

# Staging a Controversy

Mark Ravenhill raises eyebrows and ire with *Shopping*.

**T**WO YEARS AGO New York Theatre Workshop spawned the award-winning *Rent*, a gritty sentimental musical about urban fringe dwellers. Now Gen-X misfits from London are poised to take to the same stage when Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* arrives at the venue in February. Despite its graphic sex scenes and a title that will have many reviewers scrambling for asterisk keys, Ravenhill's popular West End hit washes up stateside on a wave of critical praise, though not without a rumbling undertow.

Successful productions of the 31-year-old debut playwright's indictment of the greed and hedonism of the Thatcherite '80s have been

mounted internationally in seven languages, but scenes like that of a heroin addict going down on a teen hustler

and coming up with a face covered in blood invite charges of sensationalism. According to Tim Teeman, deputy editor of London's *Pink Paper*, Ravenhill's play coincides with a growing British

"antigay movement," where "gay people are rejecting the whole marketing of gay," arguing that just because the subject matter is homosexual, that doesn't mean it's good for the community.

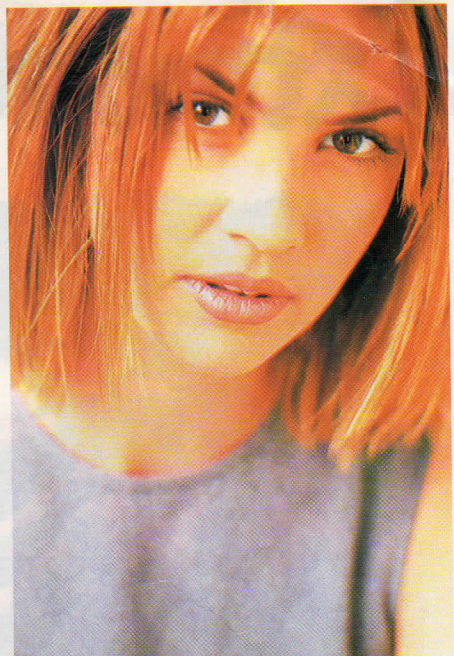
"The characters keep trying to reach out to each other through sex but keep getting it wrong," explains Ravenhill. "Instead, sex causes them to hurt each other physically and psychologically." But the most brutal onstage depictions are of homosexual acts, and the Londoner acknowledges, "the least appreciative has been the gay audience."

For Ravenhill, the backlash is a sign of the times: political correctness clashing with clear-eyed realism. "It's a bit sad, a community using theater as a form of narcissism," he says. "One reaches a point where you don't want to see any more chirpy, witty, suffering-yet-holding-out images of gay men."

Another controversial hit, perhaps, but no anthem this time around.

—GERARD RAYMOND

*Gerard Raymond has contributed to The Village Voice and Harper's Bazaar.*



## Samantha's Fox

Megan Ward, the new face on *Melrose Place*.

**I**F YOU'RE GOING to be on *Melrose Place*, you want to mess things up a bit," says Megan Ward, the blonde babe who recently checked into Fox's soapy drama as Connie Rexroth, Samantha's best friend from college. "You've got to cause some controversy, and end up being nice."

The "nice" part remains to be seen, since Connie arrived to try to split apart Sam (Brooke Langton) and fiancé Billy (Andrew Shue) and—surprise!—made a play for Samantha herself. "I had no interest in playing a cliché," says Ward, 28, of going for the girl for the first time in her bustling TV career, which includes roles on Fox's *Party of Five* and NBC's defunct *Dark Skies*. Adds executive producer Frank South, "We didn't want to do a psycho lesbian story." Indeed, Connie is no crazier than the rest of the *Melrose* menagerie, which has been without a homo specimen since Matt (Doug Savant) left last fall.

And Ward is so much the wiser, having learned the games gay people play to hide their lover's gender. "Everyone just assumes that [Connie's ex] Charlie is a man," she says with a laugh. "Every time I refer to her, I had to say 'Charlie.' I couldn't say 'her' or 'him.' It's hard to say someone's name five times in one paragraph." —JEFFREY EPSTEIN

ANJA GRABERT (RAVENHILL), ROBERT SEBREC/LANOINE (WARD)

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