An Interview with David Mamet

by Matthew C. Roudane

Source: *http://www.upstartfilmcollective.com/portfolios/jcharnick/mamet-museum/old-interview.html*

The interview with David Mamet took place 4 December 1984. The conversation was originally to be held in the playwright's Cabot, Vermont home, a renovated farmhouse near Montpelier where he does much of his writing. However, last minute changes prompted Mamet to fly to New York City, so we met at The Players, a club for actors, playwrights, and others committed to the theater. The club is near Mamet's New York home, where he lives with his actress wife, Lindsay Crouse, and their young daughter. They divide the time between their Vermont home and their New York City dwelling. Located next to Gramercy Park, The Players made for an ideal setting for our conversation. When Mamet entered dressed in a dark suit, I was struck by his physical presence: crew-cut hair, thick neck, solid shoulders, stocky frame. No wonder, I thought, he was a wrestler in his Chicago high school days. Whereas a recent interview with Mamet concentrates on Mamet's life (Hank Nuwer, "Two Gentlemen of Chicago: David Mamet and Stuart Gordon," *South Carolina Review* 17 [Spring 1985]: 9-20), the present conversation deals with his art. Over coffee on a clear, cold, and dry day, Mamet voiced his opinions, not only about his dramaturgy, but about the contemporary theatre as well. He spoke directly, precisely, looking eye-to-eye across the oak table. Mamet's Chicago accent, at times, made him sound like many of his characters as he spoke about his work, Havana in hand. Although Mamet occasionally appears in newspapers, magazines, and theatre reviews, and his involvement with Hollywood as a screenwriter grows, the present conversation stands as one of the first scholarly interviews with the playwright. After our talk, Mamet suddenly gave me complimentary tickets to see his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Glengarry Glen Ross,* a play which, with *American Buffalo,* helped further establish Mamet's reputation as one of America's most engaging contemporary writers.

Roudane: **The myth of the American Dream seems central to your artistic vision. In *American Buffalo, The Water Engine, Lakeboat, Mr. Happiness, A Life in the Theatre,* and *Glengarry Glen Ross,* a whole cultural as well as spiritual dimension of the American Dream myth is present. Could you comment on why this myth engages you so much?**

Mamet: It interests me because the national culture is founded very much on the idea of strive and succeed. Instead of rising with the masses one should rise from the masses. Your extremity is my opportunity. That's what forms the basis of our economic life, and this is what forms the rest of our lives. That American myth: the idea of something out of nothing. And this also affects

the spirit of the individual. It's very divisive. One feels one can only succeed at the cost of someone else. Economic life in America is a lottery. Everyone's got an equal chance, but only one guy is going to get to the top. "The more I have the less you have." So one can only succeed at the cost of, the failure of another, which is what a lot of my plays - *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* - are about. That's what Acting President Reagan's whole campaign is about. In *Glengarry Glen Ross* it's the Cadillac, the steak-knives, or nothing. In this play it's obvious that these fellows are put in fear for their lives and livelihood; for them it's the same thing. They have to succeed at the cost of each other. As Thorstein Veblen in *Theory of the Leisure Class* says, sharp practice inevitably shades over into fraud. Once someone has no vested interest in behaving in an ethical manner and the only bounds on his behavior are supposedly his innate sense of fair play, then fair play becomes an outdated concept: "But wait a second! Why should I control my sense of fair play when the other person may not control his sense of fair play? So hurray for me and to hell with you."

Roudane: **What are your thematic concerns in *Glengarry Glen Ross?***

Mamet: If there are any thematic concerns, they must be blatant. The play concerns how business corrupts, how the hierarchical business system tends to corrupt. It becomes legitimate for those in power in the business world to act unethically. The effect on the little guy is that he turns to crime. And petty crime goes punished; major crimes go unpunished. If someone wants to destroy Manhattan for personal gain, they call him a great man. Look at Delorean. He completely raped everybody in Northern Ireland with that scheme; he made a car that wasn't worth the money - and that wasn't enough. He started dealing in cocaine - and he walked. He walked away because he "suffered" enough. In *Glengarry Glen Ross,* it's interesting to watch Aaronow. He's the one who comes closest to being the character of a *raisonneur,* for throughout the whole play he's saying, "I don't understand what's going on." "I'm no good." "I can't fit in here." "I'm incapable of either grasping those things I should or doing those things which I've grasped." Or his closing lines, "Oh, God, I hate this job." It's a kind of monody throughout the play. Aaronow has some degree of conscience, some awareness; he's troubled. Corruption troubles him. The question he's troubled by is whether his inability to succeed in the society in which he's placed is a defect - that is, is he manly or sharp enough? - or if it's, in effect, a positive attribute, which is to say that his conscience prohibits him. So Aaronow is left between these two things and he's incapable of choosing. This dilemma is, I think, what many of us are facing in this country right now. As Veblen, who's had a big influence on me, says, a lot of business in this country is founded on the idea that if you don't exploit the possible opportunity, not only are you being silly, but in many cases you're being negligent, even legally negligent.

Roudane: **At the close of *American Buffalo, I* sensed a felt compassion, some sense of understanding between all three men, but especially between Don and Bobby. However, at the close of *Glengarry Glen Ross,* I sensed little compassion, no resolution, little sense of redemption. Could you talk about these two plays in light of this?**

Mamet: *Glengarry Glen Ross is* structurally a very different play from *American Buffalo. Buffalo is* a traditionally structured drama based on tragedy, whereas *Glengarry,* although it has aspects of tragedy in it, is basically a melodrama - or, a drama. Endings in tragedies are resolved. The protagonist undergoes a reversal of the situation, a recognition of the state, and we have a certain amount of cleansing. This is what Don experiences in *American Buffalo.* But this doesn't happen in *Glengarry Glen Ross. So* the structure is different, it's not as classical a play as *Buffalo,* and it's probably not as good a play. But it is the structure of each that affects the characters and the endings.

Roudane: **What engages your aesthetic imagination in *American Buffalo?***

Mamet: I was interested in the idea of honor among thieves; of what is an unassailable moral position and what isn't. What would cause a man to abdicate a moral position he'd espoused? That's what *American Buffalo is* about. Teach is the antagonist. The play's about Donny Dubrow. His moral position is that one must conduct himself like a man and there are no extenuating circumstances for supporting the betrayal of a friend. That's how the play starts. The rest of the play is about Donny's betrayal of the fellow, Bobby, who he's teaching these things to. The same is true to a certain extent of Levene in *Glengarry Glen Ross.* All throughout the play Levene is espousing the professional doctrine of technique. What he's saying is that I am therefore owed certain support because of what I've done, because of who I am. And at the end of the play, Levene betrays himself.

Roudane: I think one of your major contributions to the stage is your "language": clearly you have an ear for the sounds, sense, and rhythms of street language. Could you discuss the role of language in your plays?

Mamet: It's poetic language. It's not an attempt to capture language as much as it is an attempt to create language. We see this in various periods in the evolution of American drama. And when it's good, to the most extent it's called realism. All realism means is that the language strikes a responsive chord. The language in my plays is not realistic but poetic. The words sometimes have a musical quality to them. It's language which is tailor-made for the stage. People don't always talk the way my characters do in real life, although they may use some of the same words. Think of Odets, Wilder. That stuff is not realistic; it is poetic. Or Philip Barry: you might say some part of his genius was to capture the way a certain class of people spoke. He didn't know how those people spoke, but he was creating a poetic impression, creating that reality. It's not a matter, in *Lakeboat* or *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* or *Edmond* or my other plays, of my "interpretation" of how these people talk. It is an illusion. It's like when Gertrude Stein said to Picasso, "That portrait doesn't look like me." Picasso said, "It will." It's an illusion. Juvenile delinquents *acted* like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One,* right? It wasn't the other way around. It was life imitating art! So in this sense my plays don't mirror what's going on in the streets. It's

something different. As Oscar Wilde said, life imitates art! We didn't have those big pea-soup fogs until somebody described them.

Roudane: **Despite your social exposures of human folly, one could argue that you're a playwright concerned with existentialist themes. That is, you seem fixed on objectifying certain crimes of the heart: the failure to communicate authentically with the self and the other. Possible? What do you think?**

Mamet: Concerning ourselves with the individual's soul is certainly the fit province of drama. I really never understood what existentialism meant. I've tried a whole long time. It has something to do with sleeping with Simone de Beauvoir, but other than that I'm kind of lost. But I suppose my plays are about the individual's inner spirit. I think that's what it's about. The purpose of the theatre, to me, is to examine the paradox between the fact that everyone tries to do well but that few, if any, succeed. The theatre concerns metaphysics, our relationship to God; and ethics or our relationships to each other.

Roudane: **Whereas many contemporary playwrights create antimimetic plays, you seem to re-work a more classic, Ibsenesque dramatic form: the well-made play. Could you discuss the dramatic form of your work?**

Mamet: I'm sure *trying* to do the well-made play. It is the hardest thing to do. I like this form because it's the structure imitating human perception. It is not just something made up out of old cloth. This is the way we perceive a play: with a clear beginning, a middle, and an end. So when one wants to best utilize the theatre, one would try to structure a play in a way that is congruent with the way the mind perceives it. Everybody wants to hear a story with a beginning, middle, and end. The only people who don't tell stories that way are playwrights! Finally, that's all that theatre is: story-telling. The theatre's no different from gossip, from dirty jokes, from what Uncle Max did on his fishing trip; it's just telling stories in that particular way in which one tells stories in the theatre. Look at *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* or *The Duck Variations.* To me, recognizing the story-telling dimension of playwriting is a beginning of a mark of maturity. That's why I embrace it. Nobody in the audience wants to hear a joke without the punch line. Nobody wants to hear how *feelingly* a guy can tell a joke. But we would like to find out what happened to the farmer's daughter. That's what Ibsen did.

Roudane: Has your cinema work - the screenplays for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *The Verdict* - helped your playwriting technique?

Mamet: My work in Hollywood has helped me very much. The good movie has to be written very clearly. The action has to be very clear. You can't take time out to digress to the highways and the byways of what might happen. You've got to tell the story. And I am trying to do this in my plays. I mean I wrote a lot of plays about feeling slices of interesting life. Nothing wrong

with that - I just didn't know any better. I'm talking about my earlier plays; *Lakeboat,* for example, and others with those episodic glimpses of humanity. Those were fine, but now I am trying to do something different.

Roudane: **What's the effect of Hollywood and mass media on the theatre today?**

Mamet: It ain't good but it doesn't make any difference. They're flooding the market with trash. The taste and the need for a real theatrical experience, which is an experience in which the audience can come to commune, not so much with the actors but with themselves and what they know to be true, just increases. Everyone's pallet has been dulled to an extraordinary degree by the mass media. But that's just the way it is. Television, of course, isn't an art form. It might be, but nobody's figured out how to make it so. It's not even a question of doing good work on television, which happens once in a while. It's that nobody seems to understand the essential nature of the media. I certainly don't.

Roudane: Could you elaborate on the actor's relationship with an audience?

Mamet: The young artist has to get better every year or the audience doesn't grow just numerically. It's not even a question of growing spiritually. What happens if the audience doesn't grow is that everything deteriorates. You don't have enough income coming in to support the artists. So you start having to appeal to a larger and larger audience, which means you start getting worse and worse. This is exactly what happened to Broadway. You have to take advantage of people; rather than appeal to a native constant constituency, you're appealing to people who ain't never going to come back, who don't really have any expectations but know they better get something for their $45. So we show them a hundred people tap dancing on stage instead of *Death of A Salesman.*

Roudane: You've said that acting has nothing to do with emotion but with action: "Stick to the action" and "Practical aesthetics." What do you mean?

Mamet: The action is what is the character doing. That's what the actor must do. Acting has absolutely nothing to do with emotion or feeling emotional. It has as little to do with emotion as playing a violin does. You have to study emotion. People don't go to the theatre to hear the emotion; they go to hear the concerto. The emotions should take place in the *audience.* It just doesn't have to be dealt with from the actor's viewpoint.

Roudane: How might you answer the charge that your plays tend always to focus on the negative, cynical side of experience?

Mamet: I've never heard that charge, so I say that's interesting. But it's easy to cheer people up if you lie to them. Very easy. Acting President Reagan says he's not going to raise taxes; of course

he's going to raise taxes, he has to raise taxes. Although it's easy to cheer people up by lying to them, in my plays I'm not interested in doing that; I'm not a doctor, I'm a writer.

Roudane: In *A Life in the Theatre,* Robert and John undergo a role reversal: John's career rises, Robert's declines. What were you suggesting about the theatrical world in this play?

Mamet: The play is not so much about the theatrical world, although that's the metaphor. The play concerns how youth and age talk to each other. John and Robert show something about our inability to communicate experience. While this notion isn't really present in *The Duck Variations* because George and Emil are the same age, it's there to a certain extent in *American Buffalo* and in *Lakeboat.*

Roudane: **Could you talk about the way in which form and content coalesce to generate the creative process within your plays?**

Mamet: My real concern always is with the play as a whole; with writing the play. There's a curious phenomena that happens when you compose a play or movie. The creation very quickly takes on a life of its own. I have no idea why; it's just words on paper. But the art I can compare it to in my experience is carving wood. You start to carve wood and very quickly the thing takes on a life of its own. Part of the wisdom of wood carving is to realize when the wood is telling you where it wants to go. Obviously it's going to be a duck if you start out to make a duck, but the kind of duck it's going to be is largely dictated by the kind of wood. And there is a similar phenomenon in writing drama. You start out with an idea, it becomes something else, and part of the wisdom is learning to listen to the material itself. Much of the material, of course, is in the subconscious.

Roudane: **What is your artistic response to what some may call a "Business as Sacrament Ethic" in America?**

Mamet: One has to learn something that can't be taken away: you have to learn your craft. As Sherwood Anderson said, a man who has a trade is a man who can tell the rest of the world to go to hell! If you want to become a commodity, which is what most actors and actresses tend to become, then you have to rely on the goodness of others, not only for ,your bread, but for your happiness. That's not very much fun.

Roudane: **As a writer you're confronted with a universe which is largely hostile, even absurd. Flux, struggle, the precariousness of existence itself is the norm. Given this reality, what is your artistic response to such a world?**

Mamet: My response is always the same thing; it's never any different. Tolstoy said it's a mistake to think that human nature ever changes. This is the only world that I live in, so a) it

would be silly for me to say something else because it isn't something else, and b) I am part of it. So the ability to perceive the problem doesn't necessarily mean that one is not part of that problem. Of course I am part of the problem. It's the same thing as people driving home from the country on Sunday night. Look at all these assholes driving, getting in my way ! It's modern life. I *am* one of those assholes.

Roudane: **Do you see yourself, as a writer, as one who shatters illusions or as some kind of truth-teller?**

Mamet: No. I am just a storyteller. Keep in mind that playwrights - O'Neill or Albee or myself - know as little about what we do as anyone else. We're just storytellers, that's all. It just so happens that society rewards some of us in extraordinary ways because the society is desperately betting that one of us is going to say something that might offer some comfort. Our job, as writers, is to do our jobs. I was thinking the other day, I have trouble sometimes finishing a lot of plays. But then I always try to remind myself it took Sophocles eighteen years to write *Oedipus Rex;* that's also because he wasn't trying to write *Gigi.*