

Underdog or top dog, why every role is a different peak

Don Warrington has an understated humour that doesn't make for an easy phone interview. It can feel he's merely tolerating my questions about his latest role alongside Christian Slater and Kris Marshall in David Mamet's Pulitzer Prize winning *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

Is Mamet's spare, dense dialogue as hard to master as everyone says? "We're doing our best," he says drily.

The ensemble piece is an excoriating takedown of the American Dream as a desperate group of Chicago estate agents lie, burgle and manipulate to triumph in a cutthroat office where only the top salesmen will survive.

Lacking confidence and self-esteem, Warrington's ageing George is bottom of the heap in this ruthlessly hierarchised workplace.

"The environment is very testosterone filled. Men trying to make a sale. You live or die according to what you sell so it's a pretty driven atmosphere. George has been left behind by the changes in the corporate world, he's one of the more depressing characters."

He adds: "It's the speed of thought that's difficult, Mamet is

BRIDGET GALTON asks Belsize Park actor Don Warrington about his latest role in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*

very specific with what he wants. It's a bit like doing Shakespeare, they both have particular disciplines you have to adhere to."

Warrington should know, last year he climbed the acting Everest that is *King Lear* in an acclaimed production in Manchester.

Asked if any part is easy after *Lear* he says: "I would love to think that but that was that mountain, and this is this mountain. Every one is different and every mountain requires a lot of attention to detail. As an actor it doesn't feel any easier. You just get on with what's in front of you."

Does he think this play has dated since its premiere at the National Theatre in the 1980s?

"It's about the American dream, conscience and morality, about the nation in microcosm. People



Don Warrington as George Aaronow in *Glengarry Glen Ross*

Picture: MARC BRENNER

are always in debate about what it means to be an American. I don't think the relevance has changed, people are still trying to make a killing."

The son of a Trinidad politician, Warrington moved to the UK as a boy, living in Warrington Road, Newcastle from where he took his stage name.

After studying at The Drama Centre in Prince of Wales Road, Kentish Town, he made his

professional debut at Hampstead Theatre in 1973, playing opposite Leonard Rossiter and Frances De La Tour in Eric Chappell's *The Banana Box*. It transferred to the West End and was turned into hit sit-com *Rising Damp* which made Warrington among the first black actors to be a household TV name.

Asked if he knew it would be a hit he says: "One expects that you do a job it ends and you move on, you don't know what's going to

happen next. But they made it into something else and, well we all know the story."

He's lived around Primrose Hill for 40 years: "Primrose Hill has changed dramatically, it used to be a fairly dilapidated area where people with artistic aspirations but no money would live, I've stayed because I like what I know and it's very familiar to me."

Glengarry Glen Ross runs at The Playhouse until February 3.

event

Review

THE SLAVES OF SOLITUDE Hampstead Theatre

★★★☆☆

Patrick Hamilton's celebrated novel is brought to stage by adaptor Nicholas Wright and director Jonathan Kent. Centred on a boarding house in (fictional) Henley in 1943, it makes for an evocative but uneven production.

Thirtysomething Miss Roach is stuck with the retirees after her London flat was bombed in the Blitz. Worst is Mr Thwaites, a prejudiced bully whose needling makes the communal areas a nightmare.

The arrival of African-

American serviceman Lieutenant Pike and German émigrée Vicki Kugelmann changes the dynamic, but it's never as simple as a love triangle, or people emboldened by the war to pursue romance.

Instead, the focus is on the introverted Miss Roach – who by nature and by learned English reserve struggles to express herself. Played with aching poignancy by Fenella Woolgar, we see her flinching at barbs and "banter", or separated from the gregarious group, a lamp drawing us in to see emotions flash across her face.

The pervasiveness of war is also evident, as Miss Roach fears a full moon – which gave German planes a clearer path to London –

and, in a standout scene, meets a former pupil (an excellent Tom Milligan), now 17 and a soldier. But elsewhere, the subtle mood of the novel is lost in choppy dialogue and artificial stakes.

However, there's great support from Lucy Cohu as the calculated glamour girl, Clive Francis as the loathsome Thwaites, Richard Tate as the mysterious Mr Prest, and Daon Bruni as the boozy charmer.

Tim Hatley's set is a feast of claustrophobic prints, with small tables crowded together: a place where you're never alone, but can easily be lonely. It makes Miss Roach's search for independence and ambition a quietly cheering kind of heroism.

Marianka Swain



Fenella Woolgar and Daon Bruni in *The Slaves of Solitude* at Hampstead Theatre.

Picture: MANUEL HARLAN