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David Mamet

In 1974, a play set in part in a singles bar, laced with obscene language and charged with a seemingly frenetic energy, was voted Best Chicago Play. Transferred to Off Off and Off Broadway it picked up an Obie Award. *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* was not David Mamet's first play, but it did mark the beginning of a career that would astonish in both its range and depth.

The following year *American Buffalo* opened at Chicago's Goodman Theatre in an "alternative season." It was well received and opened on Broadway fifteen months later where it won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. It ran for 135 performances, hardly a failure but in the hit or miss world of New York, not a copper-bottomed success either. Nonetheless, in three years he had announced his arrival in unequivocal terms.

David Mamet came as something of a shock, not least because his first public success, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, seemed brutally direct in terms of its language and subject, as did *American Buffalo*. But it was already clear to many that here was a distinctive talent, albeit one that some critics found difficult to assess, not least because of his characters' scatological language and fractured syntax, along with the apparent absence, in his plays, of a conventional plot. They praised what they took to be his linguistic naturalism, as though his intent had been to offer an insight into the cultural lower depths while capturing the precise rhythms of contemporary speech (though he did invoke Gorky's *The Lower Depths* as being, like a number of his own plays, a study in stasis). That he was highly talented seemed obvious, but what that talent might consist of was altogether less certain.

There is, indeed, a distinctive rhythm to his work but he is interested neither simply in documenting contemporary speech patterns nor in anything as self-conscious as poetic drama, despite the fact that he claimed to have written *American Buffalo*, *The Woods*, *The Cryptogram*, and *Oleanna* in free verse. The rhythm both itself contains a meaning and, like everything else, serves the plot, as does the language which may seem to shape itself into poetry, sculpted arias, but is, in fact, fully functional in terms of forwarding

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action and thereby revealing character or vice versa. As opposed to the cinema, the theatre, for Mamet, is a place where language dominates, where it becomes clear that "what you say influences the way you think, the way you act, not the other way around."[1] That was the essence of his work even if the critics were not yet fully registering what they were seeing and hearing.

Despite his early recognition, indeed, his was not entirely a smooth ride. Both *The Water Engine* and *The Woods* failed in New York in 1979, the former closing after sixteen performances and the latter after thirty-three. The same year *Lone Canoe* was staged at the Goodman and proved a disaster. It looked to some as if here might be another young writer thrown up by regional theatre and a forgiving Off Broadway who had been granted his day in the sun and would now disappear, as had many others before him. They were plainly wrong.

Here, in fact, was a writer uncowed by apparent failure, amazingly prolific and already diversifying into cinema, writing an accomplished screenplay for Bob Rafaelson's film version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. There was then, and is now, a restlessness to Mamet's talent and imagination which sees him constantly reaching out in new directions, writing a plethora of plays (not always produced), articles, fictions, screenplays.

When *Glengarry Glen Ross*, opened to much praise in London, in 1983, it seemed that he had confounded his critics. Highly successful at Britain's National Theatre, it did little business in New York until it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, at which point lines began to form around the theatre. It ran for 378 performances.

From that moment onwards, Mamet's career opened up with revivals of his earlier work and a string of successes in the theatre and the cinema, for which he would direct as well as write. Added to this were an increasing number of essays, collected into books, which explored his early life, his theories of acting and such apparently arcane areas as poker playing, hunting, and a spell with a magazine for men, inventing captions for unequivocal photographs of women.

For some, these last seemed to chime with plays which either excluded women or concerned themselves with a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the genders. This won him a brief reputation as a misogynist as some critics chose to extrapolate his characters' views to include their author's, and took his exploration of a contemporary sexual and social alienation as indicating his own position.

Though this view would fade with time, it received a new boost with *Oleanna* (1992), which registered contemporary debates over political correctness and the idea of sexual harassment. He was assumed by some to have his thumb securely on the scales, parodying the woman's viewpoint

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and vindicating the man's, though in truth audiences seem to have split along gender lines. Certainly, audience responses came as a shock both to Mamet and to Harold Pinter who directed the British production.

Oleanna is concerned with the clash between a university professor, distracted by personal concerns, a man described by Pinter as "a pretty pompous guy who loves his own authority and his own position," and a woman student initially baffled by her studies and subsequently vindictively determined to destroy her teacher, interpreting a gesture of concern as a sexual assault. The play ends as, frustrated literally beyond words, he strikes her. Pinter has recalled the first night at the Royal Court Theatre in England in 1993:

> the audience applauded. I was pretty shocked. So was the actress who was under the table at the time. When she came out she was crying. She was so shocked at what had happened. The audience thought she was crying because she had been beaten up but she was shocked by the venom, coming from men and women. In fact the leading man's (David Suchet) family were there and in the dressing room afterwards his mother said, "I'm so glad you beat her up. She had it coming to her."[2]

Rather than make any changes in his direction to obviate this response Pinter told the cast, "fuck the audience and just get on with it."

What that play, and many others, revealed was precisely Mamet's sensitivity to shifts in the cultural and political pressure that had earlier led him to write *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* at a time when untrammelled capitalism was being advanced as a moral virtue. However, in *Oleanna* he seems not quite to have grasped just how vitriolic arguments over political correctness and sexual harassment had become. On America's campuses contesting languages were indeed doing battle. The nature and ownership of power was being debated precisely in the context of shifting gender roles, as he had hinted in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, but the stakes, it seems, were higher than even he or Pinter had assumed.

Mamet had made adjustments to the play which had originally ended not with the physical attack but with the protagonist reading out a prepared text, McCarthy style, confessing to his own guilt. It was this version that Pinter had accepted and was about to rehearse. Mamet, however, had decided to cut it on the grounds that "it didn't work." Pinter persisted, insisting to the author that "It doesn't make any sense to finish with the beating because that is the whole point. She comes back." After further negotiations he received a letter from Mamet: "Fuck it. Do it."

The fact is that the sexes are at odds in many of his plays but so they were in a culture in which they were renegotiating their roles, the nature and extent of their respective powers. What he was not concerned to do was adjudicate

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between positions which were, as he insisted, simultaneously both right and wrong. He was, like Sam Shepard, registering the gulf both between the sexes and between an inherited language of aggressive masculinity and needs that could barely be articulated. In truth, the men in his plays are no more assured about their own inner resources or their relationships with one another than they are about encounters across the gender divide. His is a drama in which need is as evident as the failure of experience to address it. It is the very gaps in experience which generate some of the plays' kinetic energy.

Does that make him a political writer? Plainly not in the sense that a young Arthur Miller had begun writing for the theatre believing it to be a direct agent of change, a mechanism for exposing truths which once understood would spur those who watched to transform both the agencies and philosophy of government. Mamet is not Clifford Odets, prompting audiences to shout out "Strike! Strike! Strike" and sally forth to halt the progress of capitalism, though he is an admirer of that playwright's sculpted language and is, indeed, suspicious of the commodifying power of capitalism.

He is, however, political if we mean by that that his portraits of alienated individuals, profoundly uncommunal, speaking a language often drained of human content, betraying the past and therefore the future, imply the necessity to confront what is lost, without which effort recuperation must be impossible. He is political if we mean by that that he, like Harold Pinter, whose work he admires, is concerned with power and the degree to which language is implicated in its operations. He is political in so far as he presents characters who are complicit in their own irrelevance, who compound an absurdity that is not cosmic in origin (his admiration for Beckett notwithstanding) but a product of the substitution of material for spiritual meaning.

We live, he has insisted, "in a political association," and that fact tends to abstract "individual human actions from individual consequences . . . The political system is a sad conundrum. In the name of history, reason, and loyalty, we debase and are debased . . . Our politicians seem to be the hirelings of raptors."[3] An "incorrigible liberal," he fulminates over tax cuts for the rich and a foreign policy that serves any interests but rationality:

> If the government has no ability to defend against the real threat of terrorists, but untold wealth to squander in the name of "rogue missile launch," then the organism is in irreversible decay. The fantasy wish for an opponent who would, by his military actions, *endorse* our military industrial complex by the nature of his aggression suggests a country that no longer wishes to survive . . . But this is, essentially, the error of all bloated plutocracy.[4]

There is a barely contained anger in his comments on the corruptions of power, the hypocrisies and cynicism of those who become the mere agents

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of corporations who disavow their responsibility for their actions and thus offer a model of human disregard. That anger is discharged, in part, in his writing, in coruscating dramas which feature those who inhabit a world gifted by such dereliction. These are vaguely aware of the betrayals in which they collaborate. They are, though, unsure how to find their way back to a language and a way of being that speaks of human necessities abandoned in the name of nothing more than the nostrums of a bankrupt culture forgetful of the past which once made it seem a great experiment.

Increasingly, he explores the idea that the vacancies he identifies in the lives of his characters might prompt a recovery of spiritual, even strictly religious beliefs. Part of his fascination with the past, indeed, lies not only in forms, courtesies, secular ceremonies which have been allowed to decay, but in beliefs seemingly traded for a mess of potage, spiritual truths surrendered in the hope that such surrender might render the world more fully into the hands of those who thought the material world to hold its own satisfactions.

It is not for nothing that he chose to make a film version of Terence Rattigan's *The Winslow Boy* in which questions of justice and moral integrity were proposed as central to private and public life alike. This is not to suggest that he is a solemn moralist. Like Bernard Shaw, he is aware of the forensic virtues of humor, even, in *Boston Marriage*, offering a pastiche Wildean parlor drama in which he both revels in and consciously ironizes a wit which refuses to acknowledge the demands of social and moral function. For Mamet, the sheer pleasure of the plasticity of language offers its own rewards.

He is a man of strong political ideas (though he harbors regret at not being more active in the anti-Vietnam-war movement) but his drama is not about politics, though what it is about bears on the political as on other forms of behavior. "My plays," he has insisted, "are not political. They're dramatic. I don't believe that the theatre is a good venue for political-argument" (Kane, ed., *Mamet in Conversation*, p. 125). If it be objected that *Oleanna* precisely focuses on a political issue, he accepts that this is so but insists that the real issue at stake is power and the language deployed to exert and sustain it.

It is tempting to say that this is a distinction without a difference since politics itself is quintessentially about power and the language with which it asserts and sustains itself (see Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*), but his point is that this is equally true of all relationships, that the political is merely one expression of a common truth. It is, as *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *The Woods* suggest, true of the relationship between the sexes. Beyond that, however, "Everybody uses language for his or her own purpose to get what he or she wants . . . No one ever talks except to accomplish an objective" (126). There is, in other words, a politics to human relationships.

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Meanwhile, his reference to accomplishing an objective is a key not only to those relationships but to writing and acting. And that objective is likely to be achieved by deceit, a disjunction between word and action, motive and declared purpose.

In his plays and novels deceit seems a natural mode of behavior and though he disavows a political role, his essays are laced with comments about the cynical slogan "Manifest Destiny" (in fact code for "pillage, plunder," and theft), the crude lies of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee and of Richard Nixon (posthumously re-invented in a breathtaking piece of sleight of hand). He comments on the self-deception of Ronald Reagan, denying, in his heart, that he had traded arms for hostages, the logic whereby the fact of political corruption in the name of public good could lead alike to the Holocaust or the chaos of Central America into which America insinuates itself with bland assurances of good will.

There is, then, a politics to David Mamet and to his plays even if he does not choose to address politics as subject matter. His plays are metaphors and their resonances expand outwards from the particularities of their setting.

Is he, then, a moralist? He certainly wags a finger or two in admonition in his essays, attacking politicians and snake-oil salesmen of sundry kinds. He looks for truth from actors, rather than the self-deceiving mechanisms they are sometimes tempted to substitute for authentic action. When he became for a time a columnist for the *Guardian* he chose to celebrate Noel Coward ("as fine an actor as anyone could hope to see"), Roger Lindsay ("the British Henry Fonda . . . incapable of falsity"), and Celia Johnson ("filled with the truth of emotion withheld"). This was not Anglophilia, though it was, perhaps, nostalgia. He had his American models – Fonda himself, Ruth Draper, Robert Duvall – but the British bias (he also includes Kenneth More, Vivian Merchant, Bernard Miles, and Ray Winstone) is not without its logic. He seems to favor a certain understatement, to be suspicious of the self-consciously histrionic.

What he primarily distrusts is "acting," though this leads him to flourish yet another Britain, Lawrence Olivier, whom he characterizes as "stiff, self-conscious, grudging, coy and ungenerous." Stephen Berkoff, scarcely himself the most understated of actors, denounced such a view as "facile," not unreasonably recalling Olivier's Henry V and Richard III. He might have added Hamlet and Heathcliff. The question is not, though, who was right in a journalistic knock-about, or even why, Ray Winstone aside, Mamet chose to burrow back into the past of the British cinema, but that his remarks were consonant with his distrust of art or, more precisely, artifice. If he is biased it is in the direction of a truth which he takes to emerge from character and action. Even language is not without its deceits. Indeed, in many ways

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language lies at the very heart of deception and misunderstanding, either consciously or because it can never be fully transitive. What he listens for is something other than words, which are more often at odds than consonant with emotion. As he said in relation to Olivier, "I'm hungry for lunch, and all he's serving is an illustrated menu."[5] He wants actors who act, not "act." He scarcely has a puritanical distrust of excess, his own plays launching pre-emptive strikes on boundaries of all kinds. What he listens for is authenticity.

Yet this, of course, raises a question, since so many of his characters are themselves simulators of authenticity and derive their power precisely from the fact that they are seldom caught "acting." But that is his point and his skill. They succeed in their deceptions because they do not succumb to the temptation to signal their deception. They are actors not "actors." They practice to deceive. But, where the trickster has no interest in truth, Edward Albee has observed that in the theatre lies can corrupt in the direction of truth and Mamet is interested in truth from the actor as he is from the personal and political realm.

In his essays Mamet spends some time explaining what theatre is not. It is not, in particular, as we have seen, a mechanism for changing the world. He does, though, see it as a place where "we show ethical experience, it's where we show interchange." Thus what *American Buffalo* "was trying to say . . . is that once you take a step back from the moral responsibility you've undertaken, you're lost" (Kane, ed., *Mamet in Conversation*, p. 12). The play "has to do with the corruption of heartfelt moral knowledge for the sake of a mythological ideal . . . It's about the same thing Nixon and all those people were doing" (18).

David Mamet is a Jewish writer, though until recently few accounts of his life or work suggested as much, except in so far as they sketched in his early years. Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth have all been discussed at least in part in terms of their double identity but Mamet has been discussed primarily in terms of his distinctive linguistic facility, his fascination with the brittle relationship between the sexes, the figure of the confidence trickster, his concern with the moral vacuity at the heart of much experience. All these things are clearly observable in his plays, but there is another dimension to him that presses on his work and is important to him as an individual. It may be, indeed, that his fascination with deracinated characters, with those who perform rather than live their lives, is itself a comment on the consequence of surrendering a grasp on certain inner truths having to do with identity.

The question of identity, after all, has a special resonance for those who have historically chosen to set themselves apart and have been set apart, those who in moving from one country to another have been invited to

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make subtle, and not so subtle, adjustments to the new world, sometimes at the price of losing a purchase on the old. The dream of inclusion may be shadowed by the nightmare of surrendered meaning. New freedoms may erode the frontiers of the self, sever the very roots which sustained. And what message do they pass to their children as they negotiate the terms on which they enter a culture determined to announce its indivisibility?

David Mamet's grandparents on his mother's side arrived in America before the First World War; on his father's side, in 1921. His mother's family derived from Warsaw, his father's from Hrubieszow, a village on the Bugg River near the Russian–Polish border. They were Ashkenazi Jews, and his father was born "right off the boat" and raised during the Depression. His grandparents brought nothing with them from the shtetl (except soon-to-be-despised languages), not objects (they were poor) nor a style. His maternal grandfather was a salesman, selling underwear. His paternal grandfather left his wife, Calara (the name of Mamet's third daughter), who therefore had to bring the family up as a single parent, in retrospect, it seems, foreshadowing a series of broken marriages which would include Mamet's own first venture.

His family life, like that of many other immigrants, was built on denial of the past, seemingly the quickest avenue to the future: "My parents generation was in the naked pursuit, first of education, and then, of success."[6] Acculturation, assimilation, was the agreed price for becoming American and in the process much was lost, though hardly counted as lost by those who were still validating the decision to leave the irrelevance of Europe and to some degree the faith which seemed to set them apart from what they would become.

They still thought of themselves as Jews but the religious content of that identification was hollowed out. They might rehearse the rituals, perform the rites of the faith but not without some embarrassment. They were Jewish by birth. Theirs was a Jewish community. They shared, as he has explained, Jewish food, "the comforting codes, language, jokes, and attitudes which make up the consolations of strangers in a strange land" (Kane, ed., *Mamet in Conversation*, p. 8). They shared, indeed, the experience of discrimination. What they did not share was a confident inner conviction expressed through an equally confident assertion, and in *The Old Religion* he would recall how fragile was their grasp on the world they believed their own, how ready their new society to force them into a role they had chosen to deny.

Yiddish and Hebrew were finally to be eschewed, for what did they mean but a willful attachment to other times and other places? They were what held apart rather than brought close. They implied a separateness that had always been the essence of the Jewish claim and the Jewish suffering. This

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generation staked its claim on America by seeking some basis on which they could move into the mainstream by modifying, omitting, suppressing, acting. They did not deny they were who they were but looked for ways in which difference could be de-emphasized, subtly adjusting themselves as though walking into the face of the wind.

Mamet has accused himself of doing much the same, and for too long. As he explained, "The Jewish child . . . is often torn between the desire to belong to the dominant culture and the desire to remain true to his or her heritage, religious observance, and cultural identity."[7] Assimilation still seemed a natural response to national myths and metaphors of inclusiveness. He might rebel against aspects of his parents' values but he felt the same seductive pressures that had pulled not only his father's generation but the so-called New York intellectuals into the mainstream not least because they could persuade themselves that they had, by their very presence, redefined it. Assimilation has its seductive attraction, whether it be Jewish actors concealing their origins or the gangster, Meyer Lansky, whose life he would dramatize on film and who slid into the American consciousness by way of crime, fleeing to Israel in a gesture whose ambiguity is revealing if perplexing.

As Mamet has explained:

> it pleased me to think that I was putting something over in myself . . . living in Vermont and doing things that it seemed were not acceptable behaviour for a nice Jewish boy whose family had the gene for liberalism – spending a lot of time gambling, hunting, fishing etc. And I spent a lot of time in pool rooms, and I enjoyed the life there.

Then he went to his niece's Bat Mitzvah and "I realized I hadn't been inside a synagogue for 30 years, and I started wondering why." He was "chagrined and shocked to find that it had something to do with a sense of not only assimilation, but perhaps a self-hatred that was nobody's fault but my own. And I thought perhaps I could remedy that" (Kane, ed., *Mamet in Conversation*, p. 172).

It was not simply a question of placing Jewish characters at the center of his work, though he would do that, but of acknowledging that the collapse of values that he documented, the sense of dislocation, abandonment, self-deceit which defined these characters, might have a correlative in his own experience. If America had lost its communal instinct, its sense of validating myths and authoritative principles, so, too, he suspected, had he. He had let something go, believing that to do so was a virtue, only subsequently to realize the extent to which it threatened something he came to believe was of primary importance.

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Mamet has spent some time working his way back to what was, perhaps, too readily surrendered: *Homicide*, *The Old Neighborhood* and *The Old Religion* offering a reflection of that process. He would ask, in particular, how far faith is implicated in identity, what the price of propitiation might be. Thirty years on from his childhood he could say, "God bless those in all generations who have embraced their Jewishness," insisting that "We are a beautiful people and a good people" (*Some Freaks*, p. 13), while proclaiming that "I am very proud of being a Jew, and I have a growing sense of the reality of God" (20). It became increasingly important for him to challenge whatever struck him as anti-Semitism, less because he thought this might change the person concerned than because he was himself discharging a responsibility in which he had once failed.

In *South of the Northeast Kingdom*, he identifies himself: "I am a Jew, born in Chicago" (10), like Saul Bellow's Augie March laying his credentials on the table. The first chapter begins, "September, this is when the year begins. So say we Jews" (3). In an interview about *The Winslow Boy* he referred to "All of us American Jews," described his distaste for David Hare's *Via Dolorosa*, "speaking as a Jew,"[8] and warned against attempts to engage the Holocaust in art quite as if he were acknowledging a responsibility to speak on behalf of those from whom he feared he may have distanced himself.

In a poem, "Song of the Jew," he wrote:

> I would die where my grandfather died –
> In that country we were banished from,
> Even knowing it was not our home.
> We came to the New World and we throve thereby,
> In the equivalent of heresy,
> Fleeing the only home we ever saw
> In the two wandering millennia,
> Which is to say, the study of the Law.[9]

The remaining two stanzas express a preference for dying where his ancestors lived and died, rather than in a place where the poet had achieved wealth and power alongside the comfortable people who envied and feared him. But they acknowledge, too, the fact that he is an outcast, that he has opted for another fate and is caught within those contradictory impulses, having become what he affected to despise. In verse, in drama, and in a novel, he has endeavored to work out what he is and what he would be and the price to be paid for both.

Passover, he reminded himself, was "supposedly the longest continuously celebrated ceremony in the world." That fact had a meaning beyond the existence of a tradition to be honored merely for its longevity. To "cut oneself

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