

THEATER REVIEW:

“Speed-the-Plow” brilliantly mines weighty topics

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Two, as it's long been said, is company. But three? Three is something different all together.

Three is the outsider coming in. Three is the difference between black and white – and the introduction of grey. And three, in the case of Tennessee Repertory Theatre's "Speed-the-Plow," which continues through Feb. 17, is the balance between "been there/done that" and a truly engaging experience that feels brand new.

For Bobby Gould (portrayed by David Alford) and Charlie Fox (Jessejames Locorriere), success is looking like the sure thing. Hollywood's their business, and on the eve of "greenlighting" a movie that's sure to bring in the cash – but not necessarily any moral satisfaction – their third party arrives with plans of her own.

The "interruption" – in the form of Marin Miller – throws Gould off his game, and David Mamet's intriguing piece dives deep into a quagmire of pretense, positioning and power plays. At any moment, any one of the three might have the upper hand.

The first act, however, is the most challenging. Two of the characters, those played by Alford and Miller, feel almost too recognizable. It's hard to divorce them from their roles in last year's "Oleanna," Mamet's take on sexual harassment. Once again (at least at this point in the piece) Alford is the one behind the desk asserting his position, as the doe-eyed Miller tries to find her confidence.

But just as the third party in the play changes everything, the addition of Locorriere is what shifts the tide for the production, as well. As proud as a peacock, Locorriere's mannerisms and expression are a perfect fit for one of such feigned loyalty – and a perfect complement to the level of familiarity that Alford and Miller already share.

As with any Mamet play, the witty dialogue comes fast and furious – and the language can be strong. But the actors carry off the exchanges with grace and ease, saying more with what they don't voice than with what they actually do. The piece itself offers plenty of food for thought, especially in the areas of motivation, fear and control. By the end, it provides as many questions as it does answers.

Can we really be so blinded by power? Can we ever find a balance between the heart and the head? And can we really be so influenced by another?

At least in the last case, the answer is yes. Influence is mighty thing – and one that plays out brilliantly in the skilled hands of those onstage.