

Stages

Weekend With Bernie

Tim Shawver's performance as a boastful lecher helps rescue David Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* from '70s irrelevance

By Robrt L. Pela

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Opening-night performances by small theater companies usually play to half-empty houses -- except, apparently, for shows with the phrase "sexual perversity" in their titles.

Sexual Perversity in Chicago's first night was a sellout for Nearly Naked Theatre Company, a fact that so pleased the show's director that he photographed his anxious audience from the stage before the curtain went up.

Once it did, David Mamet's 1978 one-act comedy unfurled like a sentimental celebration of sex obsession. *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* is often performed in tandem with the author's *The Duck Variations*, another one-act set in Chi-town. That play, in which a couple of codgers sit on a park bench and talk about nothing, is meant to offset the endless expletives of *Sexual Perversity*, in which the topic is always either sex or women, and usually it's sex with women.

In a series of blackouts, each of them ending in a smarmy punch line, we meet Danny and Debbie, a pair of young singletons who become lovers. Their new romance is threatened by the misogynist ravings of Danny's lunatic pal Bernie, a boastful lecher who's completely incapable of love, and by the bitter tirades by Deborah's roommate, Joan. Neither of these sidekicks wants to lose their friends to love, which they're convinced they'll never find themselves. Bernie's manipulative rants about women as sex toys (his story about a recent conquest who was into "combat sex" is hilarious) are meant to destroy Danny's budding relationship, as is Joan's envious bitching about Deborah's "doomed" romance. While these two wail, Deborah and Danny move in together, but both have heard too much '70s sex rhetoric to believe in romance, and pretty soon they're both back to trolling discos in search of something less permanent.

I liked the performances better than I liked Mamet's script, which hasn't aged well. Despite its clever dialogue and wicked commentary, *Sexual Perversity* plays like a retrofest of fern bars and obsolete opinions. From the vantage point of post-AIDS America, this look back does little to illuminate the differences between current sex politics and those depicted here. Disparaging speeches about the Equal Rights Amendment and naive attitudes about sexuality and misogyny (such as the theory that Bernie's opinion of women might be related to his having been groped by a grown man when he was small) make this seem all the more like a period piece. So why produce a play that appears to have no relevance?

Details

Who / What:

Sexual Perversity in Chicago

Details:

Nearly Naked Theatre's production continues through Saturday, June 9 . Call 602-274-2432.

Where:

On the Spot Theater, 4700 North Central



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At least partly so that we can watch Bernie, a fascinating character whose entire world view is governed by sex ("What do you have to do to get a drink in this place? Come on a cracker?"). Tim Shawver turns Bernie, an exaggerated archetype, into a brilliantly pathetic loudmouth whose boastful braying never fools us and is never not hilarious. Shawver is playing 28 but looks a decade younger, a fact that makes his swaggering bravado all the funnier. Outfitted in a Nik-Nik shirt and trousers made from spun petroleum, he's a wiry, wound-up nerd who turns Mamet's vulgar eruptions into raunchy poetry.

Michael Sherwin, in a melted Dynel wig, plays an efficiently naive straight man to Shawver's silly antics. Sherwin's later scenes, in which he shouts down Debbie and is dissed by Bernie, better display his talents as a dramatic actor. The women aren't half as convincing: Lisa Fraser's Joan is more harsh than bitter about her spinsterhood, and Andrea Morales' Debbie is too aloof -- neither sexy enough to pick up nor romantic enough to marry. Director Tim Butterfield keeps up a frenetic pace, but his pilfered soundtrack is too far-flung to typify the sexy '70s disco era -- there's nothing sexy about "Kung Fu Fighting" or songs by the Partridge Family.

More than two decades after its debut, *Sexual Perversity* is still being touted as controversial. Don't believe it. Mamet may have filled his script with naughty language, but today it plays like a screwball comedy about romantic failure. Nearly Naked's audience laughed a lot, albeit nervously, at discussions about what semen tastes like (Clorox? The junior prom?) and at Bernie's incessant air-humping. But we left humming the melody to "I Think I Love You."