

# Program Notes

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## LAW AND DISORDER

### David Mamet's Subversive Style

by Sean Bartley



Over the past four decades, David Mamet has explored an enormous range of subjects and styles in his plays and films. His plays can rarely be categorized in traditional genres; they take delight in transforming and subverting their dramatic precedents. Though he is best known for terse, serious dramas like *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *American Buffalo*, comedy has played a prominent role in his writing. Mamet began his career writing comic plays, and has returned in recent years to iconoclastic comedies.

Mamet overturned the genre of romantic comedy in his first major public success, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974). The play opens with

lovers flirting on a park bench and ends with their all-night argument, inviting the audience to laugh at the hopelessness of these characters' romantic relationships. Johan Callens, a Mamet scholar, characterizes the comic world of *Sexual Perversity* as one where "men and women constantly sabotage their own strategies as they consistently fail to achieve what they believe they desire. Both sexes seem to lack a usable language, a shared understanding." From Shakespeare to Shaw, romantic comedies have traditionally ended in matrimony. *Sexual Perversity* closes with Danny and Bernie, two unsuccessful, lonely antiheroes, sitting on a beach, ogling unsuspecting women in bikinis.

Mamet reversed the power dynamic between the sexes in *Boston Marriage* (1999), the fifth of his plays to premiere at the A.R.T. At first glance, the play's language, style, and setting pay homage to Oscar Wilde's drawing room comedies. But Mamet subverts the tradition of Wilde's elegant, aristocratic women who guide their husbands towards moral rectitude. Instead, he presents his all-female cast as, in the words of *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley, "guiltless lesbian lovers in the age of guilt." The world of *Boston Marriage* is ruled not by male power, but female machination. In Wilde's comedies, men toil to trick and deceive their wives. But in *Boston Marriage*, the pervasive ploys of women banish their doltish fathers and male lovers from the stage altogether. The drawing room, formerly home to Wilde's bickering gentlemen, has become a female kingdom.

More recently, Mamet has shifted his focus from small-cast comedy to large-scale farce. In *November* (2008) he invited audiences to laugh at an antihero president swindling his way into reelection, stripping the American presidency of its gravitas. In *Romance*, Mamet investigates and caricatures one of theater's most venerable genres: the courtroom drama.

The first courtroom drama may well have been Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the third part of his *Oresteia* trilogy. Aeschylus' hero Orestes faces a trial by jury to assess and exonerate his family's crimes. Plays about trials have been widespread across theatrical cultures and ages: Aristophanes (*The Wasps*), Shakespeare (*The Merchant of Venice*, *Henry VIII*), Ibsen (*John Gabriel Borkman*), and Brecht (*Saint Joan*, *Life of Galileo*) all understood that the mounting tension of a courtroom made for good theater. The trial has also become a staple of American drama: *Twelve Angry Men*, *Inherit the Wind*, and *A Few Good Men* all enjoyed huge popular success, and the genre continues to thrive on television, from *Law and Order* to *Judge Judy*.

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Few of these classic courtroom plays are comedies, and most share the same basic structure: intrigue and suspense builds as a trial moves towards verdict and resolution. But by injecting farce into the courtroom, Mamet radically subverts this classic structure. *Romance* does not move inexorably towards a verdict; the play does not even specify the charges laid against the defendant. Mamet not only refuses to give us answers, but even hides the question itself.

Mamet's courtroom is less a temple of law and order than a madhouse of pure comedy. The niceties of legal procedure evaporate; the jury is absent, making way for the total authority of a wise-cracking, pill-popping judge. The language of Mamet's lawyers parodies uptight, politically correct "legalese," daring us to laugh at crime, racism, sexism, homophobia, and even conflict in the Middle East.

Throughout his career, Mamet has subverted dramatic genres, creating comic energy by exploding long-standing theatrical traditions. *Romance* is his most outrageous formal experiment to date, undercutting the sobriety and tension of courtroom drama with the anarchy of freewheeling farce.

Whether he is writing in a comic or serious mode, Mamet never forgets the power of laughter. Where other playwrights may study the tragedies of Shakespeare and the Greeks for inspiration, Mamet takes a different approach. "The model of the perfect play," he claims, "is the dirty joke."

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



*Casey Affleck, Matt Damon, and Ben Affleck doing a staged reading from Romance at the A.R.T. annual gala in 2000.*

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## MAMETISMS

Excerpted from *Writing in Restaurants* and *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*

Compiled by Sean Bartley

### ON THE PURPOSE OF DRAMA:

Children jump around at the end of the day to expend the last of that day's energy. The adult equivalent, when the sun goes down, is to create or witness drama — which is to say to order the universe into a comprehensible form.

When you come to the theater, you have to be willing to say, "We're all here to undergo a communion, to find out what the hell is going on in this world." If you're not willing to say that, what you get is entertainment instead of art, and poor entertainment at that.

Drama doesn't need to affect people's behavior. There's a great and very, very effective tool that changes people's attitudes and makes them see the world in a new way. It's called a gun.

The purpose of art is not to change but to delight. I don't think its purpose is to enlighten us. I don't think it's to change us. I don't think it's to teach us.



A Mamet cartoon.

Artists don't wonder, "What is it good for?" They aren't driven to "create art," or to "help people," or to "make money." They are driven to lessen the burden of the unbearable disparity between their conscious and unconscious minds, and so to achieve peace."

### ON ROMANCE AS A GENRE:

Romance celebrates the inevitable salvation/triumph of the individual over (or through the actions of) the gods — such triumph due, finally, not even to exertion, but to the inherent (if unsuspected) excellence on the part of the protagonist.

In these — the problem play, the evening news, the romance, the political drama — we have conquered not our nature but our terror, the one specific proposition: we have championed the romantic, which is to say the specious, the fictional, the untrue; and our victory leaves us more anxious than before.

### ON DRAMA AND POLITICS:

American political campaigns are, as understood by the attendant hucksters, structured as a drama. The hero is the American People, in the person of the candidate. He or she cre-

ates a problem and vows to solve it.

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Politics, at this writing, sticks closer to traditional drama than does The Stage itself. A problem is stated, the play begins, the hero (candidate) offers herself as the protagonist who *will* find a solution, and the audience gives its attention. Like the more traditional drama, the problem in politics is notably imaginary — that is, something which either does not in fact exist or that cannot be eradicated by political action. . . And legitimate political concerns — the environment, health care — go begging for an audience because they are not dramatic.

We respond to a drama to that extent to which it corresponds to our dream life . . . We are told the theater is always dying. And it's true, and, rather than being decried, it should be understood. The theater is an expression of our dream life — of our unconscious aspiration. It responds to that which is best, most troubled, most visionary in our society. As the society changes, the theater changes.

## ON TRIALS:

During the O.J. Simpson case I was at a party with a couple of rather famous jurists. I said it occurred to me that a legal battle consisted not in a search for the truth but in jockeying for the right to pick the central issue. They chuckled and pinched me on the cheeks. "You just skipped the first two years of law school," one of them said.

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*David Mamet rehearsing Boston Marriage with Rebecca Pidgeon and Felicity Huffman at the A.R.T.*