

Cambridge Marriage: Mamet at the A.R.T.

By Sean Bartley



DAVID MAMET'S MARRIAGE with the A.R.T. was brokered by an unlikely go-between: Anton Chekhov. In 1988 Robert Brustein, a long-time Mamet collaborator, commissioned the playwright to adapt *Uncle Vanya*. Brustein saw Mamet, famous for his spare but poetic language, as the perfect choice to render Chekhov's dialogue into contemporary American rhythms. According to Brustein, the production, starring Christopher Walken, was "an act of deconstruction designed to exhume the living energies of Chekhov's writing from under the heavy weight of 'masterpiece topsoil.'"

Four years later at the A.R.T., Mamet scored an incendiary hit directing his new play *Oleanna*. Starring William H. Macy and Mamet's wife Rebecca Pidgeon, the piece tackled sexual harassment in the wake of the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill train wreck. A controversial success in Cambridge and New York, *Oleanna* inspired roundtables in *The New York*

Times and engaged academics in heated debate. No other Mamet play has inspired critics to spill so much ink.

After a performance, a female student asked the playwright whose side he was on, the strutting macho professor's or the guerilla feminist's. "I'm an artist," Mamet replied. "I write plays, not political propaganda. If you want easy solutions, turn on the boob tube. Social and political issues on TV are cartoons; the good guy wears a white hat, the bad guy a black hat. Cartoons don't interest me."

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Although in *Oleanna* Mamet created a complex feminist firebrand, the play also used Mamet trademarks—testosterone-drenched dialogue and physical violence. With his next play at the A.R.T., Mamet explored a new path. Set in a living room rather than a male workplace, *The Cryptogram* dramatizes the tension between a boy and his mother as they struggle to deal with the parents' divorce. When their worlds collapse, the two turn to and on each other. Tinged with tender bitterness, the play shows an astonishing capacity to dramatize the fragile world of a ten-year-old who, eager to go on a fishing trip with his father, cannot fall asleep. "When is Dad coming home?" the boy keeps asking his mother. But the father never comes home. In this semi-autobiographical work, Mamet also created one

of the most fascinating women on the contemporary American stage. As Felicity Huffman, who played the mother, told the *Boston Herald*:

"He writes difficult, challenging roles for women, but he also writes difficult, challenging roles for men. No one's the hero. There wasn't a hero in The Cryptogram, but it has a brilliant part for a woman. No one's the hero in Speed-the-Plow. He gives his women, along with the men, really difficult jobs to do, and

you can get so mad at his women. In Speed-the-Plow, for example, the only female character has the tough and often maligned job of speaking the truth. So I don't think it's true that Mamet doesn't write well for women. He's certainly written well for me."



After *The Cryptogram*'s success, Mamet penned *The Old Neighborhood*, a trio of short plays starring Tony Shalhoub and his wife Brooke Adams. The pieces follow Bobby Gould, a man who tries to reconnect with his Chicago roots. By going back to his past, Bobby hopes to find the strength to move forward into the future. In an interview with A.R.T. Literary Director Arthur Holmberg, Mamet revealed the identity crisis at the play's core:

HOLMBERG: Although they both try, neither Bob Gold in *Homicide* nor Bobby Gould in *The Old Neighborhood* seems to be able to find any kind of meaningful way to be Jewish in the United States. Why do they both fail?

MAMET: Because they're Jewish in the United States.

Mamet's next play, his fifth at the A.R.T., caught critics and audiences off guard. *Boston Marriage*, a comedy of

manners, was Mamet's homage to Oscar Wilde. Starring Felicity Huffman and Rebecca Pidgeon as feuding lovers, the play featured Mamet's first all-female cast and was set in a turn-of-the-century drawing room. The title was a nineteenth-century euphemism for a loving attachment between women. Claire, the older of the two, has snagged a wealthy protector. "Is he married?" asks Anna, her young lover. "Why would he require a mistress," Claire responds, "if he had no wife?" Anna has her own surprise. She wants to use Claire's boudoir to seduce an even younger woman. The younger woman turns out to be the protector's daughter as the convoluted plot bubbles and boils and thickens. Mamet's elegant dialogue, dotted with polysyllabic epigrams, showed new colors on the author's linguistic palette.

With *Romance*, Mamet tackles courtroom farce. At first Mamet's trial, presided over by a pill-popping judge, seems ordinary enough. Soon, however,

far left: William H. Macy and David Mamet in rehearsal for Mamet's *Oleanna*, photo: Brigitte Lacombe; bottom left: Felicity Huffman and Shelton Dane in the A.R.T.'s production of *The Cryptogram*, photo: Henry Horenstein; left: Felicity Huffman and Rebecca Pidgeon in the A.R.T.'s production of *Boston Marriage*, photo: Richard Feldman; below: Brooke Adams and Tony Shalhoub in the A.R.T.'s production of *The Old Neighborhood*, photo: Richard Feldman



the courtroom's solemnity is shattered. Spurned lovers and sadistic doctors arrive, hurling cookware and bodies across the room. By the time the near-comatose judge declares his verdict, such bedlam has arisen that the audience never learns the charges against the defendant.

Chekhov once quipped: "There is nothing new in art except talent." During his two decades at the A.R.T., Mamet has stretched his prodigious talent in unexpected ways. Freed from the commercial pressures of Broadway, the playwright used the A.R.T. stage to break new ground: he took on new genres, expanded his linguistic registers, and enlarged his gallery of female roles. With *Romance* he presents A.R.T. audiences with his wackiest dramatic world yet.

Sean Bartley is a second-year dramaturgy student at the A.R.T./MXAT Institute for Advanced Theatre Training.

A Mamet Reunion

SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO AND THE DUCK VARIATIONS

By Sean Bartley

ORIGINALLY, THE PAIRING of David Mamet's short plays *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *The Duck Variations* was pragmatic rather than artistic. A marriage of convenience, the decision to perform the two works as a double bill in their 1976 premiere justified a full ticket price. Strong parallels, however, exist between the two works, particularly in their male friendships. Emil and George, the chums of *The Duck Variations*, may be viewed as older versions of Bernard and Danny, *Sexual Perversity's* randy twenty-somethings.

Take this exchange from *The Duck Variations*:

GEORGE: *Where?*

EMIL: *Look at her will ya!*

GEORGE: *That?*

EMIL: *What else? Go, sister?*

And a similar sequence from *Sexual Perversity*:

BERNARD: *Lookit this.*

DANNY: *Where?*

BERNARD: *There.*

DANNY: *Oh yeah.*

BERNARD: *My sweet goodness.*

DANNY: *Uh huh.*

BERNARD: *What a sensitive young lady.*

At first glance, the two passages are interchangeable. But Mamet has hidden a parable on sex and aging inside these two examples of male banter. Only Bernard and Danny are actually looking at a half-naked woman. George and Emil describe a sailboat.

The Duck Variations begins precisely where *Sexual Perversity* left off. In the final

moments of *Sexual Perversity*, Bernard and Danny sit beside Lake Michigan ogling women in bikinis. The women ignore them as the men dish out insults:

(They watch an imaginary woman pass in front of them.)

BERNARD: *Hi.*

DANNY: *Hello there. (Pause. She walks by.)*

BERNARD: *She's probably deaf.*

DANNY: *She did look deaf, didn't she.*

BERNARD: *Yeah. (Pause.)*

DANNY: *Deaf bitch.*

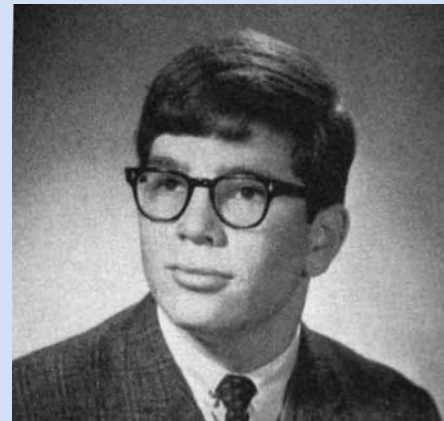
The Duck Variations begins with Emil and George alongside the same lake. But instead of drooling over babes, they contemplate the ducks.

Both Bernard and George are masters of comic exaggeration. For Bernie, the object of hyperbole is sex. In increasingly absurd stories, he describes lovemaking inside a plane, underwater, and in a hotel room in flames. But George, Bernie's *The Duck Variations* counterpart, has more on his mind than sex. Trying to impress the importance of pollution upon his friend, George spins his tallest tale: "They're finding ducks with lung cancer. There were these five or six stunted ducks sitting in a clearing hacking their guts out...they were trying to bum a smoke."

George and Emil have become prudes in their old age. In *Sexual Perversity*, sex is the central issue. But in *The Duck Variations*, copulation comes up only once, in a priggish exchange on duck sex:

GEORGE: *They're allowed to mate?*

EMIL: *This we do not know.*



GEORGE: *Eh?*

EMIL: *Only a few farmers know this.*

GEORGE: *Yeah?*

EMIL: *The mating of ducks is a private matter between the duck in question and his mate.*

GEORGE: *Yeah?*

EMIL: *It is a thing which few White men have witnessed... And those who claim to have seen it... Strangely do not wish to speak.*

GEORGE: *There are things we're better off not to know.*

EMIL: *If you don't know, you never can be forced to tell.*

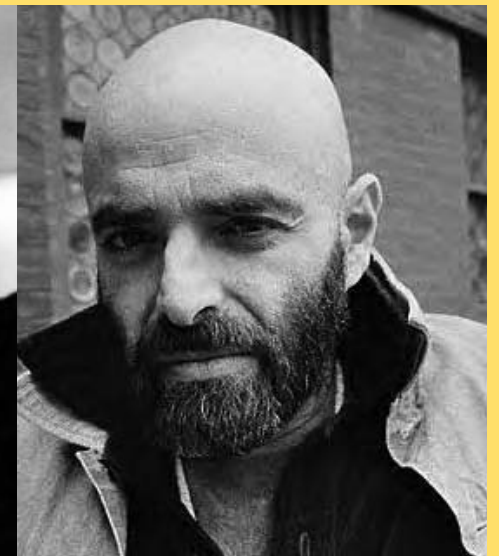
GEORGE: *They don't got those beaks for nothing.*

But despite the parallels, *Sexual Perversity* and *The Duck Variations* have been divorced from one another for decades. *Sexual Perversity* proved much more popular with younger audiences, and Mamet penned the short curtain-raiser *A Sermon* to introduce it. This spring, the A.R.T. will reunite Mamet's early comedies, juxtaposing them with one of his latest comic hits and allowing audiences to make their own connections among the works.

Sean Bartley is a second-year dramaturgy student in the A.R.T./MXAT Institute for Advanced Theatre Training.

Short Works, Long Histories: David Mamet, Harold Pinter, and Shel Silverstein

By Scott Zigler



DAVID MAMET ENJOYED longtime friendships and collaborations with both Harold Pinter and Shel Silverstein. His most interesting collaboration with Pinter was on the film version of *Catastrophe*, a play by Samuel Beckett—a writer whom both acknowledge as an important influence on their work. In the film of *Catastrophe*, Mamet directed Pinter in the leading role of the Director while Mamet's wife, the Scottish actress Rebecca Pidgeon, played the role of the Assistant. This film also marked the last on-screen appearance of the legendary English actor Sir John Gielgud, who appeared in the role of the Protagonist. In another collaboration, Pinter directed the British premiere

of Mamet's play *Oleanna*, which had its world premiere at the A.R.T.

Mamet's two best-known collaborations with Silverstein are the screenplay for the film *Things Change* (which Mamet also directed) and a successful off-Broadway evening of one acts entitled "Oh Hell" which included Mamet's play *Bobby Gould in Hell* and Silverstein's *The Devil and Billy Markham*, produced at Lincoln Center. When Mamet, his longtime collaborating actor William H. Macy, and I founded the Atlantic Theater Company, we chose Silverstein's short plays as the best vehicle for the company's debut.

Mamet, Pinter, and Silverstein all agree on the importance of the short

form play in developing both their craft and their discipline as writers; they have each acknowledged that it is extremely important in the life of the writer to always have something to work on, especially when a larger project might require some distance.

"Seriously Funny" presents a selection of comedic short works from these three great playwrights.

Scott Zigler is the Director of the A.R.T./MXAT Institute for Advanced Theatre Training.

Above, left to right: David Mamet, Harold