Christophe Collard

Living Truthfully: David Mamet's Practical Aesthetics

Although better known as a playwright and film-maker, David Mamet started his artistic career as a teacher of acting. In this essay Christophe Collard contextualizes the influences, evaluates the implications, and criticizes some of the implementations of his 'Practical Aesthetics' by bridging the divide between Mamet's aesthetic theory and its concretization in practice. Often mistaken for a disingenuous appropriation of the so-called 'Stanislavsky System', Mamet's derived 'Method' arguably is more functional than original. Nevertheless, Collard argues that his confusion between various interpretations of these precepts is deliberate and serves primarily a reflexive purpose, as illustrated here with an analysis of Mamet's rehearsal play *A Life in the Theatre*. Christophe Collard works as a research fellow in American theatre and drama at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels), where he recently completed a doctorate about media and genre crossings in the work of David Mamet.

AS A TEENAGER, playwright, film-maker and militant acting theorist, David Mamet was involved with the theatre programme at the Hull House settlement house in Chicago. He worked backstage and attended workshops by Viola Spolin and Sheldon Patinkin. Spolin was the author of *Improvisation for the Theatre: a Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (1963), which considered acting to be primarily an act of reciprocal, outward-directed creation rather than internalized reproduction (Spolin, p. 4).

Mamet was later to find these precepts crystallized into a systematic approach by Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre in New York's Lower East Side, during his 'junior year abroad'. Meisner had been a founding member of the Group Theatre, a Depression-era ensemble that was conceived in the tradition of the Moscow Art Theatre, whose ideas had been promulgated in the United States by Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya's American Laboratory Theater.

Although the Group Theatre worked within a Broadway framework to reach the widest possible audience for its socially inspired productions, its greatest influence lay in its Americanization of Constantin Stanislavsky's acting theory. Different conceptions of its precepts, however, led in the summer of 1934 to a rift between Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler (Callens, 2005, p. 26; Rabkin, p. 332). The latter had worked with Stanislavsky in Paris to clarify those aspects of the so-called 'Stanislavsky System' which caused difficulties within the Group Theatre. There she learned to de-emphasize the importance Strasberg placed on 'affective memory' and shift the actor's attention on stage to the human problems presented by the text and enacted by the ensemble.

Meisner adopted these views and developed a pedagogic approach in which emotional recollection played no role whatsoever (Meisner and Longwell, p. 9–10). His teaching revolved around responding instead of reacting to one another's performance. To achieve such response, the aspiring actor had to know his lines cold and master all of the text's physical requirements so that nothing would distract him from 'the reality of doing' (Pollack, p. xviii). In this way, he would learn to funnel his creative instincts to *productive* ends.

Meisner's emphasis on craftsmanship through training formed the basis of the 'Practical Aesthetics Workshops'. These acting workshops, organized at Vermont College by David Mamet and the actor William H. Macy

 © CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS doi:10.1017/S0266464X10000631
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the mid-1980s, in turn led to the publication of *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* (1986) and to the formation in 1985 of the Atlantic Theater Company in New York City. Dissatisfied with the limited scope of self-centred acting theories, Mamet and Macy concentrated here on the practical dimension of 'getting the page onto the stage' (Nadel, p. 135).

Actor as Communicative Vessel

But while Mamet acknowledged the influence of Sanford Meisner's teaching on his own thinking, he nonetheless minimized its technical similarities with his personal approach. To him, the importance of Meisner chiefly related to his particular insistence on the concepts of the 'through-action' and 'super-objective', to which all aspects of a production ought to be subjugated (Mamet, 1987, p. vii). In fact, the majority of Mamet's publications on acting theory refer directly to Stanislavsky, even if more in a philosophical than technical sense. As a 'Method', he argues in *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (1997), it is a 'cult', and hence detrimental to the development of concrete skills (Mamet, 1998, p. 6).

In spite of this specification, Mamet's pronouncements on the matter remain contradictory. As well as rather crudely amalgamating the early Stanislavsky as implemented by Strasberg with the Russian director's later shift towards Physical Action, the reference to a presumed 'Method' itself mischievously polarizes and capitalizes *ex negativo* on the cultural renown of Strasberg's Actors' Studio (Merlin, p. 250; Wilmeth, p. 139–40).

At stake is a critical yet constructive disposition, both on stage and beyond it. Contrary to Strasberg's emphasis on emotional recollection, Mamet considers the actor to be a communicative vessel mediating between the text, the stage, and the audience. Self-conscious and introspective performances, conversely, deflect the spectator's attention from the essential, i.e., the play as conceived by the playwright and staged by the director. The Mamet-actor should 'deny nothing, invent nothing' (Mamet, 1998, p. 71) in order to safeguard the play's conceptual design. On a broader plane, the sincere, outward-directed actor becomes a metaphor for existential courage in the face of contingencies:

> Acting in my lifetime has grown steadily away from performance and toward what for want of a better term can only be called oral interpretation, which is to say a pageantlike presentation in which actors present to the audience a prepared monologue complete with all the Funny Voices. And they call the Funny Voices emotional preparation. In life there is no emotional preparation for loss, grief, surprise, betrayal, discovery; and there is none onstage either. Forget the Funny Voices, pick up your cue, and speak out *even though* frightened (p. 32–3: original emphasis).

Along this reasoning, the performer plays 'the moment' by improvising along with his partner within the 'framework of given circumstances' (Bruder *et al*., p. 9)[1] of text and *mise-en-scène*. Focusing on self-characterization, on the other hand, would engender 'the habit of accepting and creating untruth and hypocrisy' (Mamet, 1998, p. 45), which, as Herbert Blau remarked, 'is doubly embodied' (p. 372) on stage.

However, the conceptual basis of Mamet's acting theory is to a certain degree obscured by its hyperbolic tone. While provocative and commonsensical, several of his arguments remain insufficiently elaborated to be effective in concrete situations. This is paradoxical given the 'practical' orientation of the approach – almost 'as if' the author's enthusiasm made him forget the book's original purpose of providing the aspiring actor with a rational alternative to the effete 'hogwash' (Mamet, 1998, p. 12) of 'the institutionally co-opted' (p. 18).

It is not that *True and False* fails to communicate how 'to deal with uncertainty and being comfortable being uncomfortable' (p. 20), nor that Mamet's arguments lack conviction, but rather that, in adopting the format and tone of a pamphlet, a rhetorical rationale is substituted for the functional one. Mamet thereby essentially contradicts his chief tenet that the actor must learn to be 'true and simple' (p. 22) instead of being 'preoccup[ied] with *effect*' (p. 23: original emphasis):

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The author's contribution is the text. If it's good, it doesn't need your help. If it's lacking, there's nothing you can do to aid it. Recognize the fact and learn to live with it – *the words and their meaning are not your responsibility*. Wisdom lies in doing your job and getting on with it (p. 57: original emphasis).

Beyond the personal comfort of 'Funny Voices', the 'truthful' actor contributes his own humanity to a text, the ambitious artist hones his craft by working on different kinds of material, and the rational person constructively confronts existential obstacles. Yet in order to achieve this in practice, such an ethical framework still requires a methodological basis.

Mamet's self-directed theatre productions and films have frequently attracted criticism for their stale acting performances (see Wilmeth, p. 147). Sauer and Sauer describe an instance when William H. Macy, notably the co-initiator of the Practical Aesthetics Workshop, experienced first-hand the ethical rigour Mamet seeks to instil through his views on acting. At one point while acting in the film *Homicide* (1991) under Mamet's direction, Macy had to play a scene with Joe Mantegna; Macy's character is filling out a passport form when Mantegna's character enters saying 'You're like my family, Tim,' to which Macy had to reply 'Bob . . . I *am* your family.' Macy said it meaningfully, but Mamet stopped him and told him 'Just fill out the paperwork.' In the next take he no longer looked up to Mantegna as he delivered the line, yet Mamet still was not satisfied and urged him to say it tonelessly (p. 5).

This anecdote indicates just how much emphasis Mamet places on avoiding insincerity. To him, it is precisely 'the strength to resist the extraneous that renders acting powerful and beautiful' (Mamet, 1989, p. 267). Ideally, an actor's truthfulness should present audiences with an image of human dignity that transcends the immediate context of its expression.

The 'interactional psychology' (Callens, 2000, p. 17) at the heart of Mamet's views on acting explains his distrust of 'Great Acting' in the way it was personified by Laurence Olivier, whom he characterized as 'stiff, self-conscious, grudging, coy, and ungenerous' (quoted in Bigsby, p. 6). 'Great Acting', Mamet insists, 'differs from acting in the main by being polite and predictable' (Mamet 1998, p. 56). Familiarity reassures both actor and audience, but stimulates neither. Repeatedly he has argued that technique for its own sake is mannerism, hence unproductive, whereas ideally it should be used as a means of 'training to break down the barriers between the unconscious and the conscious mind' (quoted in Savran, p. 138), and, in so doing, of highlighting the 'liberating' potential (Merlin, p. 249) inherent in the artist's 'double vision' of product and process.

It appears therefore all the more ironic that such a practice-based approach must rely on analogical thinking to situate itself. *True and False* opens by stating its affinity with the Stanislavsky system in principle rather than in practice, and retains this abstract posture while promoting a rationalization of its subject. Nonetheless, Mamet's recurrent involvement with acting marks a metaphorical shortcut to a broader aesthetic consciousness. *True and False* actualized the conceptual framework of Mamet's views on acting and was criticized for its lack of substance. However, considering the book in isolation amounts to confusing product with process. After all, as a rousing manifesto it complemented the *Practical Handbook for the Actor*, as well as Mamet's rehearsal play *A Life in the Theatre* (1977).

Travelling Light

By describing *True and False* as a 'riposte to bad teaching of what's generally called the Stanislavsky system' (quoted in Isaacs, p. 212), David Mamet provocatively draws attention to his own 'practical' alternative. Of course, stigmatization of this kind is likely to breed antagonism and, given the treatise's hyperbolic tone, may accordingly be interpreted as a form of theoretical hubris. However, the technical specificity of Mamet's dramaturgy, for one, hints at a more complex conception of acting. Perhaps the most seasoned performer of 'Mametspeak', William H. Macy, observed that Mamet's dialogue is 'difficult

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to memorize [because it] is so finely tuned that improvising is nearly impossible. If you paraphrase it, it suddenly becomes very clunky in your mouth, as if you stumbled over the carpet' (quoted in Wilmeth, p. 148).

Mamet himself has repeatedly stated that he started writing plays to illustrate his views on acting.[2] Of key importance in this regard is the rehearsal process. Whereas the Strasberg 'Method' prescribes a rather strict protocol of execution, Mamet's views stress the development of 'skills'. The constant practice and readjustments that precede a theatrical performance deepen the actor's understanding of a role – not by sudden insight, but through spontaneous reactions within a tightly knitted framework. As Macy's comment illustrates, 'truthful' delivery of a Mamet text results from the tension between, on the one hand, 'hard-won habits' (1987, p. 105) disciplined by the 'given circumstances' of one's role and, on the other, the contingencies inherent in real-time performance.

What attracts Mamet in Stanislavsky's thinking is that specificity can be regarded 'as a tool of release rather than constraint' (Mamet, 1978, p. 21). In the case of the actor, concrete skills resulting from continuous exercise allow him or her to remain focused on the action. Moreover, by subdividing the latter into minimal objectives, 'all concerns of *belief, feeling, emotion, characterization, substitution*, become irrelevant' (Mamet, 1998, p. 82: original emphases), since the actor is no longer concerned with mere 'appearances'. Instead, a viscerally seasoned understanding of a scene's 'mechanics' paired with an 'outward-directed concentration', Mamet claims, add a unique dimension to the script which the audience 'couldn't have learned or imagined from reading it in a library' (p. 63; see also p. 90–5).

It is ironic that Mamet's theory as depicted in *True and False* would have suffered a similar fate as the derided 'Method', were it not for the compilation of the *Practical Handbook for the Actor* by six alumni of the Practical Aesthetics Workshop, and the publication of *The Monologue Audition: a Practical Guide for Actors* (2000) by Karen Kohlhaas, a veteran member of the Atlantic Theater Company. Impervious to its polemical effects, the former manual provides a less ambiguous perspective on the influence of Stanislavsky: simply none of its specific exercises are attributed to the Russian director, whereas his theoretical authority is appropriated to support the conceptual orientation of the approach.

'Particularization', not Empathy

Even if opportunistic, this strategy has the advantage of avoiding inconsistencies. The authors quote Stanislavsky – through Mamet – in positing that 'Generality is the enemy of all art' (Bruder *et al.*, p. 15) as justification for what they claim to be a unique heuristic model. Accordingly, 'Practical Aesthetics' substitutes 'particularization' for empathy, implying that performers concentrate on 'single units of action' which they must define by means of the mnemonic device of the 'as if' (Bruder *et al.*, p. 23–8). The overall performance, in turn, is organized by the 'through-action', an overriding motif to gauge the accuracy and consistency of each individual action (p. 33). Naturally, neither the 'as if', nor the 'through-action' should be acted out, as this would undermine the actor's 'truthfulness'. When asked during rehearsals for the world premiere of *Glengarry Glen Ross* in London if he had any notes for the actors playing the salesmen, Mamet famously replied 'I've got one note: These guys could sell you cancer' (quoted in Price, p. 162).

According to David Mamet's 'Practical Aesthetics', the performer should master the 'externals'[3] of his role so that actor and audience alike can be immersed in the illusion. Put differently, the approach aims at an 'organic' blend between the 'framework of given circumstances', rigorous training, and disciplined improvisation. To Kohlhaas, this leaves the actor free to 'act on the character's behalf' (p. 68) while bypassing the constraints and pressures of 'becoming' it, and thus take advantage of a 'double vision' that is neither pandering to the audience, nor reductive to oneself.

As much as 'Practical Aesthetics' represents a rational alternative to Strasberg's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'Method,' only its label, could effectively be considered an original contribution to acting theory. Paul De Bruyne rightly observed that Mamet's views are little more than an almost *verbatim* rendition of the first part of Sanford Meisner's two-year actors' training (p. 64–5). Incidentally, this was all the formal instruction Mamet ever received, since his poor aptitude for acting meant he did not complete the course (Nadel, p. 44).

Meisner's teaching was based on repetitive exercises that physically conditioned the actor to ward off self-censorship. Technique, he insisted, is a means to an end, not a distinctive feature in its own right. His objective as a teacher was to impart his students with an actor's instinct that would allow them to tackle the widest possible range of roles:

MEISNER What's the first thing that happens when they build the World Trade Center – you know that building?
STUDENT 1 They dig a hole.
MEISNER Well, of course they dig a hole. They don't glue it to the sidewalk! (*Laughter*) What's the first thing they did when they built the Empire State Building?
STUDENT 2 They had to put down a foundation first.
MEISNER They had to put down a foundation on which . . .
STUDENT 2 . . . they built the building.
MEISNER . . . they built the building.
(Meisner and Longwell, p. 16)

Instead of cues, aspiring actors were taught to pick up impulses from one another through the Word Repetition Game. Being focused on the action itself creates a spontaneous flow of emotion. Jump-started by 'The Magic *As If*' (Meisner and Longwell, p. 136) the dialogic interchange between the different players on stage then generates a sense of creative self-confidence which drowns out concerns about interpretation and characterization (Meisner and Longwell, p. 72, 131, 196):

MEISNER You're staring at me.
STUDENT I'm staring at you.
MEISNER You admit it?
STUDENT I admit it.
MEISNER You admit it.
STUDENT I admit it.
MEISNER I don't like it.
STUDENT You don't like it.
MEISNER You don't care?
STUDENT I don't care.
MEISNER You don't care?
STUDENT I don't care!
MEISNER *sticks out his tongue – class laughs.*
(Meisner and Longwell, p. 23)

Viola Spolin, too, believed 'body release, not body control, is what is needed for natural grace to emerge, as opposed to artificial movement' (p. 146). Like Meisner's, her teaching revolved around defining a 'Point of Concentration' that channels the actor's performance towards a 'seasoned' understanding of his role (p. 320, 329, 338). Given the evident similarities in both approaches with Mamet's 'Practical Aesthetics', the latter's quasi-exclusive acknowledgment of Stanislavsky as formative influence becomes more understandable – i.e., as evidence of the Russian's wide appropriation and usurpation, which turned the appellation 'Stanislavskyan' into an empty shell. That both Spolin and Meisner's views on acting either partly echoed or drew their inspiration from some of Stanislavsky's precepts effectively provided Mamet with an elegant escape hatch to mask his own 'anxiety of influence'.

'Sticking to the Channel'

In *An Actor Prepares* (1936), Stanislavsky states that:

> There should never be any posing on the stage that has no basis. There is no place for theatrical conventionality in true creative art, or in any serious art. If it is necessary to use a conventional pose you must give it a foundation, so that it can serve an inner purpose. (p. 99)

The 'foundation' he alludes to is the subdivision of the theatrical action into different 'units', organized by an abstract 'super-objective'. In an anecdote which Mamet quotes in *On Directing Film* (1991), another militant treatise, Stanislavsky explains both principles' essentially functional character through the metaphor of a river pilot, navigating his boat over a long stretch through turns, shallows, and reefs by 'sticking to the channel' (Stanislavsky, p. 107).[4]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This 'unbroken line of the through-going action' should in fact be understood as a pragmatic construct allowing for some necessary interruptions in the guise of the stage's typical contingencies, precisely to avoid the actor's live performance being directed by an *idée fixe*. What is more, the 'super-objective' must express a conception of the production common to all concerned, so that the different semiotic layers of the *mise en scène* point in the same direction (p. 239, 244, 258, 284). These notions accordingly led to Stanislavsky being credited with the discovery that 'truthfulness' on stage results from the action that constitutes it, not from mimetic effects.

Actually, aside from anecdotal disputes on the origins of his acting theory, Mamet's attribution of the 'through-action'-principle to Meisner and of 'the reality of doing' exercises to Stanislavsky entails a salient philosophical polemic. By deliberately covering over his traces, Mamet once more confounds his detractors. Harold Bloom pointed out that 'influence' in Shakespeare's day meant 'inspiration' (p. 12). Rather than a Freudian Oedipal rivalry, the 'anxiety of influence' displayed in Mamet's acting theory implies foremost creative interpretation and appropriation of intellectual stimuli. Only in a second stage, Bloom notes, does the strong thinker 'wrestle with [his] precursors' (p. 5) for cultural supremacy, as denoted by the term's current understanding.

Theatrical Living

The integration of influences into a personalized discourse or aesthetic sensitivity is precisely that which defines a thinker *as* thinker and, conversely, is a fundamental part of the life cycle of an artist *as* artist (p. 7). Constructive thinkers, moreover, are acutely aware of this relation as a dialectic progression that is simultaneously continuous and discontinuous. Mamet's positioning between acknowledgment, appropriation, and rejection of both Meisner and Stanislavsky is ambiguous, while his deliberate 'misinterpretations' express a 'disciplined perverseness' (Bloom, p. 95) that transcends formal comparisons and beats criticism at its own game. In other words, by staging the problem of influence Mamet forces his audiences 'to lift up the hood, as it were, and look at the wiring' (Mamet, 1998, p. 90).

Indeed, David Mamet's views on acting reflect a concern with the ontological ambiguity of role-playing. As early in his career as 1973 he had written and produced *Litko: a Dramatic Monologue*, a companion piece for his *Duck Variations* in its Chicago premiere at the Body Politic. This short sketch opens with a double metalepsis:[5]

> LITKO (At rise Litko is discovered addressing the audience. Litko speaks.) Do we understand each other? His demeanour and, in fact, his line ('Do we understand each other?') go far in helping to create a bond between Litko and his audience. Unbutton coat. Litko speaks: let us dispense with formality, and get down to theatrical clichés. The audience smiles appreciatively at his candid behaviour. Thanks gang. Pause. (1973, p. 175)

After a conventional acknowledgment of the audience, Mamet immediately breaks the illusion by having his Litko-character perform what would usually be understood as stage directions.

However, both the perverse call to embrace the commonplace and the explicit patronizing of the public's reaction hint at an even more complex conception not unlike the format of stand-up comedy.[6] The blatant imposture to incorporate a text's reception into the scenic outline of its presentation is echoed at yet another level. Litko, a name that conspicuously resurfaces in Mamet's *Lakeboat* (1970, 1980) and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), as well as in his unproduced television play *The Museum of Science and Industry Story* (1975), goes on to describe hypothetical feedback from an imaginary audience as external observer, before returning to an ambiguous, fluctuating position inside the diegesis.

Such a refusal of a stable narrative perspective suggests that this monologue does not serve as a young iconoclast's theatrical manifesto, but rather marks an introspective reflection by an ambitious artist on the nature of his medium. Aside from constituting 'a metaphor of Mamet's multiple careers in and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press

out and around the theatre' (Nadel, p. 67), seemingly ironic exclamations like 'Why, then, does Litko not reply? Has he been "struck dumb"? Shall he lapse into song? Or dance? Or mixed-media?' (Mamet 1973, p. 176) contribute to a constructive alternative for such fatalist reductions as 'the theatre is dead' (p. 177). After all, a theatrical provocation that leaves no respite invites cognitive communion. Since Mamet, in his own words, started out as 'a vehement, possessed teacher of acting' (1987, p. viii), it should come as no surprise that his ideas on acting and performance resurface in his dramatic work.

The Importance of Self-Reflexivity

Typical for metadramatic creations such as *Litko* is their lack of concern for the real as conventionally defined, and their underscoring of the moral irresponsibility of realism (Schmeling, p. 54). Even if self-referentiality remains a matter of degree, a stage production automatically dramatizes its own artificiality through the 'liveness' of the illusion. But whenever theatricality itself is staged, the play transcends its referential context or reality construct and metaphorically expresses role-playing as an existential condition. Metatheatre, to Lionel Abel, indicates 'that the world is a projection of human consciousness [and] order . . . something continually improvised by men' (p. 183). In line with Mamet's 'Practical Aesthetics', metatheatricality hence calls for a continuous awareness of one's actions and the relativity of perception. The problem of influence was already a first indication that acting theory to Mamet was never an end in itself. Self-reflexivity, however, is.

Just as an actor's performance to Mamet should be 'truthful' rather than predictable, the structural conception of his drama resists facile reductions. Four years after *Litko*, at the time of his commercial breakthrough with *American Buffalo*, Mamet wrote *A Life in the Theatre*, the title of which evokes Stanislavsky's volume of memoirs, *My Life in Art* (1924).

This rehearsal play featuring a young and an ageing actor opens with a long interchange backstage that subtly introduces the plot's chief peripeties. Robert, the experienced one long past his prime, seeks to impose his authority on John, a rising talent, by constantly calling for the latter's acquiescence in his own pompous yet poorly formulated observations about the evening's performance and the nature of their craft in general. Not to be outdone, John questions Robert's authority and gradually unsettles his confidence with pointed comments of his own. Though touched by the critical undertone of John's words, Robert reacts by lecturing him on what he believes to be the actor's first principles: 'You have a job to do. You do it by your lights, you bring your expertise to bear, your sense of rightness . . . fellow feelings . . . etiquette . . . professional procedure . . . there are tools one brings to bear . . . procedure' (1977, p. 48).

The switch from performance to process is structurally significant, since it immediately shifts the balance of power to Robert's advantage. His concern about the essentials of acting exudes an air of experience that leaves John momentarily humbled. Mamet ends the first scene with a similar interchange about their plans for dinner. This time, the topical insignificance of the discussion firmly steers the audience's attention towards the negotiation itself (Mohr, p. 777), which in Gregory Mosher's televised version (1993) coincides with stagehands removing the scenery around them.

The next, much shorter cameo offers a variation on the tension built just moments before. Ostensibly inconsequential acts like handing over the other's hat are seized upon by Robert to extend his recovered supremacy with pedantic small talk, even causing him to soliloquize on 'my hat, my hat, my hat', a pose which is met with an ambiguous 'mmm' from John (Mamet, 1977, p. 54). In another vignette, Robert lectures John during a curtain call and urges him to knock on wood to avoid 'blood upon the stage' (p. 56). Although this refers to a fencing combination Robert wanted John to perfect, the request's disingenuousness paired with John's pregnant pauses contributes to a growing uneasiness between them that is painfully

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press

confirmed later in the play with the 'real' blood spilt by Robert in a suicide attempt.

Two Kinds of Acting

However, in spite of the play's moral overtones, Mamet is no moralizer. While it is undeniable that Robert's pedagogic observations become increasingly transparent to John and the audience, not everything he says results exclusively from a growing sense of frustration:

ROBERT Isn't it strange . . .
JOHN Yes?
ROBERT That people will spend time and money on their face and body . . .
JOHN Mmm?
ROBERT On smells, textures and appearances . . .
JOHN Uh huh.
ROBERT And yet are content to sound like shop-girls and sheepherders.
JOHN Ummm.
Pause.
ROBERT It's quite as important as physical beauty.
JOHN On the stage, you mean.
ROBERT On the stage and otherwise. (p. 58)

Important in this regard is Robert's admission that he, too, as a beginning actor, traded on idiosyncrasies rather than practising the fundamentals of his craft. While nothing in this scene or in the previous ones indicates that he is alluding to John's diction, their deteriorating relation suggests as much. Yet despite petty sneers thinly masked as advice to keep his 'back straight' (p. 59), the drift of Robert's rant that 'Style is *nothing*. . . . Style is a paper bag. Its only shape comes from its contents' (p. 59: original emphasis) establishes parallels with Meisner's 'reality of doing' and Mamet's own 'Practical Aesthetics'.

Moreover, given the potentially insulting quality of Robert's comments, it is remarkable that John is once more subdued by the passion of the older actor's speech, especially since the issues of diction and appearance quickly make way for another exposition on the nature, purpose, and dignity of the acting profession:

ROBERT We must not be afraid to *grow*. We must support each other, John. This is the wondrous thing *about* the Theatre, this potential.
JOHN Mmmm.
ROBERT Our history goes back as far as Man's. Our aspirations in the Theatre are much the same as man's. (*Pause.*) (Don't you think?)
JOHN Yes.
Pause.
ROBERT We *are* society. Keep your back straight, John. The mirror is your friend. (*Pause.*) For a few more years. (*Pause.*) What have we to fear John, from *phenomena*? (*Pause.*) We are explorers of the *soul*.
Pause.
JOHN Is my back straight?
ROBERT No. (p. 60: original emphases)

Equally notable is that each time Robert gets carried away in a philosophical frenzy, his eloquence improves exponentially. Mamet further stresses this speech's importance by juxtaposing its climactic ending with two cameos in which Robert is markedly less boisterous.

The schizophrenic perspective proposed through a simultaneous presence of straightforward principles, pedantry, and a shifting power balance thus establishes the play's structural conception as intrinsically dynamic, and the teacher–student relationship as 'a remarkably productive ironizing device' (Hubert-Leibler, p. 81). Hans-Ulrich Mohr supports a similar view when he argues that, in life and – especially – in the theatre, the teacher role is only legitimate 'when it also practises an interest in and a reflection on the new' (p. 781).

Martin Roeder-Zerndt draws attention to John's resistance to one-dimensional roles in his relation with Robert. Aside from being his *protégé*, pupil, and sounding board, he aspires to more commensurate roles as colleague, friend, and confidant (p. 141). Hence, Mamet's refusal to portray either the teacher or the student as static characters signals a humanistic faith in the individual's capacity for change.

The Incident of the Safety Pin

Mamet's views on acting resurface in a pivotal scene, the length of which allows for the connection of certain thematic strands – provided, however, that the actors' performances are sufficiently subtle. After a brief

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interchange on John's set of brushes, Robert asks his younger colleague to '*do* less' in tonight's performance as 'An aesthetic consideration' (1977, p. 63: original emphasis). Infuriated, John demands some explanations, which Robert fails to articulate. But before the atmosphere radically sours, contingency intervenes in the guise of Robert's broken zipper. It is only moments before the curtain is to rise, and John instinctively helps him out with a safety pin. This makes for some slapstick innuendoes underscored in the teleplay with camera switches between the actors in their dressing room and the female stage manager overhearing them:

ROBERT Come on, come on.
John attempts to pin Robert's fly.
ROBERT Put it in.
JOHN Just hold still for a moment.
ROBERT Come *on*, for God's sake!
JOHN Alright. Alright. You know, I think you're gaining weight . . .
ROBERT Oh, fuck you. Will you stick it in?
(p. 65: original emphasis)

The spontaneity of John's reaction expresses a subconscious sense of interdependence some critics have interpreted as a homoerotic undercurrent. Simmering tension, wordplay, but also altruism, when taken together constitute a narrative echo of the actor's 'double vision', which, by analogy, equally marks the subject of the ensuing sketch, the play's first of six 'onstage' scenes. In the original Chicago production directed by Gregory Mosher, these were played to an invisible audience upstage, whereas the 'offstage' interchanges faced front.

The melodramatic current here in the play's initial inset is one of lies and betrayal, but it is comically deflated as Mamet swaps the characters' names and cues are botched. What is more, the overall mediocrity of the troupe's repertoire permits further variations on the playwright's 'Practical Aesthetics' in a generically recognizable framework. The repetition of lines such as 'It's funny, you know, how things attain the force of habit . . . ' (p. 66) and 'He lets you see the thought there' (p. 71–2) cut through the different diegetic levels in order to show the audience the machinery of illusion making.

Theatre as a Closed Society

On the other hand, since three-quarters of the 26 scenes refer to the actors' life offstage, the estrangement effect of the role-playing within the role remains limited. Mamet's naturalization of metatheatrical elements precisely resists one-sided classifications, his presenting the liminal crossings between the various roles as part of one human life – a point enhanced by the physical presence on stage of two actors impersonating actors. As William Herman rightly notes about the onstage 'play' scenes, 'more important than the quality of any particular drama is the very existence of theatre' (p. 147).

Nonetheless, Manfred Schmeling warns that equating life with theatre as inseparable constituents of the same condition is naive, because the latter is simultaneously life *and* play (p. 68).[7] The reduction of theatre to role-playing also slights its 'spectacular' capacity of directing perception towards the metaphorical dimension of such systemic transgressions. Life may very well consist of a constant dialectic between reality and illusion, but the distinction serves an indicative purpose.

Through Robert, Mamet insists on the development of 'practical' skills and uninflected delivery, yet the inconsistency of the actor's actions invites reflection. His entanglement in petty rivalries deflects his attention from what he himself professes to be the essence of the acting profession. By the same token, though, Robert's outbursts of theory cannot be classified as pure extravagance:

ROBERT We should do this whole frigging thing in rehearsal clothes, you know? Eh? Do it in blue jeans and T-shirts and give it some life, you know?
JOHN Yes.
ROBERT Eh? And give it some *guts*. (*Pause.*) Give *guts* to it. (*Pause.*) And to hell with experimentation. Artistic experimentation is shit. Huh?
JOHN Right.
ROBERT You're frigging well told. (*Pause.*) Two *actors*, some lines . . . and an audience. That's what I say. Fuck 'em all.
(p. 75: original emphases)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A Life in the Theatre interweaves structure, form, and plot to depict the theatre as 'a closed society' (Mamet 1977, p. 77) that feeds on the interplay of 'attitudes' and 'aspirations'. Otherwise players and audience take 'too much for granted, fall away and die . . . on the boards, or in society at large' (p. 78).

Undisciplined experimentation or improvisation, on the other hand, would fail to establish a communicative relationship with an audience and undercut the stage's critical capacity. Ironically, this is what happens to Robert in the last 'onstage' scene, when his memory betrays him and his arrogance alienates John, who leaves him alone on stage to address the audience while the curtain is being lowered. Earlier examples hinted at the actor's courage to react constructively to unforeseen obstacles, yet Robert's current debacle implies that such 'heroism' at the very least requires a minimum of professionalism and respect for one's partner, the text, and the audience.

Just as ineffective is Robert's rant against theatre critics, who 'create nothing' (p. 84) and will 'praise you for the things you never did and pan you for a split second of godliness' (p. 83). Even if these remarks sound remarkably similar to Mamet's at the 1978 American Theater Critics Convention in Minneapolis (Mamet, 1986), Robert's rage blinds him to the absurdity he commits only moments later when advising John 'Never [to] take *advice* [. . .] from *people* [. . .] who do not have a vested interest [. . .] in your eventual success' (Mamet, 1977, p. 84).

John, though, sensing the jealousy about his own more positive appraisal behind Robert's embittered tone, will no longer be bullied. This self-possession pushes the mercurial Robert definitely over the edge in a profoundly metatheatrical scene. John is rehearsing the self-reflexive opening chorus from the second act of Shakespeare's equally self-reflexive *Henry V* in front of an empty house while offstage Robert is talking and crying. Indeed, 'now sits expectation in the air / [. . .] / And hides a sword' (Mamet, 1977, p. 87),[8] since Robert will cut his wrist after the aforementioned public humiliation that follows this scene.

As Johan Callens points out, the reference to *Henry V* is no coincidence, since the play's

> famous Prologue celebrates the actors' and spectators' joint capacity to people the 'unworthy scaffold' in the theatre's 'wooden O' with the variety and 'full[ness] of life'. (2004, p. 55)[9]

And, of course, Prince Hal becomes Henry V at the end of *Henry IV*, *Part 2*, requiring him to improve his character and distance himself from the dissolute Falstaff (Herman, p. 150).

In terms of its narrative progression *A Life in the Theatre* stages the tenuous balance individuals should find in and outside the theatre. At the same time, the play's metatheatricality points to the potential of self-reflexivity. The 'liveness' of the stage, in turn, allows for a moment of cognitive communion before releasing the audience to 'the intimidating force of cultural opinion' (Abel, p. 232). In the final scene of what *New Yorker* critic Edith Oliver termed Mamet's 'love letter to the theatre' (p. 116), Robert faces an empty house, but mimics appreciation for the applause from an imaginary audience following a spontaneous summary of a life of make-believe: 'Ephemeris, ephemeris. (*Pause.*) "An actor's life for me"' (Mamet, 1977, p. 95).

After his paternalism, dogmatism, anger, and despair, Robert's newly found sense of humility can normalize his relations with John. For all that, he still commands the stage and relishes its illusionary power. These, the play indicates, need not be mutually exclusive. As Mamet concludes at the end of *True and False,* his militant treatise on acting, 'It is not a sign of ignorance not to know the answers. But there is great merit in facing the questions' (1998, p. 127).

References

Abel, Lionel, *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form,* intro. Martin Puchner (New York: Holmes and Meier, 2003).

Bigsby, C. W. E., 'David Mamet', in Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 1–40.

Blau, Herbert, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry,* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bruder, Melissa, *et al*., *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*, intro. David Mamet (New York: Vintage, 1986).
Bruyne, Paul De, 'Mamet als leerjongen: De Sandy Meisner-connectie', in Ronald Geerts, Klaas Tindemans, and Karel Vanhaesebrouck, ed., *Willen jullie in zo'n wereld leven? David Mamet in Vlaanderen en de wereld* (Brussels: VUB Press, 2005), p. 63–78.
Callens, Johan, 'David Mamet', *Post-War Literatures in English,* 48 (2000), p. 1–21.
———, 'The 1970s', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* (2004), p. 41–56.
———, '"Till Upon Thine Inland Sea Stands Chicago, Great and Free": David Mamet en de Windy City', in *Willen jullie in zo'n wereld leven? David Mamet in Vlaanderen en de wereld* (2005), p. 25–39.
Herman, William, *Understanding Contemporary American Drama* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987).
Hubert-Leibler, Pascale, 'Dominance and Anguish: the Teacher–Student Relationship in the Plays of David Mamet', in Leslie Kane, ed., *David Mamet: a Casebook* (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 69–85.
Isaacs, Jeremy, 'Face to Face', in Leslie Kane, ed., *David Mamet in Conversation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 211–25.
Kohlhaas, Karen, *The Monologue Audition: a Practical Guide for Actors*, foreword by David Mamet (London: Nick Hern, 2000).
Mamet, David, *Litko: a Dramatic Monologue* (1973), in *Goldberg Street: Short Plays and Monologues* (New York: Grove, 1985), p. 173–9.
———, *A Life in the Theatre* (1977), in *Plays: 2* (London: Methuen Drama, 1996), p. 39–96.
———, 'Realism', *New York Arts Journal*, Nov.–Dec. 1978, p. 21.
———, 'Address to the American Theater Critics Convention', *Horizon* (1986), reprinted in *Writing in Restaurants*, p. 138–41.
———, *Writing in Restaurants* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).
———, 'Some Freaks' (1989), in *A Whore's Profession: Notes and Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 225–339.
———, 'On Directing Film' (1991), in *A Whore's Profession*, p. 341–412.
———, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).
Meisner, Sanford, with Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, intro. Sydney Pollack (New York: Vintage, 1987).
Merlin, Bella, 'Mamet's Heresy and Common Sense: What's True and False in *True and False'*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, XVI (2000), p. 249–54.
Mohr, Hans-Ulrich, 'David Mamet's *A Life in the Theatre*: Language, Strategies, Subtext, Communication', in Jürgen Kamm, ed., *Twentieth-Century Theatre and Drama in English: Festschrift for Heinz Kosok on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1999), p. 773–90.
Nadel, Ira, *David Mamet: a Life in the Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
Oliver, Edith, 'Actor Variations', *New Yorker,* 31 October 1977, p. 115–16.
Pollack, Sydney, 'Introduction', in Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, p. xiii–xvi.
Price, Steven, 'On Directing David Mamet', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, p. 154–70.
Rabkin, Gerald, 'The Group Theater (US)', in Colin Chambers, ed., *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 332.
Roeder-Zerndt, Martin, *Lesen und Zuschauen: David Mamet und das amerikanische Drama der 70er Jahre* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1994).
Ryan, Marie-Laure, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
Sauer, David K., with Janice A. Sauer, *David Mamet: a Research and Production Sourcebook* (Westport: Praeger, 2003).
Savran, David, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988).
Schmeling, Manfred, *Métathéâtre et intertexte: aspects du théâtre dans le théâtre* (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1982).
Spolin, Viola, *Improvisation for the Theatre: a Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques,* (London: Pitman, 1963).
Stanislavsky, Constantin, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, intro. John Gielgud (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1936).
Wilmeth, Don B., 'Mamet and the Actor', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* (2004), p. 138–54.

Notes

1. See also Kohlhaas, p. 67.
2. Most explicitly in the Preface to his collection of essays, *Writing in Restaurants*: 'As a practical laboratory for my Mandarin aesthetic interests, I began directing my students [first at Marlboro College, VT (1970–1), then at Goddard College, VT (1971–2)] in plays, then I began writing plays for them to do, and that is how I came the long way around the barn to playwriting' (Mamet, 1987, p. viii).
3. Bruder *et al*. list a) bodily adjustments (e.g., posture, voice, or speech alterations, and physical handicaps); b) ornaments (e.g., costumes and make-up); c) physical states (e.g., drunkenness, exhaustion, illness, etc.), p. 48.
4. See Mamet, 1991, p. 409; as well as Mamet, 1987, p. 15.
5. In the chapter 'Metaleptic Machines' of her *Avatars of Story* (2006), Marie-Laure Ryan defines 'metalepsis' as 'a grabbing gesture that reaches across levels and ignores boundaries' (p. 206).
6. See also Roeder-Zerndt, p. 102.
7. See also Callens, 2000, p. 21.
8. Mamet, 1977, p. 87; see also Shakespeare's *The Life of King Henry the Fifth,* Act II, Chorus, ll. 8–9.
9. Ibid., opening Chorus, ll. 10–13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000631 Published online by Cambridge University Press