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Al Pacino Crash Lands in David Mamet's *China Doll*

David Sheward · Wednesday, December 16th, 2015

"I'm too old for the game," moans Al Pacino as Mickey Ross, the billionaire wheeler-dealer at the center of David Mamet's *China Doll*. Pacino could be speaking for himself and the playwright as well as the character. This latest work from the one-time master of the blistering, testosterone-fueled style of American drama is simultaneously flabby (meandering monologues) and undeveloped (sketchy storyline). In addition, the actor is delivering a faint suggestion of the brash Pacino schtick. It's like watching an early rehearsal of a first draft. One can only feel pity for director Pam McKinnon, who has previously shot new life into Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Delicate Balance*. Her imprint is barely discernible as the pacing is slow and the plot confused.



Al Pacino and Christopher Denham in *China Doll*

Credit: Jeremy Daniel

The title is confusing as well. The china doll could mean Mickey's girlfriend Frankie, whom he frequently refers to as needing his protection. She, along with almost everyone connected with Mickey, is offstage at the other end of a bluetooth connection. For most of the play, Pacino delivers one-sided conversations except for brief dialogues with Ross's bland assistant Carson (Christopher Denham does the best he can with this shadowy role).

For what we can piece together, the about-to-retire Ross has purchased a new airplane and had it flown to Canada with the British Frankie as sole passenger in order to avoid American sales tax. But the pilot had to touch down in the US before moving on to Toronto and Mickey is now on the hook for \$5 million. The whole frame-up is engineered by New York's young governor—perhaps modeled on Andrew Cuomo—whom Mickey blasts as a rich hypocrite. This predicament gives Mamet the cue to have Ross launch several rambling speeches about the corruption of public officials and how being ruthless in business and politics is the sole path to wealth. (Spoiler alert: apparently Mickey does get his comeuppance but it's ambiguous.)

What is Mamet saying here? That all politicians are liars, all voters are fools, and the only way to get ahead is lie, cheat, and steal? And that we should admire those cut-throats and pirates who have the honesty to recognize this and rob the rest of us blind? That's a perfectly valid, if extremely cynical viewpoint, but Mamet fails to make it compelling, as he has in earlier works. To compound the script's flaws, Pacino appeared to be struggling with his lines at the performance attended (to be fair, it's a gigantic undertaking). He spends too much of the show sprawled on the attractive sofa in Derek McLane's cavernous penthouse setting, only occasionally rousing himself to the old

Pacino intensity. Mickey may be exhausted, but the star shouldn't be.

After the curtain fell and the obligatory standing ovation was delivered, I felt a bit like Pacino and Mamet were laughing at us. Like Mickey and the slick salesmen of Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*, they've taken advantage of the public's gullibility and charged top dollar for shoddy goods.

Dec. 4—Jan. 31. Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre, 236 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue., Wed., 7 p.m.; Thu.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours including intermission; \$72—\$152.50. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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