...

CAROL: You have an agenda, we have an agenda. I am not interested in your feelings or your motivations, but your actions. If you would like me to speak to the Tenure Committee, here is my list. You are a Free Person, you decide.

All at once, John is no longer looking to arrive at a mutual understanding:

JOHN: ...You're *dangerous*, you're *wrong* and it's my *job*... to say no to you. That's my job. You are absolutely right. You want to ban my book? Go to *hell*...

At that moment, his lawyer calls and John finds out about the attempted rape charges. But even that doesn't set him off. The phone rings again, and Carol makes what is perhaps her most invasive gesture of the play:

CAROL: ...your wife... ?

JOHN: Who it is is no concern of yours. Get out. (*To phone:*) No, no, it's going to be all right. I can't talk now, Baby. (*To Carol:*) Get out of here.

CAROL: I'm going.

JOHN: Good.

CAROL (*exiting*): ...and don't call your wife "baby."

This is the final act that turns John from "reasonable" man to assailant. In John's view, Carol is now not only one with the most extreme forces of "political correctness," she is on his territory. If he invaded her life by trying to touch her in an inappropriate manner, she has now invaded his life with a single inappropriate remark.

The transformation is complete. To each other, Carol and John are no longer people but political positions. John, the oppressor, strikes out to defend his privacy and his privilege. Carol, the oppressed, cultivates her status as victim. With every blow John inflicts on her, she gains another piece of the moral high ground.

Beaten and cowering on the floor, Carol has proved her case. "Yes. That's right," she says, "That's right."

Chronology of Sexual Harassment Legislation in the U.S.

- 1964:** Civil Rights Bill passes, including a broad employment discrimination section to cover gender discrimination.
- 1972:** Congress passes the Equal Employment Opportunity Act
- 1976:** Court rules that behavior which creates an "artificial barrier to employment that was placed before one gender and not the other" is considered sexual harassment.
- 1977:** First charge of sexual harassment of students brought under Title IX of the 1972 Education Act Amendments. A female undergraduate at Yale says her professor offered her an "A" in his course if she would accept his sexual proposition. When she refused, she got a "C." The suit was dropped in 1980, when the university established sexual harassment grievance procedures.
- 1986:** The Supreme Court rules that sexual harassment on the job is illegal discrimination even if the victim suffers no economic loss.
- 1991:** 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco establishes the "reasonable woman" standard.
- 1991:** Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas televised hearings bring the issue of sexual harassment to the immediate attention of the nation.
[1992: *Oleanna* opens off-Broadway in New York]
- 1993:** In November, the Supreme Court rules that "So long as the environment would reasonably be perceived as hostile or abusive, there is no need for it also to be psychologically injurious."

I. The preface to *Oleanna* reads:

"Oh, to be in Oleanna
That's where I would rather be.
Than be bound in Norway
And drag the chains of slavery."
— folk song

The title of Mamet's play suggests a world in which people are not enslaved by the problems Carol and John face. Could such a world exist? How would it be different from this one? What would it be like? Does this play suggest such a world could exist?

questions TO DISCUSS

2. How could Carol and John have done things differently? How could they have sorted out the situation so they didn't hurt each other?

3. Could this situation exist with a female professor and a male student? How might things be different or similar?

4. Think about the books you have read in school over the past few years. Who is represented? Do you think there should be more diversity in your reading materials? If so, which authors should be included?

5. Why are students given grades? What would it be like if students weren't given grades? Have you ever been given a grade that you felt was unfair? Why was it unfair? What did you do about it? If you were a teacher, what criteria would you use to grade your students? Is there another system besides grading that might work?

6. Why are you in school? What are some reasons to go to college? Are there any bad reasons to go to college?

7. How do men and women see things differently? How do men and women have trouble communicating? Have you ever felt misunderstood because of your gender? According to the women in the class, what things do men not understand? According to the men, what do women not understand?

8. If you were to be harassed by a teacher or fellow student at your school, what procedures are in place to help you? Research the policies of your school's administration. What are the proper channels to be followed?

9. Can a teacher and a student be friends? Why or why not? Write a dialogue, poem or short story about your relationship with a teacher.

Where are you going to see the play?



The Seattle Repertory Theatre, founded after the Seattle World's Fair in 1963, is one of America's largest professional, non-profit, regional theatres. Now in its 31st season, The Rep attracts an average of nearly 23,000 season ticket holders each year and serves an annual audience of nearly one quarter of a million people.

Each year, the Rep performs six productions in its Mainstage season, in the 856-seat Bagley Wright Theatre, and three productions in its Stage 2 season, in the 133-seat PONCHO Forum. The shows at The Rep range from classics to contemporary works, and premieres of new plays.

The Rep is located in the Bagley Wright Theatre at 155 Mercer Street, on the northwest corner of Seattle Center.

STUDY GUIDES: WHO NEEDS THEM?

This studyguide was written by Andrea Allen, Literary Manager for the Annex Theatre, and David Hlavsa, Head of the Drama Department at St. Martin's College in Lacey, WA. Ted Sod, the Rep's Artist-in-Residence, edited the guide. Annie J. Howell, Publications Coordinator, designed the publication.

What do you think of this Studyguide? Let us know! Send your feedback to: Ted Sod, Seattle Rep, 155 Mercer, Seattle, WA 98109.