David Mamet and American Macho

Why did Americans reject the British gentleman as their dominant model of masculinity? Why is a boy's relationship to his mother a crucial factor in shaping his masculinity? What and how do boys learn about what it means to be a man? Holmberg demonstrates how David Mamet's plays provide insights into these questions, and into the masculine malaise. Through the gangsters, businessmen, soldiers, sailors, athletes, frontiersmen, and thugs he created, Mamet celebrates and criticizes American macho. The book provides close readings of Mamet's well-known plays as well as plays that have not previously received the critical attention they deserve and includes discussions of recent films and unpublished film scripts that shed light on Mamet's attitudes to American macho. Holmberg also presents detailed analysis of Mamet as director of his own plays, which gives fascinating insights into the playwright's intentions through his instructions to actors on how to play a part.

Arthur Holmberg is Professor of Dramatic Literature, Theatre History, and Performance Theory at Brandeis University. He is also the Literary Director of the American Repertory Theatre at Harvard. He was the US editor for The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre, and he has also edited The Lively ART: Reflections on Twenty Years of the American Repertory Theatre. He is the author of The Theatre of Robert Wilson. His articles on theatre, film, and music have appeared in many publications including The New York Times, the International Herald Tribune, The Washington Post, and Modern Drama. Holmberg served as resident dramaturg at the ART, where he worked with artists including Robert Wilson, Philip Glass, and David Mamet.
The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad of shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

The primary intent of this series is to set up a forum of important and original scholarship in and criticism of American theatre and drama in a cultural and social context. Inclusive by design, the series accommodates leading work in areas ranging from the study of drama as literature to theatre histories, theoretical explorations, production histories, and readings of more popular or para-theatrical forms. While maintaining a specific emphasis on theatre in the United States, the series welcomes work grounded broadly in cultural studies and narratives with interdisciplinary reach. Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama thus provides a crossroads where historical, theoretical, literary, and biographical approaches meet and combine, promoting imaginative research in theatre and drama from a variety of new perspectives.

**Books in the Series**

2. Marc Robinson, *The Other American Drama*
3. Amy Green, *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Reinvent the Classics*
4. Jared Brown, *The Theatre in America during the Revolution*
5. Susan Harris Smith, *American Drama: The Bastard Art*
6. Mark Farnow, *The American Stage and the Great Depression*
7. Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825–1860*
8. Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*
9. Stephen J. Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard*
10. Michael A. Morrison, *John Barrymore: Shakespearean Actor*
11. Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television*
12. Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society and Myth*
13. Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870–1906*
15. S. E. Wilmer, *Theatre, Society and the Nation: Staging American Identities*
17. John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*
22. Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic*
23. Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*
24. Katie N. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900–1920*
27. Heather S. Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787–1861*
28. Arthur Holmberg, *David Mamet and American Macho*
David Mamet and American Macho

ARTHUR HOLMBERG

Professor of Dramatic Literature, Theatre History, and Performance Theory, Brandeis University

Literary Director, American Repertory Theater, Harvard University
To Harriet Voyt
Contents

List of illustrations page xi
Acknowledgments xiii
Introduction 1
1 Enter the cowboy 6
2 Mamet and American macho 60
3 Mothers and masculinity 90
4 The boy culture: act like a man 133
5 Mamet’s pants 224
Notes 243
Bibliography 275
Index 302
# Illustrations

1.1 (a) *The Voysey Inheritance*, (b) *American Buffalo*  
1.2 *The Untouchables*  
2.1 *The Edge*  
3.1 *The Cryptogram*  
3.2 *The Cryptogram*  
4.1 *Lansky*  
4.2 *Lakeboat*  
4.3 *Lakeboat*  
4.4 *Oleanna*  
4.5 *Oleanna*  
5.1 *Heist*  
5.2 *Heist*  
5.3 *State and Main*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) <em>The Voysey Inheritance</em>, (b) <em>American Buffalo</em></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Untouchables</em></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Edge</em></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Cryptogram</em></td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Cryptogram</em></td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lansky</em></td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lakeboat</em></td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lakeboat</em></td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Oleanna</em></td>
<td>194 and 195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Oleanna</em></td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Heist</em></td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Heist</em></td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>State and Main</em></td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

Every book is a battle. Many are the friends and colleagues who helped during the struggle. How fortunate I was to have such intelligent and patient editors at Cambridge University Press: Don Wilmeth, Victoria Cooper, and Rebecca Taylor. I am grateful to my colleagues at the American Repertory Theater, especially Robert Brustein, Gideon Lester, Ryan McKittrick, Kati Mitchell, Jan and Jeremy Geidt, Amanda Gutowski, Diane Borger, and Diane Paulus, Artistic Director. I also want to thank the stalwart army of interns in the literary office who made countless trips to and fro to fetch books and xerox articles: Blythe Yee, Rima Brihi, Lucy Burns, Nora Long, Heidi Nelson, Grace Geller, Eli Keehn, and Sara Bookin-Weiner. Jenna Clark Embrey was enormously helpful in preparing the manuscript for production. I am also grateful to Dean Adam Jaffe of Brandeis University for arranging a leave of absence and for a Norman Grant. The grant permitted me to spend time with Mamet in San Francisco during the rehearsals of Faustus. Mark Dellelo, coordinator of the Getz Multimedia Lab at Brandeis, was kind enough to teach me the technology to capture the stills that illustrate this book. I must also thank the following friends for reading the manuscript and offering advice: Professor Brigitte Lane, Professor Antonio Cao, Professor Manfredi Piccolomini, Professor Barbara Levy, Dee Worman, Meryl Langbort, Francesca von Broembsen, and Charles Thomas. Harriet Voyt and Tom Cole have a special place in the book. And it gives me great pleasure to acknowledge the generosity of David Mamet.