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Shamelessly chasing the American dream in 'Glengarry Glen Ross'

ARTS COMMENTARY

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Welcome to the cutthroat world of sales.

In "Glengarry Glen Ross," four real estate agents working in the same Chicago office in the early 1980s are sadistically pitted against each other in a sales contest. The top seller, the one who reaches a certain goal, will win a Cadillac. The two lowest sellers will be fired. The men are scrambling.

They lie, cheat, steal, bribe, threaten and do everything short of killing each other, in order to be on top. This is "The Lord of the Flies" with the boys grown into men ... chronologically, at least. With their jobs, their very livelihoods, on the line, they are willing to do anything to save themselves. This David Mamet play received an

Olivier Award and a Pulitzer Prize. In 1992 it was made into a movie starring Jack Lemmon, Kevin Spacey, Alan Arkin and Al Pacino. A 2005 Broadway revival won the Tony Award and Drama Desk Award for Best Revival of a Play.

Locally, the Laboratory Theater of Florida presents a version as the company's last offering of the season. The stage bristles with testosterone as the characters posture and strut and battle, the air blue with four-letter words and coarse language. These men insult each other, refer to women as "broads" and use ethnic slurs freely. The play opens in a Chinese restaurant, with salesman Shelly (Michael Hennessey) and office manager Williamson (Todd Fleck.) Shelly is the play's tragic figure and one of the more demanding roles, as his emotions ricochet from triumph to despair.

At the restaurant, he's pumping Williamson for some good sales leads.

In some ways, he's making a sales pitch, the same as if he would if he were selling real estate. Only in this instance, he's trying to sell himself. It's interesting to note that when he's not making any sales, he claims it's bad luck, but when he does make a deal, he attributes it to his enormous skill. The production gets off to a rough start; the actors initially seem to grapple with Mr. Mamet's idiosyncratic dialogue, anticipating each other's lines rather than actually listening and responding to each other. Mr. Fleck's character is supposed to be stoic and unflappable, but he almost seems to not even be there.

This is office politics in the extreme, and Mr. Fleck plays that person in the office everyone hates: the one who wields power yet lacks experience, skill or empathy; the one who withholds good, just because he can. The salesmen are all angry at management, who make such large profits off of them and give them so little in return. And now they have to compete for their jobs. Mr. Hennessey's Shelly is a sad schlub of a guy. He's in a slump, and can't seem to close a deal. Later in the play, when he makes a sale, his demeanor completely changes; he crows about his skill, struts about the office, retelling the event with point-by-point detail. He is a Jackie Mason-type figure: loud and wheedling. His officemate Moss (Jack Weld), on the other hand, come across as aggressive and calculating. He snarls, he sneers, he entices. Worldly wise and sophisticated, he attempts to persuade another salesman to burglarize the office for him. Director Annette Trossbach has Mr. Weld playing against type here, and this unexpected casting is a clever choice, as this is possibly one of Mr. Weld's best dramatic performances.

Joel Hawkins plays Aaronow, the salesman Moss tries to persuade. Aaronow is so timid, so perpetually afraid, that it's difficult to imagine him ever making a sale. A ghost of a man, he lacks the boldness the others possess. If Eeyore ever became a man, he'd be Aaronow. Roma (Scott Carpenter) rounds out the



Scott Carpenter as Roma and Jack Weld as Moss in "Glengarry Glen Ross."

quartet of competing salesmen. We're first introduced to him at that same Chinese restaurant. He's sitting, philosophizing, talking to a man in the booth next to his. Suddenly, he's selling real estate to him, skillfully reeling him in.

In Act II, we see Roma's name at the top of the board. Unless someone somehow outsells him, he'll win the sales contest. Mr. Carpenter plays this character with relish, and it's fun to watch, even though Roma is such a sleaze. He's brimming with self-confidence. And he lies so sweetly, willing to say anything to make a sale.

The sales office is a sad, generic affair: wood paneling, mini-blinds, a water cooler. The men sport sideburns, fat colorful ties and suits with wide lapels. Roma wears a blue shirt with white collar and cuffs with a yellow power tie: the business uniform so popular in the '80s.

"A man's his job," Shelly declares at one point. Take away his job, the playwright seems to suggest, and you take away his manhood. Yet, all the hours devoted to slaving away at a job — is it worth it? Is it worth all the sacrifice? Does it make them happy? Is chasing the American Dream worth the price?

The men connive, plot and betray each other. It would be hell to work with them. But it makes for gripping — and darkly funny — theater. }

'Glengarry Glen Ross'

>> When: Through May 3

>> Where: The Laboratory Theater of Florida,
1634 Woodford St., Fort Myers

>> Tickets: \$22, \$18.50 for seniors/military,
\$12 for students

>> Info: 218-0481 or www.laboraorytheaterflorida.com

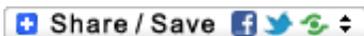
>> Note: Adult language and subject matter

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