

British Theatre Guide

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A Life in the Theatre

David Mamet

Hiraeth Artistic Productions in association with Ovation

Upstairs at the Gatehouse

14–19 August 2012

Mamet's 1977 play, which has been described as "a love letter to theatre", clearly draws on the dramatist's own early experience as an actor. While acerbically eschewing sentiment, it is full of an affection and nostalgia for the business and especially the kind of stock company to which his two protagonists belong.

Robert is a veteran, an old school actor, part of an on-going tradition. He may pontificate from his vast experience but his confidence and self-esteem are challenged by new blood, aware of his own loneliness, not such a "perfect study" as he used to be. Sharing a dressing room with him is John, a young actor of growing skill and confidence. He is respectful of the older man's experience but increasingly finds his tolerance challenged by Robert's manner.

In a series of short scenes, we see the changing balance of their relationship as the season continues in situations before a show and after, in rehearsal, just about to make an entrance and, interspersed between these funny but, as it were, "real life" scenes, are brief glimpses of them in the varied repertoire of a stock company from a World War II battle scene to French Revolution romance and hospital drama, scenes which affectionately send up both the plays and the performance styles of stock theatre forty or more years ago.

Zoé Ford's production doesn't attempt a naturalistic staging. Suzi Lombardelli's setting has costume racks, light-bulb framed arches and necessary furniture and a scattering of objects around the perimeters and hanging from above, some of which are there for practical purposes, some no doubt intended to be symbolic, though I never worked out of what, but it enables scenes to flow easily and rapidly one after another. The playing however is very real, with a use of consciously richer tones when the actors are playing roles.

John Fleming makes Robert by turns avuncular, patronising, mentoring and tetchy. As John, Duncan Williams passes from respectful accommodation to exasperation. Their generational differences nicely marked by the different exercises they use to warm up, that Robert uses greasepaint, John pancake makeup. They are well-matched in presenting the pendulum swings of their relationship.

There is no attempt to assume American accents. The actors here are played as though they are members of a mid-twentieth century rep or summer season company in Britain which perhaps makes it even easier to identify with them for I am sure that any theatre professionals in the audience will recognize the situation very well.

This early play is relatively lightweight but nevertheless in its seventy-five or so minutes playing time it gives an amusing glimpse backstage that says something about generational competition

that has a certain poignancy, not just in the presentation of Robert but in the uncertain future that lies ahead for John, despite his current growing confidence.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)