

As long as you don't look too closely

State and Main, written and directed by David Mamet

By David Walsh
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I'm not an admirer of playwright and film director David Mamet's work in general. His mannered staccato dialogue, which by now merely irritates, and his apparent contempt for those of his fellow beings not as clever as himself do not seem to me to have resulted in the production of very convincing or satisfying artistic work, although they may have added up to a wise career move.

Nonetheless, no one would assert that Mamet is unobservant or lacks internal fire, and when he turns his attention to institutions that deserve a thorough going-over, he may be just the man for the job. He certainly merits praise for the work he did on the script for *Wag the Dog* (1997), directed by Barry Levinson, in which the administration in Washington enlists the aid of a Hollywood producer to fabricate a war overseas, complete with suffering civilians and atrocities, to provide the pretext for a military adventure that will divert attention from the president's sexual misdeeds. No one who has seen the film will ever view America's claims about the purity of its motives in the same light again.

When Mamet dealt with the real estate industry and its swindles, in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (made into a film, directed by James Foley, in 1992), he also did the general public a service. His meditations on life and morals, however, usually fall flat, deflated by the author-director's smugness and cynicism. *The Winslow Boy*, his previous directorial effort, was noticeably lacking in energy and apparent purpose.

After having worked on more than two dozen film scripts, Mamet does know the film industry. And he cheerfully skewers it in *State and Main*. A Hollywood production has come to a small, picturesque town in Vermont. The director and his crew have been kicked out of their previous location, in neighboring New

Hampshire, for some unnamed sin, presumably involving the moral turpitude of its leading actor, Bob Barringer (Alec Baldwin), who has a thing for minor females.

The film crew sets up camp in Waterford, Vermont to make a picture entitled *The Old Mill*. Such a structure, they've been assured by a tourist brochure, exists in the town. The first joke, of course, is that it doesn't; the mill burned down some 40 years earlier. Financial reasons make it impossible for the production to pick up and move elsewhere, so they are faced with the challenge of making a film about an old mill that can't include one. This problem and others are dumped in the lap of first-time screenwriter Joe White (Philip Seymour Hoffman), an up-and-coming playwright.

Meanwhile director Walt Price (William H. Macy) has the task of keeping Barringer out of the company of young girls and persuading his lead female performer, Claire Wellesley (Sarah Jessica Parker), that she should take her shirt off for the film. One thing leads to another. White falls in with a local book shop owner and amateur theater director, who was previously engaged to an ambitious local politician. Barringer can't keep his hands off the more than willing daughter of the coffee shop owner. In a nice scene, the star crashes a car (with the girl inside, who's unhurt) in the middle of town, climbs out of the upside down vehicle, calmly says to White (a witness to the accident), "So that happened" and sidles off unfazed to his hotel. White ends up having to decide whether to tell the authorities about Barringer and the girl or lie to protect the film production. In fact, he has two chances to decide what to do.

I wouldn't make any extravagant claims for *State and Main*, but it has some amusing and pointed bits about the film industry, as well as crusading politicians and

small-town life. David Paymer is fine as the film's producer, given to issuing the most colorful and bloodcurdling threats. Baldwin manages to convey something about the film's handsome, irresponsible lead, without moralizing. Julia Stiles, Ophelia in last year's *Hamlet*, as the object of Baldwin's desire, continues to impress, and Rebecca Pidgeon is completely charming as the local bookseller.

It's probably best to leave it at that. Mamet's nastiness seeps through in more than one spot, often directed against undeserving or relatively defenseless targets, in a manner that suggests his essentially unforgiving and unsympathetic attitudes. However, since the film delivers a number of accurate blows, let's simply count our blessings.

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