

MAMET ON MAMET: POLITICS AND POETICS IN *OLEANNA*, *RACE*, *THE*
ANARCHIST, AND *CHINA DOLL*

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MAMET ON MAMET: POLITICS AND POETICS IN *OLEANNA*, *RACE*, *THE*
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ABSTRACT

Mamet on Mamet: Politics and Poetics in *Oleanna*, *Race*, *The Anarchist*, and *China Doll*” aims to illuminate Mamet’s mature aesthetic through a close examination of four of his later plays. The thesis blends textual examinations of the plays with reporting on major, commercial productions of them. The combination of the two modes yields insights about current perceptions of David Mamet’s place in the American theatre. In every chapter, Mamet’s *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture* (2011)—a work of nonfiction by the playwright—is referenced to further highlight the themes of the play and the playwright. However, the first chapter “David Mamet and the Eight Selling Playwrights of the Twenty-first Century” is an introductory chapter that establishes Mamet’s canonical status in the theatre, within the pantheon of playwrights who are commercially reliable. The final chapter “Lions in Winter: *China Doll*” follows

the format of the middle chapters, except for the primary account of attending the world premiere of the play at the Gerald Shoenfeld Theatre on Broadway in New York.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the Colleges of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Mamet On Mamet: Politics and Poetics in *Oleanna*, *Race*, *The Anarchist*, and *China Doll*” presented by James Michael Alderiso, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of praise.

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CHAPTER 1

THE EIGHT SELLING PLAYWRIGHTS AND DAVID MAMET

David Mamet sells. He is an indisputable member of the dramatic American canon, and he is also commercially enticing. Now more than halfway through the second decade of the twenty-first century, he is one of the most produced playwrights in the commercial theatre of New York. Indeed, Mamet ranks along with six other masters in a group I will be calling The Eight Selling Playwrights of the Twenty-First Century. The qualifications for successful admittance to my club: a playwright (dead or alive) must be able to report six different Broadway productions of his work since January 2000. Only eight playwrights gained admittance. Here are their names in alphabetical order: Noël Coward, David Mamet, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, Harold Pinter, William Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, and August Wilson. These names epitomize the “commercial” tastes of play-going in the early part of the century. The names also reveal what is safe and what is marketable. These are the authors the public is willing to pay for again and again. It is a shame that we only have one living member of this club still writing.

Let us take some time to analyze the makeup of these eight men. Seven of them belong to the twentieth century, while Shakespeare sits between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Five are indisputable Americans, whereas Coward, Pinter, and Shakespeare hail from Mother England. Seven are white, August Wilson is black. None are women. Regarding the subject of religion and faith: three are definitely Jewish, we know of one one lapsed Catholic, a Renaissance Christian, a disciple of blues and

jazz, an end-of-days Roman Catholic convert, and an aesthete of culture and sophistication. We know five were reportedly heterosexual, two were gay, while the remaining wrote sonnets to both sexes. Two are Nobel Laureates. Five are Pulitzer Prize winners. Seven of the eight were contemporaries of one another. All have written indisputable classics of dramatic literature.

These names are a revealing look at the writers transposing the most of their voices in the twenty-first century; each singular voice still speaks to audience members of the twenty-first century. They have power, much of which comes from their universally accepted literary merit, but also through their ability to sell tickets. Producers have banked on these names numerous times in the early part of the twenty-first century, and one can also see this also through regional theatre seasons as well. For instance, one needs to only go back to the 2008-2009 season at the Kansas City Repertory Theatre to find productions of five of the men's work, the three missing being Noël Coward, Eugene O'Neill and Harold Pinter.

These eight men have titles that theatres across the country can bank on. They are able to exist outside of academic theatre. They represent purchasing power through the test of time, the only true legitimizer of canonical belonging. Indeed, for time cares little about cultural wars, revolution, disease, or literacy rates; time will just pass. Time brings with it tangible proof of competence. Essentially, time slices through the trendy fashions to legitimize the durability of an eternal idea or genius.

More frank discussion should occur about deciphering whether or not a work is eternally durable. I will always be interested in how works of art become classics in their own respected fields. One thing remains for sure: every single generation is responsible

for continuing the lineage; every generation has the power to delegitimize or reaffirm a play. A generation commits these decisions when it finally has the purchasing power to decide what sort of plays are worth doing repeatedly.

People who are not on the list: no writer of the avant-garde and no representative of the Theatre of the Absurd—I refute Martin Esslin who considers Pinter an absurdist, a categorization that now seems both anachronistic and anti-geographical, tied to Paris in the 1950s. There is no nineteenth-century master, no seventeenth or eighteenth century comedy of sexual conquests, no Shakespeare contemporary, and certainly no winner from the City Dionysia. Why are they not as reliable for an early twenty-first century audience? My theory: these genres do not suit the tastes of the current purchasing power, the Baby Boomers.

David Mamet, the only Baby Boomer on the list, is indeed a symbol for the current state of American play-going. This is not to be confused with musical theatre-going—the true breadwinner for the masses. It is a dreadful shame that we only have one living playwright in this group, but this speaks for the current state of the art form. Novelty and experimentation do not always sell. Who can guess which playwrights will be the most frequently produced in the forthcoming decades!

The proceeding pages focus on the sole, living author of *The Eight Selling Playwrights*: David Mamet. Each chapter of the work focuses on both historical and textual readings of *four* of his most recent plays performed on Broadway—that is, *four of the six* productions that gained him admittance to my club, *The Eight Selling Playwrights of the Twenty-first Century*. These are the productions that have gained Mamet admittance in chronological order: the 2009 Broadway revival of *Oleanna*, the original

production of *Race* (2010), the 2010 production of *A Life in the Theatre* (1977), the original production of *The Anarchist* (2012), the 2012 revival of *Glengarry Glenn Ross* (1983), and the original production of Mamet's most recent play, *China Doll* (2015). I will be focusing on *Oleanna*, *Race*, *The Anarchist*, and *China Doll*. The latter three works were all performed on Broadway in the decade of the 2010s and were all written during the Obama administration. I have chosen to omit *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *A Life in the Theatre* because there is already an wealth of scholarship on the play that earned Mamet his Pulitzer, and *A Life in the Theatre* simply does not interest me as much as his most recent dramatic offerings.

Through this work, I make no apologies for refusing to separate Mamet's personal writings and public personality with my readings of his work. I align myself with dissident feminist and cultural-provocateur, Camille Paglia. She writes in her seminal 1990 tome, *Sexual Personae*, "Behind every book is a certain person with a certain history. I can never know too much about that person and that history. Personality is western reality" (Paglia 34). The days of a text existing completely apart from an author should long be over. That might serve the functionality of mounting a production, but it does little to advance literary and historical scholarship in the ongoing twenty-first century. The dead-end corridor of post-structuralism must be called out for what it is: a turgid, word-obsessed, and reductive set of processes that has given way to a critical landscape of grievance-based writing and a misplaced reverence for heroic victimhood. I again wholeheartedly return to Paglia's call-to-critics, now over a quarter of a century old. She writes with both anger and resolve, "The humanities must abandon their insular fiefdoms and begin thinking in terms of *imagination*, a power that crosses the genres and

unites high with popular art, the noble with the sleazy” (34). Paglia had it right all the way back in 1990.

Synthesizing all of my qualms and assertions, imaginative analysis is always the chief aim of my writing. I will rely on commercial, printed criticism from New York journalists about the productions, but also on professional scholars of Mamet’s work. The essays on each play will always be both about the production and a textual examination of the written word. At all times, I am interested in examining the thematic concerns of David Mamet’s most recently produced commercial work. Through the course of these series of essays, I hope to mirror what is commercially appealing about Mamet to the reader—to help better articulate why the reader might like or dislike his work. The hope is to examine his artistry and illuminate why it works and why it provokes, because it does. It sells.

Since Mamet is still alive and kicking, and has a marketed, cultivated personality—one I would argue is familiar to both students of playwriting and all other practitioners of the American theatre—it comes as no surprise that Mamet has published many works of nonfiction. Using both his short treatise on the nature of the art form, *Theatre* (2010), and his incendiary, unapologetic work on the current structure of American politics, *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture* (2011), I hope to turn Mamet on Mamet to examine the complexities and the unified vision that exists between his plays and his public persona. Additionally, and in consideration of the four plays I have chosen, we will see how Mamet’s politics and dramatic poetics stack up through comparison to a work he wrote nearly twenty years before publishing *Theatre* and *The Secret Knowledge*—*Oleanna*— and then through three

of his most recent, full-length plays. Mamet has much stuff to say about political correctness, American politics, and the art of crafting a play. By creating a before-and-after template, I want to see how thoroughly Mamet holds up to everything he so adamantly articulates.

More specifically, *The Secret Knowledge* is the key yarn that binds these essays together. The main theme of the book is the oppressive state of discourse in the United States. Whether this oppression occurs in discussion on feminism, race, higher education, or the English language itself, Mamet wants us to fear institutionalism and singularity of thought. The ability to make distinctions is our power—to allow for contrary thinking is the true secret knowledge.

Returning to Mamet's popularity, Mamet is one of the few, living playwrights who can pull off a successful world premiere on Broadway. Mamet's plays speak for an entire generation of actors, writers, and directors in the American theatre—some of whom will be frequently mentioned anecdotally. Mister Mamet has been elevated to the heights of both commercial and literary success. He garnered these triumphs through a keen observation of how ordinary people do battle with the English language to get what they want. Mamet's body of work can only be considered prolific. This goes doubly for his nuanced opinions on the bare-bones functionality of theatre and his unapologetic love of the free market. We all can still learn a lot from his indisputable genius, for even if a reader or audience member exhibits distaste for his work, there is something to be said about a figure in our art form that we all *know* everyone has a distinct opinion on through his or her relationship to the American theatre.

CHAPTER 2

DESIRES IN THE UNIVERSITY: *OLEANA*

David Mamet's violent play *Oleanna* is ripe with anxieties of higher education, and pedagogical futility. Mamet paints a turbulent male-to female, pedagogical relationship through the characters of John and Carol. Working on all cylinders is a deep distrust of academia and institutionalized feminism. Additionally, Mamet's conservatism hinders genuine sympathy for the character of Carol. Throughout each of these chapters, I make a habit of identifying a hidden preference for a certain character and ideology. Make no mistake: Mamet wants us to see Carol as less sympathetic than John.

The key to unlocking my claim lies in Mamet's peculiar choice of two dedications before *Oleanna*. One of the dedications is an esoteric, folk song. It reads:

Oh, to be in *Oleanna*,
That's where I would rather be.
Than be bound in Norway/
And drag the chains of slavery (Mamet xiv).

This is an interesting choice for a dedication, or prefatory use of quotes. Mamet seems to be lamenting a simpler time of living, with more freedom and liberation. The question becomes, of course: what exactly is he lamenting? Perhaps this is a cry for an era long gone, when communication was simpler and the anxieties of ineffectual, postmodern communication were not isolating and alienating to the individual. In a different approach, the dedication can also assert a lamentation for a time when men and women were not at war with one another. Men and women each had their singular, prescribed

place. The last line is especially problematic in considering who precisely is bound in chains of slavery. Does Mamet fashion that men are in chains now due to the rise of feminism? There is something quite illuminating about this dedication, and yet Mamet's choice in near obscurity bars anyone from really pinning down a clear claim.

Now, the other dedication comes from Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*. This prefatory excerpt makes a clear case for which character Mamet sides with in his play. Butler's short passage paints a critical view of youth. The dedication reads:

The want of fresh air does not seem much to affect the happiness of children in a London alley: the greater part of them sing and play as though they were on a moor in Scotland. So the absence of a genial mental atmosphere is not commonly recognized by children who have never known it. Young people have a marvelous faculty of either dying or adapting themselves to circumstances. Even if they are unhappy—very unhappy—it is astonishing how easily they can be prevented from finding it out, or at any rate from attributing it to any other cause than their own sinfulness (xiii).

This passage is remarkably cynical and pejorative in its view about young people. Mamet picks this excerpt as a dedication to hint at which character's interests he is more aligned with in the play. Carol—obviously being the younger character in the work—seems to be articulated here as never having known the good-old, simplistic days, an image painted in the previous dedication. Carol has been viewed by critics as unfairly nefarious in her deceptive game of cat-and-mouse. Much of the sympathy in the play—and this is only through my personal readings, as I have never seen a production—is to be

directed toward John, and yet John does many things throughout the text that are deeply problematic to his role as professor and mentor. It is in this vein of thinking that Mamet is at his most cynical. He feels it to be odd, yet uncanny that a man and woman would have to perform the role of pedant and instructor. This of course highlights Mamet's always-present skepticism toward change.

The play also deteriorates entropically as the scenes progress in sequential order. This of course happens both in terms of effectual communication and the audience's opinion of Carol. Critic Kathleen Roberts Skerrett articulates this point well in her article, "Beyond 'Consent': David Mamet's *Oleanna* and a Hostile Environment for Souls." She writes:

This bleak summary does not capture the considerable sympathy and bewilderment of the characters. Yet because both can be so readily caricatured, *Oleanna* has been interpreted as a reactionary, antifeminist polemic on the one hand and as a withering critique of academic hypocrisy on the other (Skerrett 235).

Indeed, if the aim of Mamet is to articulate—without any favoritism toward one gender or the other—a sense of alienation from one to the other, he fails miserably as Carol is not sympathetic enough. Carol comes off—even through a critical reading of the text—as deceptive and manipulating; Carol's language, which starts off fragmented and disjointed, becomes increasingly more convoluted and byzantine. I cannot find this to be coincidental. Mamet is giving us a hint at who is more to blame for the catastrophe at the end of the play. Carol and her 'group' wield more power as the play continues on. This is no mistake and Mamet is certainly asserting the inevitable powerlessness of John.

With this in mind, we see that Mamet's drama also magnifies an undeniable eroticism between the two characters. They, of course, cannot act on this eroticism, due to the twentieth-century concerns of what is deemed ethical. Skerrett again comments eloquently on the problematic complexities of the situation and how they manifest throughout the text. She asserts:

[. . .] the play exposes a powerful fantasy of phallic dominance and vaginal lack that capsizes the characters in the absence of any alternative. Neither John nor Carol has any way to conceptualize the erotic energy between them, nor does either have any practical means to order desire across either the sexual or the pedagogical difference between them. Their communication is characterized by longing on both sides for some answer to their experience of want as well as bewilderment over experiences of shame, incomprehension, and frustration in relation to that longing. But the communication between them is in shards (Skerrett 236).

Skerrett provocatively explores this energy as the main source of conflict throughout the text. I agree with Skerrett in terms of erotic desire for John through Carol, but John seems uninterested in her on every level that he could possibly know her as a human being—perhaps this is also foretelling. In fact, a reader or audience member can see the thwarted, yet vague confession in the first scene as possible proof of an erotic attraction. Carol keeps trying to get something out before John ignores her and picks up the phone:

CAROL: I always. . .all my life. . . I have never told anyone this. . .

JOHN: Yes. Go on. (*Pause*) Go on.

CAROL: All my life. . . (*The phone rings.*) (*Pause. John goes to the phone and picks it up.*) (Mamet 38).

What exactly is she trying to say? Perhaps she is not confused, and came only to get closer to her male professor. This of course would further magnify the Butler dedication in the beginning of the printed text. Mamet could be giving the audience a hint that this is all a spiteful act of a jaded, young woman, much like that of Abigail Williams in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*—a character who is eerily similar to Carol. Both female characters are sensitive to power dynamics and go after an older, married man. Regardless, the play stills comes across as anti-empathetic to Carol and her—assumed—feminist supporters. For they cannot be taken seriously if this whole controversy serves as a sociopathic attack or act of revenge— against John; Carol's treatment as a scorned woman is unpalatable, especially since we are not privileged to any official answers regarding this possible suggestion. Mamet's own fear of political change must be articulated as the dangers of political correctness. Skerrett finds Mamet's treatment of her sexual rebellion deeply disconcerting and as a huge indicator of his deep anxiety of progressive feminism. She argues that John creates some emblem of masculine, empowered fantasy for audience members.

Again, Skerret continually articulates anxieties of physical and emotional emptiness for the character of Carol, and of course as a stand-in archetype of all femininity. She also highlights the deep insufficiencies of John's character:

[. . .] he has immersed his anxiety in a fantasy of masculine success and economic security that constantly agitates his attention. Carol experiences her confusion as being already recognized by herself and others as

feminine lack and “badness.” She wants John to give her something, “to help her,” but neither of them knows what that is. The dynamic capsizes into reaction and vengeance: she destroys his professional career, and he destroys her ability to see her desire as anything but the emptiness of a [. . .] (Skerrett 243).

In a clever way, Skerrett begins to see—through Carol and by using Freudian psychology to help illuminate—Mamet’s attempt at constructed empathy for the character. Skerrett is arguing that Mamet is painting a girl who cannot be sexually satisfied (the way she should be in his mind) due to late twentieth-century constructs of women in both social life and academia. Skerrett asserts that Mamet is showing this as a personal tragedy of Carol’s incorrect and underdeveloped place of femininity; John of course then receives the most sympathy because he can be viewed strictly as collateral damage. In a way, Skerrett believes Mamet is subconsciously exploring his deep and very potent fear of the feminine.

However, Mamet speaks up. In an essay titled “Feminism” in *The Secret Knowledge*, Mamet addresses Skerrett and the collective feminist, scholarly criticism he has received for this incendiary work. Mamet writes:

I find these attacks upsetting first because I am a sensitive fellow, and second, because, to the contrary, I love women. I’ve been privileged enough to have spent my life surrounded by them [. . .] Here is another question spawned by the University: Why do I not *write* for women? [. . .] The answer, I *do* write for women, is unsuccessful in averting wrath, for the wisdom inculcated by the University is not, it seems, of that weak

variety which bows before fact [. . .] But the question, again, is not a

request for information, but an attack. Well, that's all right (Mamet 136).

Mamet addresses these accusations in *The Secret Knowledge* nearly twenty years after *Oleanna* premiered. I would agree that he *does* write for women—and decent parts for women too, as we will see in *The Anarchist*. Feminist scholars—and Skerrett being the most vehement of them on this issue—do not buy these claims, but Mamet also knows their scholarship and survival thrives on claims of grievances; some people sell real estate, some sell feminist scholarship—it is all in a day's work.

On a different note, *Oleanna* is also an example of Mamet's perpetual suspicion of academic institutions. One of the few plays in the canon of American Drama that deals directly with pedagogy in higher education, *Oleanna* is permeated with skepticism and distrust of academic and intellectual power. Mamet also suggests that the academic world has all sorts of pompous pretensions of power that cloud real communication. The lack of effectual and productive communication within the text is definitely linked to a mistrust of academic life. In the essay "Arrested Development" found in *The Secret Knowledge*, Mamet makes a case that the twenty-first-century system of higher education in America is largely about indoctrination. He writes:

What is Liberal Education? It has become an indoctrination in aggressive Identity Politics, a schooling, that is, in the practice of indictment, assault, exclusion, and contempt, all of which contradicts the statement of Universal Humanity upon which all its educational "ideology" rests (Mamet 124-125).

Mamet articulates a national, academic system that is brewing with resentment, repression, and hypocrisy.

The most recent production of interest opened on Broadway on October 11, 2009. It starred Julia Stiles and Bill Pullman. The production closed only two months later. Ben Brantley of the New York Times had this to say about the production in his article “He Said, She Said, but What Exactly Happened”—and more broadly what he makes of the play nearly two decades after its world premiere:

What happens after is a matter of individual interpretation, even though we see exactly what happens. Or do we? What’s so infernally ingenious about “Oleanna” is that as its characters vivisection what we have just witnessed, we become less and less sure of what we saw. Anyway, that’s what occurs in performance — or should. Think about it afterward, or read the script, and you’ll realize that the sympathies of Mr. Mamet, a man’s man among playwrights, are definitely with John, however flawed he may be (Brantley).

Perhaps the play’s ideas and cautionary warnings are too unpalatable for the current climate of incendiary identity politics. While the play’s concerns make a case for the inevitable tyranny of political correctness, Carol’s construction as a character comes off as more malignant than neutral.

CHAPTER 3

GLADIATORS IN THE COURTROOM: *RACE*

Race (2009) is a play about race. *Race* is also yet another play by Mamet about political correctness. It officially opened on December 6, 2009, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. This date—a Sunday—was also that of the final performance of the 2009 New York revival of *Oleanna*, only two streets down at the John Golden Theatre on West 45th Street. Again, Mamet boasted another extraordinary feat: two plays on Broadway at the same time. *Race* is a distant cousin to *Oleanna*, for it makes use of the audience as judge and jury. Mamet's aims are undoubtedly provocative: he wants to illuminate the darker sides of affirmative action and political correctness. Mamet is at his most adamant in articulating a social analysis of human interaction: people will use whatever card they can to compete for resources. *Race* is no exception.

Mamet pulls no punches with his opening dialogue. The specificity of the words is to the point and provocative; it immediately pulls the reader/audience member into the proceeding events. These are the first few lines of the play:

HENRY. Sit down.

(CHARLES sits.)

You want to tell me about Black folks? I'll help you: O.J. Was guilty.

Rodney King was in the wrong place, but the police have the right to use force. Malcolm X was noble when he renounced violence. Prior to that he was misguided. Dr. King was, of course, a saint. He was killed by a jealous husband, and you had a maid when you were young who was better to you

than your mother. She raised you. You've never fucked a black girl, but one sat near you in science class, and she was actually rather shy.

(pause)

CHARLES. ...I would never say any of ...

HENRY. You're fucking A right you wouldn't. Which is the purpose of the lesson. Do you know what you can say? To a black man. On the subject of race?

CHARLES. "Nothing."

HENRY. That is correct (Mamet 7).

The dialogue already screams Mamet. The word choice is glaringly precise. People taking in the first few lines already either feel frustrated or aroused by Henry—who is black—and his blunt, realistic advice to his white client, who is accused of raping a black woman.

Race is a four-character play. The drama begins when Charles switches from one high-profile lawyer to a mixed-race team (black and white) in hopes of augmenting his chances of being found innocent. The biracial team of Henry Brown (black) and Jack Lawson (white) also has a young African-American law student working with them on the case—Susan. The first act of the play revolves mostly around whether or not the team should take on Charles Strickland as a client. Mamet has fun with teasing the audience regarding the question of Strickland's innocence or guilt throughout the duration of the work. This is the first time Mamet has taken on a group of attorneys at law. It seems that with every play he writes, he finds a new field of employment through which to explore

his ethical view of human interaction. From selling real-estate to the Hollywood machine to academia, competition is fierce and competitive.

Race also marks the first time Mamet directed his own work on Broadway. I can not help but find it amusing that around the time he made his directorial debut, he deemphasized the importance of the art of directing in *Theatre*, published less than a year later. Mamet is not a theorist. Mamet finds the director's position in the theatre as persistently secondary—even tertiary—in comparison to the craft of the actor and playwright. He writes in his penultimate essay for *Theatre*, "Directing for the Stage", of how he:

[. . .] read Brecht's theoretical writings on the alienation effect, Robert Lewis, and a host of Americans on the correct implementation of the Stanislavsky system, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*, and blah blah blah. It took me many years as a director to acknowledge that not only did I have no idea what the above were talking about, but that, most probably, they didn't either. Stanislavsky's trilogy is a bunch of useless gack. Brecht's gibberish about the alienation effect is, as proved by a lot of Joe Papp's oeuvre in the seventies, unimplementable (Mamet 144).

Only someone of Mamet's stature could dare attack the Father of Modern Acting. The most powerful, living American playwright prizes dramatic appeal above all else. He is an essentialist—always pointing out the people and things that pull more pretention than functional, artistic weight.

Returning to the play, *Race* fared only moderately well at the box office, and critically it was a mixed bag. Compared to the six most recent productions of Mamet's work, *Race* ran longer than any other production, but it did not fill the seats as did the short-lived revival of *Glengarry Glenn Ross* or *China Doll* in the fall of 2015. My theory: Al Pacino was the draw of the masses. Still, on August 21, 2010, when *Race* had its final performance at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, the show finished with 297 performances. This is no small victory for a *straight play* on the Great White Way.

However, the show's critics found the play rather—and this word is usually unexpected for a Mamet play—safe. Ben Brantley writes in his review titled “In Mametland, a Skirmish in Black and White” of the play's lack of shock value.

Though the play made pointed use of sexual and ethnic words that are still seldom heard in polite discussion, these elicited far more giggles than gasps. I couldn't help longing for the days when a new play by Mr. Mamet so knocked the breath out of you that you wouldn't think of standing up afterward until you were sure your legs would support you (Brantley).

Brantley goes on to admit that there are important ideas about race being confronted, albeit in a delivery that is—at worst—competent. From the opening words of the initial review in *The New York Post* by Elisabeth Vincentelli: “The most stunning thing about the David Mamet play that opened last night is how clunky it is” (Vincentelli). These two reviews are indicative of the youthful American theatre's opinion of David Mamet in the twenty-first century—as in: yes, he has talent, but this is the same old same old. I think much of the contempt for Mamet derives from his contemporaries who are envious of his assured longevity in the canon.

For this reason and also for his recently professed conservatism, Mamet is an enjoyable punching bag in theatre circles from academic departments to small, professional theatres around the country. As we have learned from *Oleanna*, Mamet is not the darling of the average-female artistic director. Regarding *Race*, Mamet has created once again another morally ambiguous female character. Susan, as Vincentelli so keenly points out, does not have a last name and acts as another female ticking-time-bomb. In the play's early critical history, Susan in *Race* elicited some comparisons to Carol in *Oleanna*. This proves interesting since both plays are about the dark and sometimes uncomfortable truths of blind political correctness, and also both of the female characters make choices that are sinister in nature. Both Carol and Susan start off as unassuming, fumbling young women and turn out to be more calculating than they initially let on through the action. I do not understand why crafting female characters who have agency—whether through good or misguided intentions—is something to criticize Mamet for in his writing; the male characters are hardly saints or angels.

More specifically, in *Race* Mamet offers up some of his most mild nihilism to date. The character of Jack defends his remark when he is called out for racism:

SUSAN. You think Black people are stupid?

JACK. I think *all* people are stupid. I don't think blacks are exempt...

(Mamet 19).

Mamet's worldview is heightened pragmatism. Characters—just like people in the real world—make decisions, sometimes often stupidly, to get what they want. Another key theme in Mamet's works: smart people have clever ways of hiding their advantages.

Perhaps Mamet hopes for catharsis in the viewer's ability to confront this truth about being a human being.

Now, the play itself is not without its structural peculiarities. At times, and even through a few readings, the various plot points that connect the story are not immediately reportable through memory. My theory is that the main dramatic question of the play is not character-specific. It is race-specific: how freely can we all talk about race, and if we cannot talk as freely as we would like to, is this a bad thing? On top of this, *Race* (much like *China Doll*) has the late-Mamet habit of relying on too much offstage reporting. How we learn about Susan's schemes in securing Charles as a sacrificial lamb for a crime he did not commit is much too reliant on people talking. Mamet's main flaw as a dramatist is his tendency to prescribe a lot of climactic action offstage or reported through a phone. This is all fine and well for establishing expositional mystery and given circumstances, but Mamet—especially in his later career—has become too dependent on offstage action as a satisfying means for resolution. Considering this recurring misstep, constructed ideologies behind texts are more easily revealed. Plays take a step towards sermons when characters become interchangeable.

Indeed, since *Race*'s premiere in the fall of 2009, it has enjoyed literary, critical attention. English academic and African diaspora specialist Cynthia A. Young makes a case for Mamet's skewed, misguided argument about race. She ends her article "Race, Rape, and White Victimhood: David Mamet's *Race*" with this political sentence: "Just as the Tea Party has so successfully done, Mamet has captured the contemporary mood of white disaffection, yoking it to an image of a postracist society intent on grinding white men under its heel" (Young 1022). Young takes a lot of time being snarky about Mamet's

persona, but in this final sentence she illuminates the truthful functionality of what *Race* is trying to convey to us all. Mamet's view: in the search for equality, inequality always can get the step ahead. Mamet is also distrustful of the martyr archetype. In Mamet's world, victimhood is inevitable as we all are maliciously competing with one another for resources, but his main point with *Race* (and prophesied with *Oleanna* earlier) is that perceived victimhood in the twenty-first century is power.

A few pages into the second scene—the top of the second act—we encounter Jack's explanation for how factions become mobs. Mamet's dialogue is fill-in-the-blank educational as Jack instructs Susan on the social nature of human beings:

SUSAN. Are black people different from other people?

JACK. All people are different. Sometimes they conjoin.

SUSAN. They conjoin.

JACK. Yes.

SUSAN. Into.

JACK. A group. A race. A jury, or an audience.

(pause)

Sometimes they conjoin into a mob (Mamet 41).

Mob culture has been a prevalent theme in dramatic literature—a fact that our current disciples of political theatre know all too well. *Lysistrata*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *The School for Scandal*, *Masse-Mensch*, *Machinal*, and *The Crucible* are just a few examples of plays where much of the dramatic conflict comes from individual choice against the demands of sweeping mobs. In Mamet's world the mob is all too real, but it is usually offstage and it is often a substitute for societal expectations of assimilation and

performance. Whether this mob is the corporate real estate office in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, or Carol's "group" in *Oleanna*, a merciless faction of people is always threatening exposure, defeat, or inadequacy. *Race* is no exception, as the mob is the offstage jury: a group of twelve Americans from different backgrounds and allegiances.

The jury is an offstage presence that sheds more light on some of Mamet's deepest ontological insights into the nature of live performance. Gladiatorial, quick, and frank, the theatre of David Mamet is a temple of competition. Catharsis exists, but only at the expense of someone's life being destroyed. Additionally, Mamet's meta-theatricality is slimly veiled through the character of Jack. Jack's frequent, nonchalant mini-lessons with Susan about the practice of law are easily Mamet's own views. Jack explains:

[. . .] But the *new* group – which is called 'the jury.' Another name for which is, The Audience. We're going to put on a show. And when we "amuse" them – they may forget, their individual allegiances and, *for a moment* be conjoined. But for our entertainment to succeed it has to have, surprise. And *if* a word gets out of the surprise's *nature*, the surprise will fail, and we will lose (41).

Is Jack talking about law or the theatre? One can hardly tell by the above dialogue, for both fields seem uncomfortably linked. Mamet articulates a connection that is at once both sublime and cynical. My feeling of cynicism comes from the charade-like articulation of law as a mere entertainment. Mamet sees only a small gap between a house of theatre and a court of law; what makes for a good case is often the material for an exciting evening at the theatre. The sublimity of the passage is the acknowledgement of the potential for human unity, for even if this moment of conjoining is minimal and

temporary, it is a remarkable phenomenon all the same. The theatre of David Mamet is certainly self-aware. Mamet's world is communal, business-oriented, and mildly merciless. The playwright's work sits confidently between the sacred space of a theatre and the bloody realities of an arena. *Race* is always cognizant of what it means to put on a show, something that recurs frequently in Mamet's work.

In *Race*, truth and falsehood are always mutually indistinguishable. There are only versions of the truth, or more competent lies. Jack and Henry in particular are quite comfortable with this side of their profession. Near the end of scene two, Jack explains to Susan:

JACK. Well, you were wrong. Two parties to a case – loser ever say
“Yes, I lost. But, you know what? The other guy was right.” *Each* side
thinks it's right. And *justice*, if it exists – lies only in the imperfect, and
mutually unacceptable result of their interaction. [. . .](54).

Pitching the best story, the story that *sells* is the name of the game. Mamet sees excessive flaws in all human institutions and constructions; nothing is perfect. There is no perfect system, profession, or person that will not change the facts for its/ his or her survival.

This view is illuminated more clearly in *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture*. Published nearly two years after *Race* was written, the book illuminates the inescapable ineffectuality of all human designs:

The tragic view, however, holds that life is complicated and man flawed, and so, our actions must be guided by laws difficult both of formation and observance; that these laws, being the product of Man, will, themselves, be flawed, that they will not cover all instances, that their observation and

correct application will often cause anxiety, and, indeed trauma, but that the health of a society (both moral and material) must rest on the attempt to do so [. . .] between Good and Evil there *is* no choice, and thus moral choice means a choice between two evils (Mamet 48).

The passage is from an essay in *The Secret Knowledge* titled “Choice.” The prose is a definitive proclamation of Mamet’s distrust in human devices and institutions. Both fiscally and socially conservative, in Mamet’s world a society’s constructions do more good than bad. Mamet rejects Rousseau and his disciples. Man is not born as a clean slate or free. In Mamet’s view, human beings are pugnacious, territorial, and competitive. Drama, in turn, serves as a cleansing ritual to confront this truth. Through this lens, we are not too far off from the citizens of ancient Rome, watching a bloody battle between two lions, or lion and Christian. My stance: this is *a* sound way of looking at the genre of drama, but it is not *the only* way of approaching the art form. For one thing, this articulation speaks little of the Comic View of life and its bountiful genre. Also, I cannot subscribe to a view of theatre that is so removed from any sense of the spiritual, or of the collective unconscious. Mamet is suspicious of any large group activity; this includes attendance at a production. The more human beings who are thrown into the mix, the more Mamet raises his brow. For Mamet, institutionalism is always suspect. The theatre, academia, the field of law, and the business of real estate are no exceptions to this rule. Mamet is apprehensive of a universal code of ethics. Personal morality is prized more highly than strict conformity to any safe principle or moral code.

Staying with *The Secret Knowledge*, another relevant passage in relation to *Race* can be found in the chapter “Self-Evident Truth.” Mamet writes:

One of the great wrongs of our democracy was the *Dred Scott* decision. Here the highest court of the land asserted its right to contravene the Declaration of Independence, and assert, as self-evident, that there existed two classes of human beings, the Black and the White, and that the Black was not entitled to protection of the Law. How does this differ from Affirmative Action? [. . .] Lincoln wrote that if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. It is self-evident that a racist view of the world *must* result in injustice. That that injustice may be calculated to benefit members of a group which may have been previously oppressed may stand as an explanation for immoral behavior, but it does not excuse it (190-191).

Mamet's comparison of affirmative action with the horrendous atrocity of the Dred Scott decision is illuminating. While some would find this comparison hardly fair, there is an element of logic to it. Equality is an ideal and something that *should* be routinely considered and questioned in the social fabric of our nation, but Mamet finds the absence of inequality to be unachievable. True equality is the fair, free openness of the competition of resources. And yet, this view seems drenched in unimaginative cynicism. Perhaps there is not one correct way at bridging the gap, but multiple correct ways.

However, Mamet remains intensely critical of political correctness, for any articulation of correctness is always an opportunity to wield power and to annihilate any contrary incorrectness. Mamet's most brilliant example of this is also found in his essay "Puritans", in *The Secret Knowledge*. He argues:

This is the state of the contemporary Liberal world—the fear of giving offense has been self-inculcated in a group which must, now, consider *literally* every word and action, for potential violation of the New Norms. To further compound the dilemma, the norms *themselves* are inchoate: consider a high school teacher coming upon two students kissing in the hallway, in violation of school rules. Suppose the two students are gay. Can you imagine a teacher who would not at the very least hesitate in or mitigate her caution or censure in fear of offending the students? (90).

Mamet is clever in crafting his examples. Through principle, this hypothetical dilemma would be tricky, and same-sex public displays of affection in high school *should* be dealt with in the same way as heterosexual displays of affection. However, Mamet is a conservative by thought, and finds a change in programming as something that always must be dealt with through the utmost caution. Only seeing surface-level benevolence in institutions or organizations is foolish and blind. Mamet values individual thought as highly as he does the free market.

Returning to the play, *Race*'s ending is unsatisfying. The play's ideas and themes are ultimately more engaging than the plot. I say this from only having read the text. All the same, most of its excitement comes from the topics of conversation. The plot and characters seem too familiar or trite. Susan seems like other female Mamet characters. Henry and Jack are tough-guy types.

The play, now over six years old, is not as frequently produced as it was during its inaugural season or through the following season in regional theatres. However, Theatre Communications Group reported that *Race* was the ninth most produced play in the

country for the 2011-2012 season; Mamet's play had seven productions across the nation during this period. John Logan's *Red* was the most produced play with twenty-three productions in the United States. In comparison to other shows and their circularity from coast to coast, *Race* tied with *August: Osage County* (2007), the musical *Spring Awakening* (2006), and *Clybourne Park* (2010). All of the plays had seven productions apiece during the 2011-2012 American theatre season. The 2011-2012 theatre season also marks the first time Mamet has appeared on the annual list since the 1996-1997 season with *The Cryptogram* (1994). While certainly not his *magnum opus*, *Race* must be considered a major work in Mamet's career.

All in all, *Race* is every bit as much a play about American law as it is a play about the subject of race. The work is a satire on the fragility of human laws and codes—both written and unwritten. The most convincing summation of the play and its concerns can be found in Patrice D. Rankine's fascinating book *Aristotle and Black Drama: A Theater of Civil Disobedience*. The last chapter of his book chronicles discussions and representations of black characters in the twenty-first century American theatre. Regarding *Race*, Rankine also sees the offstage courtroom as a character of its own; he writes:

Race presents the debate in courtroom terms. [. . .] A courtroom is like a church to the extent that it is a sacred space, wherein particular rules, conventions, and practices apply, and not necessarily those of every day life. These spaces are easy arenas for civil disobedience, places for persons to act in uncustomary ways. The courtroom and church, where public discourse and crises are aired, are counterpoints to the home, the

private hearth. And yet, the theater allows entry even into private spaces
(Rankine 220).

This brilliant insight is at the thematic heart of the play. *Race* is an arena where hidden, unconfessed animosities can be purged. The team of attorneys at law is an assembly of gladiators—well adapted to the necessity of trickery, deception, fact-spinning, and contrived performance. At all times, they are cognizant of the slippery design of human laws. David Mamet has written a play that illuminates the practice of law as only partially removed from the practice of playmaking. Both professions are serving the human need for design, symmetry, retribution, and cosmic justice.

CHAPTER 4

WORDS IN THE OFFICE: *THE ANARCHIST*

The Anarchist (2012) is a labyrinthine philosopher's dream. With only two female characters, an ambiguous office setting, and no act or scene breaks, the play is a seventy-minute one act—and yet—the intellectual and dramatic heights to which Mamet soars is nothing short of masterful; *The Anarchist* is his best offering of the decade. Mamet's work is about Cathy, a woman serving a life sentence—she has already served thirty-five years—for the murders of two police officers she killed when she was part of a youth-oriented, anarchic cult back in presumably the early 1970s. Cathy's friend and onstage opponent is Ann, her present parole officer who has known Cathy since the beginning of her sentence. Cathy is up for parole due to her exceptional behavior while serving her sentence. She also has found Jesus. The play—much like *Oleanna*—is a game of muscular intellect and endurance; both women have their own agenda and nothing is of course, as it seems. An interview that at first appears amicable and cordial turns quickly into a mini-Inquisition.

The play is also the most big-picture oriented play that Mamet has written in quite some time. *The Anarchist* ascends to dizzying heights both metaphysically and ethically. Indeed, it takes very little time before the women—especially Cathy—to start talking in a hypothetical or abstract sense. We know within the first few lines that these women have an intense intellectual relationship. This is apparent because Cathy so quickly transcends talking about herself. This passage is only seven lines into the play:

CATHY: I hope that I've learned to be reasonable. At least I have studied it. Most importantly.

ANN: *Most* importantly.

CATHY: Yes.

ANN: *Reason* more than patience?

CATHY: One might think the pressing study would be patience. But patience, of course implies an end.

ANN: "Patience implies and end."

CATHY: Well, yes.

ANN: As?

CATHY: One may be patient only *for* something (Mamet 7-8).

This dialogue indicates an extensive, private experience with the other woman's mind. Not even a complete page into the play, and Cathy is already articulating syllogisms of logic and we barely know who she is. Cathy chooses to quickly take the conversation to the abstract and the intellectual side of thinking; she transcends the insular world of the self. *The Anarchist* does indeed exist in two worlds: the unique circumstances and roles the two women play to one another, and the world of ideas—and more intricately—the world of faith and beliefs. *The Anarchist* is strikingly original and singular for Mamet because much of the thematic pull is concerned with a belief in a creed or adherence to a cosmological view of the human race. The play deals with the human spirit, or the human need for a transcended divinity. The seventy-minute work is an interrogation of a prisoner's teachings and doctrine—upon the completion of my first reading, I found myself thinking about Jesus of Nazareth, Joan of Arc, and various late 1960s/early 1970s

gurus. Mamet has written a play that both confirms our need for abstract, spiritual thinking—and in turn, illuminates why this thinking is so enticing—but also articulates a sense of realism about how human behavior has to be governed for the common good of our species. And yet, what makes the play dramatic gold is that both women understand the other’s pint of view.

The play also reads like a confessional. Cathy has written a manuscript during her time in confinement, but also a revolutionary treatise which Ann frequently quotes to challenge her supposed rehabilitation. Cathy must navigate her youthful validation of the words she once wrote, but also convince Ann that through finding Christ she has truly become remorseful. Cathy must affirm her past to evade her future, but paradoxically, this will ultimately damn her life.

Ann reads from Cathy’s various writings frequently, but one of the first times she quotes a passage, Mamet reveals the rules of the game we are about to see unfold:

ANN (*Reads*) : “Words not meant to misdirect are wasted.”

CATHY: Well, there you are . . . and their absence of meaning allowed us . . . or, we *understood* them. As a celebration of the transgressive. Because they had no meaning (12).

This reads almost like a friendly handshake before a game, or the reading of terms before a medieval battle. *The Anarchist* is a play by David Mamet, and therefore it is steeped in a distrust of language—a late twentieth-century trend that starts with Beckett and is elucidated by other Anglophone playwrights. Mamet’s master is Harold Pinter. Both playwrights have a way of using the English language as an intricate weapon for distortion and hidden agendas. *The Anarchist* is no exception.

Additionally, Mamet is playing with the seductive quality of philosophy; each branch of thinking is always trying to recruit new disciples. Mamet is clever in how he hints at this truth:

CATHY: Well: to the young, the foreign idea is seductive.

ANN: Why is that?

CATHY: As to the young, everything is foreign. Which is why they are revolutionaries.

ANN: Because?

CATHY: It's easy. One may easily "make things anew" according to one's insights if one possesses no experience. The French word was "seduire" to seduce.

ANN: "To seduce."

CATHY: "Seduire. And why would I forget it? It's the same word [. . .]
(14).

Throughout *The Anarchist*, it is as if Mamet is being the most honest regarding the landscape of the human intellect: a byzantine, ferocious force in constant need of expansion and adherents. This landscape also applies to belief and faith. With this view illuminated, our Western concept of the soul exists only in our ability to stand against mistruths. It is our given, unalienable right—always present, but frequently not used—to always choose whether something is truthful or not. We all have a choice in either adherence or refutation to a singular idea. The outside, external word—usually through a political system and with threat of painful death—can of course make a person comply to the individual's perceived mistruth. But even so, if the individual refuses to admit—with

words—her dedication to The State, the only thing The State can do is implement painful force or annihilation of the individual’s body. So, an idea or belief *can* actually transcend the corporal, transient vessel of the human body. Some ideas are too dangerous for The State to permit exposure.

This idea is discussed by the women later on in the play. Mamet’s Cathy creates a dichotomy between The People and The State. The People are only governed by natural laws of the external world, The State is governed by man-made laws and principles. An individual with complete disregard for The State can easily be called an anarchist, or sainted visionary—much of this depends upon how the viewer perceives the person. The dialogue reveals a central, moral conflict between the women:

ANN: How are “the People” different from the State?

CATHY: Well, that’s the province of philosophy.

ANN: You read philosophy (17).

Cathy’s view from her youth articulates a separate, broader, yet tangible understanding of the human condition that goes beyond The State and the rules it imposes on the masses.

Similarly, another crucial motif in the play is the juxtaposition between the French language and the English language. Ann quotes Cathy’s text, which describes French as the Language of Philosophy, while Cathy’s ex-lover—and through a past recollection—describes English as the Language of Colonialism. This dichotomy is cohesively secured by dialogue early on in the play. Cathy makes a link between the Language of Philosophy and its people and culture:

CATHY: They’re quite immoral. Don’t you think? The French.

ANN: Tell me. Why?

CATHY: They hold the view the world is an illusion.

ANN: Is that their view?

CATHY: Oh, yes. No wonder it sparked terrorism (12).

Comparing this exchange to the labeling of French as the Language of Philosophy and English as the Language of Colonialism, we see how Mamet finds the philosophical language more deceiving and imprecise. The Language of Colonialism—by nature—can not be concerned with thinking the world is an illusion if its *motus operandi* is the propagation of its ideas, culture, and language; I am going to say it: Mamet is no Francophile. For instance, take the immediate dialogue following the above passage:

CATHY: If nothing has meaning save that we ascribe to it. What reality is there, for example, in another's suffering? As a result of which we find much tragedy. (*Pause*) No wonder they tend to lose wars (12-13).

As I have articulated in earlier chapters, Mamet's dramatic spirit is pugnacious. He enjoys the spirit of human combat—even if it is between two women and entirely a war of intellects.

The dichotomy between the English and French language—articulated by Mamet, but also through his fictional surrogate—is also a juxtaposition of cosmological and political worldviews. In an interview with John Stossel, in promotion of *The Secret Knowledge*, Mamet explains: “[. . .]we have to have a constrained vision of the universe—the unconstrained vision, the liberal vision is that everything can be done [. . .] it's just not true” (Mamet). This interview was surely conducted during Mamet's writing process for *The Anarchist*, which opened at the John Golden Theatre a year later on December 2, 2012. A constrained—and more accurately—practical vision of human

beings and how they should be governed is at the heart of *The Anarchist*. I suspect Mamet sides more with Ann than Cathy—especially considering the play’s surprise conclusion.

Retreating to *The Secret Knowledge*, Mamet elucidates his conservative vision of human nature. He writes:

The constrained view is that neither human beings, nor any conglomeration into which they may form themselves, are omnipotent, nor omniscient, nor omnibenevolent. We are incapable even of knowing, let alone implementing, engines to alleviate the true causes of, and indeed of understanding the true nature of, many of the problems besetting us. This is, as Hayek says, The Tragic View. We are not only wrong, but most often wrong. The treasured values of one generation (slavery, phrenology, lobotomy, physical discipline of children, women as property, et cetera) are seen now as vile but as absurd. As, eventually, will many of the cherished ideas of today. This is tragic, but inevitable (Mamet 59).

This passage comes from an early essay in the book titled “Milton Friedman Explained” and legitimizes a practical, conservative outlook on human nature. Regarding *The Anarchist*, Ann is clearly closer to Mamet’s view than Cathy’s anti-government and unimplementable worldviews from her youth. Some ideas are dangerous and worrisome. Preservation is at the heart of Mamet’s political leanings. With this knowledge, a play about a possible rehabilitation of a multi-murderer can only have one inevitable ending, especially when David Mamet is the playwright.

Moreover, in *The Anarchist* the issue of change is also a concern throughout the text. Mamet is asking: can people ever change? Mamet's writing is quite to the point:

CATHY: Can people change?

ANN: I don't know.

CATHY: If they had changed, could you recognize it? [. . .] (27).

Cathy is clever, because the question is both rhetorical and personal—a provocation and challenge for Ann. Criminality is irrevocable, but this does not mean a person will *absolutely* commit the same, malicious act again. However, a conservative approach to reform is hardly unwarranted—Mamet always wants to play it safe and assume the worst in people; it simply saves time.

The Anarchist must also be looked at through the lens of gender. Three of the four plays that I am dealing with in this work are two-character plays. Coincidentally, each of the three plays is an example of every gender pairing possible for a two-character play; *The Anarchist* is the all-female, two-character play. One of the things I noticed about halfway through my first reading of the text is the *lack* of four-lettered expletives that usually litter a David Mamet play. Even more illuminating: *Oleanna* gets foul at the end when John threatens Carol in her moment of victory, but up until then there is hardly a single offensive word in the play. *China Doll*—the no-females-allowed, two-character play— wastes no time in utilizing adult language. Apparently, Mamet thinks adult women do not curse in conversation with one another; there is not a single word uttered that could not be pronounced on broadcast television.

Mamet expert Arthur Holmberg reveals an explanation for what I have detected in the plays I have studied. In his recent book *David Mamet and American Macho*, he writes:

Language is one of the major strategies we use to perform gender. Growing up, we learn gender-specific ways to talk. Boys and girls follow different speech codes [. . .] Men challenge other men's authority through interruptions, insults, threats, and verbal dueling. They enjoy the thrust and parry. Some sociolinguists sum up the difference this way: women use language to build a sense of community, men to compete openly with each other (Holmberg 183).

Holmberg is right on most accounts. Holmberg's book was written before *The Anarchist* was first performed, so he does not deal with the psychologies and speech patterns of Cathy and Ann. However, his point about how women use language to build a sense of community lands as accurate for the dialogue of the play. For instance, Cathy on more than one occasion tries to unite herself with Ann through shared experience, or inquiries of caring. She asks about Ann's daughter, a question that Ann is too clever to answer; Cathy frequently tries to misdirect Ann during her interview/ interrogation. Cathy is also a cunning projector, for she knows that Ann has been studying her for over thirty years and manipulates any soft spots or perceived weaknesses.

Cathy also utilizes her past sexual experience with both sexes as an exotic, mesmerizing appeal over Ann; Cathy frequently insinuates that Ann has a nonexistent intimate life. For instance, take this dialogue:

ANN: Do I lack Sex?

CATHY: You lack *something*. Which is equal. In your mind. To the lack of sex. And so, is signalized bit it [. . .] (26).

We do not realize until the play's sudden denouement of how steely and armor-willed Ann really is. Throughout the play, she comes off as much less capable, especially in a verbal duel with Cathy.

However, Ann finally, triumphantly declares Check Mate. In a series of incendiary questions, Cathy finally slips inadvertently: she feels nothing for shooting the officer(s) when she was a youthful renegade. In her words: "He was carrying a gun. He would have done better to use it" (57). Then, in an unexpected turn-of-the-tide, Ann walks over to the conference table, turns on the intercom, and asks for Cathy's preceding comment to be transcribed; she got her. The following dialogue concludes the play and is one of the finest, most satisfying endings I have read of a play in years:

CATHY: You have just sentenced me to a life in prison.

ANN: Yes?

CATHY: For speaking my mind.

ANN: Is that what I did?

(*Pause.*)

CATHY: Do you believe in mercy? What have you done in your long "service" to the State that was a human act.

ANN: I've done this. (*Pause*) They'll take you back to your cell (58).

The ending is ingenious. While the reader/ audience might have first identified with Cathy, we see now that she is indeed still dangerous. Ann might not be able to reform Cathy's ideals or convicted beliefs, but she has every right to use the power she has been

endowed with—from the State—to prevent her from causing any more disruption to civilized society. Moreover, Cathy’s maxims of truth should be allowed to exist freely, but she ended that privilege when she violently took human life. For even if Cathy has found Christ, and even if she is truly remorseful and will not commit murder again, she is a permanent threat. Mamet is at his most adamant in his stance on judicial punishment: the State must exist to confine violent criminals from inspiring and perpetrating malignant, heinous acts. At the end of the day, anarchy is in nobody’s best interest.

Regarding the commercial and critical reception of *The Anarchist*, the play has not been received well. Take this passage from Ben Brantley’s official review of the world premiere for *The New York Times* in an article titled “War of Wills, Vocabularies and Virtues: David Mamet’s ‘Anarchist’ at the Golden Theater”:

Theatergoers must really furrow their brows here just to follow the basic arguments, never mind the layers of motivation woven into them. And without giving away too much, I think it’s fair to reveal “Anarchist” basically concludes that all those polysyllabic words mean nothing, when you come right down to it. Right is right, and wrong is wrong. When you reach the end of “Anarchist,” you may feel you’ve traveled an unnecessarily winding road to get there (Brantley).

I have never seen a performance of the play, so I cannot fully evaluate Brantley’s criticism. However, Brantley’s conclusions on the thematic and moral underpinnings of the play are spot on. Also, Patti Lupone and Debra Winger—who played Cathy and Ann respectively—were both cited as having given capable, competent performances for the material they were working with onstage. Nevertheless, perhaps a great deal is lost in this

work without getting a chance to read the written word. Additionally, the original production bombed financially. After opening December 2, 2012, it closed on December 16, 2012, at the John Golden Theatre. Even for a *straight play* on Broadway, this is a less than ideal run. David Mamet also directed his work—his second time up to bat in this position on Broadway and one he has not since repeated.

In 2015, another production opened in Los Angeles at Hollywood's Theatre Row. Rebecca Pidgeon—Mamet's wife and forever Carol from *Oleanna*—played the role of Ann and Felicity Huffman was Cathy; Mamet did not direct. Jordan Riefe writes in his review from *The Hollywood Reporter*: "In the end, Mamet gives his audience plenty to consider, but *The Anarchist*, with its underwhelming conclusion and under-baked characters, feels more like an etude than a fully developed composition" (Riefe). Perhaps Mamet wanted to try his luck on a different coast in a spare, ninety-nine-seat theatre. Unfortunately, while the production ran longer than the initial production in New York, it still did not fare well with audiences and critics alike. An intellectual dialogue does not make for good drama—except when it does. Personally, I rather enjoyed my study of the play; and, while it took me a few hours to work through the intricate dialogue and muscular rhetoric and syllogisms, I was completely enthralled the whole time. Again, perhaps some plays are better on the page than on the stage.

In the end, *The Anarchist* will not go down as one of Mamet's most lucrative, dramatic enterprises. However, I rank it as my second favorite—after *Oleanna*. While short in length, but convoluted in language and ideology, the play is also insular and claustrophobic. The play is Mamet's least commercially successful, major work of the twenty-first century. However, the play as a piece of literature is sound and more than

competent. The play is indicative of Mamet's recent political and philosophical leanings. *The Anarchist* teaches us to be practical in regards to criminality and dealing with evil. Cathy cannot be granted her freedom, because she has proven that her individual liberty is a threat to not only The State, but also to The People. Unchecked, unrestrained freedom is an illusion, and for Cathy's transgression she must be sentenced. Mamet often argues that drama is about the purging of lies—the painful revelation of the God-awful truth. In *The Anarchist*, the truth is that human beings—by themselves and left to their own devices—will cause more human misery and destruction than under the thumb of a governed state. Mamet is inflexible in this ethical treatise of criminality, culture, and justice.

CHAPTER 5

LIONS IN WINTER: *CHINA DOLL*

Mamet's most recent play has been billed as a "world premiere on Broadway." This clever move by the producers speaks volumes not only about Mamet's clout in the American theatre, but about the current state of new play development in the country. Untried in more forgiving markets, *China Doll* opened at the Gerald Shoenfeld Theatre in New York on December 4, 2015. Panned by the critics but lucrative in financial earnings, the play is dedicated to Al Pacino, its star and breadwinner.

Even at the current moment of my writing, the play has just finished the end of its run on Broadway. Having read the play upon its publication by Theatre Communications Group, I found the drama to be an absorbing read; I was hooked from the start. It was never quite clear where it was going or what was happening, but the play did not read as predictable or trite. However, seeing the production for myself was an entirely different experience. This chapter will be both a personal account of my experience attending the original production, and a preliminary analysis of some of the thematic material buried in the text of the written word.

Hopping out of a cab on January 7, 2016, I made my way up to the mezzanine of the Gerald Shoenfeld Theatre. I was amused at the makeup of people around me: young men and couples in their sixties and seventies. The set, designed (or rather decorated since Mamet is distrustful of design) by Derek McLane was tucked behind a baby blue curtain until the start of the performance. Once the play began, a pristine apartment was revealed with elegant, but modern taste. Upstage there was a view of what appeared to be

an empty rooftop garden or patio. Grass-like plants grew on the edge of the balcony to convey the apartment's significant distance from the ground. Al Pacino entered from down left and was greeted with thunderous applause and appreciative cheering. The only other time I heard such a momentous vocalization from an audience was when I saw Angela Lansbury in *Blythe Spirit* at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles!

The play went on and it became difficult to hear every line Pacino delivered. Moreover, the play in performance was not as engaging as it was on the page. More often than not, I found my mind wondering during the first act. There was some laughter occasionally, but it seemed as if people were mostly amused at seeing Pacino portray the slick-talking, reptilian billionaire. At intermission, I overheard a flirtatious exchange between a female usher and male audience member. The woman's words: "Yeah, do not worry. We will get out of here at about nine. You only have to suffer until then." I did see people leave at intermission.

However, the most jaw-dropping moment of my evening occurred near the completion of the performance: the ending was completely different from the version I read in the printed copy of the play, published by TCG only two months earlier. I fancy the published (original) ending, but before I explain the difference between what I read and what I saw, some analysis of the play is in order.

China Doll is a two (essentially one-and-a-half) character play. The characters are Mickey Ross, a billionaire in his seventies who apparently earned his dough through Machiavellian, political maneuverings, and Carson, his thirty-something yes man who spends most of his stage time juggling numerous phone calls. The play begins with Mickey berating the younger man for failing to find out where Ms. Pierson (Mickey's

much younger lover) is. The plot from here gets increasingly more byzantine. Much of the action of the play involves Mickey sweet-talking his variously powerful friends and business associates by telephone. His main goal: fly Ms. Pierson on his almost-purchased airplane to London where they will be married. His obstacle: a young politician running for governor (presumably of New York) halts his fiancée in Toronto and orders a full strip search. It sounds like the stuff of comedy, yet the proceedings seem to ask the reader/ audience to be on the edge of suspense. The first act ends with Mickey ordering Carson to pull up a file of career-killing dirt on “the Kid.”

Now, while most of the first act involves Mickey on the phone, he occasionally talks to Carson and asks him if he wants to learn “a lesson.” These conversations are such a relief from the chore of keeping up with a one-sided phone conversation. Most importantly, they illuminate thematic concerns at work in the play. The most startling of these proclamations comes early in the first act. Mickey teaches the business transaction of romance:

A beautiful woman will never be alone. As she requires protection. Men *pursue* her, and she will accept the best current offer. She must *protect* herself, as all compete for her. And will plague her. Until she accepts an alliance. In this competition, might I offer a preemptive bid? Yes. Is it youth or beauty? No. It's wealth. Should I berate myself for having wealth? Should she for having *beauty*? Who would say so? (Mamet 17)

It is the first clarifying, truthful moment in the play thus far. Without question, it is an unpalatable motivation, but what have we learned to expect from Mamet's male protagonists? What works about the short monologue is the articulation of Mickey's logic

and narrow vision. Carson however, doesn't appear (at least on the surface) to be seduced into this ethical treatise of acquiring women, and the brilliant Christopher Denham played Carson's response with a distinct sense of generational trepidation and mild disgust. Carson's ethical view of women cannot be considered synonymous to Mickey's view, for both men inhabited different cultural climates. Regardless, Mickey's lessons with Carson are the best part of the first act.

The second act turns mordantly serious. Mickey is charged with violating the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, his passport has been cancelled, and jail time becomes unavoidable. The tension builds when Carson refuses to perform Mickey's illegal commands, and this leads to Mickey bludgeoning him to death with a model airplane. In the original version, there is a knock on the apartment door and Mickey mutilates himself and feigns an attack by shouting "Oh my God. Will no one help an old *man*?" (82). However, the night I attended the show, the play had an entirely different ending. While Mickey still murders Carson with the model airplane, there was no knock this time. Mickey composed himself, checked Carson's pulse, and then started to exit the apartment, before uttering, "So be it" or "So, let it be."

Obviously this alters the play considerably. It makes the conclusion less cynical, for perhaps the murder was a momentary, unpremeditated force of rage. Why did Mamet alter the ending? From all accounts, Mamet didn't even show up to the opening night. He saw a final rehearsal and the first preview, and jumped on a plane back to California (Riedel). Whether the producers or Mamet's friend and star (Pacino) asked for a revised ending is still unclear. One thing was certain: the audiences were not having it and neither were the ferocious New York critics.

China Doll had a panic-induced fall at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre. For one, negative traction was gaining on the notion even before the start of previews that Pacino was not up to the task. Michael Riedel of the *New York Post* was responsible for the gossip-mongering article first published on October 29, 2015; he instigated much of the calamitous momentum from the vulture-like New York critics. He writes:

“China Doll’ is indeed, in keeping with the Mamet idiom, a f—cking disaster. And nobody knows that better than its star, Al Pacino. Friends of the actor say they’ve never seen him so despondent. He sits in his dressing room after the show “totally lost,” one says. And sources say he’s getting no help from Mamet [. . .] (Riedel)

Riedel’s write-up (published more than a month before opening night) also insists that Pacino is reading from teleprompters in the wings, the laptop in the apartment, and from a screen behind the couch. The article shaped the fever for the impending critical failure.

After the postponed opening night (it was originally intended to premiere on November 19), Riedel wrote another article that luxuriates in the backstage drama of the production; “Tantrums, terror, B12 shots: Inside Al Pacino’s Broadway bomb” goes even further into the nail-biting flop. The theatre critic for the *New York Post* explains: “What went wrong? Start with the playwright and the star. Neither is at the height of his powers anymore” (Riedel). Riedel’s account of the proceedings is sketchy. He frequently ends his anonymous tips with “one source says.” He apparently has friends everywhere, as he reports extensive insider knowledge—everything from a report that Pacino refused to appear in front of photographers at the opening night party at the Redeye Grill to his routine injection of vitamin B12 after Saturday matinees. Riedel also goes after *China*

Doll's director, Pam Mackinnon. Apparently she is known on Broadway as The Elk, because "[. . .] she is too big for the room and runs around banging her antlers into the wall." (Riedel) Again, Riedel identifies an anonymous source who asserts that Mackinnon is not good with stars and succumbed to any demand Pacino made in the rehearsal process.

So, what went wrong? Who is to blame: Mackinnon, Pacino, or Mamet himself? Riedel surmises that the two older men are no longer as artistically potent as they once were, and yet this reductive explanation does little to pin down which specific artistic position is more at fault. My position: more productions need to occur before we can decipher the original production's shortcomings.

Returning to the two actors themselves, Pacino may very well be the cause of the production's negative response from the critics. It was hard to find the man (Pacino) intimidating, unless a person is intimidated by wealth or the idea of Al Pacino and his other roles. What was more mind-boggling was that Carson (played by the unusually tall Christopher Denham) was so easily and pathetically murdered by a man the size of Pacino. There was no resistance or fighting from Carson. He was struck once, fell, and did not try to defend himself. It was not at all convincing. Mickey is Carson's employer, and moreover, has much more accumulated wealth than a younger man; Mickey's superiority is understood between both characters. Mamet wants us to see these components as the primary power dynamic. Youth and beauty become irrelevant, as do physical capabilities. Moreover, it is easy to see why Mamet dedicated the play to Pacino, for both men have tremendous wealth, prestige, macho vibes, and years of experience. If Mamet sees the primary relationship amongst men as competing for assets of power and

women, *China Doll* easily becomes a play with an intended pedagogical transaction; Mickey is teaching a younger man (young enough to be his son, and maybe even grandson) what it takes to have success and power. Here yet again, there are parallels to Ionesco's *The Lesson*. Except in Mamet's second revision of the play, the pedagogical transaction is from older male to younger.

If there is perhaps one persistent theme through Mamet's dramatic writing it is survival. People (especially men) do what they have to do to get by in the world. We can see elements of this even from Mamet's trailblazing years in Chicago. Mamet sees every human interaction as a transaction. *China Doll* should end with Carson outwitting Mickey, but the older man is more desperate in his pursuit for survival and the play resolves in Carson's demise and Mickey's new dilemma of having a dead body in his apartment. Carson will not become Mickey, but why? Perhaps Carson does not wish to rise to the heights of financial, political power as Mickey did in his youth, or maybe Mickey sees all too familiar potential in the younger man and permanently bars a younger successor. Regardless, Carson is integral to the heart of *China Doll*. It is easy to be distracted by the imagined personalities on the other end of the phone, but this is *only* a two-character play. More specifically, it is a play between an older man and a young man. What happens offstage happens offstage. The play is about the two men we are forced to deal with for the longevity of the play; their relationship is the most significant component of the play. There are thematic conflicts embodied in their relationship: father and son, employer and employee, old and young, and teacher and student.

Learning is a key action in *China Doll*. It is what is happening symbiotically between the two of them: learning and teaching. In Mickey's (and I would say Mamet's

as well) logic, there are things that can be learned and there are things that can not be learned. This can be seen in the dialogue at the beginning of act two when Mickey is talking to his female friend on the phone:

“*Ringolevio?*” It’s a game we used to play.

(*Pause.*)

Well, you can’t learn it.

(*Pause*)

’Cause you have to learn it in the *streets*. Cheer *up*. I’ll see you in the airport.

(*Pause.*)

You too.

(*He hangs up. Carson reeneters.*)

I’ll tell you what: I’m getting *old*. (Mamet 53)

He is getting old because he is always playing the teacher. Mickey may have his own assets and hedonistic lifestyle, but much of his power rests on his *secret knowledge*. These words are always self-aware in Mamet, as we know from his recent treatise on American culture and politics, *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of the American Culture*. Secret knowledge is a weapon in Mamet. These words can be easily linked to Mamet’s ontological view of drama found in the “Politically Correct” chapter of *Theatre*. He writes, “Drama is about lies. Drama is about repression. As that which is repressed is liberated—at the conclusion of the play—the power of repression is vanquished, and the hero (the audience’s surrogate) is made more whole” (Mamet 69). In Mamet’s world something is always hidden. Lies and deception are everywhere.

Characters learn by conforming to a new lie. The established, the old, and the powerful all spin a web of deception, of secret knowledge, to legitimize their illusion of control. This is why Mamet is suspicious of all transposed education. Mamet's characters hide their own insecurities by creating the illusion of secret knowledge. This is how the playwright sees much of human interaction: teaching lies to preserve power and authority.

Obviously, Mamet wants Mickey to serve as the audience's surrogate in *China Doll*. The question becomes: what aspects of Mickey's vanquished repression are we supposed to empathize with by the play's conclusion? Mickey's actions cannot possibly be universally cathartic. How do Mickey's actions (which include bribery, trickery, and murder) complete us? Perhaps Mamet believes that we are always repressing the negative, evil aspects of our nature. What makes Mamet cynical in this case is that the truth is always dreadful and unbearable; self-knowledge is no picnic. Mamet does have a tragic view of experience, for he believes we are always suppressing complete self-interest. For Mamet, drama serves as a way to become more whole with our consumptive selfishness. Mamet would put the audience closer to the spectators watching gleefully in the Coliseum than the worshipful devotees of a temple. Mamet argues that we have a ferocious appetite for danger and self-destruction.

Now, some critics would argue that there is nothing to be gained by identifying the protagonist of a play with the playwright; they believe the author to be separate, an irrelevant vessel in relation to the piece he births. Critically speaking, the more we know about a person, the more avenues we open in attempting to fully realize a piece of art.

Mamet critic Arthur Holmberg affirms this view in his introduction to his book *David Mamet and American Macho*. Holmberg asserts:

[. . .] no intelligent reader takes the words of an imaginary character for those of the implied author. [. . .] The *Glengarry Glenn Ross* gang put money in their purse by lying and swindling and stealing. Even though we can sympathize with them, no one can read the play as a defense of theft. (Holmberg 4).

Holmberg's point only works if you do not believe in writers subconsciously unraveling aspects of their ego onto each character. Additionally, there are repeating archetypes that persist in the trajectory of any playwright's work. One of Mamet's persistent favorites is the alpha male/businessman-warrior. *China Doll* is the reveal of the aged alpha just on the final frost of autumn. Mickey is Mamet's *Lion in Winter*. Carson becomes the metaphorical bastard son, unsuitable for power or the blood required to wield control. One cannot dismiss Carson as anything other than ultimately ineffectual. Carson is the sum of a whole slew of Millennial-aged men, most specifically through the eyes of a successful male Baby Boomer. The play pits two generations of men against another in a battle for survival. Mamet's point is clear: the young men of today still have a lot to learn about the brutal world of politics and business. At the heart of Mamet's protagonists rules a pugnacious, combative spirit. Relentless conflict is an inescapable truth in the quest to become powerful.

Mamet articulates the merciless world of power dynamics amongst us all in his essay, "Rumpelstiltskin", found in the heart of *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture*. His aim: sincere honesty. Mamet writes:

As we have seen, all under the sway of the Nazi regime had to greet each other with the Nazi salute. Many found this, as it was an avowal of subjugation, intolerable. The Id said, “I will not give the wretched salute.” The Ego replied, “What does it *mean*? You don’t actually have to believe in the Nazis, it’s just a simple gesture, and performing it will save your life (Mamet 105).

Letting the Id have its way becomes the goal of drama, by Mamet’s estimation. Mamet’s view of the functionality of theatre is a purge of our most defiant, usurpative urges.

Returning to key components of the original production, *China Doll* could have come off as a vanity spectacle to the critics and early audience members. However, the production began to see the lucrative-black at the box office. Pacino was bringing in both the bucks and the crowds. Throughout its Broadway run, *China Doll* played to an average house of 86% capacity. This is a remarkable statistic for a new play on Broadway. When comparing this figure to other plays starring cinematic stars, *China Doll* boasts an average capacity well above other competitors in the theatre season. Pacino’s star-power beat the likes of: James Earl Jones in the *The Gin Game*, Bruce Willis and Laurie Metcalf in *Misery*, and Keira Knightley in *Thérèse Raquin*. All of these productions have significantly lower average capacities. Pacino’s name is billed larger than Mamet’s name, and so it is for this matter of font-size that I credit Pacino with bringing the paying patrons; Pacino is much of the reason the show gained so much capital. However, and from all accounts, his incessant stardom also resulted in a bastardizing of the written word of the playwright and to the necessary art of directing.

Now, if we consider my analysis on the thematic fabric of the play, its inaugural production becomes somewhat ironic. Mamet is not too far off from his most recent protagonist. Mickey embodies a defiant older man at war with the inevitable loss of power; Mamet and Pacino are going to go out swinging. *China Doll* is destructive masculinity at the last, lethal frost of autumn.

EPILOGUE

David Mamet's later plays reveal a keenly specified voice in the American theatre. Rooted in a conservative, skeptical distrust of institutionalism and dogma, Mamet advocates for a national and artistic dialogue free from the blatant conformity of the singularity of thought. While not always successful in his later years, Mamet's plays still entice and provoke. The man is a singular voice, often imitated, frequently abhorred, but never defeated.

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VITA

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