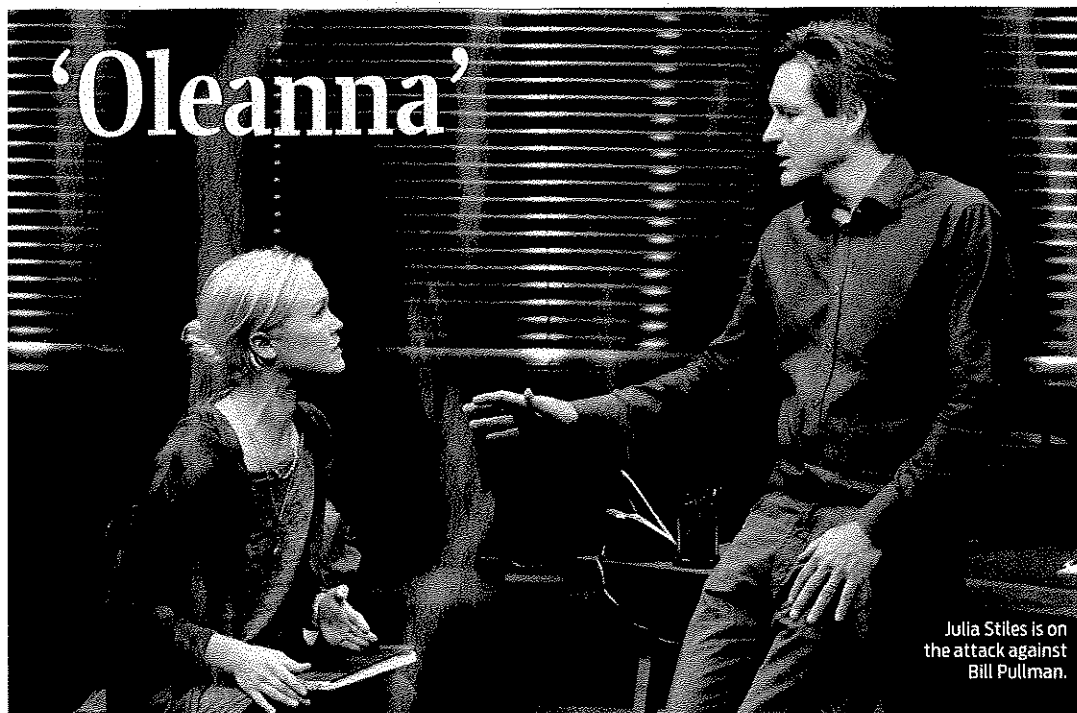


REVIEWS

THEATER/CONCERT



Julia Stiles is on the attack against Bill Pullman.

By Jay Reiner

David Mamet's scorching 1992 play "Oleanna," whose subtitle could well be "Drag Me to Hell," is about a slightly fatuous but well-meaning college professor, John (Bill Pullman), and the demented student, Carol (Julia Stiles), who destroys his life in the name of "political correctness."

That's the term John uses near the end of the play to describe Carol's unfathomably malefic behavior. But the term really is Mamet's euphemism for a virulent strain of academic feminism known to flourish on some college

campuses. Apparently, Carol has succumbed to the radical ideology of what she calls "my Group," and once she has been Dworkinized, it's lights out for the professor.

It could be argued that the student isn't demented but merely overzealous in her pursuit of revenge and ideological purity, or whatever motivates her vicious behavior. As written, though, this is the only interpretation that makes sense because Carol's IQ seems to rise about 60 points during the play. She barely can put together a coherent sentence when we meet her, but once she gets the professor in her sights, she seems

BOTTOM LINE 75 minutes of dynamite theater.

VENUE: Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles (Through July 12). CAST: Bill Pullman, Julia Stiles. PLAYWRIGHT: David Mamet. DIRECTOR: Doug Hughes. SET DESIGNER: Neil Patel. LIGHTING DESIGNER: Donald Holder. COSTUME DESIGNER: Catherine Zuber.

to develop a keenly analytical mind and the power of articulate speech. Are we really watching a takeoff on "The Three Faces of Eve"?

What Carol does seem to be, though, is largely a device for Mamet to vent his anger and underline the consequences some

lofty but skewed political ideas can have on real people in the real world — especially when they fall on the ears of troubled or confused young people. The provocation succeeds because it's nearly impossible not to take sides in this inflammatory play, then to think about why you took the side you took.

Pullman and Stiles are riveting together under Doug Hughes' taut direction. Mamet's broken-sentence dialogue flies between the two characters like a shattered pane of glass, each fragment finding its mark and leaving a speck of blood.

Pullman probably has the easier job because the professor makes sense as a character and basically has only to react to the mystifying behavior of a monstrous student. Carol, on the other hand, is such a wickedly contrived character — not her ideas, but her motives — that it's almost difficult to take her seriously at times. It's even possible to conclude she has set a trap for the professor, acting helpless and confused to evoke the protective (read patriarchal) responses she exploits so successfully. Stiles manages to throw a cloak of believable ambiguity over much of Carol's behavior and motives, probably the best that can be done with the character.

In the end, it really doesn't matter what Carol's motives are. It's the bogus ideas and malicious attitudes she accepts to express her feelings that matter, as does the terrible power they confer on suggestible people like her. **B+**