

Speed-the-Plow

Atom Egoyan's reflection on seeing Speed-the-Plow

I saw *Speed-the-Plow* on Broadway in 1988. It was certainly one of the most powerful experiences of watching a play I've ever had, for several reasons. First of all, I was at the beginning of my career, having made two small personal films (*Next of Kin* and *Family Viewing*) and wondering where they fit in the world. I was in New York to show my second feature at the New Directors/New Films festival at the Museum of Modern Art, and I desperately wanted to see this latest play by David Mamet. At the time, I was still writing plays (some might remember that I wrote several original scripts for the Victoria School Drama Festival, culminating in the "Showcase Performance" of my play *The End of Solomon Grudy* presented by Mount Doug in 1978). I was a huge fan of David Mamet, and I really loved his early plays like *American Buffalo* and *A Life in the Theatre*.

What made *Speed-the-Plow* so astonishing for me was not only the extraordinary dissection of the power struggle and game-playing of the industry I was about to enter (though in reality I didn't start dealing with Hollywood for another decade), but the amazing interplay between what was being explored on stage and what happened outside the theatre after the play. Through three intense scenes in producer Bobby Gould's office and house, I saw the three actors bring Mamet's words to life. Joe Mantegna and Ron Silver were fantastic as Bobby and Charlie Fox. Madonna – making her stage debut as Karen – was less convincing. There was something disingenuous about her status as the one of the biggest pop icons of that period and the role she was trying to fit into as someone struggling to make it.

It was what happened after the thunderous applause that closed the show that made this the ultimate piece of theatre, as it played onto the streets of New York. I left the theatre to see a huge crowd of people waiting by the stage door. There was a stretch limo outside, and it was waiting for Madonna. When she left the door with massive security, the crowd started to go wild with screams and shouts. Then, the moment the limo pulled away, this crowd seemed to disappear. I stayed across the street, watching this all. The sidewalk suddenly

became empty. After a few minutes, Joe Mantegna and Ron Silver came out. There was no limo or even a taxi waiting for them. I followed them down the street.

At the time, I was too shy to approach these two great actors and ask them how it felt to be the stars in a play about the triumph of power and wealth over art and personal vision, only to see Madonna's star power finally steal the show. While they emerged as the victors on stage, they were completely ignored as they walked away from the theatre, poor players who has strutted and fretted their hours on the stage and disappeared into the night.

Atom Egoyan