Crossings

Crossings:
David Mamet's Work
in Different Genres and Media

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

The present collection originated in the Third International David Mamet Conference, organized by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel on April 24-25, 2008, with the support of the Fund for Scientific Research-Flanders, the Belgian Luxembourg American Studies Association, Ghent University, and the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts. Both the conference and companion volume feature among the celebrations, large and small, in the run-up and wake of Mamet's sixtieth birthday on Nov. 30, 2007, with the Goodman Theatre in Chicago taking an early lead, followed amongst others by the Mamet Fest at the Manitoba Theatre Centre, Winnipeg showcasing fourteen plays in the course of two weeks, and the "Sex, Satire, Romance, and Ducks" comedic ensemble staged by the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA. Further marking the occasion were three Mamet premieres in two years—the plays *November* (Atlantic Theater Company, 2007) and *Keep Your Pantheon* (Center Theatre Group, 2008), besides the movie *Redbelt* (2008)—not to mention the production of two more screenplays, *The Prince of Providence* (co-written with Howard Korder and directed by Michael Corrente) and *Come Back to Sorrento* (co-written with Rebecca Pidgeon and directed by Michael Worth), based on novels by respectively Dan Stanton and Dawn Powell. At the time of writing rumors of new dramatic work were also circulating: in the Fall of 2009 a play called *Race* was scheduled to open on Broadway as directed by Mamet, as well as *School*, a new one-act comedy on "recycling, poster design and the transmission of information," directed by Neil Pepe at the Linda Gross Theater, NY, the main stage of the Atlantic Theater Company which Mamet co-founded in 1985.

If this flurry of activities rightfully leads one to conclude that Mamet, far from basking in his reputation of established artist, diligently keeps up his parallel careers in theatre and film, the present volume, apart from offering a retrospective assessment, is intent on showing how closely interconnected those careers have always been, feeding as well as competing with each other, proving in their combination a common desire for experimentation also evidenced by his ventures into novel and essay writing. While it is true that Mamet first established his reputation as a theatre artist, already from the 1970s onwards his craft was heavily

influenced by television and film, and within each medium his favorite subjects and materials tended to receive diverse generic treatments. Consequently this volume focuses on the medium and genre aspects of selected works, as foregrounded by Mamet's combined practice. It thereby offers a more sustained meta-artistic assessment, although the essays extend the crossings formally, thematically, and metaphorically to adaptations and translations, cultural and ethnic assimilation or the resistance against it, legal and moral transgressions, postmodern bridgings of the high/low cultural divide, class mobility, gender challenges, and intertextuality. At stake, too, in these concerns is Mamet's authorial status and positioning in the postmodern age marked by hybridization, recycling, and mass production, as suggested by his implication in the dynamic between independent American cinema and the Hollywood culture industry.

Part I, entitled "Transgression, Passing and Interactivity" sets the scene by broaching the subject in a more thematic way, and raising issues that reverberate throughout the volume. The opening essay by Ira Nadel, author of the only biography of Mamet to date voted one of the seven top Theatre and Film titles for 2008 in the *London Times*, provides a survey of his life and career. Concentrating on Mamet's Chicago origins and the city's influence on his writing, Nadel explores the overarching element of corruption as a core "value" for Mamet's characters in their professional and personal relations. Nadel's essay segues into that of Ronald Geerts, which deals with the central role of the confidence man in Mamet's work in general, but especially in his crime films, making for a specific subgenre, that of the confidence thriller, represented by *House of Games*, *The Spanish Prisoner*, and *Heist*. As Geerts shows, Mamet's con films are endebted to a wider American and archetypical tradition of the trickster but should be distinguished from the more likeable "aristocratic" Hollywood heroes because Mamet's con men, often feeling forced to break the law by a ruthless capitalist system, clearly have a darker, violent streak. Short of seeing in Mamet himself a trickster Christopher Bigsby insists on the artist's versatility and protean character, which are set off by an increasing yet often frustrated need to belong, reflected more recently in the reassertion of his Jewishness and in *The Unit* (2006-), the television series he has been directing and scripting. The latter series is used as the starting point for Steven Price's essay which demonstrates the longstanding influence of television on Mamet's aesthetics from the early plays (*Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *American Buffalo*) to the more recent movie, *Spartan.* In addition the protracted collaborative work on a television series is shown to offer a sense of family, found in the theatre

companies Mamet has been associated with (St.Nicholas, Goodman, Atlantic) as well as in the (para)military unit. Bruce Barton prolongs this investigation. As a preliminary he rehearses the kinds and degrees of interactivity and organic performance which film and theatre allow. These distinctions are central to *Imagination in Transition: Mamet's Move to Film* (2005)—Barton's book-length comparison of Mamet's early plays and transitional movies (*House of Games* and *Homicide*)—but are problematized in the present essay, considering the difficulties Mamet's characters experience with nourishing intimate relationships as opposed to debased instrumental and physical interactions. Barton's resulting conceptualization of theatre and film challenges established psychological and sociological perspectives with insights from emerging models of cognition and perception, in order to arrive at a less deterministic view of filmic spectatorship, more in keeping with the theatre's openness to the real in all its unpredictability.

Part II, "From Micro Shifts to Macro Economics," brings together medium and genre specific close readings of Mamet works as well as larger contextualizations, ranging from literary-historical movements to the conditions governing independent cinema. Since language is a crucial medium more often preventing than fostering intimacy between Mamet's characters but in any case having a strong impact on the viewer, Roger Bechtel has a closer look at the rhythm of Mamet's speeches in *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and how that rhythm survives, or does not survive, the transposition to film in its reliance on the cut. For this purpose he follows up Mamet's own references to Eisenstein, by bringing in the Russian film director's affective theory of montage to support his case. In her treatment of dramatic and filmic space Deborah Geis touches upon a different component influencing the internal dynamics and external reception of a work—her samples being once again *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, now supplemented with *Lakeboat*, *Oleanna*, and *Edmond*. In her view, these adaptations, apart from "opening up" the plays and defusing some of the tension, interestingly enough also manage to turn the seemingly objective realistic cinema into a more imaginative medium, permitting the viewers' active participation. This conclusion confirms Barton's revision of his earlier argument that Mamet's own transitional movies tended to exploit the viewers' impossibility to intervene or influence the preproduced performance. As analyzed by Günter Beck, *The Old Religion*, Mamet's novelistic fictionalization of the early twentieth-century case of Leo Frank, presents itself as another paradoxical "opening up" of Mamet's art to past and present reality. And insofar as the novel relies extensively on a dramatization of the protagonist's interior

monologue, it inverts the frequent enough monologization of Mamet's stage dialogues.

The relationships which Mamet's characters maintain with the larger environment again feature prominently in Dennis Carroll's discussion of *Lakeboat* and *The Old Neighborhood*, which builds on the organicity and unresolvedness of their "epic" and "trilological" forms (and on some of the characters' difficulties to adapt to new circumstances) in order to align these works more closely with the naturalist than the realist "genus" or "canon." Because these works already allow for parallels with the dramaturgy of Chekhov, their discussion is followed by Christophe Collard's treatment of Mamet's adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* and its "intimate" film version, *Vanya on 42nd Street*. The latter, through its title and setting (the then empty Amsterdam Theatre, New York), establishes a complex dialogue between Mamet, Chekhov and Broadway, supported by filmmaker Louis Malle's and stage-director André Gregory's subtle if also confusing integration of the drama into everyday reality, which never lapses into cheap spectacle. Collard's discussion of different stagings of Mamet's Chekhov adaptation permits him to construe adaptation itself as an analogical, dynamic, open-ended and reflexive process—trans-textual, trans-generic and trans-medial. After the framings of Mamet's stage work by naturalism and Chekhov's dramaturgy, Yannis Tzioumakis then shifts the ground to the film apparatus governing the production and reception of *Oleanna*, written and directed by Mamet. This necessitates a consideration of the major studios' recent relegation of such adaptations, whether of canonical plays or box office successes, to independent cinema distributors, giving the authors more artistic control over the final "product" but less of a budget and less screening opportunities.

Part III, devoted to "Tragic/Comic Turns, Gender and Politics," opens with Brenda Murphy's addressing the so-called "Lomanization" of Shelley Levene in the screen adaptation of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which was still scripted by Mamet yet directed by James Foley. Unlike Bechtel, who primarily looks at the effects of the filmic montage of scenes already in the play script, Murphy directs her attention to the greater focalization of the movie's first part, evident in Levene's added scenes and lines. And while the focus on Levene is balanced by that on Roma in the second half, the movie is shown perceptibly to shift the mood from the ironic humor of the play's dark comedy towards pathos and tragedy. As a corollary Mamet also establishes a more explicit intertextual relationship between *Glengarry Glen Ross* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Intertextuality is also central to the next two essays. James M.Cherry thus deals with parodic responses to Mamet, which prove that his growing status by now exceeds academic circles. The

familiarity with his work in contemporary popular culture is indeed great enough for parodies to be as rhetorically effective as Mamet's own evocation of Miller's all-time classic in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Though Mamet's stylized renderings of naturalistic speech patterns are an obvious target for ridicule, witness Jonathan Joy's *The Gentleman Caller*, these parodies assume various guises—as exemplified by David Ives' series of sketches in *Speed-the-Play*, Lance Tait's one-act *David Mamet Fan Club*, Arthur Kopit's full-length play, *Road to Nirvana*, Matt Groening's animated television soap, *The Simpsons* (targetting the tragic figure of Levene), and Smacky Productions' internet "mash-up," *Glen & Gary & Glen & Ross*. These takes on Mamet's work also vary considerably in tone, from an easy-going romp through a more serious debate over his place in a macho culture and a predominantly realistic American theatre, to a virulent critique of his alleged complicity in the infection of Broadway by Hollywood's meretricious standards when casting Madonna in *Speed-the-Plow*.

The relationship between Hollywood and Broadway equally drives *All About Eve*, the primordial intertextual model in Amos Poe's film noir parody, *Frogs for Snakes*, whose discussion is here included because its inset, the production of *American Buffalo* by a bunch of actors doubling as collectors for a loan-shark, provides the rationale for a reinterpretation of that play, for Poe's seemingly arbitrary or gratuitous cross-referencing of film history, and for a moral critique aimed at the American way of conducting business. Robert Vorlicky, finally, closes the volume with a treatment of Mamet's satirical play, *November*, whose "nearly realized" "lesbian, non-crossdressing marriage plot [...] is a substantial leap in U.S. theatrical representation," at least " in the work of a major American playwright on Broadway." Forming with *Romance*, Mamet's "slapstick courtroom farce," and *Keep Your Pantheon*, his one-act meta-play first aired on BBC Radio 4, a "gay trilogy" set in the "workplace," these plays gainsay the artist's apparent turn to the right publicized in his controversial 2008 *Village Voice* essay, "Why I Am No Longer a 'Brain-Dead Liberal'." If such provocative op-ed pieces, like the outspokenness of his essays released in the most diverse magazines, maintain the buzz surrounding Mamet, they also challenge viewers and readers to (re)consider their convictions and scrutinize the transfer or transmutation of Mamet's own into his works. And the pay off, more often than not, is that the best of these works still preclude pat conclusions of the kind arguably drawn from his essays.

—Johan Callens

PART I

TRANSGRESSION, PASSING AND INTERACTIVITY

CHAPTER ONE

DAVID MAMET, THE AMERICAN WAY: "LOUD AND NASTY, THAT'S THE ONLY WAY IT STICKS"[1]

IRA NADEL

Real Classical Money

Midway in David Mamet's 1987 film, *House of Games*, the following conversation takes place when the psychiatrist Margaret Ford, played by Mamet's then wife Lindsay Crouse, discovers that she is being tricked:

> Ford: You were going to con me out of my money.
> Mike: It was only business.
> Ford: It was only business, huh?
> Joey: It's the American way.

Mamet repeats the phrase in his 2007 collection on the movies, *Bambi vs. Godzilla*. "In How to Write a Screenplay" he labels the corruptibility of screenwriters as "the American way." Their lack of integrity, easily bending to the demands of producers and directors, is how they respond to the irresistible temptation of money. This is both characteristic and unavoidable. Success only comes to those who are blind to "the blandishments of conscience, common sense or good taste."[2] The struggle for power originates in money which perfectly suits Hollywood: it's no more than a bank. But to succeed, you must be dishonest.

This outlook represents a philosophy that defines Mamet's work from his early play, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, to his latest, *November*. It expresses his inherent distrust of relationships, whether professional or personal, as his Hollywood satire, *Speed-the-Plow,* intensely shows. In action, such behavior combines bravado with deception and echoes another line from *House of Games:* "Don't Trust Nobody." For Mamet, this also means language. It, too, deceives and misleads.[3]

This corrupt, if not modern, view of America has its origin in Mamet's city of birth, Chicago. Nelson Algren identified this feature in his prose poem to the city entitled *Chicago, City on the Make* first published in 1951. Chapter 1 is "The Hustlers," Chapter 4 "Love is for barflies." Hustling started when the first settlers conned the natives out of their land on the shores of Lake Michigan:

> They hustled with dice or a deck or a derringer . . . their arithmetic was sharper than their hunting knives. They skinned the redskin down to his final feather . . . Mountain grog seller and river gambler, Generous Sport and border jackal, blackleg braggart and coonskin roisterer . . . right from the go it was a broker's town and the brokers run it yet.[4]

It is no surprise that *Playboy* magazine started in the city.

In a quick comparison with other places Algren points out that "Hustlertown" keeps "spreading itself all over the prairie grass" (48). Other cities are finished, complete, but Chicago is still growing. But in this town where a "heartbeat carries farther than its shout," its people grow up "too arrogant, too gullible, too swift to mockery and too slow to love" (48). This is also, of course, a literary town, the place of Theodore Dreiser, Vachel Lindsay, Maxwell Anderson, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Harriet Monroe, Ernest Hemingway, Richard Wright and Saul Bellow—to name only a few. It was also the birthplace of Walt Disney, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Philip K. Dick, Benny Goodman, Bobby Fischer and, of course, David Mamet.

Algren then outlines the ethos that directs Mamet as well as others:

> "Watch out for yourself" is still the word. "What can I do for you?" still means "What can you do for me?" around these parts . . . . It's always been an artist's town and it's always been a torpedo's town [a torpedo is a smalltime crook], the most artistic characters in the strong arm industry as well as the world's most muscular poets get that way just by growing up in Chicago—and that's an American sort of arrangement too they tell us (CCM 56).

"So whether you're in the local writing racket or in the burglary line," Algren continues, "if you're not a bull then you'd better be a fox. Wise up, Jim: it's a joint where the bulls and the foxes live well and the lambs wind up head-down from the hook." And here, art takes the form of the con: "'If he can get away with it, I give the man credit' is said here of both bad poets and good safeblowers," Algren writes (CCM 56). Art and criminality go hand-in-hand: "Write, paint or steal the town blind—so long as you make your operation pay off you'll count nothing but dividends and hear

nothing but cheers" (CCM 56-7). Mamet, of course, absorbed this ethos, telling the critic John Lahr that if he hadn't been a playwright, he would have likely been a criminal.[5] Mamet's work and dramatic practice offers a Chicago cocktail, toughness topped with theory.

In a paragraph Algren outlines the Mamet style:

> It used to be a writer's town and it's always been a fighter's town. For writers and fighters and furtive torpedoes, cat-bandits, baggage thieves . . . this is the spot that is always most convenient, being so centrally located . . . whether the power is in a .38, a typewriter ribbon or a pair of six-ouncers [boxing gloves], the place has grown great on bone-deep grudges: of writers and fighters and furtive torpedoes. (CCM 62).

It's an "October sort of city even in spring" (CCM 72).

The anger of Mamet's characters embodies the contradictions of the city, the drive for fairness and honesty met by chicanery or crime. It's the world of *American Buffalo*, or what Algren calls "the All-Time All American bums . . . . where somebody is always forgetting to touch second [base]" (CCM 65). It's Teach bursting in Don's junk shop incensed because of Ruthie's sarcastic remark about sharing a piece of toast; or Bobby lying about seeing a coin collector leave his apartment to gain the respect of Don and Teach; or the theft of the telephones, as well as the leads, in *Glengarry Glen Ross.*

As they plot the burglary of the coin collector who paid ninety dollars for an American Buffalo nickel, and Teach talks his way into doing the break-in instead of the inexperienced Bobby, in the search for "real classical money" (AB 36), Mamet intensifies the miscommunication and failures of language, as well as morals. An argument between Don and the sensitive Teach, feeling defensive over his being late because of a broken watch, makes this clear. Told by Don to "calm down," Teach replies, in pure Mametspeak, "I am calm. I'm just upset."[6] Throughout Mamet's work contradiction reigns, becoming the natural state of things. In this world, what is right is individual as Richard Roma makes clear in *Glengarry Glen Ross.* As he explains to his prospect Lingk in the play, he deals with things that happen to him on a day-to-day basis: "I say *this* is how we must act. I do things which seem correct to me *today.* I trust myself."[7]

Further disagreement about how to break-in in *American Buffalo* leads to this elaboration of the American Way:

> Teach: You know what is free enterprise?
> Don: No.

> Teach: The freedom . . .
> Don: Yeah?
> Teach: Of the *Individual* . . .
> Don: . . . yeah?
> Teach: To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit.
> Don: Uh-huh . . .
> Teach: In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit. Am I so out of line on this?
> Don: No. (AB 72-3)

Teach's explanation for his gun expands his argument. Told by Don he doesn't need it, Teach responds with "it's not a question do we *need* it . . . *Need* . . . . Only that it makes me comfortable, okay? It helps me to relax. So, God forbid, something inevitable occurs and the choice is (And I'm *saying* God forbid) it's either him or us" (AB 84). In the wonderful fragmented language of Mamet, Teach defends his gun by telling Don, it's "Protection. Deterrence":

> Don: I don't want it with.
> Teach: I can't step down on this, Don. I got to have it with. The light of things as they are. (AB 85)

But when Bobby returns and admits that he did not see the buyer leave his apartment so that Teach and possibly Fletch can break in, that he made it up, Teach's anger is palpable:

> Teach: What's he saying?
> (*Pause.*)
> Don: You're saying that you lied?
> Teach: What is he saying?
> Don: You're saying you didn't see him with the suitcase?
> Teach: This kid is hysterical.
> Don: You didn't see him?
> Teach: He's saying that he didn't see him?
> Don: When he left this morning.
> Teach: He's saying that he lied? . . . He's saying he didn't see the guy? (AB 102).

In a brutal response, Teach begins to trash the junk shop while screaming "There Is No Law" (AB 103).

The violence in this play and other Mamet works like *Edmond* is alternately shocking and expected. Like the destruction at the heart of Sam Shepard's *True West* or Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, violence, whether physical or verbal, seems endemic to modern American

writers. Think of the death of Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August*, the murders committed by Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* or the violence represented by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*. Or think back to the 19th century and Emily Dickinson. Her poem, "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun" begins

> My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
> In Corners—till a Day
> The Owner passed—identified—
> And carried Me away—
>
> And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—
> And now We hunt the Doe—
> And every time I speak for Him—
> The Mountains straight reply.

Mamet's American Way is as much inherited as it is created.

American Buffalo with its deeply rooted Chicago voice—Mamet used to play cards regularly with a group of small-time crooks and was, himself, called Teach because he taught at the Pontiac Correctional Center—is not his only Chicago centered play. His first hit, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago,* his filmscript for *The Untouchables*, his movie *Homicide*, and his later work *The Old Neighborhood* exhibit the South Side gypsy attitude of the city again summarized by Algren: Chicago is "a working stiff's town and a poet's town" where everything "looks so old yet the people look so young" (CCM 63, 64).

Chicago is the source of Mamet's speech, its rhythm, cadences, and syntax with its vocabulary often corrupted in the aid of clarity. The obscenities and vulgarities in his plays are not there to shock but to communicate reality. What Mamet does is work the "iambic pentameter out of the vernacular of the underclass, he made it sound like people talking, and he made it funny," said Gregory Mosher, his principal director for more than twenty years. Importantly, language for Mamet determines action: "words cause specific behavior . . . . [the] type of language determines the type of action." (DML 87) "Dead hard sound" is how he characterized Chicago talk. "It's a very harsh song. Chicago has always been a writer's town . . . perhaps because there was no room for euphemism." (DML 4-5) Mamet embodies Sherwood Anderson's remark that "for a long time I have believed that crudity is an inevitable quality in the production of a really significant present-day American literature" (DML 5).

Mamet's Chicago days laid the ground work for his later development. Briefly, he was born November 30, 1947, attended the Francis Parker School, a well-known progressive school that did not give grades and spent most of his free time playing piano, football or wrestling. He did, however, begin to hang around Second City, mostly as a waiter and occasionally as a pianist for children's shows. His parents' divorce in 1959 was a traumatic event and he spent most of his time with his father, a labor lawyer who was an intense man who, when the family was still together, insisted that Mamet and his sister nightly provide articulate, precise summaries of their day and daily define a new word. (As Mamet would later quip, no one with a happy childhood ever went into show business.) Mamet's determination that his characters must be honest and frank in expression and emotion may derive from these exercises. Similarly, the con became his only means to survive against the intimidations and threats posed by his parents. "In my family there was always a large premium on being able to express yourself—if only for purposes of chicanery" (Mamet qtd. in DML 4). Later, he would learn the finer points of the con through poker, gambling and life among Chicago's petty criminals.

The con is one way to outwit victimization and Mamet uses it to structure his plays and films. He repeatedly begins his dramas with a dubious action that deliberately obscures the real event. Teach's grandiloquent and angry entrance repeating "Fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie . . . ." (AB 9) is unclear. What caused his anger? The opening of *Boston Marriage*, Mamet's 1999 play about a possible lesbian couple, similarly deceives not only the audience but the characters. Act I begins with a discussion of the address and decor of the house they are in as if they were unacquainted.

> Claire: I beg your pardon. Have I the right house?
> Anna: What address did you wish?
> Claire: Two forty-five.
> Anna: The number is correct in all particulars.
> Claire: Then it is the décor which baffles me.[8]

Later, when Claire asks if her seams are straight, Anna unemotionally answers "Euclidian" (AB 87). The very title of Mamet's film, *The Spanish Prisoner*, refers to a confidence game and opens with an equally deceptive scene. As the character Susan in the film reminds the other character and the viewers, "You never know who anyone is." (DML 6)

Following Goddard College in Vermont where he wrote his first play as a senior study—it's called *The Camel Document* and through a series of blackouts joins Second City humor with Brecht—Mamet returned to

Chicago to begin a series of odd jobs (rug salesman, taxi driver, real estate salesman, apprentice on a lakeboat). He seized an opportunity to teach drama at Marlboro College in 1970 and then again at Goddard where William H. Macy and Steven Schachter became his students. He returned to Chicago for a third time in 1974 and began, with Macy and Schachter, the St. Nicholas Theatre Company. He was its artistic director until he left for New York in 1976. During this time, Mamet began to write drama seriously, largely because the company could not pay performance fees for established works. It was simpler to write new work, he said (this is very Chicago, a do-it-yourself town). He also began to have his plays produced at the well-established Goodman Theatre through its new associate artistic director, Gregory Mosher, who would go on to premiere or direct over twenty Mamet plays (including his major failure, the 1978 *Lone Canoe*, Mamet's only attempt at a historical drama incorporating song. It has never been remounted).

Chicago taught Mamet to be tough, candid and gut-right. Representing the no-nonsense American Way in his plays and further films is the directness, frankness and clarity of his language, even if it's not fully understood. It's exacting, muscular, visceral—and actors love it. "Action talks and bullshit walks," Donny warns Bobby in *American Buffalo* announcing a Mamet mantra (AB 3-4). Drawing from Aristotle who argues that character is action, Mamet creates conflicts measured by movement and what he believes to be the essentials of acting: good diction and textual confidence. As he told the opening night cast of his play *The Water Engine*, "be strong, direct and brave, do not be introspective. Continue to create rather than interpret" (DML 2). Play, don't perform it, he would often instruct his actors. Later, the Chicago style informed his view of New York writers who focus on "what does life mean," while Chicago writers respond with "Who the hell cares?" and ask, instead, "what do you do?" (DML 4)

Mamet celebrates the minimal, parallel to his use of no-nonsense language. What looks like obscurity is a form of lucidity: leaving out is more valuable than putting in. Robert's request to John in *A Life in the Theatre* that he "*do* less" on stage epitomizes the approach. Mamet learned this when first studying music, being told at one point to leave out the third (the third step in the octave) and concentrate on the missing tone. One hears this silent note anyway, as a musical producer later explained. This equaled a tip he had from a hustler-instructor Mamet knew at Bensinger's pool hall in Chicago: "If you can see more, *don't* shoot" (DML 2). This attitude leads to Mamet's mini-history of modern drama: "Chekhov removed the plot, Pinter, elaborating, removed the history, the

narration; Beckett, the characterization. We hear it anyway." That last sentence is the key. We elaborate, predict, or estimate naturally; we naturally fill in the blanks. Good writers get better, Mamet believes, "only by learning to *cut.*"[9] You do more with less: "tell the story, take out the good lines, and see if it still works." He believes this the best advice he ever heard about writing. Similarly, "Good drama has no stage directions." (DML 9, 2)— recalling Peter Ustinov's instructions to a young Method actor: "Don't just do something—stand there!" (DML 132)

If Chicago taught Mamet attitude and talk, New York taught him what to do with it. Mamet spent his third year at Goddard (1967-68) in New York at the Neighborhood Playhouse where he studied acting, unsuccessfully. In the lobby of the theatre still on East 54th Street, Mamet's photo hangs alongside those of Diane Keaton, Jeff Goldblum, Robert Duvall, Steven McQueen, Leslie Nielsen, and Gregory Peck—but with this inscription, "Don't worry, they didn't ask me back either." Sanford Meisner was the director of the school and the principal acting teacher, assisted by others like Martha Graham. Meisner, a graduate of the Group Theatre famous for its application of the Stanislavski method, was well-known for his repetition exercise where two students face each other and simply repeat what they see, enunciating but unconsciously shifting their reactions, while essentially using the same words. An unconscious improvisation occurs which is truthful and convincing. It led to Meisner's declaration not to "learn the lines [of a text]; let them happen. Improvise, do anything you want to bring to life the feeling of your degradation [or joy]." (SM 131) Words are like a canoe that floats on a river; the actor is the river.

At the same time Mamet was at theatre school he was working as stage manager at off-Broadway's longest running musical, *The Fantasticks*. He started as house manager, opening the theatre, guiding guests to their seats and cleaning up after. During intermissions, he sold programs and cast recordings. One night when the assistant stage manager got sick, Mamet was pressed into running the lightboard. Much adjusting of dials, knobs, and sticks were needed with a dazzling light change for the show's final moment, a reprise of the song "Try to Remember." At that moment, Mamet accidentally hit the master switch and the stage, house, and lightbooth were plunged into darkness. He never forgot the moment and the need for precise, rehearsed movements from the technical crew as well as the actors and staff.

Farce, burlesque, satire: Mamet learned these initially at Second City and *The Fantasticks* and it would be incorrect to emphasize only his brooding darkness or intensity. Satire is an important element of his

writing, from the comic relationship of Teach and Don, often expressed through their inarticulateness, to the sudden shift in vocabulary between the everyday and the formal in *Boston Marriage*. When Claire tells Anna she is in love, she is mocked and responds formally, "How ill your disordered state becomes you." "Tell it to the Marines" is Anna's swift reply (BM 23). The unexpected shifts in tone bring a remarkable, humorous uncertainty to the work. Similarly in *State and Main*, where the very act of filmmaking is subject to satire, one of the final scenes showing the rural population of a small Vermont town studying the showbiz paper *Variety* and analyzing box office grosses. The director in the film can only work if he has a lucky pillow, while his actors know their lines but not "what order they come in."[10]

Mamet's *Wag the Dog*, the Robert De Niro and Dustin Hoffman hit of 1997, shows satire at a national if not international level and how we are ever susceptible to illusion, to being well-deceived. ("Men live but to be deceived" Anna tells Claire in *Boston Marriage* [BM 79]). His Swiftian vision of American politics where a Hollywood producer stages a false war to deflect attention from the sexual peccadilloes of the President during a re-election campaign, matches his portrait of American business, whether in a Chicago real-estate office or a Hollywood studio. In the latter, *Speed-the-Plow*, his Broadway play about two minor Hollywood producers, he shows the backstabbing nature of competition and the length some might go to get ahead. Madonna, some might recall, starred in the original Broadway production.

Farce seems to be in control of his most recent work, however, especially *Romance*, which premiered at the Atlantic Theater in New York in March 2005. This courtroom drama (one uses the term lightly) is a send-up in four scenes of the Middle East peace process, sexuality, prejudice, and the law, and it addresses the following critical questions: was Shakespeare Jewish? Can a chiropractor bring peace to the Middle East? What success can come from a "*quiche* offering?"[11] (R 95) Disorder rather that order rules the courtroom where a chiropractor is on trial for an unnamed offence before a judge who asks if he may pontificate for a while (R 7) and begins to take allergy pills with such regularity that at the opening of Scene Four he needs to ask the Bailiff what time it is. "Your Honor, it is nine A.M." "At night?" he replies.(R 63). Again, morality, now allied with comedy, is inverted. The defendant trying to help his lawyer "frame" a defense suddenly realizes his representative is uncooperative. "*Why did you* go to *Law* School? If you don't want to *Lie*?" he asks incredulously (R 36). When he realizes that his lawyer will not lie and believes that the defendant *is* guilty, the character unleashes a torrent

of abuses interrupted only by the Bailiff wondering what the two would like for lunch. Exasperated, the defendant cries

> God forgive me, what have I done? I hired a Goy lawyer! It's like going to a straight hairdresser. And now he wants me to SUBMIT. You fucken brain-dead, white socks, country club plaid pants Campbell's soup fucken *sheigetz* Goy. Submit. That's fine. Take the example of Your Lord (R 43).

In turn, his lawyer screams, "you people can't order a cheese sandwich . . . without mentioning the Holocaust," bringing the response, "my people do not *eat* cheese sandwiches" (R44). Venom becomes the new raison d'être. Accused of being a Christian, the attorney states he's an Episcopalian, causing the defendant to ask, "And what the fuck is *that*? A Catholic with a Volvo?" (R 45)

Such language is, of course, unsettling, for characters as well as audiences. Mamet knows it but he won't stop. Hence, the need to deceive and the reliance on the con. Characters constantly trick each other, whether the small time hoods in *American Buffalo* or the would-be Hollywood producers in *Speed-the-Plow*. But lying in this world is not immoral, "it's a gift for fiction," as Walt the director explains to the writer Joe in *State and Main* (SM 15).

"You Make Your Own Right and Wrong"

Ironically, Mamet's acting principles emphasize the opposite of lying. They stress the honest expression of the text. Just say the words is Mamet's mantra. Unemotional acting is his goal. This may, in part, relate to a so-called Chicago acting style described by Gregory Mosher as "simple and emotional and without being indulgent. . . . It's about getting on with the play." (DML7) It also leaves a lot for the audience to fill in.

Mamet's directness comes about as well from his Judaism which is similarly aggressive. He rejects, and is impatient with, the idea of the assimilated Jew in favor of that of the tough Jew, the *shtarker*. This is the Jew as a fighter, in-your-face as he shows with his character Marty Rossen, film producer in *State and Main*. Confronting the chiseling town councilor, Doug, Rossen exclaims, "there's an old saying, two scariest things in the world, a black man with a knife and a Jew with a lawyer. Now, I am a lawyer and I am *The Jew*." (SM 85)

Defining Jewish identity has been a catalyst for a number of Mamet's plays and essays from his early *The Disappearance of the Jews*, to his 2006 essay collection, *The Wicked Son*. It began in 1975 with *Marranos*, a play about the failed attempt of Jews to pass as non-Jews in sixteenth

century Spain. He opposes the idea of assimilation because it, too, is a con, one that never works, and must be renounced as Jews must reject their "state of being the underdog . . . we Jews give ourselves a vast amount of bad press," he has lamented.[12] Through his understanding of the Torah and Jewish theology, which he began to seriously study in Boston with Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, as outlined in *Five Cities of Refuge* and *The Wicked Son*, Mamet roots himself in Jewish texts and laws, finding a natural home in rabbinical debate.

Mamet appreciates history in many forms, including antiques. His desk is from the 1860's, his kitchen table a hand-made work of Vermont maple, his Vermont farm house two hundred years old. He is also a collector—of buttons, guns and knives—for many years admiring the well-built character and defined purpose of a knife, as he makes clear in a 1999 essay, "Knives," found in his collection, *Jafsie and John Henry*. A knife is also a favored trope of his for acting (see *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* [1998]), as well as a symbol, sign, and tool in his plays. In *The Cryptogram,* the gift of a knife is both a sign of male friendship and a symbol for cutting the bonds of friendship and family. It is also a totem for a young boy who has lost his father. In *The Old Religion*, Mamet's novel about the Leo Frank murder in the South, a knife is both the murder weapon and the sign of marking off the Other, the Jewishness of Frank.

A knife, however, can also become a source of comedy. Visiting the offices of the Goodman Theatre in his early days as a Chicago playwright, he walked in with a large hunting knife dangling from his belt. As he sat down to talk to two publicists, he didn't realize the knife attached itself to a chair. When he got up, he found *himself* attached to the chair and as he swung around, the chair crashed into the desks, scattering papers and files. After freeing himself, he looked up at the frightened publicists and calmly said, "Don't worry, you can fuck up *my* place anytime you want."

Mamet's artistic world is complex: at best amoral, at worst immoral. His confidence men are operators who live for deception. Morality is always under pressure if not review, an American habit as Teach explained to Don in *American Buffalo* and as Richard Roma explained to his client in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Mamet's world is filled with inflated self-confidence bordering on pseudo-heroism but it's actually self-deceit in a search for truth in a no holds barred competition. And when it deflates, it's devastating, as Teach reveals at the end of *American Buffalo* as he is about to destroy Don's junk shop:

> My Whole Cocksucking Life.
> The Whole Entire World.
> There is No Law.
> There Is No Right And Wrong.
> The World is Lies.
> There Is No Friendship.
> Every Fucking Thing.
> . . . . We all live like the cavemen. (AB 103)

The "true solution" to understanding life, or at least our experience of it, may lie in "transcending the rules," as Joan in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* says.[13] Mamet's characters constantly do this. But his characters remain inarticulate in their quests, as Bernie from *Sexual Perversity* illustrates: "A lot of these broads, you know, you just don't know. You know? I mean what with where they've been and all. I mean a young woman in today's society . . . . You don't know *where* the fuck she's been. (*Pause.*) I'm just talking to you, you understand." (SP 39) Characters survive on miscommunication and ambiguity:

> Danny: I'm going to wash my hair. Is there any shampoo?
> Deborah: Yes. And no.
> Danny: Now what's that suppose to mean?
> Deborah: Everything. And nothing. (*Pause.*) (SP 51-2)

Mamet's life, while intense, has not always been one of unrest. He is happily married to the actor Rebecca Pidgeon and is constantly undertaking new work. His new Broadway play, *November*, is a commercial success, as is his new film, *Redbelt* (jujitsu master must return to the crime underworld to maintain his new innocence). He is also re-inventing his political self. A recent essay in *The Village Voice* expresses a new conservatism.[14] Summarizing his effort with *November*, he explains that it balances the conservative or tragic view with the liberal or perfectionist view of politics. The conservative president in the play believes government should stay out of the way because the failures of the free market economy are less heinous than those of government intervention. His speech writer, a liberal lesbian, thinks differently. Mamet then announces in his essay that he is rejecting his former liberalism which is impractical because "everything is always wrong." A review of his life may contradict that view, but further thought now convinces him that people are *not* basically good at heart. This Hobbesian view has in fact "both prompted and informed my writing for the last 40 years. I think that people, in circumstances of stress, can behave like swine and that this . . . is not only a fit subject, but the only subject, of drama." Yet people get by