

Political Hijinx

by Paul Hansom

November, by David Mamet. Directed by Peter Flynn. With Greg Bostwick, Jesse Bush, Wally Dunn, Sharon Eisman, Ryan Garcia.
At the Hangar Theatre through July 18.



Just when you thought Presidential politics were over, here we go again with November, David Mamet's very recent noodle on American democracy. You can't really call this a political play by any stretch, because Mamet is less interested in satirizing the Presidential office than in exploring the farcical nature of its lunatic mendacity.

November plunges us into the Oval world of lame-duck President Charles Smith, a week before election day - he doesn't stand a hope in hell, but he wants to go out stuffed with cash (courtesy of the turkey lobby), and maybe even a bigger legacy. Chucky will take what he can get. Always. Flynn's production is sharp and pithy, and marshals a cracking cast who smoothly escalate the absurdities into weirdly known knows.

Wally Dunn gives a great turn as the oaf-President, neither Bush nor fowl, he's got a little bit of star-spangled reverence and a thousand stupid ideas. Pacing the perfect circus ring set, he's a composite of crass, dumb, and weasily characteristics, the compound expression of a greed-driven narcissist seeking advantage, regardless of the contradictions.

And where would a daft President be without the true calculator and real brain in the office? No, it's not the veep this time, but the Chief of Staff, Archer Brown. Jesse Bush gives a rock-solid portrait of the sharp, polished Ivy man, keen and capable, he's more than a little disgusted with Chucky, but sensible enough to hide it.

Mamet counter-balances this calculated cynicism by throwing an ethical, idealistic, lesbian speechwriter into the mix. Enter Clarice Bernstein, ably played by Sharon Eisman. She's a privileged member of the Beltway community, though she believes she's not, blinded as she is by her own self-aggrandizing identity politics. She's just bought herself a Chinese baby, and brought back avian flu as part of her bargain. Clarice snuffles and sneezes, battering out well-rounded sound bites on her typewriter. (Typewriter? In this day and age?) She's as comfortable with espousing righteous pieties as she is in trying to blackmail the Pres into marrying her to the girlfriend on TV.

Mamet's loopy coup, though, is putting a rep for the National Association of Turkey center stage. It's a sweet catch-all, and Bostwick is the Teflon coated Guy Smiley of bird, as bent as the rest of them. And what's an American farce without the Indian? He shows up as the outraged Chief Dwight Grackle (a limber Ryan Garcia), spouting tribal hocus-pocus and shooting off poison darts. He brings the play to its ridiculous conclusion, and seals the deal for a new Nantucket Casino.

Thankfully, though, Mamet refuses the Oprah moment, but it's his lack of deliberate focus and (yes, I'm going to say it) redemption, that swerves the play away from significance. Mamet remains committed to exploring America as idea, ideology, process, and mess, and while we don't need to be led by the nose to see right or wrong things, we might need a bit more than a general silliness as a final message. Don't you?