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Bloated script curbs 'Boston Marriage' play

BY MICHAEL MORAIN • REGISTER THEATER CRITIC • JANUARY 19, 2008

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Everything about Theater . . . For A Change's current production of "Boston Marriage" is ambitious.

- Costume designer Christy Wilkins' elaborate Victorian dresses drip with lace and ruffles.
- Thatcher Williams' thoughtful set transforms Grand View College's Viking Theatre into an early 20th-century parlor.
- Mark Littlejohn's lively direction keeps the two-hour comedy moving.

But ambition - and even genuine talent - isn't enough. David Mamet's bloated script isn't worth the effort, especially for the sparse audience of six who showed up for Thursday's premiere.

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As the story goes, Anna (portrayed by the dynamic Suzie Oddy) and Claire (played with poise by Rachel Salowitz) are two middle-aged socialites and lesbian lovers, who live together in an arrangement euphemistically referred to as a Boston marriage. (The term probably originated from similar characters in Henry James' "The Bostonians.")

Their domestic bliss, however, doesn't last long. Just when Anna finds a man to bankroll her life with Claire, Claire falls for a younger woman. As the inevitable cat fight unfolds, the lovers' mousy Scottish maid (the very funny Susan Gulbranson) looks on, occasionally adding her own troubles to the mix.

While Anna and Claire careen through various emotions - jealousy, fear and ornery affection - one wonders how the story might play out in modern-day Boston, where the women would

likely be legally married.

One wonders, too, how Mamet cooked up the idea in the first place.

Because the Chicago-born playwright made a name for himself with macho plays like "American Buffalo" (1975) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Glengarry Glen Ross" (1984), it's likely he wrote "Boston Marriage" to prove his ability to create meaty roles for women. (His wife, Rebecca Pidgeon, starred with Felicity Huffman in the 1999 premiere.)

Even so, one can only guess why he chose to set it in a claustrophobic Victorian drawing room right out of Oscar Wilde or Edith Wharton. Instead of trading Mamet's signature rapid-fire dialogue, the characters wander off into tangents smeared with flowery nonsense.

In the too-long second act, Claire prattles on about losing her handbag: "I had laid my reticule upon the etagere, in the solarium, next to your dead ficus plant." Later, she refers to one of Anna's schemes as a "Byzantine rodomontade."

To their credit, Oddy and Salowitz deliver their high-falutin' lines with grace, and they milk Mamet's occasional anachronistic jokes - "put a sock in it!" "tell it to the Marines" - for all their worth. Gulbranson, too, makes the most of her weepy role with excellent timing and a spot-on Scottish accent.

Still, the words get in the way. The simplest way of saying something isn't always the best, as any high school student slogging through Shakespeare could attest. But if we peel away the stilted "Masterpiece Theatre" language, the emotions don't ring true.

It's unclear, for example, why the two women are so mean to the maid. It's downright baffling why the jealous Anna finally agrees to help Claire seduce another lover.

In the end, Mamet's attempt to create convincing women is about as believable as John Travolta's "Hairspray" turn as Edna Turnblad.

The gifted cast does its best to put life into the characters - while wearing corsets - but the script is a bad fit. More than anything, the play suffocates for lack of fresh air.



PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Suzie Oddy and Rachel Salowitz star as life partners Anna and Claire in David Mamet's 'Boston Marriage.'



Claire (Rachel Salowitz) spies in the mirror as Anna (Suzie Oddy) consoles their Scottish maid (Susan Gulbranson).



The Scottish maid (Susan Gulbranson) checks in on life-partners Claire (Rachel Salowitz) and Anna (Suzie Oddy).



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Claire (Rachel Salowitz) and Anna (Suzie Oddy) hold a séance to learn wisdom from their naïve maid's (Susan Gulbranson) grandmother.

'BOSTON MARRIAGE'

Presented by Theater . . . For A Change

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through Jan. 27.

WHERE: Grand View College's Viking Theatre, 2811 E. 14th St., Des Moines

TICKETS: \$10

DETAILS: (888) 288-9512, theaterforachange.com

NOTE: Due to adult language, the play is not recommended for children.