LANGUAGE AS DRAMATIC ACTION -
A STUDY OF FIVE PLAYS BY DAVID MAMET

by

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

The drama of David Mamet is one which is, above all, concerned with language. His plays are scabrous tours de force which set out to expose what he sees as the decline in moral standards in contemporary America and the subsequent debasement of oral expression. The banality and aimlessness of much modern experience is captured, distilled and reconstituted in his extraordinarily rich and pungent dialogue. Mamet's wickedly funny yet fundamentally very serious works teem with language which is at once wholly authentic and yet strangely lyrical, the discordant sounds of urban aphasia being somehow raised into dramatic poetry. He takes the most basic - and frequently obscene - street language and shapes it into a new form of existence; it is real and yet not quite real, coarse but curiously poetic.

Language is everything to Mamet; the lines spoken by his characters do not merely contain words which express a particular idea or emotion, they are the idea or emotion itself. His characters' speech dictates the form his plays will take, as well as the mood and swing of the discourse.

Praised by the majority of critics for his ability to reproduce the idiom of the streets as a kind of free verse, he has been attacked by others for much the same reason, as well as being mistaken for a simple realist whose only concern is verisimilitude. Such criticisms are, I feel, unjustified and misleading. It is my opinion that Mamet is one of the best and most original dramatists now working in America.

The subject of this thesis is Mamet's use of language as dramatic action in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO, AMERICAN BUFFALO, A LIFE IN THE THEATRE, EDMOND and GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS. These works are excellent examples of Mamet's versatility with idiomatic language as well as covering, fairly broadly, his progress as a dramatist from 1974 to 1983.
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter One - INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two - SEXUAL PERVERSITY</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN CHICAGO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three - AMERICAN BUFFALO</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four - A LIFE IN</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE THEATRE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five - EDMOND</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six - GLENGARRY GLEN</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROSS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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A seminal element of the language in Beckett's dramas

Perhaps more than any other contemporary European playwright, Beckett's works contribute a theatre of language; the lines spoken by his characters do not merely contain words which express a particular idea or emotion, they are the idea or emotion itself. A description by Samuel Beckett of James Joyce's Pinnacles" could be equally applied to Beckett's drama. Beckett observes that "Here form is content, content is form." Similarly, Sartre Storey considers that the language of Habermas is not an instrument and a medium for thought. 

Jack Kroll calls Beckett a 'marvelous' American playwright who is a genius. Indeed, all playwrights are obviously different. The writer's language, the spoken, is Beckett's poetic and rhythmic poetry. His language is longer more than dialogue. It becomes the shape of the play itself. For example, the dissonance and non-chromatic language in SHADOWS is reflected in the second half of the play, the discontinuity of experience felt by the protagonist being echoed in the music, and the notes in which the drama is written. The very structure of the play reflects the linguistic structure. Similarly, the poetry of the scenes in waiting for Godot is sadistic. No other contemporary writer's structure is more an internet of the poetic and the narrative, more the poem as the narrative. The language of the fear of waiting and waiting, each sentence a short, pithy and in the present as we are the waiting. James Joyce created to be a poet. The play, the poetic, the aesthetic, none not by any other American writer, but by the poetic. The dialogue.

FOR MY PARENTS
AND IRENE
Introduction

A general discussion of the language in Mamet's drama

Perhaps more than any other contemporary American playwright, Mamet's works constitute a theatre of language; the lines spoken by his characters do not merely contain words which express a particular idea or emotion, they are the idea or emotion itself. A description by Samuel Beckett of James Joyce's FINNEGAN'S WAKE could be equally applied to Mamet's drama. Beckett observed that "Here form IS content, content IS form". Similarly, Robert Storey considers that

Mamet's characters...are their language; they exist insofar as - and to the extent that - their language allows them to exist. Their speech is not a smokescreen but a modus vivendi...

Jack Kroll calls Mamet "that rare bird, an American playwright who is a language playwright". All playwrights are obviously 'language playwrights' in one sense, but Mamet's poetic and rhythmic gifts enable the language to become much more than dialogue - it becomes the shape of the play itself. For example, the disjointed and monochromatic language in EDMOND is reflected in the actual form of the play, the discontinuity of experience felt by its protagonist being echoed in the short, black-out scenes in which the drama is written. Thus, the very structure of the play reflects its linguistic strategy. Similarly, the brevity of the scenes in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO reflect the characters' inability to sustain an interest in anything beyond the present moment. Because of the fear of incipient boredom, their sentences are short, pithy and to the point and so too are the scenes Mamet creates to accommodate them. The play gains its energetic pace not by any overt stage action, but by the speed of the dialogue.

Mamet concentrates not upon cultivated expression, "but upon that apparent wasteland of middle American speech" which is the language of the lower classes of the United
States. He moulds their attenuated and brutalised speech into some of the most vital and original dialogue that can be heard in the theatre. In spite of their inarticulateness, his characters have a passion for speaking, a desperate energy which permeates all their conversations. As John Lahr observes, through the hilarious brutal sludge of his characters' speech, Mamet makes us hear exhaustion and panic. Such characters feel an overpowering need to talk, to make a mark in space which confirms their importance and temporarily assuages their fears. Without exception, Mamet's characters yearn for more than they have, and they express their yearning in words which, though often impoverished and debased, authentically—often brilliantly—reflect their predicament. From the bluntest of materials, Mamet carves his dialogue, establishes mood and character and imbues his work with tension and movement. With apparently so little, he achieves so much. Jim Hiley notes how the playwright's prolific, quasi-poetic inflation of language is essential to his message. Mamet's people are small-minded and foul-mouthed, but their talk indicates an achingly vast sense of aspiration. In the tension between the two lies tragedy, and a startling critique of American life.

Hiley is here referring to GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, but his words are equally applicable to any of Mamet's works.

Mamet utilises every nuance of dialogue to forward his plots and to depict character. He considers that the action of his plays is inextricably bound up with the rhythms he creates. To Mamet,

Rhythm and action are the same...in the theatre, if you have to use any narration, you're not doing your job.

He is fascinated by the way in which language can actually influence action, can impinge upon the subconscious to the extent that it motivates behaviour, rather than vice-versa. The notion of language dominating and prescribing codes of
behaviour derives from Mamet's early training as an actor under the direction of Sanford Meisner, a founder member of The Group Theatre and a staunch advocate of the Stanislavski method of acting. Mamet believes that the teachings of Stanislavski helped him to understand certain crucial elements about language, and considers that his exposure to them deeply influenced his writing style.

Acknowledging his debt to Stanislavski, Mamet states that

> My main emphasis... is on the rhythm of language - the way action and rhythm are identical. Our rhythms describe our actions - no, our rhythms prescribe our actions. I am fascinated by the way, the way the language we use, its rhythms, actually determines the way we behave, rather than the other way around.\(^8\)

Robert Storey has noted the tendency of Mamet's characters to follow the lead of their language:

> Because so much of the activity of his characters is prescribed by their speech, it is often fruitless to analyse their 'psychology'; like the victors of Dos Passos' USA, like Jay Gatsby, like the unenlightened of a Hemingway novel, they behave as their language directs them to behave, with unquestioning faith in its values.\(^9\)

This is how Teach, in AMERICAN BUFFALO, can talk himself into corners from which there is no escape other than to rely upon further linguistic invention. Having let his words determine his actions, he has no other choice but to be led on further by them. Similarly, the shark-like salesmen in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS are constantly propelled forward by their language; to them, to talk is to survive. As the words spill out, so their behaviour endeavours to match them.

Mamet's characters speak in words which sound absolutely authentic and believable and yet contain the essence of true poetry with all of its compression, rhythm and artificiality. His priority as a dramatist is not with a verbatim reproduction of conversation (which would undermine his poetic control in favour of mundane accuracy), but with a stylized evocation of the tonality of discourse. He points
out that the language in a play such as AMERICAN BUFFALO is very far from being a literal transcription from life. Of course it's not really spoken speech at all; it's dramatic writing that happens to have rhythms similar to those of spoken speech. Christopher Edwards observes how Mamet possesses a wonderfully acute ear for the vernacular of Chicago and re-creates it in all its raw poetic vigour, repetitive obscenity and desperate velocity. But the powerful naturalism of the speech is not mere literal transcription of what is heard. Like all naturalism, it only seems so because of the conscious artistry of the author. Mamet's effect is accomplished by way of a stylized formality... and Jack Kroll notes that Mamet has heard the ultimate Muzak, the dissonant din of people yammering at one another and not connecting. He is a cosmic eavesdropper who has caught the American aphasia... [He is not] the proverbial tape recorder picking up speech like lint... Mamet is an abstract artist [whose] characters speak in a kind of verbal cubism [by which he is able] to create a formal and moral shape out of the undeleted expletives of our foul-mouthed times. Mamet is less concerned with the narrative thrust of plot than with ensuring that his dialogue retains the cadences and rhythms that he sets up. "If it's not poetic on the stage", he has said, "forget it". During a radio interview, Mamet outlined his main aim as a dramatist to Christopher Bigsby:

I'm trying to write dramatic poetry... I'm trying to capture primarily through the rhythm and secondarily through the connotation of the word the intention of the character. So when that is successful, what one ends up with is a play in free verse. If people want to say that it sounds just like the people on the bus, that's fine with me, because that's how the people on the bus sound to me.

Mamet therefore appreciates the dramatic potential already present in ordinary speech although, as he has made clear, he does not merely record what he hears around him, but manipulates it into free verse. However, because of the apparent authenticity of his dialogue, Mamet has often been categorised as a naturalistic playwright, writing a kind of 'kitchen sink' drama. He is annoyed when reviewers
miss the poetry in his work and comment only upon its ostensible realism. He observes that American theatre in general is obsessed with realism:

Most American theatrical workers are in thrall to the idea of realism. A very real urge to be truthful, to be true, constrains them to judge their efforts and actions against an incoherent standard of realism, which is to say, against an immutable but unspecified standard of reality.\textsuperscript{15}

Further, he considers that

Realism is death. It is hard, unrewarding work in the service of a master who left long ago. It is the tool of the untalented and afraid.\textsuperscript{16}

He told Christopher Bigsby that

\textit{Drama} is not an attempt to depict something which is real in the external world but rather an attempt to depict something which is real in an internal world...It's the difference between being a painter and an illustrator.\textsuperscript{17}

In a short essay entitled 'On Being Truthful in Acting', Stanislavski wrote about the differences between presenting 'reality' onstage, and an artistic representation of that reality. His subject was acting, but the comments are very relevant here:

What does it really mean to be truthful on the stage?...Does it mean that you conduct yourself as you do in ordinary life? Not at all. Truthfulness in those terms would be sheer triviality. There is the same difference between artistic and inartistic truth as exists between a painting and a photograph: the latter reproduces everything, the former only what is essential; to put the essential on canvas requires the talent of a painter.\textsuperscript{18}

Clive Barnes likens Mamet's gifts as a poet to those of Hemingway. Both writers have, he says, the "magic trick of language that transforms the recognisable into the essential".\textsuperscript{19}

Mamet sets out to tell the truth in his plays, but chooses to do so by means of his artistry and poetry rather than by documentary devices, which merely record and include every detail. He believes that there is a great need for what he calls "true drama",\textsuperscript{20} that is,
the drama [which is] based solely on the honest perception of a writer and the honest intention of the actor.

and feels that he can best achieve success in this medium by concentrating upon the poetic elements in his work. By so doing, he can convey depths of character and nuances of motivation which could never be communicated by pure realism. The essential and the evocative can be separated from the morass of information, and sensitively manipulated into verse. For Mamet, then, the poetry is all-important and takes precedence in his work. He says

a line's got to scan. I'm very concerned with the metric scansion of everything I write, including the word 'fucking'. In rehearsal I've been known to be caught counting the beats on my fingers.

The majority of critics are very quick to respond to Mamet's poetic qualities. Benedict Nightingale calls him the bard of modern-day barbarism, the laureate of the four-letter word

and speaks of the
gaudy, swaggering poetry [that he has fashioned out of the street-wise idiom of Chicago...]

Victoria Radin considers that the structure [of Mamet's plays] surges forward with the dense assuredness of a poem

and B.A. Young notes how, in Mamet's hands, base inarticulateness "takes on a kind of poetry". To Richard Corliss, his work goes far beyond a mere representation of street language:

This is street slang refined and extended into the surreal, the baroque, the abrasive, the lyrical

and Richard Eder believes that if Mamet's dramatic process of intensification and refining continues - he might just possibly become our first true verse dramatist.

It is perhaps ironic that a writer who includes in his work the roughest usages of the vernacular should have the word 'poet' so frequently applied to him. Through linguistic devices which are often covert or disguised, he employs the resources of metrical communication to transform the most basic threads of discourse into verse. He utilises to
the full the associative and lyrical value of words, their rhythm and cadence, imagistic compounds and tonal effect. The following short extracts and analyses may serve to illustrate some of the methods used by Mamet in creating his poetic drama.

At the end of GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, Richard Roma proposes that he and Shelly Levene should go into partnership together:

Roma: Okay. Two things, then. One... I been thinking about this for a month, I said 'the Machine... There's a fellow I could work with,' never, isn't that funny? I never did a thing. Now; that shit that you were slinging on the guy today was very good, and excuse me it isn't even my place to say that to you that way; I've been on a hot streak, so big deal. What I'm saying, it was admirable and, so was the deal that you closed. Now listen; there's things I could learn from you - you see, I knew we'd work well together - Here's what I was thinking: we Team Up. We team up, we go out together, we split everything right down the middle... (Act 2, p.63)

There is an irresistible - though dislocated - rhythm in this extract which is set up in the opening moments and continues through to the end. It reflects both Roma's neurotic personality and his too-sincere manner of speaking and, in so doing, acts not only as metrical scansion but as a means of depicting character. Roma begins with monosyllables which have something of the cadence of a phrase such as 'Ready, steady, go!', after which his sentences gather momentum and breathlessly rush ahead. The entire speech is written rather like a race from the first words to the last, constantly threatening to get to the point and then backtrack, or stumbling on its way. After he has (he imagines) gained Levene's attention, Roma's words build rapidly into what is almost a hymn of praise for his friend's abilities; he launches into a stream of hyperbole and mixed-up syntax which is stemmed only by the imposition of his carefully placed verbal scaffolding. In between the flattery, he moves from the initial "Okay. Two things then, One" to "Now" to
"Now listen" to "Here's what I was thinking". At first, Roma implies that he is going to list the "things" he has on his mind, but in his haste he forgets to do so, the "One" dangling superfluously in a torrent of speech. In trying to compress everything he wants to say in as little time as possible, Roma's mind works faster than his mouth can form the words he needs to express himself; the "never" which is included in "There's a fellow I could work with, never, isn't that funny? I never did a thing", intrudes before he can include it in the sentence for which it is intended. Mamet uses underlinings to suggest emphasis; they are Roma's way of sustaining the cadences he has set up for himself and an indication to the actor to stress those particular words. The emphases also suggest Roma's shallow sycophancy, how he strains to appear self-effacing and modest. The constant use of commas suggests a mind which runs on ahead of itself, pausing infrequently and even then not for long enough to justify a full stop. With what is an original use of poetic paradox, Mamet makes Roma's metaphor of the "shit" that Levene was "slinging on the guy" a statement of admiration rather than denigration, and it is interesting to note that Roma's "I" and "You" only become "We" when he has mentally determined that Levene will concede with his request.

In REUNION, Bernie begins to tell his daughter a story:

Bernie: ...So I'd been drunk at the time for several years and was walking down Tremont Street one evening around nine and here's this big van in front of a warehouse and the driver is ringing the bell in the shipping dock trying to get in (which he won't do because they moved a couple of weeks ago and the warehouse is deserted. But he doesn't know that.) So I say, "Hey, you looking for Hub City Transport?" And he says yeah, and I tell him they're over in Lechmere...I figured maybe I could make a couple of bucks on the deal. And why not. So I ride over to Lechmere, I find the warehouse, You ever been to Lechmere?

(p.14)
Bernie's tale at first takes the form of a stream of consciousness ramble, unbroken by any punctuation. Like Roma, his mind works faster than he is able to formulate the words to express himself but the rhythms here are quite different. Bernie is an elderly man, an ex-alcoholic who is seeing his only daughter after an absence of over twenty years, and his slightly muddled syntax and confusion of tenses reflect his nervousness and past history. That he had "been drunk at the time for several years" is Bernie's rather unsubtle way of conveying self-pity, but it also affords Mamet the opportunity to use a metaphor which forms an image more common to poetry than to the prose in which it is written. The use of specific names such as "Tremont Street" and "Lechmere" are included not only for their mellifluous qualities but also to particularise events. This is a familiar Mametian device which serves to personalise the characters, establishing them as living, breathing people with a background in palpable reality. Bernie frequently begins his sentences with the word "So" which lends a subtly hypnotic undercurrent to the rhythm of the story at the same time as echoing the repetitive nature of authentic speech. Indeed, the entire extract has all the hallmarks of everyday discourse, although the last few sentences are set out as free verse, the repetition of a melodic word like "Lechmere" suggesting Bernie's pleasure in saying the word aloud as well as establishing a brief rhyme.

A short sketch entitled IN THE MALL concerns a conversation between a thirteen-year-old boy and a 60 year-old man. 
The boy tells the man:

B: ...I like to do things, you know, that people say that they can't do. I climbed this fence once that everyone said you can't get over. It had barb wire at the top. They make this stuff it's razors. It's a razor-ribbon you can't climb it. I went up. You hold on to the barb wire you go right over I came down the other side. They didn't care. They said that it was stupid. I bought a pair of socks once they had stripes on top I folded 'em down. I thought, 'Maybe this is to show us where to fold.'
This is perhaps the most obviously poetic of the extracts selected here. The boy describes the barbed wire on the fence as "barb wire", shortening the word onomatopoeically so that it sounds more like what it is meant to suggest: a hard, abrasive sound for a metallic image. His poor grammar in a phrase like "They make this stuff it's razors" is, paradoxically, more powerfully descriptive than if he had spoken articulately. The metaphor he chooses is purer and more precise than the simile it would have become had his speech been grammatically correct. Mamet then extends the metaphor into the alliterative "razor-ribbon", hyphenated to imbue it with more strength and to emphasise the rough, rolling 'r' at the beginning of each word. In describing his action of actually climbing over the fence, the boy verbally re-enacts it: "You hold on to the barb wire you go right over I came down the other side." It is significant that, as he imagines the action occurring, he describes it in terms of "You", but when he has actually accomplished his task, he reverts to "I" - he is, after all, the person who has achieved this feat of bravery and he subconsciously takes the credit for it. The first part of his description of the climb therefore takes the form of a kind of instruction, how one would go about accomplishing such a task, whereas the latter part is a statement of achievement. Mamet captures perfectly the impudent, boastful manner of speech enjoyed by adolescent boys but then contrasts his character's apparent toughness with a final show of innocence and naïveté: the boy muses that the stripes on a pair of socks might be indicative of where the fold should take place.

The following extract from AMERICAN BUFFALO demonstrates Mamet's ability to produce wonderfully funny dialogue which retains all of the grammatical chaos of ordinary discourse whilst functioning brilliantly as a kind of free verse. In a burst of bathetic exaggeration and self-pity, Teach complains to Don that he has been badly treated by Grace and Ruthie, two women with whom they play poker:
Teach: ...But to have that shithead turn, in one breath, every fucking sweet roll that I ever ate with them into ground glass... this hurts me, Don. This hurts me in a way I don't know what the fuck to do. (Pause)

Don: You're probably just upset.

Teach: You're fuckin' A I'm upset. I am very upset, Don...They treat me like an asshole, they are an asshole...The only way to teach these people is to kill them.

(Act I, pp.10,11)

This manic verbal torrent is, despite its ostensibly anarchic structure, far from slap-dash. Mamet gives pace to Teach's words with carefully placed commas and emphases, expressly designed to achieve the maximum impact. The comparison of the "sweet roll" with the alliterative "ground glass" is very telling; not only are they syllabically identical, which contributes to the peculiarly mesmeric music of the speech, they show the machinations of Teach's mind. A sweet roll is to Teach just about the most inoffensive example of something he has shared with Grace and Ruthie; it also contains the word "sweet" which subliminally suggests his own 'sweet' nature. In order to contrast the halcyon days of the "sweet roll", when Teach in his innocence shared with and even bought food for his persecutors, he selects a surrealist and cruel image, "ground glass" in order to underline his torment. His long opening sentence is a poetically brilliant and accomplished paean to anger, and its length and rhythm make the short colloquy far more powerful and ironic: "...this hurts me, Don. This hurts me in a way I don't know what the fuck to do." Teach's language seems to prescribe its own eccentrically compelling rhythms as he ploughs through words in an effort to assuage his anger. It must be remembered that the remark which sparked all of this verbal violence was, in fact, a very minor insult. As Robert Storey notes,

Such a mind invites language to fill its great shallows of ignorance with the rhythms of omniscience and authority.29

The syntactical anarchy of a sentence such as "They treat me like an asshole, they are an asshole" suggests Teach's
mounting frustration, the repetition simultaneously highlighting his apparent helplessness and desperation. There is here a disconsolate childishness, and a whine is written into the lines, intended to draw sympathy for his cause and to win his audience's support. Don's inane attempts at conciliatory action add considerably both to the empathetic pulse which underlies the scene and to its dark and sardonic humour. His assertion that Teach is "...probably just upset" is as brilliant a model of understatement as one is likely to find!

THE WOODS is perhaps Mamet's most traditionally poetic play in that all of Ruth's lines are written in verse and the imagery used is of an obviously 'poetic' nature. However, Mamet utilises his most obvious poetry for a very specific purpose: Ruth tries very hard to impress her boyfriend, Nick, with whom she has come out for a weekend in the country. She speaks in a self-conscious, almost maudlin verse whilst Nick's dialogue is all in prose. Mamet's primary reason for this is to suggest Ruth's romantic nature as opposed to Nick's more prosaic personality. She goes to the woods to look for love whilst Nick seeks only sex. In this extract, Ruth recalls a boat she has seen:

Ruth: ...Down by the Lake there is a rotten boat. A big green rowboat. It might be from here to here. It's rotten and the back is gone, but I'll bet it was pretty big. I sat in it. Inside the front was pointed up. It smelted real dry. I mooshed around and this is how it sounded on the sand. Swassshh. Chhhrsssh. Swwwssshhhh. Very dry. You know, I think I would of liked to go to sea. Girls couldn't go to sea. As cabin boys or something.

Nick: They had women pirates.
Ruth: They were outlaws. Men would not let women go to sea.
Nick: The Vikings.
Ruth: They let women go?
Nick: Sure. (Act I, p.4)
Ruth's diction is strained and pretentious because Mamet intends that it should be so; she strives to impress Nick, to interest him with tales of exciting adventure implied in "...I would of liked to go to sea" but receives only the baldest of responses. Ruth is only too well aware of the gulf which separates her from Nick and, in order to comfort herself and give herself confidence, she tries to narrow the divide by means of language. She tries to recreate the exact sounds she made when she was in the old boat by experimenting with language, making up 'noise' words which make her feel secure. It becomes essential for Ruth to sound as authentic as she can since she can then distract her mind towards subjects which are, in themselves, unimportant but which temporarily at least offer a diversion. As Christopher Bigsby observes, such verbal exercises imply somebody finding refuge in a bogus precision, feigning interest in a subject tangential to her real anxieties.30

There are, of course, many more excellent examples of Mamet's poetic gifts, the above being only a very small selection. However, they do give some impression of his versatility with language, particularly his skill in writing original and acute dramatic poetry.

Mamet has been called the "Aristophanes of the inarticulate".31 Like the Greek dramatist, he is a poet and a satirist, an iconoclastic demolisher of contemporary sacred cows. He exposes what he sees as an iniquitous social system through the language of his characters which, although raised into Mamet's dramatic verse, remains, at its base, an attenuated and debased form of communication. In order to dramatise the injustices inherent in modern, urban society, he usually draws his characters from the working classes, or from those who live on the very fringes of society, the outcasts, misfits and petty criminals. Mamet creates a kind of drama in which such characters can be placed in the centre of a play, much in the same way that Harold Pinter does. Relatively minor - certainly unheroic - characters who converse in ostensibly mundane and
unimaginative language are common to the work of both writers. Time and again, Mamet's work is compared to Pinter's; Mel Gussow writes that

Mr. Mamet is like Harold Pinter turning into Tom Stoppard.

and Howard Kissel believes that AMERICAN BUFFALO is

Pinteresque, not only because the language is so taut and pungent and the mood full of menace, but also because the action was not entirely clear.

Frank Rich feels that

Mr. Mamet's talent for burying layers of meaning into simple, precisely distilled, idiomatic language...can only be compared to Harold Pinter's.

and when Michael Coveney saw AMERICAN BUFFALO at the National Theatre in 1978, he opined that "it was like hearing Pinter for the first time".

Mamet openly acknowledges his debt to Pinter and, indeed, GLENGARRY, GLEN ROSS is dedicated to him. Mamet believes that it is quite impossible for a modern playwright not to be influenced by a writer like Pinter or, indeed, Beckett.

He says:

Beckett and Pinter - of course I am influenced by them. If you're interested in modern dance, how could you not be influenced by Martha Graham?

Robert Storey considers that the similarities between Mamet and (particularly) the early Pinter are striking:

Both are what we might call magic realists. Both are drawn to situations of uneasy, sometimes claustrophobic intimacy between 2 or 3 characters, among whom there is an acknowledged sparring for power. In both, speech has an air of phonographic accuracy, with all its repetitions, ellipses and illogicalities intact, acquiring both on the page and in performance an often comically surreal intensity.

Christopher Bigsby notes the influence of both Beckett and Pinter on Mamet's drama:

Like Beckett, he is concerned with dramatising a largely plotless world in which nuance and gesture become of central significance. Like Pinter, he tends to locate his plays in an ostensibly realist environment only to deconstruct the assumptions of realism as they relate to plot, character and language.
During an interview, the British actor Jack Shepherd, who has appeared in two National Theatre productions of Mamet's plays, commented upon the similarities and differences between the works of Mamet and Pinter. He told me that Mamet's way is very typical of American drama—there are many confrontations and the characters tell each other exactly what they think—or appear to, at least. His work is much more brash than that of Pinter, although there is the same concern for subtlety and nuance. With English drama of the Pinter type, it is all nuance and oblique sense, but with American drama, it appears to the audience to be far more direct even when there is evasion occurring as well as a strong subtext.

Like those of Pinter, Mamet's plays often take the form of dramatised conversations which deal in detail with ostensibly unimportant issues. Every word is, however, absolutely crucial to the overall shape of the work. A good example is THE DUCK VARIATIONS which, on the surface, seems to be nothing more than an extended duologue between two old men in a park, each of them vying for verbal supremacy in a continuing debate about ducks. It is the measure of Mamet's talent for burying layers of meaning into simple discourse that the play takes on a far more serious tone, though without losing any of its humour. This work is really about fear of insignificance and death, the terrors of the modern world, the loss of individuality, the constant need for story-telling and even existential anguish.

Pinter's deceptively simple plays with their 'ordinary' characters and apparently banal linguistic style opened Mamet's eyes to the possibilities awaiting a dramatist, particularly one who is primarily interested in language. He realised that dramatic characters need not be heroic or 'special'; they could be ordinary, even dull. However, their lack of status need in no way detract from the dramatic possibilities they could offer a creative and imaginative writer. Mamet explains how
Pinter was probably the most influential when I was young and malleable. THE HOMECOMING, THE BASEMENT, especially his revue sketches. I felt a huge freedom because of Pinter's sketches - to deal in depth and on their own merit with such minutiae.

In Mamet's drama, too, the commonplace finds a valid form of dramatic expression; the apparently insignificant is imbued with meaning and the most prosaic speech given the kind of attention usually reserved for 'great art'. Indeed, Mamet's brilliant rendering of inarticulate speech is one of his major strengths as a dramatist. If even the most trite or obscene language is taken to have more than one level of meaning, it then becomes possible to envisage its vast potential in dramatic form. John Ditsky points out that Mamet's characters' inarticulateness becomes the direct theatrical representation of interior stress, of psychic missed connections

and goes on to say that

the theatre of inarticulation...may prove significant because, ironically, it lets us better understand: in other words, because it lets us see the thought there.

Stephen Harvey observes that if Mamet's characters have fifty-word vocabularies, he makes sure that every monosyllable counts... inarticulate speech can be the most dramatically nuanced of all.

When one of Mamet's characters has something of importance to say, his or her abortive efforts at eloquence can paradoxically speak volumes. They always have something important to say, even if it is only they themselves who believe it. Often, their lack of fluency actually serves as an aid to audience concentration, since such language enforces alertness and sensitivity to nuance. It is not possible to listen half-attentively to such lines as

...Lookit, sir, if I could get ahold of some of that stuff you were interested in, would you be interested in some of it?

(AMERICAN BUFFALO, Act I, pp.27,28)

or What are we giving ninety per...for nothing.

For some jerk sit in the office tell you 'Get out there and close.' 'Go win the Cadillac.' Graff. He goes out and buys. He pays top dollar for
Through his characters' banal and incoherent speech, Mamet can make transparent their over-verbalised as well as their unspoken emotions. Possibly one of his greatest achievements resides in his ability to suggest what lies just beneath the surface of their words. He is able to draw attention to that which is barely apprehended by the speakers themselves, let alone given the substantiality of language. The tough and gritty dialogue in a play such as LAKEBOAT conceals its characters' desperate loneliness and sense of abandonment; behind their incessant references to sex, gangsters and gambling there lies emptiness. Rather than admit fear and vulnerability, the men who work on the boat find solace in fictionalising events, distancing themselves from the reality of their situation. So entrenched have they become in their make-believe world that they hardly remember that it is, in fact, make-believe. Their discourse is frequently blunt and banal to the point of savagery, but this does not prevent Mamet from extracting every nuance to convey his dramatic point.

Pinter has observed that intense experience is often communicated in the most inarticulate manner; he believes that

the more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression.  

This would certainly seem to be the case in the following extract from THE SHAWL, when Miss A realises that the Clairvoyant in whom she has confided is a charlatan:

Miss A: THAT'S NOT HER PHOTOGRAPH. I TOOK IT FROM A BOOK. You're all the, all of you, god damn you! How could you...If you can't help me, NO one can help me...why did I come here. All of you...Oh God, is there no...how can you betray me...You...you...God damn you...for 'money'...? God...May you rot in hell, in prison, in...you charlatan, you thief...

(Act 3, pp.43,44)

In her confusion and rage, Miss A can hardly speak; she
begins sentences, leaves them unfinished, and casts about wildly for a term of damnation of the severest kind. In the extremity of her anguish she is almost completely inarticulate, a total contrast to the measured, calm tones she has employed elsewhere in the work.

Partly through his study of the acting techniques of Stanislavski as modified by Sanford Meisner, Mamet recognises that it is often not the content of what is said that matters most, but the action which underlies it. For him, communication frequently has less to do with actual language than with the silent empathy which exists between speakers. He feels that

\[
\text{Rhythm and action are the same...words are reduced to the sound and rhythm much more than to the verbal content.}^{45}
\]

Richard Eder accurately sums up Mamet's skill for writing obtuse - and ostensibly shallow - dialogue which actually conceals the real issues:

The evidence is often indirect and evasive. In its awkwardnesses and silences, speech can testify to the opposite of what it seems to say. The gun flash is precisely not where the bullet lodges. Mr. Mamet reports the flash and shows us where the wound really is."^{46}

An episode occurs in AMERICAN BUFFALO in which the surface chatter has very little - if anything - to do with the realities behind the scene. Teach has been trying to persuade Don that Bobby is too inexperienced and risky a proposition to trust with the coin heist that is being planned. Bobby has been sent out to get coffee and food for breakfast and, just as Teach is reaching a crescendo of rhetoric about the boy's unsuitability, Bobby returns:

\[
\text{Teach: ...And what if (God forbid) the guy walks in? Somebody's nervous, whacks him with a table lamp - you wanna get touchy - and you can take your ninety dollars from the nickel shove it up your ass - the good it did you - and you wanna know why? (And I'm not saying anything...) because you didn't take the time to go first-class.}
\]

(Bob re-enters with a bag)

Hi, Bob.

Bob: Hi, Teach. \hspace{1cm} (Act I, p.38)
There follow some exchanges about the food between Don and Bobby. Teach remains silent until

Teach: (To Bob) How is it out there?
Bob: It's okay.
Teach: Is it going to rain?
Bob: Today?
Teach: Yeah.
Bob: I don't know. (Pause)
Teach: Well, what do you think?
Bob: It might.
Teach: You think so, huh?
Don: Teach...
Teach: What? I'm not saying anything.
Bob: What?
Teach: I don't think I'm saying anything here. (Pause)
Bob: It might rain. (Pause) I think later.
Teach: How's your pie?

There is here an almost Chekhovian subtext; what is said aloud bears very little relation to what the characters are really saying. In the same way as Lopakhin engages Varya in mundane conversation in Chekhov's THE CHERRY ORCHARD instead of proposing marriage, so Teach talks to Bobby about the weather and the suitability of his pie instead of addressing his real concerns. Stanislavski wrote that Chekhov painted pictures from life, not plays for the stage. Therefore he often expressed his thought not in speeches but in pauses or between the lines or in replies consisting of a single word:

and goes on to note how

Chekhov's plays are profound in their amorphousness, the characters often feel and think things not expressed in the lines they speak...

The work of both dramatists allows the audience a glimpse of what lies beneath the superficial words, as well as delineating their characters' motives. Teach's show of friendship and concern is plainly bogus, and even the pathetic Bobby is aware that something is awry. However, he plays along with the chit-chat until Don prompts him to become really nervous at which point he tries desperately to please Teach by supplying him with the answers he thinks he wants to hear. With wonderful irony, Mamet twice has Teach state: "I don't think I'm saying anything" while
speaking to the boy. He most certainly is not, but the tension which has been created has a powerful eloquence of its own. The dramatic effect of this pared down, very sparse dialogue is entirely due to the contradiction between the words spoken and the emotional and psychological action which underlies them. Mamet's language has almost entirely lost its rhetorical and informative element in this scene, and has fully merged into dramatic action.

In the same way as Chekhov's characters often talk around the truth to avoid direct contact with reality - such confrontation risks a vulnerability which is unthinkable - so Mamet's portrayal of the trivia of daily routine, the seemingly inconsequential conversations and evasions disguises his portrayal of process, development and crisis. Chekhov wrote:

> Let the things that happen onstage...be just as complex and yet just as simple as they are in life. For instance, people are having a meal at table, just having a meal, but at the same time their happiness is being created, or their lives are being smashed up.49

This is an almost telegraphic synopsis of an aesthetic but, as Laurence Senelick says in his book about the works of Chekhov,

> it is a symbolist aesthetic; beyond the commonplace surface of existing lurks the real life of the characters.50

Mamet, too, combines surface naturalism with symbolism. The cluttered chaos of Don's junk shop in AMERICAN BUFFALO surely reflects the detritus which Mamet sees as clogging up modern America. THE WOODS is set not only in the actual month of September but also in the emotional autumn of its characters' relationship - they play out what may be the last days of their love affair against a backdrop of ominous rain clouds and decaying plant life. The real-estate office in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS may well be a microcosm of capitalist society gone mad, and its subsequent office break-in redolent of the collapse of law and order. The plight of the workers in LAKEBOAT is surely intended to reflect a general malaise and boredom, and to underline
the metaphysical void in which they find themselves, and EDMOND's lashing out as he murders Glenna is no doubt intended to illustrate the breakdown and violence of the whole of modern society, to symbolise the lack of understanding between people. During an interview, Miranda Richardson who played Glenna in the Royal Court production of EDMOND in 1985 observed that the way in which Edmond murders Glenna is deeply symbolic. Glenna dies, as all of Mamet's characters suffer, because of a profound lack of communication and understanding. He tries to find the truth, believes he has found it and then has it negated in the most brutal way...his only reaction is one of panic and to kill what stands in his way.

Like Chekhov, Mamet always overlays any symbolic reference with a patina of irreproachable reality; it is never heavy-handed or obvious. Don's junk shop may represent chaotic America but it is also just a very untidy junk shop, and the disorder which is found in the real-estate office after the robbery in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS is simply the result of a crude and messy burglary. Ruth and Nick in THE WOODS may be symbolic of the babes in the wood, with the concomitant implications of both innocence and loss but they are also just another couple who have decided to have a weekend away in the country. Each symbolic image can be quite painlessly offset with one of stark realism.

Mamet's characters speak in the authentic, rambling manner of everyday discourse, picking up scraps of language and re-working and re-defining them to suit their own ends. There are some excellent examples of the way in which people pick up verbal clues from one another in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, but perhaps the best of all takes place when Moss is in the process of trying to entrap his colleague into complicity in a robbery, and endeavours to draw him into agreement about the unfairness of their present lot:

Moss: We're stuck with this fucking shit...
Aaronow: ...this shit...
Moss: It's too...
Aaronow: It is.
Moss: Eh?
Aaronow: It's too...
Moss: You get a bad month, all of a...
Aaronow: You're on this...
Moss: All of, they got you on this 'board...
Aaronow: I, I...I...
Moss: Some contest board...
Aaronow: I...
Moss: It's not right.
Aaronow: It's not.
Moss: No. (Act I, Scene 1, p.13)

Mamet, like Pinter, capitalises upon the fact that real-life conversations seldom proceed smoothly and logically from point to point; most dialogue is repetitious or inconsequential, or both. As Moss prompts his colleague into culpability, he need utter only a fragment of a sentence for Aaronow to finish it, or half-finish it for him. There are very few complete sentences here, but each man knows enough about the other to fill in the gaps and say what is necessary for his own purpose.

In 1888, in his Preface to MISS JULIE, August Strindberg outlined his feelings on the irregularity and lack of form of most speech. In his play, he intended that the characters should appear to speak naturally and without obvious authorial interference; they should not become catechists who sit asking stupid questions in order to evoke some witty retort.

Strindberg was very concerned that their speech should sound as life-like as possible and, in order to give the impression of naturalism, he allowed their minds to work irregularly, as people's do in real life, when, in conversation, no subject is fully exhausted, but one mind discovers in another a cog which it has a chance to engage.

As a result of this, Strindberg's dialogue wanders, providing itself in the opening scenes with matter which is later taken up, worked upon, repeated, expanded and added to, like the theme in a musical composition.

Mamet strives to create natural-sounding speech in his dialogue, but always within the confines of his dramatic poetry and he, too, uses recurrent motifs, both verbal
and purely dramatic. In PRAIRIE DU CHIEN, the motif takes the form of the Storyteller's repeated question of whether the child in the carriage is asleep, as he builds up the suspense of his dark, chilling tale; in AMERICAN BUFFALO, it is the symbol of Teach's missing hat which culminates in his having to construct one out of paper to avoid getting wet - an action very much at odds with one who seeks to pass himself off as a hardened gangster; in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO, the first scene establishes Danny's essential innocence as he constantly asks whether the girl in Bernie's ludicrous story was 'a pro' and, in A LIFE IN THE THEATRE, the leitmotifs which run throughout are Robert's pretentious references to the theatre as life and his irritating and affected habit of referring to the 'fitness' of things.

Film, radio and television have for several generations brought the verbal textures of American speech to this country. As Gareth Lloyd Evans notes, it is not difficult to understand why, on a purely linguistic level, American language holds such a fascination for the British:

> There is an element of 'thrill' in listening to a language which is apparently built of the same materials as one's own but which has strongly unusual features - noises, rhythms, words, phrases, nuances. Without pushing the notion too far, we may perhaps consider that there is an analogy here with the thrill of listening to poetry. It, too, uses the raw materials of our own common stock of speech, but its attractiveness and power come from the unusual usages to which that common stock is put...Americans...sometimes may use language badly, but they rarely use it dully.\(^{55}\)

Mamet's characters frequently use language 'badly', their syntax becoming garbled or their phrasing perverse but in Mamet's hands, their speech always sounds fresh and alive. He takes the worst kind of grammatical chaos that American speech can produce and moulds it, without a hint of condescension or parody, into utterly authentic-sounding poetic cadences. Ross Wetzsteon remarks upon Mamet's ability to capture what sounds like genuine American discourse:
The American stage is littered with the language of the lower-middle classes. Every playwright who's ever wandered into a diner seems to think he has an ear for the pungent patois, the idiosyncratic idioms, the colourful cadences of a truly American speech, more diverse, more realistic, more honest than the homogenised vocabulary, rhythms and accents increasingly forced into our minds by the relentlessly regionless blandness of national television. What results is almost a condescending caricature... This is so unlike Mamet's careful, gorgeous, loving sense of language... he has the most acute ear for dialogue of any American writer since J.D. Salinger.

Mamet usually writes in a Chicago dialect which includes the linguistic fall-out from generations of immigrant handling of the American tongue, and Kenneth Hudson notes how American language is distinguished or handicapped, according to one's point of view, by a remarkably coarse ear, which is probably the result of a levelling process brought about by the mixture of races which has gone to make up the American nation. Out of this speech cauldron came a form of language which concentrated upon basic communication between members of a population which was socially and geographically extremely mobile. Subtleties of speech which characterised much more stable British society for generations had little place or point in America.

Mamet's characters certainly speak in a blunted manner with few grammatical niceties, their speech being littered with all kinds of linguistic antecedents suggestive of Jewish, Italian, Spanish and Negro origin. Harold Clurman once described Clifford Odets' dramatic language as an ungrammatical jargon - and constantly lyric. It is composed of words heard on the street, in drugstores, bars, sports arenas and rough restaurants... It is the speech of New York; half-educated Jews, Italians, Irish, transformed into something new-minted, individual and unique... His dialogue is moving, even thrilling, and very often hilarious. It is not 'English'; in a sense it is not 'realistic' at all. It is 'Odets'.

How easily Clurman's words could be applied to Mamet's plays! Indeed, it is instructive to note that Mamet cites Odets as a particular influence upon his work. However, Mamet gathers together all the strands and moulds them into an idiom peculiar to relatively small areas of the
United States; New York and, particularly, Chicago. As John Ditsky points out, Mamet's language
owes nothing to an effete, drawing-room mid-
Atlantic tradition, and little to any commercial
New York-Los Angeles sort of slanginess.
and Ross Wetzsteon expresses his admiration for a writer
who has a true gift for particular speech patterns, unlike
most writers who attempt the reproduction of dialogue for
the stage and who feel that they have
'captured' Brooklyn by using 'dese' and 'den'
and 'dose', the South with a drawl, Texan with
a twang.

One aspect of Mamet's linguistic technique which frequently
attracts attention is his knack for incorporating the pace
of city life into his dialogue. The world Mamet dramatises
is one in which literally every second counts, and where
there may be danger around every corner. Consequently,
brevity of expression becomes extremely important. Mamet's
characters frequently leave out what they feel to be
extraneous or redundant words in their sentences; they have
something which they wish to convey, and they do so in as
little time as possible. In his haste, Teach (in AMERICAN
BUFFALO) sometimes telescopes his words: "Probably" becomes
"Prolly" (Act I, p.16) and he often utters sentences which
seek to communicate their meaning in a kind of telegraphic
frenzy: "He don't got the address the guy?" (Act II, p.85);
"I'm not the hotel, I stepped out for coffee, I'll be back
one minute" (Act I, p.57) and "What's the good keep the
stuff in the safe..." (Act II, p.80). Similarly, in PINT'S
A POUND THE WORLD AROUND, 'A' states that "...The guy should
have been in Tuesday, I spect him Friday, if he don't come
then" (page 67) and in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, Roma observes
that the policeman brought in to solve the burglary
"...couldn't find his fuckin' couch the living room" (Act
2, p.62).

Jack Barbera comments upon Mamet's use of compressed and
abbreviated language in an article in which he acknowledges
Mamet's part in creating a highly stylized dialogue out of
everyday speech, but also points out that in today's frantic
city bustle, such language becomes more and more common. People really do speak in this brief, truncated fashion. Barbera recalls an interview given by Mamet on the Dick Cavett ETV Show (on either 29 November 1979 or 16 January 1980 - he does not give the precise date) when he mentioned entering an elevator and hearing a woman say: 'Lovely weather, aren't we?'

Thus, the rhythms and syncopations of Mamet's language authentically reflect both the inner pressures of his characters and the pace and confusion of their urban environment, as well as distilling the Chicago dialect into precise, idiomatic verse. During an interview, Jack Shepherd talked about the difficulties of finding Mamet's authentic Chicago accent:

AMERICAN BUFFALO very definitely has an accent built into it, but it is different from that in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS. The rhythms are similar, but they are more like those in KOJAK - sly, idiomatic city talk. Chicago is quite a hard accent - I couldn't really get to grips with it, and eventually settled for New York!

In an article he wrote for DRAMA magazine, Shepherd elaborates upon the difficulties he encountered with the Chicago accent:

In plays by Mamet the actor has to talk much more quickly than is customary in British theatre... The rhythms of the text are breathtaking...Once the actor gets the rhythms right, he starts sounding authentic. He starts talking Chicagoanese. In AMERICAN BUFFALO, I was told that my accent sounded authentically American New York. In GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS I was told that I sounded like I came from Detroit, which is a good bit further west. By the next production I might make it to Chicago.

Mamet often underlines certain words for tonal emphasis, to give an indication of where stresses lie. AMERICAN BUFFALO includes many such instances. For example, Don observes that "You don't have friends this life..." (Act I, p.7) and such emphases are common throughout the play to indicate the rise and fall in tone: "She was mad at him" (Act I, p.6), "Everyone, they're sitting at the table and then Grace is going to walk around...fetch an ashtray...go for coffee...this..." (Act I, p.14), and so on. It is almost impossible to speak such lines in a standard English accent - it sounds...
totally wrong - although Jack Shepherd believes that both AMERICAN BUFFALO and GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS could be successfully performed with Cockney or Northern English accents. This would not appear to me to be a viable alternative since Mamet's idiom is totally and uncompromisingly American. His Chicago rhythms imbue every line, indeed every word and would, I feel, make an 'English' interpretation of any kind seem dangerously contrived and inauthentic.

Mamet's characters speak a language which accurately reflects the cultural abyss into which their country has fallen; they have become emotionally dessicated in their struggle to survive in a society which no longer coheres. It is only through public myths and a life lived according to the dictates of the mass media that they can communicate, and there are now only the most vestigial traces of authentic communion between them. Such characters no longer speak with a genuine voice which can impart what they most need to say; they take on false roles, converse in a superficial and second-rate style and, eventually, deny their true personalities in favour of an adopted - more socially acceptable - myth. Subsequently, they seem to dissolve into what is expected of them in their (adopted) social roles, but continue to feel the need for something more. It is as though the language they have plundered from already debased sources such as television soap operas and advertising jargon denies them the means of genuine communication. Referring specifically to AMERICAN BUFFALO but with obvious pertinence to his other work, Mamet has commented upon that essential part of the American consciousness, which is the ability to suspend an ethical sense and adopt instead a popular, accepted mythology and use that to assuage your conscience like everyone else is doing.66

If this is accepted, it becomes easy to see how his characters can constantly delude both themselves and those around them. It is easier for them to fall in with the myths being manufactured in their society than to fight against them.
Some of the pressures of life are alleviated by such action - the myths, after all, offer a specious form of security - but such relief remains at best superficial. The rot at the core remains unchecked. Their ability to explain away the finer points of the ethics of robbery, cheating, blackmail, overt sexism and racism allows them to literally "assuage [their] conscience [s] like everyone else is doing". For them, self-interest and self-preservation obviate the necessity to think of others.

Mamet observes that a genuine, innocent voice has been lost in contemporary America and notes that

What I write about is what I think is missing from our society. And that's communication on a basic level.67

His characters' reliance upon an artificially-created mythology in order to escape reality is reminiscent of the society dramatised by Arthur Miller in his satire on the Great Depression, THE AMERICAN CLOCK. In this play, the characters attempt to escape from the terrible hardships they experience by over-indulgence in cinema-going and an obsession with popular music. Priorities become distorted and, at the beginning of Act II, Miller suggests the encroaching stupidity which threatens to descend upon the entire populace. Rose frets about

The crazy ideas people get. Mr. Warsaw on our block, to make a little money he started a race track in his kitchen, with cockroaches. Keeps them in matchboxes, with their names written on - 'Alvin', 'Murray', 'Irving'...They bet nickels, dimes...Wherever you look there's a contest; Kellogg's, Post Toasties win five thousand, win ten thousand...Sing! (She sings opening of 'Do-do-do What You Done-Done-Done Before'.)...I must stop getting so stupid. I don't see anything, I don't hear anything except money, money, money...

Such characters are not made stupid through any real fault of their own, but through fear. Mamet dramatises a very similar society, although in his world there is now no major economic Depression, merely a generalised and deep-rooted depression. His characters are aware of the inadequacy and cheapness of their life experience, but are
unable - even unwilling - to do anything to rectify matters

despite a gnawing feeling that they should do so. One of

the ways in which their frustration is dramatised by Mamet

is via their use of obscenity.

Compulsively foul-mouthed, his characters indulge in

expletives which have often become meaningless through

endless repetition; such words have almost entirely lost

their original meaning and are now used mainly as a

satisfying way to express frustration. However, Mamet

utilises this kind of language for a number of dramatic

purposes including emphasis, the replacement of a sought-

after word with an obscenity, maintaining rhythm,

establishing a bond between the speaker and his (or her)
audience and as a means of merely getting from one word to

another. Mamet makes no apology for recording the harshest
street language without censoring any of its rough edges.

Indeed, these jagged shards of speech become an important
means of depicting character, shaping emotional responses
and creating tension as well as serving as a perverse vehicle for Mamet's poetic diction. Ross Wetzsteon seizes

on just this latter aspect, declaring that "not since
Celine has obscenity seemed so poetic".69

In Mamet's hands, obscenity does become poetic, certainly
dramatic. By punctuating his characters' words with
language which has seldom, if ever, found itself spoken
onstage - at least in such quantity - he creates rhythm
and verse out of the most unmelodic sounds and at the same
time runs the risk of becoming a target for those who
would reduce him to the level of verbal pornographer.
Jack Kroll notes how Mamet rapidly alternates the poetic
and the profane, the idiosyncratic with the universal and
how his characters' exchanges
dwindle to single words or even fragments of words
and then explode into a cross-fire of scatological buckshot.68

Mamet claims that his dialogue is liberally spiced with
obscenities because that is the way in which people in
certain areas of society do indeed speak. Further, he believes that, despite the paucity of such language, there is undoubtedly a level at which it is totally honest and forthright:

You really have to love that kind of talk to write it...More than that, you have to need it. The people who speak that way tell the truth. They don't institutionalise thought. They speak from a sense of need.  

Thus, Mamet suggests that despite all of the negative influences which serve to render their language spare and inadequate, there is truth in his characters' minimal expression, an honesty which is uncluttered by the bonds of polite conversation.

Colin Stinton, an American actor who has appeared in a large number of Mamet's plays, spoke during an interview about some of the reasons why the dramatist includes such a quantity of profanity in his plays:

This is how people really do speak, although Mamet does more than merely record...Anyone who has ever worked on a construction crew, or in a real-estate office, or been on a lakeboat will know that this is the way people do converse - especially men - often poetically, often brilliantly in their own kind of perverse way...Men working together tend to get set into certain linguistic patterns; they develop a kind of masculine bond of communication. Mamet builds upon such relationships in his plays. I used to work with some guys who, when they hurt themselves or were annoyed in any way, would chant 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus'. There was a certain rhythm in which they had to say this which never varied. Once, however, one of them hit his hand with a hammer and, for the first time, he worked in another 'Jesus', which altered the cadence to something like 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus', Mamet even re-arranges the syllables of a word in order to include an obscenity if it fits in with his rhythms. One example occurs in AMERICAN BUFFALO when Don describes a girl he has seen:

The ass on this broad, un-be-fucking-lievable in these bicycling shorts sticking up in the air... (Act I, p.33)
Stinton comments on this particular linguistic effect:

Mamet's constant inclusion of words such as 'fuck' or 'fucking' are incorporated for a rhythmic purpose. Sometimes he has a character work in one of these in the middle of another word, so that it becomes 'um-fuckin-believable' or whatever. They actually break up the syllables to fit in a cussword, so intent are they in (a) gaining the maximum effect from their words and (b) keeping up the cadences they have set themselves. It is so much a part of their vocabulary that they feel that the word is a necessary punctuation just to make sure their audience is really listening. I think that is a lot of what it has to do with: it's a way of affirming that you are still communicating with a person...it's a way of constantly getting confirmation that what you are saying is being heard, and understood...and, by continually - and rhythmically - coming back to 'home base' which is 'fuck' or 'shit! you are grounding the conversation in an area in which you or your listener have an understanding.

Stinton feels that the emphasis which is given to this particular aspect of Mamet's work arises partly because of his linguistic dexterity rather than through any lack of imagination as a writer of dialogue. He considers that

David is verbally so dazzling that you can sometimes fail to see themes in his plays straight away. All that is apparently on show is a lot of flashy language, and the nature of the flash is often the way in which the characters have pornographic or vulgar elements in their speech. Consequently, these can be the aspects which show up most on a cursory viewing.

This idea is a far cry from the view that the obscenities in Mamet's work are included only to inflame the sensibilities of the audience or, as Leo Sauvage puts it

to provoke giggling and bursts of hysterical laughter, most often from women.

It would, however, be naive to suggest that Mamet is totally innocent of the desire to shock his audience; any writer who sets out to evoke, without censorship or apology, the blunt and often savage language of the
streets must in some way deliberately court outrage. He frequently sets his plays in the seamy - and seedy - underworld, choosing for his characters low-life villains and misfits, and he does dwell upon their base language to an inordinate degree. But this is not the action of a verbal pornographer: it is Mamet's way of finding the truth, of offering a picture of society without any prettifying of its unpleasant realities. The savagery and bluntness is included because it is only by incorporating such elements into his work that he can offer an honest representation of the world he chooses to dramatise. Mamet sets out to grab the attention of the audience by including every oath and, if that audience is offended by such naked exposure to an ugly reality, then Mamet is making no apology for it.

In the same way that Edward Bond writes plays which depict the most appalling violence to emphasise his political point of view, so Mamet utilises obscene language as a means of pointing to the spiritual malaise which he considers is endemic in the United States. The decline in the quality of spoken language is, to Mamet, symptomatic of a much wider decay. In the Preface to LEAR, Bond writes:

I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People who do not want writers to write about violence, want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence.

Mamet uses another kind of violence, verbal violence, to expose what he considers to be a corrupt and venal culture, which has exchanged the golden vision made possible by the American Dream for the tinselly ostentation of a society of excess. Mamet is dismissive of those who find his language shocking, observing that there are far more important issues in the world about which one can be justifiably upset:
He asks

Is the language shocking? I guess different people are shocked by different things. I'm shocked at the torture in South America or how high officials do dastardly crimes and, rather than punishing them, we say they've suffered enough. That stuff's shocking to me.77

Mamet's plays may be outrageously controversial, but he is concerned not with somehow making obscenity more theatrically valid but with drawing the attention of the audience to the deeper implications of his work - to make them think about why his characters do speak in this way, and the kind of society which has created them.

Because Mamet is, as Jack Kroll points out, in every sense "a language playwright", it is illuminating to look at his playwriting techniques and the objectives which he sets himself as a dramatist.

Mamet writes with extreme economy of expression. With very few words, he is able to convey a great deal. Because he sets up his theatrical coups with such meticulous attention to detail, he can utilise language very sparingly indeed, making every word an important contribution to the power of the scene. Nothing in Mamet's drama is redundant, or unnecessary. Gregory Mosher, the artistic director of the Goodman Theatre in Chicago where many of Mamet's plays have had their premieres, recalls how the writer obsessively beats out the rhythms of his dialogue until he is satisfied both with its tonal quality and with its ability to succinctly convey the information he requires:

Every syllable is counted... You can see him in the back of the theatre during rehearsals, counting out the iambs.79

If anything is omitted from or added to the total schema, Mamet believes that this will be glaringly obvious. During
a lecture, he impressed upon his students the necessity for economy and meticulous planning in playwriting:

A play...is nothing other than a succession of moments. Every moment has to be true. Just like a musical script: if you take out a note, the script isn't going to work. If you put in an extra note that's not going to resolve.80

In an essay entitled 'First Principles', Mamet states:

Every time the author leaves in a piece of non-essential prose (beautiful though it may be) he weakens the structure of the play...81

Colin Stinton recalls one of Mamet's favourite literary maxims, a warning on literary excess given by Samuel Johnson which would certainly seem to echo his assertion in 'First Principles':

Johnson said that you should read over your compositions and, if you find a passage of which you are particularly proud, you should strike it out. The implication is that it is too easy to be self-indulgent. David certainly follows this advice; he is continually on the look-out for things he feels are sentimental or over-stated, to see if there is a better - or shorter and clearer - way of putting across what he wants to say...One of his favourite sayings is 'KIS' - Keep It Simple.82

At another lecture, Mamet postulated the theory that the perfect formula for a well-constructed play was that of the dirty joke:

In a well-written play and a correctly performed play everything also tends towards a punchline. The punchline is the objective. If we learn to think solely in terms of the objective, all concerns, of belief, feeling, emotion, characterisation, substitution become irrelevant...And if you think that way - in terms of the play as a dirty joke heading towards a punchline, it becomes a little bit easier to see what's essential...it can't just be there. It's either essential to the action, essential to 'what am I doing?' or it's harmful.83

Elsewhere, Mamet again uses the 'dirty joke' formula to make a point about excess:
The model of the perfect play is the dirty joke. 'Two guys go into a farmhouse. An old woman is stirring a pot of soup.' What does the woman look like? What state is the farmhouse in? Why is she stirring soup? The dirty joke-teller is tending towards a punchline and we know that he or she is only going to tell us the elements which direct our attention toward that punchline, so we listen attentively and gratefully...the interaction of the characters' objectives [should be] expressed solely through what they say to each other - not through what the author says about them.84

Thus Mamet excises all extraneous matter from his works. The dramatist's almost obsessive concern with paring away all excesses also recalls the words of the novelist Willa Cather, one of his formative influences. She once wrote that

Too much detail is apt, like any form of extravagance, to become slightly vulgar.85

Mamet's work may often be intentionally 'vulgar', but such vulgarity never emanates from overstatement. EDMOND is an excellent example of a play in which everything but the absolutely essential has been pared away, leaving only brief, pungent episodes which sting with the power of their 'punchline'. Colin Stinton remarks upon two scenes in this play which demonstrate, even by Mamet's usual economical standards, extreme brevity whilst simultaneously forwarding the action:

There is an amazing terseness in the very short Hotel scene, and in the way Mamet highlights Edmond's wife's real concerns and intentions when she visits him in jail.86

After Edmond has been mugged and beaten, he goes to a Hotel where he hopes to find refuge and comfort. The Hotel is only identified as such in the printed text, the audience in the theatre having no idea of his whereabouts until he asks, quite simply, for a room. Nothing specific has been stated, nor any obvious clues given as to the setting for this scene until these words are uttered. In the 1985 production of the play at The Royal Court, the only visual clue was that of a man seated behind a counter, reading a newspaper, when the crumpled...
and battered Edmond appears. Stinton, who played Edmond not only at The Royal Court but in the American production of the work, told me that the American version was even more sparing in visual detail than was the British. The play was performed there with virtually no props at all, except two or three stools and a bed which were moved around or taken off the stage to represent Edmond's home, a bar, a whorehouse, a Hotel, Glenna's apartment and so on. There was no back-drop at all and none of the imaginatively-constructed fire-escapes and neon bar sets which added so much to the British production. The sparsity of the visual imagery in the American version was, therefore, perhaps even more so than that at The Royal Court, a fitting correlative to the terseness of the text. However, both productions were notable for their austerity and their adherence to Mamet's stipulation for simplicity. Nothing was wasted or needlessly overstated, but the action was succinctly advanced nonetheless.

The second example cited by Stinton occurs in the scene in which Edmond's wife visits him in prison. Edmond tries to keep the conversation going, his wife offering only monosyllabic and non-committal responses until she asks him: "Did you kill that girl in her apartment?" (Scene 19, p.87). It is not merely that she confronts her husband with a question about the murder - this seems to be of secondary importance when the line is analysed - but that she asks whether he killed the girl "in her apartment". The real motive of her query is not why Edmond should have committed murder, but to find out whether he had been unfaithful to her.

Stinton told me that Mamet's recent experience in filmmaking had had a direct influence upon his writing of EDMOND. When he began working on the play, he had just completed the screenplay for Sidney Lumet's film, THE VERDICT, and the extreme economy of means used in EDMOND reflects his concern with saying as much as possible in the briefest of scenes. There is in this play a very filmic interest in moving forward the action with as little hindrance as possible. Stinton remarks upon this as follows:
EDMOND and THE VERDICT were written very closely together...David became more conscious of getting what you want out of a scene as rapidly as possible, of constructing a scene so that you have a specific objective in mind...ensuring that there are just enough words to make the scene do what it is supposed to do, and make the audience interested in knowing what the next scene will be...In EDMOND, perhaps more than in any of his other plays, David tries to accomplish something with each scene, and this makes him more of a story-teller himself. He has always been a story-teller in the sense that his characters tell stories...but in EDMOND he has become more adept at writing scenes which together make stories.\footnote{87}

Mamet's plays are frequently so terse and brief that audiences can sometimes miss important aspects, despite their desire to know "what the next scene will be". Stinton considers that Mamet's ability to present information in such economical terms is both a strength and a flaw:

Mamet frequently conveys his meaning in exceptionally brief - sometimes gnomic - scenes...by the same token, however, there will be those in the audience who will not appreciate this brevity, and the writing will go right past them without their having understood just what is going on. Mamet's plays are so terse, so Greek, so ingenious that they can, unless the audience is extremely well-tuned to his idiom, be misunderstood. Most people are used to having things spelt out for them and David doesn't do that...he doesn't warm up his audiences in any way; it's just straight in. He expects them to fill in the blanks and follow the clues, the very definite clues, which he provides...Possibly one of his shortcomings is that he expects everyone to be as quick and precise as he is in picking up clues and nuances...he has the ability to pick up on every clue, every shade in even very difficult or ambiguous plays. He is an incredibly perceptive listener!...If he has a flaw, then that is it, but it is also one of his greatest virtues, this ability to be so precise and terse. The flaw, if any, lies in his exaggerated expectations of our ability to appreciate it.\footnote{88}

Stinton cites the recent success in this country of the American production of AMERICAN BUFFALO as an example of the need for Mamet's plays to be seen (and heard) more than once if they are to be truly appreciated:

It is little wonder really that Mamet's plays are sometimes misunderstood at first viewing. They are often too dense and verbally too dazzling to take in without a second (or even third) viewing.\footnote{89}
He believes that the play's success was due not merely to the fact that a star such as Al Pacino had been cast as Teach but that Mamet's almost bewildering linguistic talents were by then more familiar. However, there were a number of critics who preferred the National Theatre's production in 1978. Comparing the two versions, Michael Coveney considered that, ironically, the National's version far more successfully tackled

The peculiar Americanism of it, the sheer rock and roll and swing of the language
d and Steve Grant observed that the American performances hardly outrank the National Theatre's earlier version.

Mamet's work was, therefore, highly regarded by some even before it became familiar, although Stinton's point is a valid one, highlighting as it does the difficulties of penetrating the playwright's very individual linguistic style.

Stinton also comments upon the brevity of some of Mamet's plays which, when considered alongside his verbal dexterity, can add to the confusion:

Some of David's plays are so short! When we did SHOESHINE recently in the States - a very short play indeed - the audience had no sooner settled in their seats, had been relentlessly lambasted by this amazing dialogue and it was over. I said to the director..."Why don't we do it twice?" I was only half-joking. The first time we could do the play just to warn them, I suggested, and then a second time to really get it across! We could say something to the effect of 'This is Mamet: this is all there is: this is your second chance. Ready? Listen!' Brevity and conciseness of expression are, therefore, two principles of playwriting which are constantly on Mamet's mind. "The whole truth lies," he has said, "in what you leave out". He told Richard Gottlieb that his "plays are getting more spare as he goes along" leaving Gottlieb to note that

Conveying a speech in a single line or even in a single word is something Mr. Mamet strives for. Mamet therefore believes that he can best convey the truth
by constantly paring away at his plays; the less padding he includes, the less distraction there will be from his central objective, that is, to present a theatrical experience which is as honest as possible. In an essay entitled 'Semantic Chickens', he sums up what he feels is the quintessential purpose of theatre:

the purpose of the theatre, as Stanislavski said, is to bring light to the life of the human soul; and the theatre...possesses this potential. Alone among community institutions, the theatre possesses the power to differentiate between truth and garbage.96

During a lecture at the Neighbourhood Playhouse in Chicago, Mamet told a group of drama students that

The theatre is a lesson in intention. That is what the objective is. That is the great lesson that we can bring to the audience, the only lesson - they see us, they see our intention, and they see what befalls us. Every time the audience goes to the theatre they receive another lesson in morality. It is up to us to decide the quality of that lesson... Because to act fully, completely, with every intention as if your life depended on it, is to love your audience and to love the art in yourself. That is what Stanislavski means when he says 'Play well, or play badly, but play truly'...you are engaged in the most important profession in the world - the study of our dreams and the study of our lives.97

Mamet strives to convey to his students the seriousness of their task as actors and frequently cites Stanislavski's teachings as a source of inspiration. It is not at all surprising that Mamet should so revere the Russian's contribution to the theatrical arts when that contribution is so in keeping with his own dramatic objectives. As Harold Clurman notes

The aim of the [Stanislavski] system is to enable the actor to use himself more consciously as an instrument for the attainment of truth on the stage.98

Mamet has gained the reputation of being an 'actor's playwright', that is, one who has a deep regard and respect for those who perform his works. As an ex-actor himself (albeit a not very successful one), he understands the acting process and retains an unwavering sympathy for the actor's lot. Colin Stinton recalls how
Mamet won't waste time on something which doesn't sound true, or poetic. He trusts his actors to be intelligent and to do their very best with the lines he gives them but, if those lines don't work, he is as likely to cut them completely as to use up valuable rehearsal time in amending them or embellishing them. He frequently asks the opinions of his actors and if they don't like a certain line or word, if they show that it is false in any way, he will simply cut it from the text. This is so unlike the practice of many, many playwrights who are jealous of every single word they write; it is often an uphill battle to get any kind of compromise from them, but this is not so with David - he is very open to ideas. 99

Freddie Jones, who played Robert in the 1979 production of A LIFE IN THE THEATRE at The Open Space, avers that Mamet desperately loves and respects actors. His heart is with us...he really does care about us. You can tell this by the ease with which actors take to his texts...they are, literally, written for actors to perform and thus they invite the best kind of acting. 100

Mamet himself observes that Actors are an important part of the writing process. Good actors are working with controlled consciousness. If they find the words awkward, it's because they probably are awkward. There are actors for example who can convey an entire speech in a single line. 101

Mamet's early training still influences him heavily; his characters are so meticulously realised and his plays so densely structured that successful performance in them demands the kind of commitment which comes with Method acting. Dick Cavett notes how Mamet's study of the Stanislavski method, especially the exercises in concentration, taught him about writing. It was there that he learned to understand the principles of continuous action and 'moment to moment'. 102

It is essential for an actor to immerse him or herself in the role, to engage in the kind of 'groundwork' that Jack Shepherd found necessary in his preparation to play in both AMERICAN BUFFALO and GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS:
The only way to act Mamet is to live in the moment, let the other actors take you by surprise, take yourself by surprise! Prepare at home, and in rehearsal, in performance - let go, take a spontaneous reaction even if it's wrong. Try not to do anything exactly the same twice. 103
During an interview, Shepherd talked about Stanislavski, and Mamet's own contributions to rehearsals of GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, both as a playwright and ex-actor:

Mamet's work is perfect for the Method...it immediately concentrates your energy on either the person or the thing you are meant to be addressing and David believes very deeply in the benefits of this System. He writes from within; he approaches his texts like an actor. He used to be an actor for a while so he knows the sorts of problems we go through. Mamet acts out the part in his head, saying the lines to himself to see if they sound real, or if they sound poetic - ideally, he wants them to sound both. Once he has an idea about how a scene should be, he acts it out for the actors: his punctuation and grammar are often strange, or even faltering as he gropes for words, but he sticks with it and the actors begin to see what he is getting at...You have to enjoy Mamet's dialogue...the actor should endeavour to live in the present when acting his work...As Stanislavski said, in the now! Listening to other actors and responding, moment by moment. The idea is to produce energy, vivacity and spontaneity, to be as natural as possible, to be true - this is essential for Mamet's drama.104

Mamet's work is expressly written to be performed, rather than just read. Although it is indeed written as dramatic poetry, its true strengths do not emerge until the words are actually spoken aloud. Both Colin Stinton and Jack Shepherd comment upon this aspect of his drama, Stinton observing that

David very definitely writes for his work to be performed. He does not write 'literature' per se, and so if actors decide to find the 'literariness' of his work at the expense of actually acting it, actually saying the words aloud, they will be doomed to failure. There is indeed poetry and many literary qualities do exist in his work...but these are best appreciated when the texts are verbalised, when the plays are in performance, rather than merely read.105

Similarly, Shepherd notes how

In AMERICAN BUFFALO and GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS the rhythm is fast!...To speak the text well you have to speak it fast. And you have to enjoy it...This seems to me the most productive way to approach David Mamet's text. Approach it with 'literary' considerations in the back of your mind, and the poetry won't stand a chance.106

Elsewhere, he notes that
AMERICAN BUFFALO is a remarkable play but it is a difficult play to read...I was a long way into rehearsal before the language became at all accessible; and it was not until we were in the third or perhaps the fourth week of performance that I began to distinguish the various strands within the fabric of the play...107

Both Colin Stinton and Jack Shepherd remarked upon how easy they had found Mamet's scripts to learn; because they are so precisely designed, there is no room for an odd ad-lib or garbled line. They are simple to memorise not only because they strongly resemble the patterns of real speech but also because they are so expertly crafted that if one reads a line in an incorrect way, it becomes immediately obvious. The rhythms have been disturbed, and the line sounds false. Stinton recalls how

I have always found it really very easy to remember Mamet's lines...I have never consciously sat down to memorise them as such - apart from the long, interruptive speeches which he sometimes includes; these are more difficult - but his words usually just seem to work effortlessly...His texts may look difficult to remember, so full are they of ellipses and grammatical anomalies, but they are really quite simple...108

and Shepherd remembers how when he first saw the script for GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS he thought it was in code, but a code which could be broken:

The text really does look like code...you wonder how you can possibly memorise this sort of language but it's surprisingly simple once you get the rhythms. It becomes difficult to get it wrong! There are no spaces in his work, no room for improvisation.109

Similarly, Stinton notes how, in Mamet's drama

There is absolutely no room for ad-libbing...But in spite of this - or indeed, because of this, he is so generous to his actors. It is so precise and therefore excellent to interpret.110

In many of his plays, Mamet makes a stylized use of specific areas of dialogue, namely the enclosure of certain excerpts within parentheses. In a footnote to AMERICAN BUFFALO, he instructs that such extracts denote

a slight change of outlook on the part of the speaker - perhaps a momentary change to a more introspective regard.111
In all the plays in which this parenthetical device occurs, characters are able momentarily to look inwards to themselves, to query motives or to reflect upon recent utterances. As John Ditsky remarks, these parentheses offer part of the dramatic opportunity afforded by the famous Pinter pauses, the chance to react or 'do a take'...

Robert Storey considers that this particular linguistic device of Mamet's is likely to become a kind of 'trademark': the parenthetical asides that lace his dialogue (destined, undoubtedly, to become as celebrated as Pinter's pauses) suggest minds that abhor verbal vacuums, that operate, at all levels, on the energy of language itself...

However, this device can become obtrusive; it can cause confusion not only for the reader but also for the actor. It is often difficult to see why certain words should be so marked out, and can lead to the feeling that one is missing some vital hidden meaning. Nevertheless, perseverance and careful analysis usually guarantee success as Colin Stinton observes:

Mamet writes so specifically for his words to be heard, for actors to say them rather than to be read that, consequently, there are sometimes problems in finding exactly what the point of a line is, even for an actor. Often, as much as one is assisted by Mamet's underlinings or parentheses, they are also a source of confusion. The words tumble out of your mouth and it can be difficult to find the correct emphasis. The first read-through of a Mamet play is, however, always exciting because you suddenly see those things which you didn't quite understand on the printed page now make sense because they are made audible. If you trust him, and give thought to the words within the brackets or above the underlinings, if you 'hit' the words he advises you to 'hit', the meaning will eventually be clear.

AMERICAN BUFFALO contains more of Mamet's parenthetical comments than any of his other plays. The following brief selection may serve to illustrate how theatrically effective this device can be. In the early scene in which Don chides Bobby for not eating properly, he moves from the specific to the general and there is an indication that this lecture is just another in a long line of pep-talks to the boy:

Don: ...You know how much nutritive benefits they got in coffee? Zero. Not one thing. The stuff eats you up. You can't live on coffee, Bobby.
Don muses on the times that he has had this self-same discussion with Bobby. An actor might interpret his bracketed remarks as being spoken in either an overtly sincere or world-weary manner, concern for his young friend's welfare or plain impatience being uppermost in his mind. Later, as Teach nears the end of what has been an overwhelmingly violent verbal assault on Grace and Ruthie, he interpolates his vicious denigration with remarks which seem designed to gain him sympathy and agreement as well as maintaining his reputation as a man 'to be reckoned with':

Teach: ... Ruthie...I mean, you see how she fucking plays...(You see what I'm talking about?)...I know you like the broad and Grace and, Bob, I know he likes 'em too. And I like 'em too. (I know, I know.)... But all I ever ask (and I would say this to her face) is only she remembers who is who and not to go around with her or Gracie either with this attitude. "The Past is Past, and this is Now, so Fuck You." You see?

(Act I, pp.14,15)

Teach is very careful not to alienate Don and Bobby: he needs them as allies. In spite of his viciousness, he ironically makes every effort to appear fair, to stress his impartiality and even fondness of those whom he so forcefully condemns. In his "I know, I know" there is the suggestion that he is aware he is being too 'soft' on the women, that his lenience singles him out as a deeply compassionate and kind-hearted man; however, Teach's motives are not as pure as he would lead Don and Bobby to believe, and there is an underlying Machiavellian slyness in his comments. He endeavours to gain their empathy and to ensure that they see him as the much-maligned victim of the piece. The use of parentheses here is almost akin to Mamet's use elsewhere of constant obscenity: as Colin Stinton has remarked, by continually reverting to a profanity, Mamet's characters bring back the conversation to an area of common ground in which all parties have an interest and an understanding. In this case, the obscenities are replaced by
Teach's use of parenthetical comments, expressly intended to gain him both agreement and sympathy, but the effect is just the same.

In order to fully appreciate Mamet's use of language, it is necessary to look not only at his work for the theatre but also at his screenwriting techniques and his screenplays. He has achieved considerable success in both media, winning the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for his play, GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS and earning an Oscar nomination for his screenplay of THE VERDICT in the same year. Mamet brings the same rigorous economy and tightness of structure to his film scripts as he does to his plays, and the two screenplays to be discussed here are the best examples of this aspect of his work.

Writing for the screen is not an occupation Mamet views as being inferior to playwriting, but one which is equally demanding and painstaking. He states that

I think screenwriting is most definitely an art form; a different art form from the theatre, but an art form.145

Although there are obvious similarities between playwriting and screenwriting, such as presentation of dialogue, Mamet feels that the two occupations differ considerably, and that a quite separate set of skills are necessary for each. In an interview published in The Performing Arts Journal, he explains the prime difference between the two:

Writing is very different in a movie than in plays. In a movie you're trying to show what the characters did and in a play they're trying to convey what they want. The only tool they have in a play is what they're trying to say. What might be wretched playwriting - describing what a character does - may be good screenwriting.116

Elsewhere, he elaborates upon the differences:

In a play...the only way you have to convey the action of the plot is through the action of the characters, what they say to each other. With a movie, the action has to be advanced narratively. To advance it through the dialogue is just boring; it is not the proper exploitation of the form. It has to be advanced, showing the audience what's happening, narrating to them the state of mind of
the protagonist which...is the worst kind of playwriting. From what I can see in the writing and directing, film is getting things structured so that it succeeds in spite of itself...You're taking the element of luck out. You are also taking out the elements of feeling and sensitivity, so you're relying absolutely on the structure of the script. The script makes the audience ask what happens next and makes the audience care about the answer to that question.117

Mamet has long been an admirer of the work of Arthur Miller, and he quotes Miller's advice to playwrights who are interested in writing for the screen: "You've got to do both or you'll lose the touch."118

Mamet's first job as a screenwriter was for Bob Rafelson's version of the James M. Cain novel, THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE. As well as achieving a wide and useful knowledge of film techniques, Mamet also "received a lesson in consistency...Working in the movies taught me...to stick to the plot and not to cheat".119 He observes that, whilst most playwrights are acquainted with the basic rules of dramaturgy, there are occasions - too frequent to be ignored - when these rules are ignored or deformed for the sake of effect. Having inserted an unnecessary, though appealing, scene in a play, the playwright might muse:

it's not consistent, but it sure is pretty. Why should I be bound by the rules of dramaturgy when no-one knows them but me?...The rule in question here is Aristotle's notion of unity of action: in effect, that the play should be about only one thing, and that that thing should be what the hero is trying to get. Unstinting application of this rule makes great plays because the only thing we, as audience, care about in the theatre is what happens next. All of us writers know this but few of us do it. We don't do it because it is too difficult. It is much easier to write great dialogue (which is a talent and not really very much of an exertion) than to write great plots.120

Asked during an interview whether the experience of working on film very seriously changed his method of working on a play, Mamet stated:

Yes, it did. It took away some of the onus of working on plot. It's very difficult for me to write a plot. That's really the art of playwriting, I think...the real challenge is to write a play structured along traditional Aristotelian
lines...I think my best plays stick to them...And my children's plays are strictly classically structured because 'what happens next' is crucial to kids.121

The screenplays to be considered here, THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE and THE VERDICT were both adapted from existing novels. Mamet says that he experienced great difficulties with the former because it is written as first-person narrative and almost all the incidents are incited by a change in the protagonist's state of mind, which is, at best, boring to express on film...The problem of the screenplay was how to distort an internal psychological monologue into a visible clash of visible forces.122

What Mamet saw as the real challenge was how long he could withhold vital information from the audience without confusing or disorientating them. He writes:

At what point do you give the audience information about the characters? And by withholding that information, how do you create suspense so that it is possible, in most instances, to have revelations on the part of the protagonist that are in consonance with the revelations of the audience? How do you make that happen for the protagonist at the same time you make it happen for the audience, so that you're neither telling the audience something it already knows nor telling the audience something it can't appreciate.123

Mamet sows the seeds for the highly-charged and passionate relationship which grows between Frank Chambers, the protagonist, and his employer's wife, Cora, at the very beginning of the work. Frank's first sight of Cora is as tantalising for the audience as it is for him. Mamet places Cora in the kitchen with her back to the camera; she is visible only through a partially open door:

She is putting dishes in the sink. She wipes sweat off her brow with her upper arm. Her blouse falls open showing her breast.124

Mamet then focuses the audience's attention on Frank, and on the double entendre which follows:

Frank looking at Cora...Frank is entranced.
Frank: The food...delicious.
Cora turns to look at Frank...She looks...for a moment, as if focussing, wondering what he is talking about, then she nods, and goes back to her washing.125
This is quite different from Cain's introduction of Cora's character; Mamet retains the erotically-charged atmosphere, but omits at this point the overtly sadistic tone inferred by the novelist:

she had a sulky look to her, and her lips stuck out in a way that made me want to mash them in for her.126

Indeed, although the finished film was one of the most visually erotic pieces of cinema yet released, Mamet's script tended to veer away from the rather sadistic and pornographic elements in Cain's novel whilst at the same time remaining faithful to the general impulse of the plot. Whereas Cain concentrates upon the sado-masochism of Frank and Cora's relationship, Mamet emphasises its passion. There are indeed still sado-masochistic elements in Mamet's version but he has, by virtue of a sensitive script, raised them above the pornographic and distasteful. The above extract is a good example of his ability to infer eroticism through linguistic suggestion rather than via brutalisation, and it accords with Mamet's desire to convey information simultaneously to the audience and to the protagonist. The audience's first perception of what might occur is consonant with that of Frank and, typically, the tension has been established with a very few words.

Whilst opening out the story at times in order to make more clear the developing relationships, at others Mamet condenses Cain's story into extraordinarily brief scenes. One example occurs when Frank and Cora's first murder attempt goes badly wrong and they attempt to revive Nick (Cora's husband) whilst waiting for the ambulance to arrive. Mamet condenses almost three pages of tightly-packed narrative into a suspenseful - and almost silent - scene, at the same time as depicting Frank's ambiguous attitude towards the man he has tried to kill:

Frank: Nick...Nick...hey, wake up. Wake up, Nick... I'm talking to you, Nicholas. Wake up, you fuckin' wheeze.127

At first, Frank seems to show concern for his unfortunate victim, feeling pity for him in the realisation that it is
only because of his own love for Cora that they are in such a position. Then, as Nick refuses to come round, a mixture of fear and resentment creeps into Frank's voice. He calls Nick "Nicholas" for the first time, perhaps suggesting his contempt for and patronage of a man whose wife no longer loves him. Finally, anger and frustration overtake all other considerations as Frank begins to curse his victim bitterly. With so very few words, Mamet opens up Frank's character brilliantly, condensing the many elements of his changing personality into this one, short scene.

Similarly, in his screenplay for THE VERDICT, mood and character are established with great economy. The opening scene sets the tone of what follows: it is hypocritical, devious and tragic. Mamet's theme is corruption, and the lengths to which a failed lawyer will go in order to secure a job on a criminal negligence case. Joe Galvin, the lawyer (and protagonist) is first seen putting "a discreetly folded ten-dollar bill" into the hands of a man who appears to be some sort of official at a funeral service. Galvin is then introduced to the grieving widow:

Funeral Director: Mrs. Dee, this is Joe Galvin...a very good friend of ours, and a very fine attorney.

Galvin: It's a shame about your husband, Mrs. Dee... I knew him vaguely through the Lodge. He was a wonderful man. (Shakes head in sympathy) It was a crime what happened to him. A crime. If there's anything that I could do to help...

Galvin removes a business card from his jacket pocket and hands it to her as if he were giving her money. (i.e. "Take it. Really. I want you to have it...") She takes the card.

Mamet's script potently underscores the visual subtext; the action of Galvin's pushing the business card into the woman's hand is an almost obscene gesture, given the circumstances, and is horribly redolent of the image of his hand giving over money to the funeral official moments earlier. Galvin's covert hypocrisy and his piety in front of the widow are quite nauseating, Mamet's dialogue establishing the hushed tones of sincerity whilst at the same time pointing to Galvin's duplicity. The language succinctly but
powerfully complements the visual image; it is a scene of wickedly subtle words and gestures, with every sound and movement contributing to the overall tastelessness of the situation. Galvin's words, though ostensibly simple and appropriate in such circumstances are, in fact, chosen with extreme care. He cleverly states that he knew Mrs. Dee's husband "vaguely" through an establishment such as a Masonic Lodge, an institution to which women are denied access. Although he scarcely knew him, he insists that her husband was "a wonderful man" in the hope of flattering the distraught woman and gaining her trust. He then repeats the word "crime" twice to ensure that it leaves its mark; he does not wish to appear pushy or insensitive, but leaves the word's resonance in the air, to work indirectly and covertly. Galvin ends his little speech with a very general and standard cliché: "If there's anything that I could do to help..." which Mamet makes doubly ironic by Galvin's action of 'selflessly' pushing the business card into the woman's hands.

It is plain that Mamet brings the same subtlety and depth to his screenwriting as he does to his plays. His writing is again spare but powerful, creating tension and depicting character without a wasted syllable. Colin Stinton told me that Mamet was far more satisfied with his work on THE VERDICT than on THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE. For THE VERDICT, Mamet collaborated on the screenplay with its director, Sidney Lumet and Stinton recalls that

Sidney taught him a lot about writing for the screen...David was very interested at that time in constructing scenes which had a specific object in mind - EDMOND is a case in point - and THE VERDICT is a melodrama written to this kind of minimal, but highly disciplined, formula...Mamet's writing powers you through it...it is simple but strong writing that makes you want to know what happens next. He felt he had accomplished his objective with more success on Lumet's film than on Rafelson's. Mamet's plays are undoubtedly fresh and original, but he candidly acknowledges his debt to a number of writers who have exerted a particularly strong influence upon his work.
Among the novelists he cites are Willa Cather...Sherwood Anderson...Willard Motley...\cite{Ernest} Hemingway...Frank Norris and Saul Bellow\cite{131} as well as Theodore Dreiser...Sinclair Lewis and Upton Sinclair,\cite{132}

What attracts him to such artists is not only their love of language and their authentic rendering of the linguistic rhythms of urban America but also that they all wrote a story of possibility...The West is beginning and...life is capable of being both understood and enjoyed.\cite{133}

This optimism is expressed over and over again in Mamet's plays. No matter how low his characters may fall and how base they may become, there still remains an almost tangible feeling of hope. It is difficult not to be reminded of Samuel Beckett's 'voice' in his novel, THE UNNAMEABLE, when it concludes:

\texttt{I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.}\cite{134}

As far as playwrights are concerned, Mamet is very specific about those who have inspired him. Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett have already been cited, and his other greatest influences have been Anton Chekhov, Eugene O'Neill and Clifford Odets. Mamet has stated that I'd like to write a really good play sometime. Like O'Neill, Odets, Chekhov, something the way it really is, capture the action of the way things really go on.\cite{135}

He has also stated that he considers that Tennessee Williams wrote the greatest dramatic poetry in the American language\cite{136} and dramatised a kind people living in a cruel country [who] don't know how to show [their] love.\cite{137}

Mamet takes an amalgam of the styles of all these writers and makes them unmistakably his own. His language is the harsh, abrasive dissonance of contemporary America, thoroughly modern in sound and content. It is constantly enlivened and refreshed by an original use of figurative speech and the rhythms of urban life, his use of obscenity...
and scatology somehow enriching what is desperately plain and prosaic. Mamet may set out to demonstrate the awful barrenness which he feels exists in contemporary American speech but, en route, he offers some truly remarkable writing.
Notes

Introduction


15. David Mamet, 'Realism typescript (undated) on loan to author.

16. Ibid.


21. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
36. David Mamet cited in Mel Gussow, 'The Daring Visions of Four New Young Playwrights'.
40. David Mamet cited in Mel Gussow, 'The Daring Visions of Four New Young Playwrights'.
42. Ibid, p.33.
46. Richard Eder, 'David Mamet's New Realism'.
47. Constantin Stanislavski, *Stanislavski's Legacy*, p.81.
51. Miranda Richardson in interview with author, 8 December 1986.
54. Ibid.
64. Jack Shepherd in interview with author.
67. Ibid, p.69.
70. Jack Kroll, 'Mamet's Jackals in Jackets'.

71. David Mamet cited in 'Programme Notes' for Glengarry Glen Ross.


73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.


78. Jack Kroll, 'The Muzak Man'.


80. David Mamet, Lecture typescript (No.5) 26 April 1983, p.4, on loan to author.


82. Colin Stinton in interview with author.

83. David Mamet, Lecture typescript (No.4) 24 April 1983, p.1, on loan to author.

84. David Mamet, 'Radio Drama' typescript, p.5.


86. Colin Stinton in interview with author.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.


92. Colin Stinton in interview with author.


95. Ibid.

96. David Mamet, 'Semantic Chickens' typescript (undated) pp.4-5, on loan to author.

97. David Mamet, Lecture typescript, 10 November 1978, pp.2&7, on loan to author.


100. Freddie Jones in interview with author, 17 November 1986.

101. David Mamet cited in Richard Gottlieb, 'The Engine that Drives David Mamet'.

102. Dick Cavett cited in Dictionary of Literary Biography , p.64.


104. Jack Shepherd in interview with author.

105. Colin Stinton in interview with author.


110. Colin Stinton in interview with author.


112. John Ditsky, 'He Lets You See the Thought There', p.27.


114. Colin Stinton in interview with author.


116. David Mamet cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross, p.5.


118. David Mamet cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross, p.5.

119. David Mamet, untitled article typescript, July 1980, on loan to author.

120. Ibid.

121. David Mamet cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross, p.5.


124. David Mamet, The Postman Always Rings Twice screenplay, December 1979, p.6, on loan to author.

125. Ibid, pp.6-7.


129. Ibid.
130. Colin Stinton in interview with author.
135. David Mamet cited in C. Gerald Fraser, 'Mamet's Plays Shed Masculinity Myth'.
137. Ibid.
Like most of Mamet's plays, this work is set in a desensitised society. The characters he portrays inhabit a cheap and fraudulent world in which standards decline daily and in which sexual intimacy seems to have become public property. Language is often used shoddily and obscenities are commonplace, their sexual connotations becoming dulled - rather like their users' consciousness - through over-indulgence. Human relationships have become attenuated to the point at which men and women view each other as little more than media-created stereotypes, and millions of people watch television soap operas in the sincere belief that their convoluted plots reflect real life.

In the mid-1970s when the play was written, what Mamet calls the "jejeune super-sophistication" of the American populace was at its height. The 'Swinging Sixties' had come and gone and, in their place was left a cynical, rather detached society which plundered the most negative aspects of the previous decade's sexual revolution, emphasising promiscuity and irresponsibility to the detriment of its emotional sanity. Because of the dominating influence of all things sexual, erotica flourished, pornography boomed and sex could be found in the unlikeliest of places. It was - indeed, it still is - used to sell clothes, food, cars, books and toothpaste. Such an emphasis upon the non-emotional aspects of sexuality was bound sooner or later to result in a deleterious blunting of the nation's consciousness, and this is precisely what has happened to the four young people portrayed in Mamet's play. For them, sex really has become a dirty word, a sniggering pastime for the easily bored. Rather than fulfilling its original function as an integral part of an emotional relationship, sex is for them little more than a cheap thrill, something which men 'do' to women and for which women should be grateful.

In this work, the failure of the American Dream has been displaced from an economic onto a sexual dimension, although
the ethics of the market place persist. The characters' conversation is dominated by the verbs 'having' and 'using', relationships having become merely sordid transactions, the protagonists merely sexual consumers. Like Teach in AMERICAN BUFFALO, Bernie Litko is described as being a "friend and associate" of another male character, rather than simply as a "friend". This suggests the invasion of commercial values into personal relationships, and underscores the fact that the two men have been thrown together by dint of their workplace as opposed to meeting through choice.

Mamet's view of such a society is bleak; his characters are alienated in every sense of that word. Alienation, as Marx observed, is descriptive of more than people's sense of estrangement from the result of their labour:

What is true of man's relationship to his work, to the product of his work, and to himself, is also true of his relationship to other men, to their labour, and to the objects of their labour...each man is alienated from others, and...each of the others is likewise alienated from human life.2

As a result of this sense of alienation, human relations come to rest on what Christopher Bigsby describes as an exploitation that is not necessarily of itself material but is derived from a world in which exchange value is a primary mechanism. One individual approaches another with a tainted bargain, an offer of relationship now corrupted by the values of the market...people become commodities, objects...3

The characters in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO are, in common with many others in Mamet's drama, emotionally adrift in a world in which the second-rate has been accepted as the norm. They occasionally glimpse the possibility of something other than the tawdry lives they are doomed to endure, but their momentary revelations have no chance of taking root in the febrile atmosphere in which they exist. With no real moral base on which to pin their ideas, their lives are shapeless, distorted and corrupt. As Richard Eder points out the characters speak as if calling for help out of a deep well. Each is isolated, without real identity. They talk to find it - 'I speak, therefore I am' - and the comic and touching invocation of their language is the evidence of their isolation and tracklessness...Their world is full...of lessons
learned but learned wrong because of the unreasonable ferocity, the lack of shape or instruction of middle American life. They have the kind of skewed philosophy that ants might evolve in the generations after the destruction of the anthill. God exists. He is dangerous and capricious, and He is a giant foot. And just as ants keep surviving their precarious worlds, Mamet's characters barely preserve their damaged humanity. They yearn and hatch schemes; their feelers wave delicately in the wreckage. SEXUAL PERVERSITY is a work of such comic delicacy, and it is such a shrewd commentary on sexual pursuit and loneliness that it could hardly be improved.4

SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO is replete with dialogue which is powered by a pulsatingly neurotic energy. Its urban rhythms are merciless and relentless, its movement being conveyed by the rapid sentence structure and fast-paced episodes. The frenetic verbal affrays in which the characters indulge are their way of concealing the vacuum which exists at the root of their lives and the abandon with which they bounce wisecracks and platitudes off one another has a surface gloss which only partially conceals their desperation. So long as they can keep on joking, criticising and fantasising, they can delude themselves that they are happy.

Structured in swift, short scenes which rise like dirty jokes to punchlines, the play examines the void at the heart of contemporary sexual relationships. Life for Mamet's characters is as shallow as the fictional lives of their soap opera heroes and incorporates many aspects of the obscene joke: their exploits are crude, debased and usually over very quickly. The form and shape of the play are themselves reminiscent of such jokes, and so the very structure of the piece enacts its meaning. The parallel is carried one stage further by Mamet having Bernie constantly spout his elaborate and ludicrous sexual fantasies, which are reported to Danny as fact but are little more than routine dirty stories which have been opened out into mini-dramas in which Bernie himself is the chief protagonist. Sex dominates all their conversations, just as work dominates those of the salesmen in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS. Such characters have only one subject at their disposal and they must discuss it exhaustively in an effort to conceal their insecurity.
and loneliness. Their relentless bragging is intended to impress, but underneath the cool bravado lies a desperate vulnerability. In an article about the play, Mamet commented upon just this aspect of the work:

Voltaire said words were invented to hide feelings. That's what the play is about. \(^5\)

Similarly, John Elsom notes Mamet's success in suggesting the emptiness beneath all the rhetoric:

Mamet's dialogue is a delight, rooted in a defensive flippancy which is supposed to conceal pain, but actually reveals it. \(^6\)

Bernie is an excellent example of a man who uses language to conceal his insecurity. He urges Danny to view women as he does: as sexual objects which can be picked up and discarded at random. He does his very best to impress his friend with his callous insouciance and contemptuous reductivism, but, in fact, he is terrified of women. There is no evidence to suggest that he has ever had a satisfactory relationship in spite of all his masculine posturing. Bernie is, literally, 'all talk'. In order to assuage his fears, he constantly reduces women to the most basic physical level. For him, they can be succinctly summed up in the following crude jingle:


The opposite sex is thus described in purely sexual terms, which are then debased still further by occurring alongside a string of nonsense words designed to convey Bernie's apparent casual contempt. By saying the words aloud, he hopes to make them true. However, his final "Huh?" suggests his weakness and his need for approbation and concurrence from his easily-swayed friend.

In SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO, Mamet looks at the ways in which language can contribute to the formation of sexist attitudes. His characters employ a kind of subtle linguistic coercion as a means of influencing and persuading their companions to concur with their way of thinking and, consequently, barriers are often erected which are then
exceedingly difficult to penetrate. Bernie's relentless chauvinism filters through to Danny, who is much influenced by and in awe of his ostensibly suave and sophisticated friend. As a result, he eventually becomes as coarse and offensive as his mentor. Mamet points out that the play is much concerned with how what we say influences what we think. The words that Bernie Litko says to Danny influence his behaviour; you know, that women are broads, that they're there to exploit. And the words that Joan says to her friend Deborah: men are problematical creatures which are necessary to have a relationship with because that's what society says, but it never really works out. It is nothing but a schlep, a misery constantly.

Partly because of the pressures of language exerted by their companions and partly through cultural fiat, any relationship formed between Mamet's male and female characters is doomed to failure. The men are unwilling - or unable - to view women as anything other than sex slaves and receptacles for their pleasure and, not surprisingly, the women regard men as natural enemies and emotional cripples. The reductive and crude exploitative images of women which are daily emblazoned across tabloid newspapers and broadcasted in countless films and television programmes have perverted the perception of their audience. In such a society, women have only two choices: they can try to emulate the ideal feminine stereotype pushed forward by the media and craved by unimaginative men like Bernie and Danny, or they can turn to feminism with a vengeance. Those who choose the former course of action are satirised by Tom Wolfe in his essay, The Woman who had Everything. In this work, he writes of the trouble to which some women will go in an effort to conform to a popular (desirable) stereotype:

Women [engage in a ceaseless quest to] make themselves irresistibly attractive to the men of New York... coiffeurs...The eternal search for better eyelashes! Off to Deirdre's or some such place, on Madison Avenue - moth-cut eyelashes? Square-cut eyelashes? mink eyelashes?...Or off to somewhere for the perfect Patti-nail application, $2.50 for both hands, $2.50 a finger, false fingernails...[then] the skin...that purple light business at Don Lee's Hair Specialist Studio...Desirability can, therefore, often depend upon as much artificial help as can reasonably be applied - and at a price. The need to follow current fashion is strong. Wolfe
exposes the obsession with public myths of beauty and sexuality for the absurdity it undoubtedly is: a desperate need to conform to a given stereotype which overrides all god sense and dignity.

Although women are undoubtedly the most offensively exploited of the sexes, men do not escape the pressures of the media. They, too, must manufacture a false image and endeavour to live up to it in order to attract the equally false objects of their desire. It is little wonder that love should so infrequently enter such relationships; they are superficial in the extreme, with both parties acting out a fantasy ideal of what they imagine the other craves. Mamet blames the mass media for much misery and heart-ache, observing that SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO is, "unfortunately, tales from my life." He explains how

> My sex life was ruined by the popular media. It took a lot of getting over. There are a lot of people in my situation. The myths around us, destroying our lives, such a great capacity to destroy our lives... You have to sleep with every woman that you see, have a new car every two years - sheer, utter nonsense. Men who never have to deal with it, are never really forced to deal with it, deal with it by getting colitis, anxiety attacks and by killing themselves.

Certainly, Bernie seems to be desperately trying to live up to a stereotyped image; his adopted persona suggests that he is something of a 'super stud', a Casanova who owes it to the world to pass on his wisdom to those less fortunate in sexual matters than himself. What is so tragic about a man like Bernie is that he is, at base, painfully aware of his own inadequacy and fear, and that is why he must behave in the overtly masculine fashion which has become his trademark.

The "Perversity" of the title is not, as one critic observes, "a misprint for perversion" but is entirely intentional. Mamet's characters are indeed perverse, but not in the sense which might be expected - although one of them does observe that "Nobody does it normally any more" (Scene 1, p.13). The perversity that Mamet has in mind emanates from their diminished perception of each other, their lack of under-
standing, and the cold, inhumane manner in which they conduct their lives. What is crucially missing is any real sense of value beyond the material, or any awareness of need which is unrelated to immediate sexual satisfaction. They are interested only if a subject can have an immediate resolution, being petulantly unprepared to contemplate pleasures which may occur at a later date. Theirs is a childish world of irresponsible liaisons and casual cruelties. Their apathy and inability to form meaningful and lasting relationships are bitter reflections on the pernicious influence of a society which encourages self-interest and mindless promiscuity at the expense of genuine emotional attachment.

SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO was voted the best Chicago play of 1974 and, in 1975, won an Obie for its Off-Broadway production. There have been a number of productions of the work, both in the United States and in this country and, in 1986, a filmed version was released under the title of ABOUT LAST NIGHT.

The first scene sets the tone for what follows: it is fast, funny and outrageous. In this episode, Bernie, the most sexually predatory of the characters - at least on a linguistic level - lovingly outlines for Danny the details of a ludicrously unlikely story about a recent 'erotic' exploit. Bernie's tale is something of a tour-de-force of sexual fantasy, and the longest and most involved of a number of fantasies which he relates throughout the play. The irony is that he intends Danny to believe every word he speaks. Danny's dead-pan responses to this first tale, even as it reaches ever more extraordinary heights of absurdity, add immeasurably to the humour of the scene. Mamet combines his linguistic gifts for creating realistic-sounding dialogue at the same time as imbuing Bernie's speech with a rhythm which is both mesmerising and persuasive. His story of sexual excess is hypnotic not only for his audience, but for Bernie himself; he gets so involved in the sheer force of his narrative that it begins to appear as though he
believes in the veracity of the tale himself. Peter Stothard calls the episode
a marvellously pungent first scene which almost nothing could follow...\(^\text{12}\)
and Ross Wetzsteon marvels at Mamet's superbly economic writing:
only half a minute into the play, the dialogue has
given the characters razor edges, cutting as caricature,
yet sharply defined as unique personalities. Already,
in the most trivial interchange, you know you're
listening to a playwright with an acute ear for the
rhythms of speech... for vocabulary as characterisation...
for conversation as action [and] for comedy not in gags
but in the way we speak.\(^\text{13}\)

This early conversation establishes Bernie as the character
with the 'knowledge' and Danny as his eager ingenu. John
Ditsky notes how the episode works as
a Pinteresque scene of mutual reinforcement...Mamet has
organised [the] most banal of materials into a
distinctly American version of Pinter's power plays of
language.\(^\text{14}\)

Bernie and Danny are sitting together in a Bar:

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Danny: So how'd you do last night?
Bernie: Are you kidding me?
Danny: Yeah?
Bernie: Are you fucking kidding me?
Danny: Yeah?
Bernie: Are you pulling my leg?
Danny: So?
Bernie: So tits out to here so.
Danny: Yeah?
Bernie: Twenty, a couple years old.
Danny: You gotta be fooling.
Bernie: Nope.
Danny: You devil.
Bernie: You think she hadn't been around?
Danny: Yeah?
Bernie: She hadn't gone the route?
Danny: She knew the route, huh?
Bernie: Are you fucking kidding me?
Danny: Yeah?
Bernie: She **wrote** the route.

(Scene 1, p.7)
___

Bernie's responses to Danny's initial question are intended
by him to be rhetorical, his answering a question with
another being his way of emphasising just how incredible a
time he actually enjoyed the previous night. He works
Danny up into a kind of verbal frenzy merely by refusing
to give him anything other than strongly implied hints of
his sexual success. Mamet captures perfectly the grammatical anarchy of idiomatic conversation in the repetition of the word "So" and the abbreviation of a sentence like "Twenty, a couple years old". The age of the girl is left totally ambiguous, which is just as well since shortly after its initial mention, it moves from about 18 to over 25, depending upon whether Bernie currently favours the idea of corrupted naiveté or well-seasoned maturity. Bernie encourages Danny's lasciviousness through his carefully constructed routine; all but three of his responses are framed as questions which are expressly designed to excite his audience whilst giving absolutely nothing away. Quite why Danny finds it difficult to believe that the girl should have been "Twenty, a couple years old" is unclear; perhaps this particular age is the one which most potently symbolises for the two men sexual rapacity or, perhaps, it is merely Danny's way of encouraging Bernie into new areas of excess. Although the characters are merely sitting at a bar, the scene is far from static; the repeated questions and incredulous answers give the whole episode a compulsive onward movement, sheer words replacing overt action.

In an effort to make his fantasy as realistic as possible, Bernie takes pains to establish the correct location and timing. Danny enjoys the detail, no matter how irrelevant, and incites his friend's erotic imagination still further by uttering neat, monosyllabic asides which will not interrupt the flow of things too much:

Danny: So tell me.
Bernie: So okay, so where am I?
Danny: When?
Bernie: Last night, two-thirty.
Danny: So two-thirty, you're probably over at Yak-Zies.
Bernie: Left Yak-Zies at one.
Danny: So you're probably over at Grunts.
Bernie: They only got a two o'clock license.
Danny: So you're probably over at the Commonwealth.
Bernie: So okay, so I'm over at the Commonwealth, in the pancake house off the lobby, and I'm working on a stack of those raisin and nut jobs...
Danny: They're good.
Bernie: ...and I'm reading the paper, and I'm reading, and I'm casing the pancake house, and the usual shot, am I right?
Danny: Right.
Bernie: So who walks in over to the cash register but this chick.
Danny: Right.
Bernie: Nineteen, twenty year old chick...
Danny: Who we're talking about.
Bernie: ...and she wants a pack of Viceroy.
Danny: I can believe that...Was she a pro?

(Scene 1, pp.8,9)

Bernie still plays cat-and-mouse with Danny; he keeps him in suspense until the last possible moment. He seeks to build up a picture of events which will accurately reflect his 'experience' in all its glory and makes Danny work for the trifles he offers. Bernie creates an atmosphere of dimly lit, seedy establishments in which the 'pick-up' is a common occurrence. Even the slightly sleazy-sounding bar and restaurant names add subtly to this twilit world of sexual adventuring: 'Yak-Zies' and, especially, the onomatopoeiac 'Grunts'. Danny's responses to the more prosaic aspects of Bernie's tale add to the humour of the scene and to our understanding of his character. Indeed, all of Danny's responses are so banal as to be absolutely hilarious. Despite Bernie's linguistic game of suspense and titilation, Danny genuinely wishes to hear every detail, enjoying the opportunity to comment on even the most mundane aspects. For example, when Bernie informs him of the exact type of pancake that he was eating at "the Commonwealth", Danny responds understandingly: "They're good" and, when he describes the brand of cigarettes bought by the girl at the counter, Danny fatuously observes "I can believe that." Apart from his desire to hear and comment upon the most inane details of the event, Danny is also obsessed with establishing whether or not the girl was, in fact, "a pro" (pp. 9, 10 and 14). At regular intervals, he repeats the same question: "Was she a pro?" as though this fact would somehow add to the spiciness of Bernie's tale. Bernie has not yet made up his mind whether the girl should be a sexually voracious virgin who has been deranged by his charms, or a hard-nosed trouper to whom such exploits are daily routine. He stalls Danny's questions by responding
with variations on the theme of "Well, at this point we
don't know" and "So at this point, we don't know. Pro,
semi-pro, Betty Co-Ed from College, regular young broad,
it's anybody's ballgame", (Scene 1, p.9).

As Bernie's story progresses into a ridiculous situation
wherein the girl dons a World War Two Flak Suit before
allowing him to make love to her, Danny's ingenuousness
similarly reaches new heights:

Bernie: ...From under the bed she pulls this suitcase,
and from out of the suitcase comes this World
War Two Flak Suit.
Danny: They're hard to find.
Bernie: Zip, zip, zip, and she gets into the Flak suit
and we get down on the bed.
Danny: What are you doing?
Bernie: Fucking.
Danny: She's in the Flak suit?
Bernie: Right.
Danny: How do you get in?
Bernie: How do you think I get in? She leaves the
zipper open.
Danny: That's what I thought.
Bernie: But the shot is, while we're fucking, she wants
me, every thirty seconds or so, to go BOOM at
the top of my lungs.
Danny: At her?
Bernie: No, just in general. So we're humping and
bumping and greasing the old Flak suit and every
once in a while I go BOOM, and she starts in on
me. "Turn me over," she says, so I do. She's
on her stomach. I'm on top...
Danny: They got a flap in the back of the Flak suit?
(Scene 1, pp.11,12)

Bernie is clearly getting carried away with his fantasy.
By this time, he does not want to hear Danny's questions
and inane remarks, he just wants to get on with the action.
Consequently, when Danny interrupts him with questions such
as "How do you get in?" and "They got a flap in the back
of the Flak suit?", Bernie is not surprisingly a little
impatient. He is becoming more and more aroused and
completely involved in his fictions, but Danny is still
operating in the realm of pragmatic realities. Thus, as
Bernie moves further into the ecstasies of libidinuous
fantasy, Danny remains firmly down to earth, querying details
which had at first served as spurs to give the story depth
and realism, but now serve only as interruptions and
Bernie concludes his imaginary exploit without his having reached orgasm; it is as though to submit to such an action is to acknowledge some form of commitment, even within the realms of a dream. As he imagines the girl lying amidst the smoke and flames, his fear of and sheer contempt for women become the uppermost emotions in his mind. Rather than complete the sexual act he had begun, he prefers to turn on the girl, flinging money in her face in the suggestion that she is nothing but a common prostitute, and he a disgusted client. For such deep-seated contempt to make itself felt even within the safety of a sexual fantasy suggests Bernie's very real sexual problems. He tells Danny that, having set the room alight and established her required quota of sound effects, the girl begged him to bring her to orgasm. By
denying her that satisfaction, Bernie likewise denies himself. His language takes on the coldness of a character like Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, his terminology owing more to fictional cops and robbers than to real life: "I peel a saw-buck off my wad, as I make the door I fling it at her. "For cabfare", I yell." He evidently sees himself as the cool-headed, though slightly misogynistic, stud who has been represented by countless film and television heroes. The slanginess of "saw-buck" and the very existence of a "wad" of money gives the scene a contrived, artificial ring; it is as though Sam Spade or Phillip Marlowe had become the protagonist and that Bernie did not exist. Bernie has been acting all the time, but perhaps nowhere so purposefully as here; he strives to give Danny the impression of his supreme control over the situation and, in so doing, verbally re-enacts what has never taken place. By saying the words aloud, Bernie enjoys a frisson of excitement over an event which has only ever existed in his mind.

Bernie's contempt for women is consolidated as he blames the imaginary girl for her perversion: "It's these young broads. They don't know what the fuck they want." This is patently untrue since, if nothing else, the girl in his dream exploit knew exactly what she wanted. Symbolically, Mamet has suggested Bernie's inability to have a satisfactory sexual relationship with a woman. Whilst he blames his fantasy lover for ruining his lovemaking, it is in fact he himself who is incapable of sustaining even sexual involvement and who terminates the relationship before satisfaction is achieved. Finally, Danny gets his answer as to whether the girl was indeed "a pro": Bernie willingly confirms this fact whilst offering him a pearl of philosophical wisdom:

Bernie: A pro, Dan...is how you think about yourself. You see my point?...I'll tell you one thing...she knew all the pro moves.

(Scene 1, p.14)

SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO has much in common with Jules Feiffer's CARNAL KNOWLEDGE which was filmed in 1971 by Mike Nichols. When Mamet worked as a busboy at Second City
Improvisations, he met and became friendly with Nichols. It is quite possible that Nichols' film influenced his work on this play; the two works are very similar, and Feiffer's original script often reads remarkably like some of the scenes in Mamet's work, although Mamet's is by far the more profound. SEXUAL PERVERSION IN CHICAGO has, in fact, been directly compared with Feiffer's novel; in his book, THE LITERATURE OF THE U.S.A., Marshall Walker observes that Mamet's play

is a set of clever variations on material...treated in Jules Feiffer's screenplay for Mike Nichols' CARNAL KNOWLEDGE. and John Elsom likens the play to "Feiffer's cartoons, but less acid and more human".

CARNAL KNOWLEDGE concerns the changing fortunes of two young men from their college days through to their early forties. The film version was a great success; it starred Jack Nicholson as the sexually predatory Jonathan and Art Garfunkel as his more reserved friend, Sandy. NEW YORK magazine called the film "very funny and very cruel and very sad" and THE NEW YORK TIMES described it as

Often pricelessly funny and accurate...merciless toward both its men and women in order to reach some kind of understanding of them, of their capacity for self-delusion and for the casual infliction of pain.

It is interesting to note how easily these reviews could be attributed to Mamet's play and, indeed, many of the critics make very similar points when commenting on his work.

Nicholas de Jongh observes that

David Mamet's SEXUAL PERVERSION, first seen 10 years ago, remains a brilliant dispatch on the civil war between the sexes and a cool lament for the way things are.

Ross Wetzsteon describes it as

A series of fugue-like vignettes which depict the sexual misadventures of four Chicagoans...[SEXUAL PERVERSION IN CHICAGO] is raunchy as hell, hilarious and despairing...

and Richard Eder feels that it is

a dazzling set of variations on how the sex hunt destroys communication between men and women.

Like Bernie in Mamet's play, Jonathan spends his time boasting of spurious exploits to his eager, and sexually curious,
younger friend. Also like Bernie, Jonathan is unable to sustain a satisfactory sexual relationship. At first he steals Susan, Sandy's girl-friend, in an effort to retain a feeling of superiority over the boy and later becomes involved in a 'love' affair with a rather stereotypical dumb blonde who wants to be loved for more than her body. Ecstatic whilst their relationship exists on a purely sexual level, Jonathan becomes afraid of the love with threatens to intrude in the affair due to his fear of commitment and an ever-encroaching impotence. He can be aroused only by women of the most buxom - and passive - kind; like Bernie, he is incapable of treating them as individuals, but refers to them always in reductive terms which relate to their physical characteristics. Early in the screenplay, Jonathan and Sandy discuss their ideal woman; like Bernie and Danny, the two men at first differ in terms of crassness:

Sandy: You want perfection.
Jonathan: What do you want, wise guy?
Sandy: She just has to be nice. That's all.
Jonathan: You don't want her beautiful?
Sandy: She doesn't have to be beautiful. I'd like her built, though.
Jonathan: I'd want mine sexy-looking.
Sandy: I wouldn't want her to look like a tramp.
Jonathan: Sexy doesn't mean she has to look like a tramp. There's a middle ground... Big tits.
Sandy: Yeah. But still a virgin.
Jonathan: I don't care about that... I wouldn't mind if she was just a little ahead of me - with those big tits - and knew hundreds of different ways...

Just as Danny is the character in Mamet's play who actually does manage to sustain some kind of sexual relationship, however brief, so it is the naïve Sandy who first attracts the beautiful - and sexually experimental - Susan. Jonathan, like Bernie, resents the relationship, reducing it to the most basic level:

Jonathan: I wouldn't kick her out of bed.
Sandy: I shouldn't try somebody else?
Jonathan: Who?
Sandy: She was the best-looking girl at the whole mixer, I'll say that for her. (Uncertainly) Wasn't she?
Jonathan: Her tits were too small.
Sandy: I was thinking of that. The hell with her.
Jonathan: But her legs were great.
Sandy: You think so? Standing so close, I couldn't really tell about her legs.
Jonathan: I wouldn't kick her out of bed.
Sandy: She's got some funny ideas.
Jonathan: I wouldn't kick her out of bed.23

Jonathan behaves as though he might have the chance to "kick her out of bed", and the credulous Sandy is anxious for the approval of his ostensibly more sophisticated friend. This is suggested in the quick-fire responses to any of Jonathan's criticisms. It is instructive to compare this scene with a similar one in Mamet's play. Bernie realises that he may be losing his hold over Danny due to the boy's relationship with Deborah. Their affair threatens the status quo of the men's friendship and so Bernie tries to influence Danny's view of the girl:

Bernie: So what are we doing tomorrow, we going to the beach?
Danny: I'm seeing Deborah.
Bernie: Yeah? You getting serious? I mean she seemed like a hell of a girl, huh? The little I saw of her. Not too this, not too that...very kind of...what? (Pause) Well, what the fuck. I only saw her for a minute. I mean first impressions of this kind are often misleading, huh? So what can you tell from seeing a broad one, two, ten times? You're seeing a lot of this broad...I mean, what the fuck, a guy wants to get it on with some broad on a more or less stable basis, who is to say him no. (Pause) A lot of these broads, you know, you just don't know. You know? I mean what with where they've been and all. I mean a young woman in today's society...time she's twenty two-three, you don't know where the fuck she's been. (Pause) I'm just talking to you, you understand.

(Scene 14, pp. 30, 31)

Bernie includes Danny in his plans for "the beach" without hesitation; it is almost unthinkable for him to admit the possibility that there may be other parties who have a claim on his friend's time. His reaction to the news that Danny is "seeing Deborah" is to try to diminish Deborah's importance in the scheme of things whilst carefully avoiding outright criticism - at least at first. Both Jonathan and Bernie use the most reductive language in an effort to influence the thinking of their friends; they are most anxious to undermine any possible emotional attachment and
so constantly bring the conversation back to areas of coarse description and innuendo. Jonathan's resentment of his friend's success is communicated in his over-casual repetition of the phrase, "I wouldn't kick her out of bed", but Bernie goes much further. Of the two, he is by far the most subtle linguistic manipulator. He must be careful not to appear too jealous or resentful, lest Danny should suspect his motives, so Bernie begins by praising Deborah, observing that she "seemed like a hell of a girl". However, he then moves rapidly into another phase wherein she becomes just another "broad" who might have a very dubious sexual history. After his initial statement that Deborah seemed to be a boon companion for his friend, he then undermines this by adding "The little I saw of her" and "first impressions...are...misleading". He goes on to infer that men can never know women, even if they meet them "one, two, ten times", thus suggesting that Danny's relationship with Deborah must be of the most shallow kind. He acknowledges that Danny is "seeing a lot" of the girl but infers that whatever may be between them can only be sexual. The repetition of the word "broad" serves to underscore Bernie's reductive perception of his friend's lover: he is at pains to suggest that no emotion can possibly be involved. Bernie gradually moves towards the final phase of his verbal destruction of Deborah. He takes on the attitude of a big brother, an experienced and trusted giver of advice to one who needs assistance: "Alot of these broads, you know, you just don't know. You know?" He brings Danny, unwillingly or otherwise, right into the conversation, never pausing to allow him time to respond. He begins to talk about Deborah as though she is something dirty, or diseased: "...where [she's] been and all". Double standards are rife here. It is perfectly acceptable for Bernie and Danny to have had numerous sexual encounters - indeed, this makes them attractive to women, but women are not allowed similar experiences.

Bernie's repetition of "what the fuck" also adds to the coarseness of his innuendo and serves as a means of grounding the conversation in the most basic sexual term-
inology. Bernie's insidious implications are far more dangerous than those of Jonathan, whose words could, at a pinch, be taken as mere extensions of his cool persona. As Bernie nears the end of his denigration of Deborah, there is a suggestion that she is not worthy of any serious consideration in any case - his "what the fuck" serving a dual purpose in this respect - and is probably not unlike the "pro" in his initial fantasy. This latter insinuation is given further weight by Bernie's echo of the indeterminate age of his "pro"; Deborah, like the fantasy girl, is aged about "twenty-two-three". His final assertion that he is merely "talking" to Danny about Deborah's possible sexual history is, of course, an anticipation of Moss and Aaronow's notable linguistic distinction between "talking" and "speaking" in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS.

Both Bernie and Jonathan are excellent examples of what Colin Stinton calls the "Teach-like character"; both men are, essentially, full of hot air and have very little genuine knowledge to impart, but they nonetheless see themselves as instructors and mentors. Stinton comments upon the specific type of 'teaching' which occurs in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO; he notes that Bernie's Teach-like quality is really bull-shitting...sexual bull-shitting of the type that men usually engage in most. The whole idea of the conquest - this is one of the things that identifies such men in their pathetic little way. The likes of Bernie use this built-in tendency to influence and persuade those around them.

Because of the extremely coarse, overtly sexist language used in the play, Mamet has sometimes been accused of being deliberately outrageous and misogynistic. Whilst there may be some truth in the playwright courting outrage, this is not done in order to score cheap laughs out of obscenity and sexism. Connie Booth, who has appeared in two of Mamet's plays, comments specifically upon the playwright's use of obscene and scatalogical language:

I feel these critics are very misguided. Mamet is meticulously selective; he never includes an obscenity just for effect. He is anything but arbitrary. It would be interesting for those who believe his work
to be obscene to take out all those words and see just how much their absence would seriously affect both the sense and the rhythm of the piece.

As far as accusations of misogyny are concerned, SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO could, in some ways, be viewed as a feminist play in that it is so very critical of its male characters. Mamet examines what he sees as the deplorable state of sexual morality in modern urban America and, in so doing, illuminates the inadequacy and ignorance of his male characters. His female characters are so disenchanted with the men they meet, and so resentful of the pressures put upon them to form heterosexual relationships, that they appear to have retreated into Lesbianism!

Colin Stinton makes the point that because Mamet portrays chauvinistic, sexist or violent men in his plays, this does not mean that he is in some way advocating their behaviour:

A lot of criticism of David's work - especially from women - emanates from the rather incredible notion that he is somehow advocating sexist men! If anything, he is calling attention to the fact that there are sexist men and this is why they are that way, this is how their minds work. He then subjects these characters to some scrutiny. It is true that he does not often write parts for women, but this is because he writes mainly from experience, from his own male experience. Perhaps more than other writers, he takes to heart the maxim that you should only write about what you personally have experienced, and David's experience is definitely not having been a woman! He does try to write good parts for women - Ruth in THE WOODS is a particularly well-written role - but feels happier in writing from the male viewpoint. The male viewpoint does not necessarily have to be a sexist viewpoint. He does have a definite feeling about the relationship between men and women. One of the things that is always illuminating is to talk to David and to see him in action with his family and you realise what a caring kind of person he is. You begin to see that his plays always deal with the obstacles to the kind of care, kind of love and affection that he wishes were there. A lot of people feel that because he has portrayed the world this negative, tragic way that therefore he is in some way saying that this is how it should be. This is the most ridiculous thing to assume. In fact, what he does is to bemoan the fact that there is not a better world... he is in fact a feminist writer in that sense because he is very, very critical of males.
He portrays his characters as elements of himself; he has known what it is to have sexist thoughts and chauvinistic attitudes, racist tendencies and so on. Hopefully, he believes he has overcome these tendencies. There is, for example, a lot of David in EDMOND - a man with flaws, faults, racisms, sexisms as part of his make-up. He depicts such characters in order to show up their fragile egos, to show them struggling to find out who they are and what they are. One way to do this is to define other people, to denigrate them so that they feel better about themselves. I think he tries to present them doing this sort of thing to provide some insight into how their minds work. It is not to advocate their behaviour as laudable.26

Similarly, the actress Miranda Richardson believes that Mamet is documenting what he has heard other men say. The fact that he does it is instructive. He is not suggesting that this is the right way to behave...He might be writing from his own experiences, but I still enjoy what his experience is. I certainly don’t think he is a sexist writer although he appears to be a little unsung of women. However, he still manages to spark one’s imagination, even if there are only ten lines to go on in his script. There is in his writing a deep sensitivity.27

Mamet comments upon the alleged sexism in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO as follows:

There's a lot of vicious language in the play [but] The real vicious language is the insidious thing, calling somebody a little girl or this girl. That's a lot more insidious than calling somebody a vicious whore - which is also insidious but you can deal with it.28

C. Gerald Fraser notes that Mamet’s play is about "the myths that men go through"29 and how Mamet credited the Women’s Liberation movement with ‘turning [his] head around a lot’. He added: 'Women have babies, have the menstrual period, for God's sake, they have something to do with the universe'.30

The women’s roles in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO are quite substantial but, again, the male characters enjoy most of the best lines. Mamet is only too aware of the imbalance and is anxious to correct it to alleviate some of the criticisms of male chauvinism. Whilst writing the play, he remarked that

I kept getting hootzed by the director and the women in the cast, you know, to write parts for women. I said I don't know anything about women, they said 'Well, you better find out, you're getting too old' - so I tried. The fleshier parts are the male parts. I am more around men; I listen to more men being candid
Colin Stinton feels that those who urge Mamet to write more parts for women are, in some respects, asking for the wrong thing; he believes that the writer goes to such pains to be truthful in his work that if he should begin to try, self-consciously, to write in a woman's 'voice', he may be doomed to falsity and failure. He agrees that good female parts do exist, in plays written by Mamet and in those of countless other male playwrights, but feels that undue emphasis is put upon Mamet's seeming obsession with male characters:

David writes as a man. Isn't this natural? Would not a woman write primarily as a woman? I am a little suspicious of people like David Hare who go out of their way to create female roles, and I have spoken to a number of women who feel a little uncomfortable with the way he has written them because he often creates twisted versions of women. There are all these hard, bitchy, domineering sorts of women. It is one thing to include these characteristics of woman - or indeed man - in the roles, but it is quite another to do it to the exclusion of everything else which often seems to happen with Hare's female characters. Hare writes of what he could not possibly have inside knowledge. It is possibly better to write about a subject that you feel confident about, and can be truthful about, than to invent something which may be offensive. Some writers may be able to write convincingly in the voice of the opposite sex; David can on occasion, but his strength is with male characters...He does however often have some wonderful insights into male/female relationships and there are some marvellous examples of this in a work like SEXUAL PERVERSION IN CHICAGO... It may be that David's supposed inability to create good female roles, more often, is indeed one of his faults but I believe his strengths lie in other directions. I think we should be grateful that we have a playwright who is so scrupulous, so truthful. He knows that many people consider that there is a lack of female roles in his plays and is constantly trying to restore the imbalance. I just hope that his efforts do not misfire.32

Mamet is concerned about the imbalance of male/female roles in his plays to the extent that during the writing of THE WOODS, Colin Stinton was told (albeit apocryphally) that Mamet instructed that some of Nick's lines be given over to Ruth to make their dialogue more even in terms of volume. Stinton said that this was exactly the sort of thing that
Mamet would do and that the story is probably absolutely
genuine. Similarly, the role of John, the Clairvoyant in
THE SHAWL was obviously written for a male actor, but since
the play has been performed, Mamet has considered the
suggestion that the homosexual pair at the centre of the
play could in fact be heterosexual, and that John could,
without much hindrance, become Joanne! He retains some
doubts, but it is a mark of his desire to appease
criticism that he has considered the transition at all.

From my own reading of Mamet's plays and from comments made
by him concerning women, I feel that the school of opinion
which brands him sexist is completely wrong-headed.
Quite clearly, Mamet's male characters are hardly admirable
or self-assured; there is little in them to suggest that
the writer is in some way condoning their behaviour. His
female characters, on the other hand, often seem to
represent Mamet's own wish that the world was a nicer and
more caring place. In THE WOODS, Ruth and Nick try to
come to terms with their rather precarious love affair.
Their propinquity in the weekend cottage serves to under­
line her need for love and affection and his reticence
and anxiety. Ruth's main concern is romance and love,
whereas Nick is far more sexually-orientated. For Ruth,
sex is important only when it is a part of love; for Nick,
love can often be an obstruction to good sex. The varying
expectations which arise from any relationship are fully
explored in this work. To a lesser extent, Deborah and
Joan in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO seek affection but
appear to have concluded by the end of the work that
affection is often more genuine and forthcoming from members
of their own sex. Indeed, at one stage, Joan laments that
the whole question of heterosexual pairing could be a huge
mistake:

...and, of course, there exists the very real possi-
ibility that the whole thing is nothing other than a
mistake of rather large magnitude, and that it never
was supposed to work out...Well, look at your divorce
rate. Look at the incidence of homosexuality...the
number of violent, sex-connected crimes...all the
anti-social behaviour that chooses sex as its form of expression, Eh?...physical and mental mutilations we perpetrate on each other, day in, day out...trying to fit ourselves to a pattern we can neither understand (although we pretend to) nor truly afford to investigate (although we pretend to)...It's a dirty joke...the whole godforsaken business.

(Scene 20, pp. 37,38)

Joan's sentiments are echoed not only in Mamet's own words that the pressures of sex can be "a schlep, a misery constantly", but are further explored in a short play he wrote in 1977 entitled ALL MEN ARE WHORES: AN ENQUIRY. The concerns of this work are very similar to those in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO, and the plight of the female character anticipates that of Ruth in THE WOODS. In both plays, the female characters look for love whereas the men, almost exclusively, are interested only in sex.

In ALL MEN ARE WHORES: AN ENQUIRY, the woman voices similar fears to those of Joan:

...What if this undignified and headlong thrusting toward each other's sex is nothing but an oversight or physical malformity? (Pause) Should we not, perhaps, retrain ourselves to revel in the sexual act not as the consummation of pre-destined and regenerate desire, but rather as a two-part affirmation of our need for solace in extremis...In a world where nothing works.

(Scene 17, p.199)

Quite how seriously we are meant to take all this is left deliberately unclear. Certainly in Joan's case, Mamet has her spout her ideas as she and Deborah have lunch; Deborah frequently undercuts the sobriety of the situation by casual interruptions such as "Are you going to eat your roll?...This roll is excellent" (Scene 20, p.38) and so on. She responds only intermittently and monosyllabically, twice announcing: "I disagree with you" and stating that she is "moving in with Danny" (Ibid). Mamet therefore makes Joan's grave sentiments psychologically questionable; could not there be a suggestion that Joan is, in fact, jealous of her friend's success with Danny and that her denigration of heterosexuality is little more than resentment? Deborah's disagreement with her friend's ideas is also based on rather ambiguous premises; she has just decided to live with Danny,
and so Joan's criticisms of the whole fabric of male/female relationships is seen as a threat. Her friend's castigation undermines her security and the reasons for her decision to move in with her lover. It is not, therefore, altogether surprising that she should repeat that she disagrees with Joan - in her present situation, Deborah cannot really afford to do anything but disagree. There remains the possibility that she secretly agrees with Joan; her silence as Joan rambles on and on could indicate either concurrence or disapproval. Mamet deliberately leaves the sexual psychology of his female characters ambiguous - and somewhat ambivalent.

Mamet's characters can conceive of themselves only as sexual beings; the world in which they live forces them to do so. Every conversation they have is concerned in some way with sex; the films they see are likely to be pornographic; the children taught by Joan are discovered playing 'doctors'; another kindergarten teacher is raped; television programmes seek to combine piety with pornography and the most intimate sexual terms have passed into common usage. This is a much harsher world than that portrayed in Edward Zwick's cinematic version of the play, ABOUT LAST NIGHT (1986). In this film, the director chose to concentrate almost exclusively upon the 'romantic' aspects of Danny and Deborah's affair, which completely distorted the meaning and altered the balance of the work. Bernie and Joan were reduced to wise-cracking cyphers who existed only on the sidelines of the protagonists' lives. What is intended by Mamet to be a bitterly perceptive satire on contemporary sexual mores becomes, in the film, little more than a routine Hollywood teenage romance, albeit with a slightly harder edge and a rather more brittle script than is usual in such ventures. In Mamet's play, the characters' sexual experimentation and hard-edged aggression function as their principal means of expressing their urban neuroses. There is little time for romance or sweet words. Moments of self-perception or a brief, fleeting acknowledgment of life
outside of sex are undercut by the relentless pragmatics of everyday life, or by the banal interpolations of characters such as Deborah when they are confronted with someone trying to make sense of the world. An earlier bout of Joan's lamentations is interrupted by that other unavoidable aspect of modern life, the telephone:

It's a puzzle. Our efforts at coming to grips with ourselves...in an attempt to become 'more human' (which, in itself is an interesting concept). It has to do with an increased ability to recognise clues...and the central energy in the form of lust...and desire...(and also in the form of hope). But a finite puzzle. Whose true solution lies, perhaps, in transcending the rules themselves...and pounding of the fucking pieces into place where they DO NOT FIT AT ALL...Some things persist. 'Loss' is always possible.

(Scene 13, pp.29, 30)

When Mamet's characters indulge in philosophical theory, their language inevitably takes on a heightened, linguistically more sophisticated tone. It is as though they have moved beyond their usual range of discourse into another sphere of understanding, even if that sphere is precarious and temporary. Joan speaks as she seldom does at such times; her 'street-wise' banter is suddenly replaced by careful phrasing and elevated terminology such as "central energy", "finite puzzle" and "transcending the rules themselves". It is contrived, rather pretentious and didactic. Joan strives to sound authoritative, in command of what she is saying but there remains a sense in which Mamet is satirising even this level of awareness. Like the rest of their conversation, it is artificial - though in a far more 'educated' way. That he constantly undercut such high-flown sentiments with crass banalities or ringing telephones is perhaps Mamet's way of suggesting that nothing that these people can say is truly authentic: it is all the manufacture of a false society.

Joan and Deborah share an apartment and are, apparently, good friends. Whether their relationship is of a platonic or a sexual nature is unclear, but Mamet does drop the
occasional hint that their friendship may be at least partly Lesbianic. For example, when Deborah first meets Danny, she announces that she is "a Lesbian" (Scene 5, p.18) although a little later she refutes this claim, choosing to imply that whilst she has had "some Lesbianic experiences ...and...enjoyed them" (Scene 7, pp.20,21) she is, in fact, happily heterosexual. In any case, the friendship between Joan and Deborah seems to be warm and genuine, if a little over-possessive on Joan's part. What is noticeable, both in Joan's reaction to Danny and Bernie's opinion of Deborah is the fact that both parties are jealous of any outside involvement. As Christopher Bigsby notes, they value only the apparently simple, undemanding and essentially adolescent camaraderie of the same sex viewing members of the opposite sex as an intrusion upon their privacy. In Bernie's case, women are considered tolerable as long as they are seen at a distance or used exclusively as objects of sexual titillation. As far as Joan is concerned, she often expresses exasperation and contempt for the men she meets and seems uninterested in forming any kind of sexual relationship, despite the fact that at one stage of the play she is sitting alone in a Singles Bar. On both sides, there appears to be an element of protective concern for their friend's welfare; sexual involvement is seen as leading inevitably to unhappiness and is, therefore, something which must be avoided on anything other than the most casual basis. Nicholas de Jongh interprets Joan and Bernie's behaviour as having its roots in more selfish motives. He notes that

[Mamet] is much alive to the way best friends do down their playmates' attempts at love, preferring to have them available always for less serious fun35

and John Elsom observes how

Danny and Deborah have their romance spoilt by friends [and notes how] coldness creeps into the warmest friendships [which are tainted by] the jealousies of others.36

Mamet suffuses the petty jealousies and resentments with a great deal of humour. As John Ditsky remarks, his use of humour is often a matter of two hard-edged personalities rubbing mannered toughnessest together ...The gags, the tongue-in-cheek pretensions that the
characters can roll with any punch, also gives a play like this an internal rhythm, an ability to work towards a blackout line, another scene.\textsuperscript{37}

For example, the following exchange takes place between Deborah and Joan when the former has been seeing rather a lot of her new boyfriend:

- Joan: So what's he like?
- Deb: Who?
- Joan: Whoever you haven't been home, I haven't seen you in two days that you've been seeing.
- Deb: Did you miss me?
- Joan: No. Your plants died. (Pause) I'm kidding. What's his name?
- Deb: Danny.
- Joan: What's he do?
- Deb: He works in the Loop.
- Joan: How wonderful for him.
- Deb: He's an assistant Office Manager.
- Joan: That's nice, a job with a little upward mobility.
- Deb: Don't be like that, Joan.
- Joan: I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me.
- Deb: How are things at school?
- Joan: Swell. Life in the Primary Grades is a real picnic.

(Scene 8, pp.21, 22)

From her opening question, "So what's he like?", it is clear that Joan is in no way about to be persuaded that the intrusive Danny could possibly be a worthy lover for her friend. In that initial query is an aggressive, hard-boiled bitterness which is not concealed by the fact that it is, in fact, a perfectly natural question. The tone is one which invites a response of denigration rather than approval, the edginess and barely-concealed sarcasm establishing Joan's mood for the rest of the scene, though Mamet uses this particular idiomatic diction elsewhere in the play to quite differing effect. An actress playing the scene could interpret Joan's mood in several ways: she could be hurt, bitter, resentful, purely aggressive or gently chiding. As always with Mamet's work, great sensitivity to the text is required if all the nuances and subtleties are to be exploited; it would be easy to portray Joan as an unsympathetic harpy, intent upon destroying her friend's relationships. This would, indeed, be a great shame since Mamet has written the part with sensitivity and understanding for the character's emotional and psychological position. Whilst
Joan resents Danny's involvement with Deborah, it is important for an actress playing the part to be aware of her vulnerability and the reasons for her resentment. Joan has found a good and kind friend in Deborah; she is understandably nervous at the prospect of losing her to someone else.

Joan's convoluted but brilliantly authentic sentence: "Whoever you haven't been home, I haven't seen you in two days that you've been seeing" has been described by Ross Wetzsteon as "The utter clarity of total grammatical chaos". Such language owes something to that heard in Woody Allen films, particularly those which chronicle the increasing incidence of urban neurosis. The idiom is purely American, with no concessions made towards 'good' English. As Jack Shepherd has observed, Mamet is so in touch with the way American people talk that he often doesn't use any discernible English grammar...

Thus, sentences are relentlessly broken up midway, tenses are confused and grammatical accuracy is the least priority. It is all ostensibly very naturalistic but, as Shepherd has also observed,

...in David's text...everything that is written is intended...it is never just there for the sake of it. Through Joan's convolutions and inconsistencies, Mamet is able to suggest so much about her state of mind. His inspired use of grammatical anarchy is also another way in which he extracts every ounce of humour from a situation. Joan's defensive sarcasm "Your plants died", immediately followed by "I'm kidding" serves to illustrate her adopted veneer of street-wise, urban toughness which can be easily shattered when she finds herself in a vulnerable position. Despite her assertion that she is "kidding", she goes on to denigrate Danny's job as a pathetic post for a man to hold and, finally, having failed to elicit any criticism of her boyfriend from Deborah, seems to blame her friend for the fact that "Life in the Primary Grades is a real picnic". It is as though Joan's life is boring enough as a kindergarten teacher without Deborah adding to its misery.
by keeping away from home. Thus, cleverly and insidiously, Joan manages to make Deborah feel guilty for her actions; the selfishness is not, in Joan's eyes, her own, but that of her gadabout friend.

Bernie is, of course, as wounded as Joan by his friend's love affair. As he tells "imaginary buddies" at the gym all about Danny's relationship (which, presumably, Danny told him only in confidence), Bernie takes on the role of seasoned mentor and adviser; to conceal his fear, he casts himself in his story as experienced - and kindly - uncle:

So the kid asks me "Bernie, Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. The broad this, the broad that, the broad this, the broad that." Right? So I tell him, "Dan, Dan, you think I don't know what you're feeling, I don't know what you're going through? You think about the broad, you this, you that, you think I don't know that?" So he tells me, "Bernie," he says, "I think I love her". (Pause) Twenty eight years old. So I tell him, "Dan, Dan, I can advise, I can counsel, I can speak to you out of my experience...but in the final analysis, you are on your own. (Pause) If you want my opinion, however, you are pussy-whipped." (I call 'em like I see 'em. I wouldn't say it if it wasn't so.) So what does he know at that age, huh? Sell his soul for a little eating pussy, and who can blame him: But mark my words. One, two more weeks, he'll do the right thing by the broad (Pause) And drop her like a fucking hot potato.  

(Scene 19, p.37)

Bernie establishes the avuncular tone which he will use to denigrate Danny's relationship with Deborah in the opening words of his speech. He calls Danny "the kid" and suggests that the boy's reliance upon his advice is far from unusual. Bernie's dismissal of the seriousness of Danny's affair moves from his claim that he, too, has felt exactly the same way to his contention that Danny is "pussy-whipped". En route, he has condescendingly sneered that a mere boy (of twenty-eight!) could entertain such feelings and has wasted no time in repeating, over and over, that Deborah is nothing more than a "broad". There is something rather pathetic in Bernie's assumption that Danny could not know that he was in love "at that age"; after all, twenty-eight is an age by which many men are already married with a family. He plays upon his friend's supposed naivety:
"Bernie...I think I love her"; he struggles to make Danny sound like a love-lorn child who hardly knows what is happening to him. Bernie reduces the couple's affair to the crudest sexual level; again and again in the play, he feels the need to diminish any emotional attachment that might be involved. He implies that Danny is ready to "Sell his soul for a little eating pussy", rushing his words and abbreviating his sentences in an effort to emphasise the absurdity of Danny being "in love". He immediately follows up this coarse statement with a phrase which accurately sums up his phony 'macho' bonhomie: "...and who can blame him", thereby suggesting that many young men are and have been in the same position, infatuated with a woman purely because of her sexual favours. With his studied, casual conceit, Bernie seeks to imply that he has, himself, been similarly misguided; there is the suggestion that such naïveté is something which comes with extreme youth and is sloughed off in knowing, confident maturity. The underlinings emphasise those words which Bernie feels are the most relevant and important to his argument: "counsel", "advise", "experience" and "opinion". For him, these words are the essence of friendship but, as he pointedly remarks, "in the final analysis", Danny must make his own decisions. The false effort he makes in trying to sound fair and reasonable and, above, all, sympathetic to his friend's plight is both appalling and irresistibly funny.

Right at the end of his speech, Bernie suddenly changes tack, and announces that Danny will "do the right thing by the broad" by dropping her like "a fucking hot potato" before very long. In his mind, this is precisely what Danny will do; all he needs is some careful prodding and manipulation from Bernie. After he has rid himself of the offensive Deborah, things can be the same again between the two friends. Bernie decides to 'speak up' for the girl, to show how fair he truly is. There has been no mention prior to this that Deborah is being somehow exploited or used by Danny: quite the opposite. However, in order to give his story a well-rounded and equitable conclusion, Bernie chooses to imply
that Deborah would, in fact, be far better off without Danny, who will soon see the error of his ways.

It is significant that Bernie should begin his destruction of his friend's affair with a string of nonsense words. Again and again, Mamet's frightened and vulnerable characters lapse into nonsense language when they are under pressure, and Bernie is no exception. He chooses to forsake normal speech in this play on more than one occasion, and it is instructive to note that each time he does so, he is undermining the seriousness of his subject. His reductive chant, already quoted elsewhere in this thesis, takes its rhythms from nonsense words: "Blah de bloo. Blah de Bloo. Blah de Bloo. Blah de Bloo" (Scene 30, p.47). The "Tits and Ass" which make up the rest of the litany are, therefore, reduced to similar meaninglessness. In GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, Richard Roma refers to the couple to whom Levene has just sold $82,000 worth of land as "Harriett and blah blah Nyborg" (Act 2, p.38), and in AMERICAN BUFFALO, Teach pretends that he is not angry with Grace and Ruthie because he has lost a large sum of money at cards, choosing to affect a world-weary tone of selfless resignation:

These things happen, I'm not saying that they don't... and yeah, yeah, yeah, I know I lost a bundle at the game and blah blah blah.

(Act I, p.15)

In THE SQUIRRELS, Arthur responds to Edmond's question about the sense of a particular passage in one of the plays which they are writing with a stream of repetition which reduces the words he speaks to mere gibberish:

Edmond: What does this mean?
Arthur: Meaning? Meaning?
Edmond: Yes.
Arthur: Ah, meaning! Meaning meaning meaning meaning meaning. Meaning meaning meaning. You ask me about meaning and I respond with gibberish...

(Episode 1, p.23)

Roma's description of Mr. Nyborg as "blah blah" suggests his contempt and total lack of feeling for the unfortunate man who has been fleeced out of so much money. Teach's concluding "blah blah blah" picks up the rhythm from the
preceding "yeah, yeah, yeah" and is intended to convey his detached emotional stance in the matter. He seems to be trying to confirm his sense of 'fair play' and chooses to do this by implying that further explanation is fatuous. Arthur's repetition of the word "meaning" is his attempt at ironic humour: both men are supposedly creative writers but are struggling with a banal story. To conceal his very real sense of impotence, Arthur chooses to joke about it, masking his loss of control over the situation in self-deprecating irony in an effort to appear self-effacing and sardonic.

In spite of Bernie's tireless campaign against Deborah, his emotional prodding does not seem to work on Danny for quite some time. As late as Scene 30, he is still living with the girl although there is the suggestion that the pair are not completely happy with their present arrangement. The ultimate breakdown of their relationship comes about amid bitter mutual recriminations and accusations, and is undoubtedly influenced by the following outburst of (ostensibly) friendly advice from Bernie:

...Big deal - you are going to lose your head over a little bit of puss? You are going to sell your birthright for a mess of potash? "Oh, Bernie, she's this, Oh, Bernie, she's that...". You know what she is? She's a fucking human being just like you and me, Dan. We all have basically the same desires, and the shame of it is you get out of touch with yourself and lose your perspective...You think you're playing with kids? 

( Scene 30, p.47 )

After referring to Deborah as "a little bit of puss" and "a mess of potash", Bernie has the audacity to state, grandly, that she is a "human being". It is as though he realises that he may have gone too far in insulting the girl, and feels the need to attribute qualities which he has certainly not indicated he believed were ever present. The final implication is that women are the same as men: they want only the casual sexual affairs which are the ideal of men like Bernie. It is, therefore, foolish of Danny to suppose that there was ever anything else in his relationship with Deborah but pure sexual exploitation.
When Danny and Deborah have broken up, Joan's response is predictable; in a misguided effort to appease Deborah's wounded pride, she launches into a stinging attack on the man who has even prevented her artistic friend from "drawing":

Joan: You can't live in the past...It does you no good...And, in the end, what do you have? You have your friends. (Pause)...have you been drawing since you've been with Dan?

Deb: It wasn't his fault.

Joan: Well, whose fault was it, mine?

Deb: It was my fault, Joan.

Joan: It was not your fault. Say what you will, the facts don't change and the fact is if you take a grown man whose actions and whose outlook are those of a child, who wants nothing more or better than to have someone who will lick his penis and grin at his bizarre idea of wit, uh...if you take that man and uh...

Deb: I'll thank you for this someday.

Joan: Yes, you will, Deb. And you know, I truly don't see why you're being so hostile. I'm afraid I have to admit that.

(Scene 32, pp.48, 49)

As Joan's vituperative verbal attack on Danny loses its initial impetus, she appears to be lost for words, resorting to uncertain sounds like "uh" in order to buy a few seconds of extra time to think of more insulting things to say. After demolishing in short, pungent strokes the man whom Deborah had once loved - and perhaps still does - Joan then feigns disbelief at her friend's "hostile" manner. By so insulting Danny, she is indirectly insulting Deborah for it is she who has debased herself (in Joan's eyes) in accommodating Danny's perverse sexual wishes.

It is interesting to note just how closely Joan's condemnation of Danny echoes Bernie's criticism of Deborah: both rely almost exclusively upon the purely sexual. They do differ in one important respect, however, and that is in the way in which Joan dismisses Danny as "a child", whereas Bernie refers to Deborah's all-too adult qualities, inferring that she is hard, experienced and manipulative. Indeed, he sarcastically asks Danny whether he thinks he is "playing with kids" when dealing with someone as hard-boiled as Deborah. Bernie's reaction to the break-up is similarly
predictable: just as Joan suggests that all will be the same now that Deborah is back at home with her, so too does Bernie immediately try to re-establish the base-line of his and Danny's friendship. He suggests that they should go to the beach in order to ogle the girls there.

Time and again, Bernie and Danny reduce the women they encounter to purely physical dimensions. Their tendency to view women as nothing more than the sum of their sexual attributes reaches its apotheosis in the final scene when the pair of them lie on the beach, admiring or deriding the girls who pass them by. This scene, more forcefully than any other, underscores their sheer inability to perceive the opposite sex as people. It is vulgar, tragic and brilliantly observed. Bernie draws Danny's attention to what is presumably a well-endowed girl who is located close by:

Bernie: Hey! Don't look behind you.
Danny: Yeah?
Bernie: Whatever you do, don't look behind you.
Danny: Where?
Bernie: Right behind you, about ten feet behind you to your right.
Danny: Yeah?
Bernie: I'm telling you.
Danny: (Looks) Get the fuck outta here!
Bernie: Can I pick 'em?
Danny: Bernie...
Bernie: Is the radar in fine shape?
Danny: ...I gotta say...
Bernie: ...Oh yeah...
Danny: ...that you can pick 'em. (Scene 34, p.51)

Although Danny now seems to be as rampantly sexist as his friend, there still remains the suggestion that he is, at heart, the pupil to Bernie's teacher. There is an air of congratulation about their exchanges, a sense of admiration for the man who can pick the best "broad" on the beach, and this man is usually Bernie with his "radar". Mamet captures the mock-irony of remarks such as Bernie's "Whatever you do, don't look behind you". As the words are uttered, it is clear that he intends exactly the opposite! It is essential for Danny to "look behind" to see the object of Bernie's disbelief. Indeed, Bernie even gives him exact directions.
The two men take verbal leads from each other to the extent that the entire passage begins to look and sound like free verse; their use of emphasis, idiomatic slang and sly humour builds up a realistic, rhythmically pleasing metre although the content of this particular "verse" leaves a great deal to be desired.

As the pair go on to discuss the charms of the women around them, Bernie becomes rather nervous; it is as though he realises that he cannot really hope to communicate with any of the girls and so must deride them and their motives for being on the beach. The following begins with a typical barrage of sexual criticism from Bernie, but soon moves into other, rather unnerving, territory:

Bernie: Flat belly, beautiful pair of tits...But now look over there. The broad with the dumpy legs and the fat whatdayacallit...Her legs are for shit, her stomach is dumpy, her tits don't say anything for her, and her muscle tone is not good...Now she is not a good-looking girl. (Pause) In fact she is something of a pig. (Pause) You see? That's all it takes...to make the difference between a knockout looking broad, and a nothing looking broad who doesn't look like anything...Makes all the fucking difference in the world. (Pause) Coming out here on the beach. Lying all over the beach, flaunting their bodies...I mean who the fuck do they think they are all of a sudden, coming out here and just flaunting their bodies all over? (Pause) I mean, what are you supposed to think? I come to the beach with a friend to get some sun and watch the action and...I mean a fellow comes to the beach to sit out in the fucking sun, am I wrong?...I mean we're talking about recreational fucking space, huh?...huh? (Pause) What the fuck am I talking about?

Danny: Are you feeling alright?
Bernie: Well, how do I look, do I look alright?
Danny: Sure.
Bernie: Well, then let's assume that I feel alright, okay?...I mean, how could you feel anything but alright, for chrissakes? Will you look at that body? (Pause) What a pair of tits. (Pause) With tits like that, who needs...anything.

(Scene 34, pp.54, 55)

The girl who is, to Bernie, "something of a pig" seems to spur his anger; it is as though she is to blame for her lack
of beauty, and for her nerve in coming to a public place to 'flaunt' her less than beautiful assets. As he speaks, a note of hysteria creeps into Bernie's voice. No-one has tackled him about his ignorant and chauvinistic remarks but, deep in his psyche, this seems to be precisely what has happened. In order to fight back any feelings of shame, Bernie launches into an attack on all the women on the beach, beautiful or ugly; he castigates them, villifies them and questions their motives for being there at all. His words are reminiscent of those who would defend an act of rape by suggesting that the victim, after all, 'asked for it' in the way she wore her clothes or by her provocative behaviour. Bernie's sexism, it is suggested, comes about through the cheapness and brazenness of women; if they did not display themselves in such a way, he would not be in a position to criticise them. Thus, Bernie tries to defend his crass behaviour by blaming women for inciting his wrath. As his hysteria grows, he repeats that the only reason for his and Danny's presence on the beach is in order to "get some sun"; this is so blatantly untrue as to become a pathetic plea for understanding. That he should refer to the beach as "recreational fucking space" is also deeply telling: Bernie presumably uses the obscenity as an expletive but there is, surely, a sense in which he wishes it were a verb instead!

It is only when Danny senses that his friend is confused and upset, and enquires whether he is "alright" that Bernie catches hold of himself, realising that he has said far too much for his own good, and for the good of his image. He gathers his wits and, within seconds, reverts to his old routine. The sudden glimpse into the tortured morass of his mind must be negated at all costs and the old, chauvinistic Bernie re-established without hesitation. His final words, reductive and ignorant as they are, manage to speak volumes about the tragic state of his sexuality: "With tits like that, who needs...anything." Bernie plainly needs a great deal more, but it is highly unlikely that he will ever put himself into a position in which he
might be able to attain it. Behind the arrogant facade lies a fearful naïveté; although both men constantly hatch plans and exchange ideas about the best ways in which to meet women, there is no suggestion that they will ever manage to sustain a relationship with one of the fantasy goddesses they ogle. On a beach full of people, Bernie and Danny remain isolated, solitary. They are now, probably more than ever, on the outside looking in. More bruised by life experience than they had been at the beginning of the play, the two men now seem to be overwhelmed by a deep-seated and acrid bitterness. This is borne out by the final words in the work, which manage to combine arrogance, cruelty and sarcasm. When a girl passes them, she chooses to ignore their greetings:

Bernie: Hi.
Danny: Hello there. (Pause. She walks by.)
Bernie: She's probably deaf.
Danny: She did look deaf, didn't she?
Bernie: Yeah. (Pause)
Danny: Deaf bitch. (Scene 34, p.55)

Bernie's misogyny has apparently influenced Danny to a fatal degree, perhaps resulting in his becoming a more dangerous type of sexist than his friend. The absurdity of his observation that the girl "did look deaf", and his need for corroboration from Bernie: "didn't she?" suggest that the veil of ignorance and insecurity has, at least partially, been transferred from Bernie to himself. Until now, Danny has been portrayed as a fairly normal, if unimaginative young man, but one who was largely without real malice. For him to utter the final, brutal words in a brutal play is Mamet's way of dramatising just how fatally Danny has come under Bernie's spell. The extent of his corruption and new-found misogyny is quite unnerving. Any implication that Danny may still have a chance of success in a normal, romantic liaison is summarily dismissed: he is more likely to find a 'mate' in the cheap restaurants or singles bars which proliferate in a society of diminished expectations.

The one-night stand and the bar-room encounter are commonplace occurrences in such a world. Singles bars, those particularly
horrible inventions of the fake-friendly American culture of excess, have become a way of life. As Woody Allen has observed:

Contemporary man...has no...peace of mind. He finds himself in the midst of a crisis of faith. He is what we fashionably call 'alienated'. He has seen the ravages of war, he has known natural catastrophes, he has been to singles bars.\(^1\)

The tone may be humorous, but the content is deadly serious. Early in the play, Mamet satirises the kind of encounter which takes place in such establishments. Bernie tries to 'pick up' Joan as she sits alone, and turns very hostile indeed when she makes it clear that she does not find him "sexually attractive":

Bernie: How would you like some company. (Pause) What if I was to sit down here? What would that do for you, huh?

Joan: No, I don't think so, no...

Bernie: So here I am. I'm just in town for a one-day layover, and I happen to find myself in this bar. So, so far so good. What am I going to do? I could lounge alone and lonely and stare into my drink, or I could take the bull by the horn and make an effort to enjoy myself...

Joan: Are you making this up?

Bernie: So hold on. So I see you seated at this table and I say to myself, "Doug McKenzie, there is a young woman," I say to myself, "What is she doing here?", and I think she is here for the same reasons as I. To enjoy herself, and, perhaps, to meet provocative people. (Pause) I'm a meteorologist for T.W.A...

(Scene 3, pp.14, 15)

Bernie carries on in this vain for some time, lying about his name and his job, trying to make his life sound romantic and thrilling until, finally, Joan has heard enough:

Joan: Can I tell you something?

Bernie: You bet.

Joan: Forgive me if I'm being too personal...but I do not find you sexually attractive. (Pause)

Bernie: What is that, some new kind of line? Huh? I mean, not that I mind what you think, if that's what you think...but...that's a fucking rotten thing to say.

Joan: I'll live.

Bernie: All kidding aside...lookit, I'm a fucking professional, huh? My life is a bunch of having to make split-second decisions...So just who the fuck do you think you are, God's gift to Women? I mean where do you fucking get off
As Christopher Bigsby notes, Bernie's pitch is a curious blend of condescension, falsehood and aggression, and observes that his response to Joan's rejection expresses not just his own model of personal relationships, but that of Madison Avenue and Hollywood, where sexual availability is a constant subtext. Bernie completely ignores Joan's assertion that she would not, in fact, be interested in his company, preferring instead to launch into his elaborate, supposedly sexy, pick-up routine. Even though it must be patently obvious that Joan is uninterested in his advances, Bernie ploughs ahead regardless, performing his act as bright young man-about-town. It is interesting to note that he calls himself by a typical 'W.A.S.P.' name, "Doug McKenzie", rather than admit to his own, very Jewish, Bernie Litko. Not only does Bernie take on in his fantasy projection of himself another man's job, but also another man's name - one which may be more acceptable to a girl who might, possibly, be anti-Semitic. He also emphasises the temporariness of his intended 'fling' with Joan by stating that he is "just in town for a one-day layover" and Mamet's use of the term "layover" rather than "stopover" adds a suggestive subtext to Bernie's opening gambit, as does his statement that he acted on impulse upon seeing her, taking the "bull by the horn". The use of the word "horn" in the singular, rather than in the more familiar plural, is surely intended as a phallic quip.

Joan's protests fall upon deaf ears: Bernie allows her no rights of her own. All that is important for him is that...
he should spin his yarn, unbelievable though it is, and that Joan should be suitably fascinated and impressed. Even when she informs him that she doesn't find him "sexually attractive", Bernie stubbornly hangs on to his story about being a high-flying meteorologist. This, like the rest of his spiel, is an integral part of the act. He cannot allow one aspect to be destroyed since this may lead to the displacement of his carefully constructed mask. Cut to the quick by her remark, Bernie's rhetoric becomes more and more enraged until, finally, he lambasts the unfortunate girl with his question concerning the meaning of society. In order to justify his outrageous and insulting behaviour, Bernie falls back upon the language of civics. This is something in which Mamet's characters frequently indulge when under stress and when they wish to give real weight to their argument. Bernie appears to be under the impression that the "bunch of rules" which apply to his own "personal pleasure" should in no way extend to Joan.

Just as the salesmen in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS see themselves only in terms of their jobs, so too does Bernie view himself purely in terms of a sexual athlete, no matter how absurd a notion this may seem. He has built up for himself a fantasy world which is quite as powerful as that invented by George and Martha in Edward Albee's WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? or by Susan in Alan Ayckbourn's WOMAN IN MIND. Joan's remark that Bernie is not, to her, sexually inviting is more than a mere insult; it is tantamount to telling him that he does not exist. She has punctured his dream and devastated his self-image: Bernie's violent aggression is, therefore, quite understandable. His predicament is reminiscent of that of the Vicomte de Valmont in Christopher Hampton's adaptation of de Laclos' LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES; when the Vicomte's sexual reputation and vanity are threatened, he crumbles. He has become so much a part of his assumed persona that the real man beneath the mask hardly exists. He decides to give up the love of his life and to accept death rather than risk exposure of his essential vulnerability. So it is with Bernie, although his dilemma is
dramatised in somewhat less romantic and expansive terms.

Bernie's rage is almost palpable as his grammar collapses and the abuse tumbles out in a stinging assault on the woman who has, in a way, murdered him with words. His error in asking her whether she believes she is "God's gift to Women" suggests his overpowering anger - surely he means "God's gift to Men". He begins to swear violently, suggesting that Joan should enroll in a convent if she "don't want to get come on to". In his anguish, Bernie's arrogance knows no bounds: if Joan does not find him personally attractive, then there must be something wrong with her. He berates her for not acting as "a grown woman" when he is, in fact, behaving far worse than a spoilt child.

After his lack of success with Joan, Bernie's first reaction is to advise Danny to behave in exactly the same way! His manner of speaking is infused with the nonchalant ease of one who has just enjoyed runaway success with his quarry:

The main thing, Dan...The main thing about broads...
Is two things: One: The Way to Get Laid is to Treat 'Em Like Shit...and Two: Nothing...nothing makes you so attractive to the opposite sex as getting your rocks off on a regular basis.

(Scene 4, pp.17, 18)

Bernie's linguistic slip in the first two lines suggests his haste to communicate his 'great knowledge' to Danny. At first, he felt it was enough to suggest the "main thing" but then he recalled that there were, in fact, "two things". Bernie has clearly learned little from his encounter with Joan - in fact, it seems to have receded to the very back of his mind or been reconstituted by him into a success story of which he can be proud. His dictum for success with women is echoed in LAKEBOAT. In that play, too, the men are lonely and ignorant and spend much of their time talking about encounters which probably never took place. In the following, Fred tells Dale how to succeed sexually with the opposite sex, and exactly reproduces Bernie's advice:
...my uncle, who is over, is conversing with me one night and as men will do, we start talking about sex. He tells a story, I tell my story. This takes him aback. "What?" he says, "The way to get laid is to treat them like shit." Now you just stop for a moment and think on that. You've heard it before and you'll hear it again but there is more to it than meets the eye. Listen: THE WAY TO GET LAID IS TO TREAT THEM LIKE SHIT. Truer words have never been spoken. And this has been tested by better men than you or me.

(Scene 10, pp.54, 55)

Fred's recipe for success is lamentable. To give it further weight, he ends his speech with two well-worn platitudes which are intended to consolidate its truth. This, too, is another case of words seeming to become true if they are spoken aloud. LAKEBOAT is a play without a single female character; there is certainly more than a suggestion that all the fantasising and bragging is little more than a means of disguising latent homosexuality. In a short work written by Mamet to be performed as a companion piece to the 1979 revival of SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO, the following, very telling, line is included:

Our most cherished illusions - what are they but hastily constructed cofferdams restraining homosexual panic.

(SERMON, p.157)

Several critics have commented upon the distinct possibility that Bernie is, in fact, homosexual; there are several clues scattered throughout the play, but perhaps none so obvious as those which occur in the scene in which Bernie and Danny are out together shopping for a gift. Bernie notices that the store appears to have employed a homosexual as a sales assistant in the toy department:

They got a fucking fruit at the games counter. I can't believe this. In the midst of the toy department. At the games counter, talking to kids all day long... a fairy...You know, one of those motherfuckers grabbed me when I was Bobby's age...We're all wondering what this old guy is doing at the cartoons, and he sits down at the end of the row, and halfway through he reaches over and grabs my joint. Reaches over another guy and grabs me by the joint.

(Scene 17, pp.33, 34)

Even when relating a tale such as this, Bernie feels he must
over-dramatise and exaggerate. It is very unlikely that the "old guy" would reach across another person to molest him! Bernie expresses his horror of what happened to him, but concludes his analysis of the situation with two completely opposing statements. In the first, he states that it is essential to learn how to cope with such events as early as possible:

You don't learn right when you're young, those cocksuckers ruin your life...Ruin it quicker'n you can turn around.

(Scene 17, p.35)

In the second, he denies that the experience could have had anything other than a temporary effect:

A kid laughs these things off. You forget, you go on living...what the fuck, huh?

(Scene 17, p.36)

The reason why Bernie changes his opinion so radically becomes clear if the rest of the scene is analysed. Immediately after he tells Danny about his experience at the cinema, Danny begins to question him about homosexual practices he may have enjoyed as a child:

Danny: You ever do that stuff when you were kids?
Bernie: What stuff?
Danny: You know. Stuff with other kids.
Bernie: Teasing? Like teasing the girls? Looking up their panties and so on?
Danny: No, I mean when you were really young kids. Fooling around with the other kids...the other boys.
Bernie: Fooling around? You mean like "messing" around with other boys?
Danny: Fuck no. I didn't mean that. I just meant...you know.
Bernie: (Pause) You mean fooling around! Sure, who didn't.
Danny: Yeah.
Bernie: Shit, we all used to fuck around.

(Scene 17, p.34)

Although it is clear that Bernie knows precisely what kind of "stuff" Danny is referring to, he becomes cagey, evasive and tentative. To be safe, he mentions "teasing the girls", an innocent, acceptable practice which has no dire implications. When Danny persists, Bernie still feigns ignorance but, to be on the safe side, turns the questioning around to imply that Danny may be a little strange in asking such questions in the first place! He uses the words "messing
around" to make some imaginary distinction between "fooling around" and its more sinister off-shoots. Again, Mamet anticipates the false distinctions which will be made by characters like Moss and Aaronow in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS and Teach in AMERICAN BUFFALO. When Bernie realises that, by the sheer force of his linguistic technique, he has got Danny where he wants him, he can relax a little and admit that he did, naturally, indulge in some "fooling around", an apparently harmless pastime with no unpleasant associations. All seems to be well, with both men warily picking non-controversial issues for small-talk until Danny's curiosity takes over and he returns to dangerous ground:

Danny: You know how to approach these things and you'll always be alright...Take you and that guy in the movies, for instance.
Bernie: What do you mean?
Danny: Just that if you'd been a little older...
Bernie: Yeah?
Danny: Or maybe the guy, if he'd been a little...younger...
Bernie: What are you fucking talking about?
Danny: I'm saying that if the circumstances...
Bernie: What fucking circumstances? Some faggot queer got the hots for my joint at the cartoons.
Danny: I'm not talking about extenuating circumstances, I only mean the circumstances of what happened.
Bernie: And what exactly are you saying about them?
Danny: All I'm saying...
Bernie: ...this happened years ago...
Danny: ...is that it could possibly have been damaging to you. (Pause)
Bernie: Yeah?
Danny: ...as a total Human Being.
Bernie: Damn right.
Danny: ...and you're just lucky that it didn't.
Bernie: Well, what the fuck, I was only a kid.
Danny: Sure.
Bernie: A kid laughs these things off. You forget, you go on living...what the fuck, huh?

(Scene 17, pp.35, 36)

Bernie's hostility is almost tangible; he had thought that the subject was closed and that Danny would not dream of returning to such a sensitive area. His anger is clear in the way in which he now chooses to refer to the pervert in the cinema: "Some faggot queer", and in the belligerent tone he adopts towards Danny. Danny becomes aware, fortunately, of the dangerous situation in which he has
placed himself, and tries desperately to lessen the serious­ness of what he has implied by rambling on about "extenuating circumstances" as opposed to any other kind. As Bernie's anger increases, Danny tries reconciliatory tactics. He tries to convey his concern that the old man's actions could "possibly have been damaging" to Bernie as a "total Human Being", the emphasis intended by the use of capital letters presumably meant to underscore Bernie's essential normality and wholesomeness. The term "Human Being" could also be chosen because it is neutral and unthreatening - far more so than the potentially inflammatory "Man". As Bernie calms down, his sexuality - for the moment - safe and unquestioned, he reverts into his usual speech patterns: "what the fuck" and "huh?". However, his tone remains rather overly defensive and edgy, his casual dismissals rather too flippant. There is surely the implication that Bernie was, indeed, seriously affected by his childhood experience and is possibly still suffering from its after­effects. His violent condemnation of the homosexual sales assistant and his grossly unfair assumption that the man might in some way interfere with the children he serves have a touch of hysteria about them. Ned Chailet describes Bernie's character as "a despiser of women...probably a liar and a homosexual" and Peter Stothard observes how he spends his life flaunting some barely suppressed homosexual fears and a feeble line in heterosexual fantasy.

Underneath their sardonic acceptance of the world as it is, and their rare insights into the cause of their anxiety, Mamet's characters are achingly lonely. Without exception, they seek affection but are unable to sustain relationships which are based upon emotion. Deborah and Danny enjoy some moments of tenderness, but outside pressures eventually force them to declare their affair null and void, and to negate the experience as a waste. Neither of them has a good word for the other once the relationship has been dissolved; it is as though to acknowledge that genuine feelings were indeed experienced is somehow to admit weakness. However, the need for love and the expression of love exists.
Deborah speaks of a story her mother used to tell her:

My mother used to tell a story about how I came into the kitchen one day while she was preparing an important dish. I was about four. I said "Mommy, can I have a cookie?", and she, for some reason, misunderstood, or misheard me, and thought that I wanted a "hug", so she gave me a "hug", and I said, "Thank you, Mommy. I didn't want a cookie after all." (Pause) You see? What is a sublimation of what? (Pause) What signifies what? (Scene 29, pp. 46, 47)

At such moments, the fragility of the mask is exposed. The innocence and genuine need for affection implicit in the child's statement suggests Deborah's awareness of the lack of true, natural love in her adult life. The stereotyped role that she must play as a sophisticated young woman is in marked contrast to the sweet naivete of her childhood self. In this speech, Deborah tries to reproduce the rhythms of childish diction for Joan; the words run on, interrupted by commas and pauses, spilling out and nudging each other along just as the convoluted sentences often uttered by real children proceed. One reason for the endless quest for sexual gratification sought by Mamet's characters could obviously be seen as a poor substitute for the true affection they obviously crave. As Christopher Bigsby observes:

whether sex is a sublimation of the emotional and the spiritual or the other way round...is crucial to Mamet's strategy."46

Mamet's characters are aware that life is rapidly passing them by. A character in ALL MEN ARE WHORES: AN ENQUIRY sums up such feelings of powerlessness:

Our concept of time is predicated upon our understanding of death. Time passes solely because death ends time. Our understanding of death is arrived at, in the main, because of the nature of sexual reproduction. Organisms which reproduce through fission do not "die". The stream of life, the continuation of the germ plasm, is unbroken. Clearly. Just as it is in the case of man. But much less apparently so in our case. For we are sentient. We are conscious of ourselves, and conscious of the schism in our sexuality. And so we perceive time. (Pause) And so we will do anything for some affection. (Scene 1, p. 185)
Later in the play, the same character laments the lack of true affection in the world:

Where are our mothers, now? Where are they?...In cities where we kill for comfort - for a moment of reprieve from our adulterated lives - for fellow-feeling (Pause) (I have eyelashes, too...)...One moment of release...We have no connection...Our life is garbage. We take comfort in our work and cruelty. We love the manicurist and the nurse for they hold hands with us. Where is our mother now? We woo with condoms and a ferry ride; the world around us crumples into chemicals, we stand intractable, and wait for someone competent to take us 'cross the street...

(Scene 16, p.197)

The need for affection is sensitively spelt out in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO when Danny, unsure of his position with Deborah in the latter stages of their relationship, presses for a response to his questions in the middle of the night:


(Scene 26, p.43)

Although he can plainly see that Deborah is sleeping, Danny insists upon pressing for some sign of life. The short, simple sentences are indicative of his insecurity, his need to spell out for himself that he has little to worry about. He is aware that his affair with the girl is currently rather tentative, and tries to nullify his fears by asking her to tell him what is on her mind - even while asleep!

A little earlier, Danny had defended Bernie to "an imaginary co-worker". Aware that his love affair may soon be over, Danny holds on steadfastly to the reality of his friendship with Bernie:

...I know what you're saying, and I'm telling you I don't like you badmouthing the guy, who happens to be a friend of mine. So just let me tell my story, okay? So the other day we're up on six and it's past five and I'm late, and I'm having some troubles with my chick... and I push the button and the elevator doesn't come, and it doesn't come, and it doesn't come, so I lean back and I kick the shit out of it three or four times... And he, he puts his arm around my shoulder and he calms me down and he says, 'Dan, Dan...don't go looking
for affection from inanimate objects" (Pause) Huh? So I don't want to hear you badmouthing Bernie Litko. (Scene 25, p.43)

Mamet manages to incorporate a great deal of urban despair into this one, short speech. He catches accurately the casual abbreviations indulged in by those who work in office blocks, their language becoming blunt and prosaic in the extreme: "we're up on six and it's past five". He also includes that most pertinent symbol of malfunctioning mechanisation, the elevator. As Danny viciously attacks the elevator door (probably fantasising that it is, in fact, Deborah), Bernie calms him down by suggesting that he should not seek affection "from inanimate objects". Quite what Bernie means by Danny seeking affection from the elevator is uncertain, but there are one or two interesting possibilities. The first is that one must not expect lifts to work upon command. The society in which Bernie and Danny live is a mechanised and complex one, and mechanical objects often go awry. It is, therefore, useless to expect "affection" (or co-operation) from such objects. The second possibility is that Bernie somehow regards Deborah as just such an inanimate object: he knows of Danny's problems and appreciates his frustrations. As a good, 'caring' friend, Bernie goes out of his way to make his own relationship with Danny the most superior in the young man's life. Danny's reaction to Bernie's advice certainly suggests that Bernie is indeed his best and most loyal friend, his verbal defence of the man exceeding anything, in terms of sheer affection, that can be found elsewhere in the work.

The need to find solace and comfort in areas other than purely human relations is also touched on in the episode in which Bernie first meets Deborah. Because communication between the sexes is portrayed as being at an all-time low, the conversation proceeds with superficial chit-chat in general and sexual innuendo in particular:

Bernie: You're a very attractive woman. Anybody ever tell you that? (Pause) Huh? So okay, so what sign are you?
Deborah: Scorpio.
Bernie: Scorpio, huh?...Scorpio...how about that.
Deborah: What sign are you?
Bernie: Scorpio.
Deborah: How about that. Danny's a Scorpio.
Bernie: You a Scorpio, Dan?
Danny: Yes. (Pause)
Bernie: Well, I don't want to say it, but it's a small fucking world. (Pause) So you guys are hitting it off, huh? The two of you, you're hitting it on/off?...You know, you're a lucky guy, Dan. And I think you know what I'm talking about. You are one lucky guy. Yes sir, you are one fortunate son of a bitch. And I think I know what I'm talking about.

(Scene 9, p.24)

Bernie comments, rather lasciviously, upon Deborah's sexual charms. He pushes her to agree with his opinion of her - completely ignoring Danny - but when she declines, he is forced to move onto another subject. The subject he chooses is one which is extremely apt and revealing: in the mid-1970s when Mamet wrote the play, the interest in astrology was increasing daily. Lacking any other opening gambit, many people would apprehend perfect strangers to ask them about their star sign. It is a significantly mundane topic for Mamet's characters. There is no doubt that Bernie believes that he is being urbane, 'hip' and very sophisticated in asking Deborah about her "sign"; Mamet satirises the mindless, bland question and response routine which can so often follow such a query. It is difficult to believe that such good friends as Bernie and Danny should not know one another's astrological signs, but this is the implication made by Mamet. Perhaps their friendship is purely concerned with sexual bravado, there being no room for even basic concerns of this kind. Having failed to elicit a great deal of information from Deborah upon learning that she is a "Scorpio", Bernie returns to more familiar ground, to sexual innuendo. His inference that the couple are "hitting it on/off" and that Danny is "one lucky guy" and so on cannot fail to communicate his crassness and insensitivity to Deborah, although he clearly remains oblivious. His assertion that Danny will know what he is talking about is reinforced in the last line when he claims that he himself knows what he is "talking about".
As Danny and Deborah's affair crumbles apart, they vie for the last word during their many arguments. It is their growing impatience with and lack of tolerance for their partner's position which prompts them into endless verbal sparring. They both use black, sardonic humour and hurtful remarks in an effort to upstage one another, their quick-fire dialogue temporarily disguising the emptiness which lies just beneath their words:

Danny: ...You know very well if there's any shampoo or not. You're making me be ridiculous about this. (Pause) You wash yourself too much anyway. If you really used all that shit they tell you in *Cosmopolitan* (And you do) you'd be washing yourself from morning till night. Pouring derivatives on yourself all day long.

Deborah: Will you love me when I'm old?

Danny: If you can manage to look eighteen, yes.

Deborah: That's very telling.

(Scene 23, p.41)

The sheer pettiness of much of this is a brilliantly accurate reflection of the absurdity of many arguments between the sexes. Danny blames Deborah for making him "be ridiculous" about the existence of shampoo; in a neat jump, he shifts the responsibility onto her. His sarcasm is meant to be chastening but its only effect is to further enrage Deborah who responds with cynical and platitudinous remarks such as "Will you love me when I'm old?" The superficiality of their 'love' is illustrated in Danny's retort that he will, if Deborah "can manage to look eighteen". Time and again, surface glossiness overrides all other considerations. As Deborah observes, it is "very telling". Danny ridicules her need to keep up with all the beauty hints in *Cosmopolitan* but, paradoxically, still requires that she should look "eighteen" when she is old. Since this is both unrealistic and absurd, it further compounds the all-embracing obsession with physical attractiveness to the exclusion of everything else.

The couple's linguistic battle continues in a similar vein until Danny remarks:

Danny: I love your breasts.
Deborah: "Thank you" (Pause) Is that right?
Danny: Fuck you.
Deborah: No hard feelings.
Danny: Who said there were?
Deborah: You know there are.
Danny: Then why say there aren't? (Scene 23, p.42)

Deborah's parody of the stereotyped response expected from her causes Danny to lash back with a coarse expletive. Unphased by his harsh words, she mouths the phrase "No hard feelings" which could be intended as a double-entendre aimed at the extent (or otherwise) of Danny's sexual arousal or, as seems more likely, a further cliched response intended to irritate him when he knows quite well that the reverse is true. When the pair eventually break up their relationship, the verbal recriminations reach an almost frightening level of intensity:

Danny: Don't give me this. Don't give me that look, Missy.
Deborah: Or you're gonna what?
Danny: I don't mind physical violence. I just can't stand emotional violence...I'm sorry...Come here...Come here.
Deborah: No. You come here for christ's fucking sake. You want comfort, come get comfort. What am I, your toaster?
Danny: Cunt.
Danny: You cunt.
Deborah: We've established that.
Danny: I try.
Deborah: You try and try...You're trying to understand women and I'm confusing you with information. "Cunt" won't do it. "Fuck" won't do it. No more magic. (Scene 28, p.46)

Danny's mood changes rapidly from one of domineering brutality to affectionate cajoling, but Deborah is too incensed to take any notice of his wheedling attempts at reconciliation. She sees them as the superficial scraps of solace that they undoubtedly are. Deborah likens herself to a mechanical object - a "toaster" - which she seems to suggest is approximately the level of need that she represents to Danny: as long as she is functional and compliant, she is an acceptable addition to his life, but once she breaks down or refuses to function efficiently, she can be thrown out and discarded. Her assertion that he is trying to understand feminine psychology via means that
in no way involve him is at once brilliantly funny and painfully true: "You're trying to understand women and I'm confusing you with information." As Colin Stinton remarks on this particular line:

Mamet captures so accurately the tension which builds up in situations like this; Danny pretends that he wants to understand Deborah but, deep inside, he cannot really be bothered. He wants to learn painlessly, by a kind of osmosis, not by having to make any effort.47

There is something terribly final about Deborah's last words here: "No more magic". She and Danny have embarked upon their romance with their eyes only half open, seeing only the outer covering of what makes a love affair a reality. Having become deeply involved - at least on a sexual level - their affair has turned sour, the romance has disappeared. For Deborah, at least, the relationship has taught her something; she is now sadder but wiser. She will become even more of a cynic than she was at the beginning of the play. For her, there is simply "No more magic".

SEXUAL PERVERSY IN CHICAGO is a very fast, very funny play. The sheer exuberance of the characters' dialogue is compelling, although their vitality is essentially illusory. They end the play as they began - confused, vulnerable and alone. However, en route the pace is electric and alive. The rapid, almost cinematic cutting between scenes comments upon the neurotic frenzy of their lives; the structure of the play has a compulsion which is matched by that of the characters. The brief scenes therefore represent a correlative to the fragmented quality of their existence.

Friedrich Hebbel once wrote that "Drama shouldn't present new stories but new relationships".48 In this work, Mamet certainly seems to have fulfilled this requirement. With an accurate ear for the cadences of (supposedly) sophisticated urban speech and with acute observation of contemporary sexual mores, he has produced a work that is wholly original and which dramatises the emptiness of relationships in an empty society. Mamet has devised a play which is absolutely contemporary in its verbal style; the text is a bubbling
amalgam of slang, clichés and what the characters consider
to be wit. His characterisation is exact and precise, his
comments upon the sexual lifestyles of his creations both
pithy and abrasive. Each character has his own voice:
like Pinter, Mamet is able to invent a linguistic per­
onality for each which is wholly believable. Bernie’s
false shield of confidence is superbly exposed in the sub­
text to his aggressive linguistic forays which Nicholas de
Jongh describes as taking place in

a Chicago voice which is a combination of whiplash
and theatrical swoops...49

Danny’s disingenuousness and growing dependence on Bernie
reveals itself in the way in which he uses certain phrases
favoured by his mentor, picking up his manner of speaking
and becoming, finally, as callous and ignorant as he is.
Deborah has about her an innocence and naivete which is
gradually squashed as the play progresses. She is too much
under the influence of the more dominating Joan to avoid
becoming completely enveloped by her. By the end of the
play, her view of men is similar to that of Joan, who trusts
none of them. Joan’s character is a wonderfully controlled
demonstration of a woman who longs for love but is afraid
of it. She cannot allow the cynical mask to fall for a
moment and, therefore, the face she shows the world is often
hard and selfish. Mamet is able to suggest that under Joan’s
street-wise banter and cool persona, a subtext of vulnerab­
ility and insecurity exists.

The play is at once a sharp satire on contemporary sexual
manners in urban Chicago and an exposé of what a medias­
dominated, capitalist-structured society can produce, but
Mamet’s greatest strength lies not in his persuasiveness
as a social critic, nor even in his sensitivity to the
plight of human relations: it resides in his superb command
over language. Ross Wetzsteon sums up Mamet’s achievement
in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO in the following manner,
which I consider to be a fairly definitive chronicle of
his work on the play:
Mamet's extraordinary promise resides not so much in his insights into money-violence or male/female relationships, or in the tragic and comic manipulations of his understanding, as in the exhilarating perfection of the language with which he expresses it. It is a rarity in the theatre to find the insights, the characterisation, the action, so deeply embedded in the dialogue itself, in its vocabulary, its idioms, its rhythms.
Sexual Perversity in Chicago

1. David Mamet, 'Stanislavski and the American Bicentennial' essay typescript, 1975, on loan to author.


5. David Mamet cited in C. Gerald Fraser 'Mamet's Plays Shed Masculinity Myth'.


7. David Mamet cited in C. Gerald Fraser, 'Mamet's Plays Shed Masculinity Myth'.


9. David Mamet cited in C. Gerald Fraser 'Mamet's Plays Shed Masculinity Myth'.

10. Ibid.


12. Ibid.


27. Miranda Richardson in interview with author.

28. David Mamet cited in C. Gerald Fraser, 'Mamet's Plays Shed Masculinity Myth'.

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29. C. Gerald Fraser, *Mamet's Plays Shed Masculinity Myth*.
30. Ibid.
31. David Mamet, ibid.
32. Colin Stinton in interview with author.
34. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.48.
37. John Ditsky, *He Lets You See the Thought There*, p.27.
40. Jack Shepherd in interview with author.
42. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.47.
43. Ibid.
47. Colin Stinton in interview with author.
AMERICAN BUFFALO

AMERICAN BUFFALO is prefaced by the following lines:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.
He is peeling down the alley in a black and yellow Ford.¹

Mamet no doubt chose this extract from an old 'folk tune' because it very neatly conveys the essence of his play; its central image is at once funny and profane, and it evokes a culture which has sacrificed spirituality to materialism. In the godless world he dramatises, success and prosperity have become a kind of religion in themselves in that they offer his lost, deracinated characters some illusion of comfort. Theirs is a violent and entropic society in which everything is uncertain, adrift and frightening, and the possession of material goods and money at least affords the appearance of stability and power.

Mamet peoples his play with what he describes as "fringe characters",² that is, those who live at the very edges of society, because he feels it is through these characters that he can best illustrate what he sees as a corrupt and venal culture. He observes that when one is looking at a large picture, you don't go to the top of the food chain to the King but to the little people...³

and opines that

That which best expresses an integrated idea of the nation is not only those who are in power.⁴

Apart from the amassing of material possessions, the only other defence that Mamet's characters have against a destructive and threatening environment lies in their use of language: they must strive to be street-wise, to cultivate the rapid response and spurious survival skills which will set them apart from their more naïve — and exploitable — neighbours. As Robert Storey points out, Mamet's America is founded upon a verbal busyness, glib, quick, deft...⁵

Life for Mamet's characters is one which must be literally lived from moment to moment, and their language often reflects their paranoid neurosis. Linguistic dexterity is important to them not only as a means through which they
can cajole, intimidate and trick their audience into complicity and culpability, but also to convince themselves of their fantasies. Having lost all control over their lives, they seek security in the adoption of acceptable social roles. For Teach and his colleagues, this necessitates their evolving into a shallow embodiment of what they most wish to be, the dream that they carry with them of being businessmen. Through language and an instinct for survival, they have denied their true sense of selfhood and have become deformed reflections of the 'acceptable' personas they have adopted. At the bottom end of the social scale, they absurdly aspire to the heights of the most prestigious boardroom. Malcolm Hay remarks upon Mamet's brilliantly witty and incisive dialogue [which] gradually lays bare the pathetic attempts to think big and act big, the crude manoeuvrings and hustling, the continued attempts - even among friends - to gain the upper hand.

Thus, they live their lives at second hand, constantly - and often hilariously - justifying their appalling behaviour as being a necessary consequence of business. If they can convince themselves of the legitimacy of what they say and do in the name of business, they can appease their feelings of inadequacy and revel in the fantasy of being important.

Mamet's characters are, essentially, lonely and desperate individuals, living in a debased wilderness in which morals and metaphysics seem to have no place. Their sense of morality is derived from the false standards by which they live and, consequently, friendship, loyalty, even love must take second place to the relentless pursuit of an already tarnished eldorado. But AMERICAN BUFFALO is not, finally, a bleak cry of despair which offers no hope. There is hope in the play, and it resides in the relationship between Don and Bobby. Their friendship is genuine, moving and ultimately optimistic. Such a fragile bond may be a very tenuous base upon which to hang the only hopeful note, but at least it exists as a reminder that human emotions can transcend even the dross of urban civilisation.
During a lecture in 1979, Mamet spoke mainly about his then current play, LONE CANOE, but his comments about the background to that work and his reasons for writing it are illuminating when applied to AMERICAN BUFFALO. He said that he wrote the play out of a kind of unhappiness with myself and a kind of unhappiness with America - which I have to come back and say is an unhappiness with myself. As Allen Ginsberg says in a long poem called America, 'I see that I am America and I am talking to myself again'. [LONE CANOE is] a play about the individual in society ... I started off with a line of the play, which is that we know (although we have forgotten) that feast and famine have to follow one another. The...Chicago authors of 60 years ago... expatiate on the aridity, the cruelty, the essential emptiness of the years that would follow them, of an America based solely on the quest for material prosperity... They saw the world opening up through the benefits of commerce and industry. They saw through the material benefits to the decay, the loneliness and the sorrow that reliance on those benefits was already creating... What's occurred to me... is that we live at the end of that time. And if so, perhaps it is possible for us to look beyond the aridity and sorrow and the emptiness of this time and toward that New Thing that will supersede it.7

Don and Bobby's relationship appears to represent the "feast" which follows the "famine" of AMERICAN BUFFALO. In the love which exists between them lies optimism and compassion, two qualities which have been markedly absent from the action despite Teach's oft-avowed declarations of trust and loyalty. Mamet does not offer any concrete answers to all the problems he presents, but he does feel that essential and fundamental issues have been seriously broached. He says that

Looking at the America in which I live and which you have to be left with at the end of the play... I would hope [I am offering] courage to look at the world around you and say I don't know what the hell the answer is but I'm willing to reduce all of my perspectives of the world around me to the proper place. After everything is said and done, we're human beings, and if we really want to we can find a way to get on with each other, to have the great, almost immeasurable, courage it takes... [we must] be honest about... our desires and not... institutionalise or abstract our relationships with each other.8

That genuine and worthwhile relations between people remain only a vague possibility in Mamet's opinion suggests the bleakness of the society he dramatises but, as Christopher
Bigsby points out that he continues to assert it with such conviction is a testament to his belief that the theatre has a central role to play in social, moral and metaphysical terms. For all their immorality and weakness - or perhaps even because of it - Mamet feels affection for his characters; his compassion for them is as vital a fact in his work as is the contempt he expresses for the values to which they subscribe and the corrupt culture of which they are tragic examples. He never patronises them, nor uses them to score a cheap laugh. He has said

I don't write plays to dump on people. I write plays about people whom I love and am fascinated by. He has also stated that the writing of AMERICAN BUFFALO was "very heartfelt". Much of the strength in Mamet's work springs from his unswerving compassion and sensitivity; the humour may spring from the characters' sheer vulnerability and humanity but it is never employed as a means of scorning them. We may not wish to have such people as Teach and his colleagues as friends, but it is difficult not to detect something of ourselves in them as we watch their antics in pursuit of an almost certainly unattainable dream.

AMERICAN BUFFALO was premiered in Chicago in November 1975 at the Goodman Theatre. It won an Obie in 1976, and the New York Drama Critics Award of 1977 for the Best Play of the Year. Since then, it has enjoyed a number of revivals, both in the United States and in this country.

The America which forms the background of the play is one which is deeply troubled and divided. It had just witnessed the exposure of lies of its military establishments over the Vietnam crisis, and Nixon's increasingly futile attempts to further cover up the Watergate fiasco behind the language of Presidential privilege. In a recent South Bank Show, Mamet commented upon the double-standards which were so rife at the time:

This wonderfully unhappy country of ours has never decided what is a crime and what is not.

He described Nixon as a "petty crook" and Spiro Agnew [sic] as
a "liar and a cheat" who got the "Nobel Peace Prize even as he was bombing Cambodia". Elsewhere, Mamet notes how

We have watched our constitutional government suborned by petty hateful men and women sworn to obey the law, and we have heard them characterise their crimes as actions taken in the public interest. Consequently, we have come to doubt that it is possible to act in the public interest.

The moral standards and ideas of propriety reflected in Mamet's desperate and incompetent crooks are hardly surprising given this background; even those who should be considered above corruption had been exposed as base criminals. Quite apart from the political hiatus which was taking place, popular culture seemed to have reached an unprecedented level of decadence. For example, one of the number one box office films of the 1970s was THE GODFATHER, a movie in which the characters constantly speak of "business" when in fact they mean murder, and do so in tones of what is at once a chilling and absurd politeness. This veiled manner of expressing violence and hostility is frequently echoed in Mamet's characters, their sentiments often being at odds with the underlying viciousness and duplicity of their discussions. John Ditsky comments upon the links between the language in AMERICAN BUFFALO and that which can be heard in films such as ON THE WATERFRONT and, particularly, THE GODFATHER. He observes that

What results...is an elaborate politeness that meshes oddly with the context of theft and violence, increasing - one assumes, given the requisite audience sensitivity - situational tension among the members of that audience.15

A good example occurs after an intensely violent verbal exposition of hatred when Teach indulges in the following exchange with Bobby as the latter prepares to fetch breakfast. Teach tells Don:

Teach: And tell him he shouldn't say anything to Ruthie.
Don: He wouldn't.
Teach: No? No, you're right. I'm sorry, Bob.
Bob: It's okay.
Teach: I'm upset.
Bob: It's okay, Teach. (Pause)
Teach: Thankyou.
Bob: You're welcome. (Act I, p.13)
Similarly, there is a bizarre display of Teach's - and to some extent, Don's - duplicity and questionable comradeship when Bobby has been 'paid off' and will no longer take part in the robbery:

Bob: You said you were giving me fifty.
Don: I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Bob, you're absolutely right ...(Pause)
Bob: Thank you. (Pause) I'll see you later, huh, Teach?
Teach: I'll see you later, Bobby.
Don: I'll see you later, Bob.
Bob: I'll come back later.
Don: Okay.
Teach: See you.

(Act I, p.45)

That this ostensibly friendly exchange should occur when it is obvious to the audience that neither Don nor Teach are being honest with the boy is very revealing. It establishes Don's guilt in his over-compensatory apologies and Teach's inherent nastiness. Bobby is clearly nervous and confused about what is actually going on; this is suggested in his own exaggerated politeness and assertive friendliness. In this short extract, Mamet conveys something of the psychological machinations of each character: under the thin guise of elaborate good manners he variously depicts insecurity, fear, guilt, dishonesty, unscrupulousness and perfidy.

Crime thrillers like THE GODFATHER seem to have made an enormous impact upon Mamet's characters, but there were many more quite different kinds of cinema entertainment available at that time, most specifically those of the 'group jeopardy' or 'disaster movie' formula. Mamet attempts to explain why this type of film should have been so popular, given the anarchy of contemporary America:

We are so ruled by magic. We have ceased to believe in logic. The cause to which we attribute so many effects is, thinly masked, our own inadequacy. We take refuge in mumbo-jumbo, in the Snake Oil of the Seventies, in escapism.16

In order to escape the realities of everyday violence, audiences sought to appease their fears by projecting them onto ever larger canvases, representations of disaster so terrifying that they made their own fears bearable by
comparison. Additionally, Mamet observes how
In our motion picture theatres big black scary
monsters interfere with white starlets [KING_KONG].
Huge and persistent sharks devour tugboats [JAWS].
Things burn [TOWERING INFERNO], crumble [EARTHQUAKE]
or are inundated with unpleasant amounts of water
[THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE]. These are our world
destruction dreams. There is in our dreamlife, no
certainty. We objectify our insecurity and self-
loathing in the form of outside forces endeavouring
to punish us.17

Those he dramatises in AMERICAN BUFFALO have internalised
the terrors of these films: it is not for nothing that
Teach invokes images he has probably seen at the movies as
a means of expressing his own fears: "...some crazed lunatic
...Ax murderers..." (Act II, p.87), "I live with madmen"
(Act II, p.105) and "We all live like the cavemen" (Act II,
p.107).

Mamet wrote the play in order to express his unhappiness at
the way in which his society was evolving; decent moral
standards no longer appeared to have any place and genuine
emotions were being insidiously corrupted. His inspiration
for the kind of characters he uses in the work derives from
his association with those who live on the borders of society.
W.H. Macy, an actor friend of Mamet notes that
He's played cards with some guys you'd never wish
to meet.18

Mel Gussow describes the play's inception as follows:
Tracing the origins of AMERICAN BUFFALO, [Mamet] says
'I used to play in this poker game in the back of a
junk store. Some very interesting people came in and
out'. He asked himself 'What are the boundaries, the
rules of behaviour?' and decided 'law is chimerical.
Rules are anarchistic. Whenever two people have to do
something they make up rules to meet just that situation,
rules that will not bind them in future situations'.19

It is instructive to note that Mamet himself used to be known
as "Teach" on his visits to this "North Side junkshop".20
Bill Bryden, who directed both AMERICAN BUFFALO and GLENGARRY
CLEN ROSS for the National Theatre, likens Mamet's use of
language in AMERICAN BUFFALO to that which can be heard during
a high-stakes card game. For him, the world that Mamet
creates
is a world of all-night poker games.21
The speakers strive to appear candid and forthright, but underneath their apparent candour their language is tentative, sly and manipulative, interspersed with long pauses and silences. What is ironic about this state of affairs is that all parties present are completely aware of the linguistic games that they and their partners are playing, but carry on as though they are unaware of any subtext. Bryden goes on to note how in such circumstances a pause is a check...on the pause you check what you have in your hand...what the next move should be... and, in an article about the game of poker, Mamet notes how

Playing poker is a masculine ritual [and that] A good poker player knows that there is a time to push your luck and a time to retire gracefully, that all roads have a turning.23

This, and a judicious use of pauses, is translated into linguistic terms when Teach begins to question Don about the proposed heist:

Teach: You want to tell me what this thing is? Don: (Pause) The thing? Teach: Yeah. (Pause) What is it? (Act I, p.26)

When it becomes apparent that Don is not willingly going to tell him any details, Teach realises that he must use a different strategy: he affects a hurt and wounded tone to convey how offended he is. Don must realise that he is giving Teach the impression that he does not trust him sufficiently to include him in the deal:

Teach: ...Who am I, a policeman...I'm making conversation, huh? (Pause)...'Cause you know I'm just asking for talk...And I can live without this... (Ibid, p.27)

Finally, when Don relents, Teach adopts a manner of righteous indignation designed to make Don feel as guilty as possible:


Teach metaphorically 'plays his ace' with this last remark.
He has managed to successfully turn the tables, and to make Don feel like a naughty child. Not only this, he has raised Don's reluctance to include him in his plans into an issue over the importance of trust and friendship, two aspects which he himself will abandon with alacrity in the not too distant future but which currently serve as a means of 'scoring points' off Don. There is also a suggestion that Don knows full well that he will eventually succumb to Teach's pressure, but engages in this weak, verbal opposition as part of a necessary ritual, understood and accepted by both men.

A specific target for Mamet's satire in the play is what he considers to be the corrupting and dangerous influence of the American business ethic: by relating bad behaviour to a business context, almost anything can be excused. Indeed, Christopher Bigsby quotes a Mafia leader as saying "...it was business, just business"\(^{24}\) when he had just strangled a member of his own 'Family'. Mamet is appalled at the way in which business considerations have insidiously found their way into personal relations; he echoes the sentiments of Saul Bellow in his novel HERZOG who feels that

\[
\text{The life of every citizen is becoming a business. This, it seems to me, is one of the worst interpretations of the meaning of human life history has ever seen. Man's life is not a business.}\]^{25}

Mamet told Richard Gottlieb that

The play is about the American ethic of business...how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ethical compromises called business. I felt angry about business when I wrote the play. I used to stand at the back of the theatre and watch the audience as they left. Women had a much easier time with the play. Businessmen left it muttering vehemently about its inadequacies and pointlessness. But they weren't really mad because the play was pointless - no-one can be forced to sit through an hour-and-a-half of meaningless dialogue - they were angry because the play was about them.\(^{26}\)

On the South Bank Show, he explained that

Although you see a play about thieves...it is not [only] about that particular section of society but about ourselves.\(^{27}\)
During another interview, he made the further point that many people dismissed the play as nonsense because you can say anything you want in the American theatre as long as you don't mean it.28

Teach and his colleagues constantly converse in the language of business at the same time as planning to commit robberies, but Mamet sees them as no more corrupt than those in the very highest echelons of power. As Frank Rich notes, Mamet's low-life characters may represent "the refuse of American capitalism",29 but essentially there is no difference between them and their so-called 'respectable' counterparts. Mamet told Richard Gottlieb that

There's really no difference between the lumpen-proletariat and stockbrokers or corporate lawyers who are the lackeys of business [though] part of the American myth is that a difference exists, that at a certain point vicious behaviour becomes laudable.30

Henry Hewes questioned Mamet's use of such 'low-life' characters as a representation of the business world as a whole, and ridiculed his notion of corruption being identical regardless of its source. He said

In this case, you have three ineffectual people using these slogans so that they become patently absurd, whereas when you have Nixon and Haldeman and Erlichman doing it, it's not so absurd 31
to which Mamet replied

But that's the American myth again, Henry. The question is, here are people who are engaged in theft, and you say that they are absurd because they failed. The question is would they become more laudable if they succeed?32

Mamet is very concerned to get across his idea that corruption exists at both ends of the social scale and that neither is excusable. Because Teach, Don and Bobby are inarticulate and incompetent, does this make them more culpable than if they were at the head of a multi-national organisation or government? Mamet was inspired to write of this kind of ethical corruption by the American sociologist and economist, Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) and confirmed him as his source in a letter to Jack V. Barbera dated 6 June 1980.33 Veblen saw at the turn of the century what Mamet believes is happening today - that the corrupting influence of the
evolving economic system will eventually destroy civilisation. In his famous and influential book, THE THEORY OF THE LEISURE CLASS, Veblen described contemporary American life as going through a "predatory phase" which Mamet interprets as follows:

as Thorstein Veblen says, the behaviour on this level, in the lumpenproletariat, the delinquent class, and the behaviour on the highest levels of society...is exactly identical. The people who create nothing,...do nothing...have all sorts of myths at their disposal to justify themselves and their predators...steal from us. They rob the country spiritually and they rob the country financially.34

In such a society, Veblen notes how

the obtaining of goods by other methods than seizing comes to be accounted unworthy of man...The performance of productive work, or employment in personal service, falls under the same odium for the same reason.35

Mamet is of the opinion that America is in the throes of a similar predatory period; certainly Teach and his colleagues appear to believe that if wealth does not come their way other than through the cunning of gambling or outright theft, then it is not really worth having. Genuine work, by contrast, becomes "a caste mark of inferiority"36 and, since Mamet's characters' fantasise that they are businessmen, they feel such thankless toil is beneath them. Language can be easily distorted to fit in with this kind of philosophy: just as Veblen noted how "honourable" could be distorted to mean "assertion of superior force...formidable"37 so Teach expresses his unabridged admiration for Don's professionalism when he makes the coin collector pay $90 for an object he had thought was a piece of junk: "Always good business...Took balls...You're going to get him now" (Act I, pp. 30, 31 and 33). Don feels that he has failed as a shopkeeper unless he has been able to somehow cheat his customers. He refuses to acknowledge that the function of a salesman is to serve his customers, and to offer them a fair deal. He tells Teach about the coin collector and how he believes the man slighted him by his very presence:

He comes in here like I'm his fucking doorman...Doing me this favour by just coming in my shop...Like he has done me this big favour just by coming in my shop.

(Act I, p.32)
A simple business transaction has been distorted by Don's logic: he sees it not so much as a mutually beneficial financial contract as proof that the customer has in some way taken advantage of him. The fact that Don had been paid a very large sum of money for an item he had previously considered to be absolutely worthless has become irrelevant; he feels that he has been cheated, that the coin was probably worth a great deal more than he was paid and that he has, therefore, been ridiculed. Consequently, the robbery to steal the buyer's entire coin collection is justified in the name of business. Theft is legitimised in Don's eyes because one deceit deserves another.

Earlier, Bobby's assertion that Fletch had "...jewed Ruthie out of [a] pig iron" (Act I, p.6) is countered by Don's avowal that the deal was totally legitimate, even though it seems likely that the pig iron was indeed stolen. In fact this is corroborated by Teach later in the play when he tells Don that Fletch "...stole some pig iron off Ruth" (Act II, p.77). However, when Bobby raises the issue, Don will not hear any criticism of Fletch:

Don: She was mad at him?
Bob: Yeah. That he stole her pig iron.
Don: He didn't steal it, Bob.
Bob: No?
Don: No.
Bob: She was mad at him...
Don: Well, that very well may be, Bob, but the fact remains that it was business. That's what business is.
Bob: What?
Don: People taking care of themselves. Huh?

(Act I, pp.6,7)

To extend this kind of logic further, any game of cards in which Teach has lost any money is automatically supposed to have been fixed; if Fletch won when Teach did not, the only conclusion possible is that Teach had been cheated. This assumption, in turn, validates Teach's subsequent betrayal of Fletch. He tells Don that if he does not act quickly and enlist his (Teach's) help with the job, he will "turn around to find [Fletch] took the joint off by himself" (Act II, p.77), an action which he has himself just
proposed. The business context of their elaborate preparation for the robbery not only offers the men a guise of self-sufficiency and justification but also, as Julius Novick points out,

provides a licence, exerts a pressure, for personal betrayal.\(^38\)

The betrayal of Bobby's trust and loyalty is quickly followed by an abandonment of Fletch; in this paranoid world, there is simply no time to take chances or, indeed, to miss an opportunity for selfish pragmatism.

Veblen's evocation of a society which raised "Conspicuous Leisure and Conspicuous Consumption"\(^39\) into an art form was also observed to

translate free enterprise as total licence and morality as the exercise of an anarchic will.\(^40\)

This is reflected in AMERICAN BUFFALO during Teach's defence of his version of American individualism: his solemn and hilarious speech is offered as a vindication of his own corruption as he tells Don that free enterprise is

The freedom...of the Individual...To Embark On Any Fucking Course that he sees fit...In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit. Am I so out of line on this...Does this make me a Commie?...The country's founded on this, Don. You know this.

(Act II, pp.74, 75)

Teach delivers this speech in justification of his intention to steal a valuable coin collection and anything else he can lay his hands on, and so nicely synchronises what is necessary to survive in Veblen's "predatory culture"\(^41\) with a perverse celebration of America's liberal Constitution.

The use of capital letters and use of underlining as emphases suggest Teach's didactic, self-righteous tone as he piously pontificates about the immorality of not breaking the law! His final assertion that Don must be aware of this state of affairs is intended to flatter him into corroboration.

The world of business has irrevocably infiltrated friendship and Mamet is deeply distressed at the artificial sentiments which have resulted from such a union. Don, Teach and Bobby constantly confuse friendship with business and engage
in all kinds of treachery in its name. Friendship has for them become synonymous with business utility. Teach sees himself as a businessman who won't allow business to impinge upon his personal relationships, but he is in fact the least capable of the three men of separating the two. Speaking of a card game in which he lost a great deal of money to Fletch and Ruthie, he pretends that his 'business' mentality has not influenced his thinking:

We're talking about money for Chrissake, huh? We're talking about cards. Friendship is friendship, and a wonderful thing, and I am all for it. I have never said different, and you know me on this point. Okay. But let's just keep it separate, huh? Let's just keep the two apart, and maybe we can deal with each other like some human beings.

(Act I, p.15)

Later, he attempts to persuade Don that Bobby is too unpredictable to trust with the robbery:

Teach: (Pause) Don't send the kid in.
Don: I shouldn't send Bobby in?
Teach: No. (Now, just wait a second.) Let's siddown on this. What are we saying here? Loyalty. (Pause) You know how I am on this. This is great. This is admirable.
Don: What?
Teach: This loyalty. This is swell. It turns my heart the things that you do for the kid.
Don: What do I do for him, Walt?
Don: No, I don't do anything for him.
Teach: In your mind you don't, but the things, I'm saying, that you actually go do for him. This is fantastic. All I mean, a guy can be too loyal, Don. Don't be dense on this. What are we saying here? Business.

(Act I, pp.34,35)

Don becomes defensive when Teach begins to underscore how much the older man cares for the boy; perhaps Don feels that Teach is implying an unnatural affection, a homosexual love for Bobby which is quite untrue. Teach knows that Don is susceptible to flattery, but goes too far. He begins to detract from what he has implied by stating that Don is probably unaware of just how good he is to Bobby. The final coup de grace is delivered when Teach utters the magic word 'Business'. All the talk of loyalty and friendship is suddenly and emphatically put into its proper perspective as he mentions what is the most important issue in their lives. Later in the play, the priority that both men give to their
business deals is mercilessly exposed by Mamet: Teach has brutally beaten Bobby for apparently ruining their plans, and Don has allowed it to happen. "You brought it on yourself", he tells him (Act II, p.98). Thus, even the tenuous love which exists between Don and Bobby can be stretched to breaking point if business interests are at stake, although Don's subsequent display of affection and atonement for his complicity in the beating somewhat sweetens his part in the proceedings.

The pathetic Bobby is himself infected with the business instinct; when forced into an impossible position through his own incompetence, he resorts to desperate measures. In a vain attempt to buy back Don's love when he believes that he has ruined his plans, he goes out and acquires his own buffalo nickel so that he can barter with Don for his friendship. He tries to explain that he bought the coin to make Don happy: "For Donny" (Act II, p.103). Don is touched by the gesture, but Teach's reaction to this display of (to him) mawkish and moronic affection is only to say "You people make my flesh crawl" (Ibid) and to fling Don's paternalism in his face:

You fake. You fucking fake. You fuck your friends. You have no friends. No wonder that you fuck this kid around...You seek your friends with junkies. You're a joke on this street, you and him.

(Ibid, p.104)

Bobby's pathetic gesture has been badly misinterpreted; it has been seen as a betrayal of business and, as none of the men are capable of separating personal relations from their money-market mentalities, this results in Bobby's hospitalisation and Teach's affirmation that Don is an object of derision who seeks his friends "with junkies". The violence of Teach's denunciation of Don and Bobby is brilliantly conveyed in the alliterative use of the letter 'f' as Teach contemptuously spits out his abuse. In this context, the word 'fuck' becomes only one of the 'obscenities'; all the words beginning with 'f' become, by association, obscene. Poor Bobby does not seem to have learnt the lesson which Don
Don (Dave King) and Bobby (Michael Feast) in AMERICAN BUFFALO, National Theatre, 1978.
had tried to teach him early in the play, that "...there's business and there's friendship" (Act I, p.?) and that "You don't have friends this life..." (Ibid) although, as we have seen, there is at least some confusion in Don's mind about the two. This confusion is, in effect, his salvation and testament to his compassion and innate decency.

The world that Mamet creates is charged with violence; his characters can barely articulate their rage or sense of impotence and so they often react in the only way known to them - by indulgence in deception, betrayal and violence. Even a man like Teach, although seriously disturbed and profoundly affected by the lack of stability in his society, remains at base a sad and desperate character; he is not a psychopath or a fundamentally evil man, but one who uses violence and his manipulative powers to buy affection and respect. Mamet draws Teach as a particularly vulnerable and child-like person, anxious to retain the fragile bonds of friendship he has managed to tie with the likes of Don and Bobby although his lack of loyalty and casual cruelty are at odds with this desire. A mass of contradictions, Teach arms himself as a deterrent against "...the path of some crazed lunatic [i.e. the householder he plans to rob, who might irrationally see him] as an invasion of his personal domain" (Act II, p.87). He does not seem to understand that he, himself, would be the intruder whose presence would initiate such violence. As he preaches the virtues of peace and amity, he casually loads his gun in case "God forbid, something inevitable occurs" (Ibid). That he sees a violent attack as not only likely but inevitable points both to his paranoia and his own sadistic propensities. The oxymoron within the sentence again underscores the many contradictions which make up Teach's personality. He goes on: "...something inevitable occurs and the choice is (And I'm saying "God forbid") it's either him or us" (Ibid). Teach invokes "God" to protect him and to convince Don that he is the last person who seeks violence. As a reasonable man, he must put his case for the necessity of the gun. As he tells Don, "it could be either him or us". The use of the plural "us" instead of the singular is
indicative not only of Teach's mounting excitement as he warms to his theme, but also his wish to personalise the sentence by including Don as a possible victim, too. To further compound the necessity for arms, he describes how the householder might try to defend himself by taking

...a cleaver from one of those magnetic boards... with the two strips...And whack and somebody is bleeding to death.

(Ibid)

Teach's vivid imagination runs on ahead of him; he clearly envisages the meat cleaver and even the kind of magnetic board on which it will be hung, the type with "the two strips". Just as he had tried to personalise his earlier statement that "it could be either him or us" by using the plural, so he now invokes the abstract "somebody" to describe the person who is "bleeding to death". In order to make Don see that he must, of necessity, be armed with a gun, he brings him right into the story he depicts, making him see through his words what could happen. Mamet makes Teach's demotic and laughable language serve as an ironic oral version of Joseph Conrad's dictum for written success: the writer must be able

To make you hear, to make you feel...before all, ...to make you see.43

It is instructive to note how often Teach uses religious terminology to convey his deepest emotions; he uses the phrase "God forbid" twice within a few moments and states that "I pray we don't [need a gun]". As he muses over the safe combination he hopes the proposed victim has written down, he ludicrously underscores his wish "...in the event that (God forbid) he somehow forgets it..." (Act II, p.80). In a spiritually dispossessed world, the evocation of God appears to be necessary only as a kind of 'good luck' incantation - it has certainly lost all of its deeper resonance. Thus, as Teach calls upon God to defend him as he plans to commit a potentially violent crime, so he arms himself against the violence on the streets where "Guys go nuts...Public officials...Ax murderers..." (Act II, p.87). Killers could be on the street and Teach wishes only to arm himself against such hazards. He is terrified of violence and yet he, as a violent man, has become what he
Don (Dave King) and Teach (Jack Shepherd) in AMERICAN BUFFALO, National Theatre, 1978
most fears: he is one of the people he tries not to encounter. Because of his terror of urban violence, Teach paradoxically admires the police force. As he loads his gun, he piously observes that

They have the right idea. Armed to the hilt. Sticks, Mace, knives...who knows what the fuck they got. They have the right idea. Social customs break down, next thing everybody's lying in the gutter.

(Act II, p.88)

Teach and his colleagues are, of course, instrumental in creating just the kind of anarchic environment they fear; they contribute to the dissolution of "social customs", and yet rely on the police for assistance against such turmoil. Like the real-estate salesmen in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS and the protagonist in EDMOND, they themselves have become part of the problematical society they fear and distrust. They break the law and yet depend upon it for protection, deplore violence and yet are quite ready to engage in it for their own purposes. The irony of such logic is taken one step further when Fletch, their proposed accomplice in the robbery, is mugged on the way to the rendezvous.

Not only does Teach value and admire the institution of the police force, he is also quick to champion other civic values. Without "free enterprise", the basic right of all American citizens, "...we're just savage shitheads in the wilderness...Sitting around some vicious campfire" (Act II, pp.74,75). When Teach believes that the final betrayal has been perpetrated, he does not merely explode in another tirade of obscenity, but chooses instead to list what he feels are the fundamental elements which must be observed in a civilised society but which are sorely lacking in his own:

The Whole Entire World. There is No Law. There is No Right and Wrong. The World is Lies. There Is No Friendship. Every Fucking Thing. (Pause) Every God-forsaken Thing...We all live like the cavemen.

(Act II, p.107)

The progression from "savage shitheads in the wilderness" to "cavemen" shows Teach's continuity of thought from mere musing about the subject to a deeply impassioned cry for order amidst the chaos. Mamet compounds the irony of all
this by having Teach cite "Law" as one of the essential elements of society. If, however, one disregards the absurdity of a criminal holding such reverence for the law, it is not difficult to understand why Teach should, like the majority of citizens, rely upon the comforting thought of an all-protective blanket like the police force to control his fears. Mamet notes how the media responded in the 1970s to the ever-increasing twitchiness and paranoia of the American populace; they created more and more 'cops and robbers' TV programmes which were intended to work as a kind of soothing balm and send viewers to bed at least a little consoled. Mamet states that

We turn on our television and we see one show after another glorifying our law enforcement agencies. We are an open book. Here we propitiate those forces we elect to stave off those who would take our electronic ranges from out of our kitchenette...Surely we must be safe from terrors both of corporeal and social mal­efactors. The Cop on the Beat...protects us.44

The notion of a crook maintaining a high regard for law and order even as he commits crimes is one of the subjects of Caryl Churchill's play, SOFTCOPS. This was inspired by Michel Foucault's SURVEILLER ET PUNIR. In Caryl Churchill's play, the arch-criminal Vidocq is actually made Chief of Police whilst another, Lacenaire, is executed at his own request as an act of profane martyrdom. Churchill sees the boundaries between the activities of the police and those of the criminal fraternity as somewhat blurred. She notes how

There is a constant attempt by governments to depoliticise criminal acts, to make criminals a separate class from the rest of society so that subversion will not be general, and part of this process is the invention of the detective and the criminal, the cop and the robber.45

In the same way as the media seeks to console the general public with happy-endings in TV crime thrillers, so the government attempts to keep police order and criminal activity separate, although law enforcement methods seem to be moving closer towards the violence they seek to control. This is further borne out in cult film heroes like DIRTY HARRY, whose viciousness and callousness in the name of law and order raises serious questions about the
exact role of the police. In Churchill's play, Vidocq muses about his possible appointment as Chief of Police:

Of course I am a professional where crime is concerned. I couldn't lead a life completely cut off from it.\(^46\)

and later, Lacenaire sings

I'm such a thief, Your Majesty, I'm such a villain you'll agree, I'd make a great policeman.\(^47\)

Teach the criminal views the police as good men with a job to do and, thankfully, the means to do it. There is a sense in which he sees himself in similar terms: he, too, must be "armed to the hilt" just in case "something inevitable occurs". He needs his gun for "Protection of me and my partner. Protection, deterrence" (Act II, p.88). Since protection and deterrence are the reasons for the existence of the police force, it is clear that Teach considers himself close in spirit to such an institution. However, he still freezes when he catches a glimpse of them "cruising" the streets (Act I, p.30 and Act II, p.88), holding his breath until they are no longer visible.

The profound paradoxes and deep dislocations of perspective which exist generally in Mamet's characters are given their sharpest outlines in Teach, and Jack Shepherd who played him in the National Theatre's 1978 production told me that he found the part a very difficult one to play for this reason:

I had a real struggle with Teach's character. Early on, I based him a bit on 'The Fonz' - the accent seemed right, North American working class...I was accused of trying to copy [Robert] de Niro's style in TAXI DRIVER but this had not crossed my mind. It could have been unconscious as I had indeed seen the film; the protagonist in that film, Travis Bickle, is an unhinged character in a similar vein. Both men are prone to profound disruptions of logic and speech which are at odds with their general behaviour. Teach will say things to Don that last two or three minutes, and which seem totally irrelevant, but the entire speech is a nuance, a means of establishing mood... It's very hard to act this kind of scene, to make the words and the actions believable.\(^43\)

Shepherd gave me some examples of what he meant by the disproportion between word and deed in Teach, the best of which were his assertions: "I am calm. I'm just upset"
(Act II, p. 70) and "...the odds are he's not there, so when he answers..." (Act II, p. 72). Such blatant contradictions are difficult to convey theatrically, although Shepherd believes that by the end of the run he had found how to give an authentic performance, full of darting movements and quick speech which suggested the contradictions within his personality... lots of physical tics and jerkiness.\textsuperscript{49}

However, AMERICAN BUFFALO is a play which is essentially concerned with language rather than deed, and Mamet advances the action almost entirely through that medium. He has said that

I think that it is absolutely essential that every beat in a play put forward the action, that every word in a play put forward the action. And any word of a play which does not put forward the action, must be excised from the play. And that any point in the play where the action takes too great a leap or turns back on itself, that point in the play must be corrected. I believe that, completely, strongly... Those points at which the attention of the audience will lag, where the audience will in effect nap, those points, no matter how brilliant the dialogue is, no matter how exciting the stage action is, those points which are not essential to the action of the play - to what happens next - must be corrected... I don't, however, feel that \underline{any excess} applies to AMERICAN BUFFALO.\textsuperscript{50}

In an article entitled \textit{Some Thoughts on Playwriting}, Thornton Wilder recalled Maeterlinck's words concerning movement in drama:

Maeterlinck said that there was more drama in the spectacle of an old man seated by a table than in the majority of plays offered to the public. He was juggling with the various meanings in the word 'drama'. In the sense whereby drama means the intensified concentration of life's diversity and significance he may well have been right; if he meant drama as a theatrical representation before an audience he was wrong. Drama on the stage is inseparable from forward movement, from action.\textsuperscript{51}

I would argue that Wilder is incorrect in his assertion that "Drama on the stage is inseparable from forward movement, from action". Many of Mamet's plays have been criticised for their stasis, or lack of plot, but they nonetheless remain powerfully dramatic. The "spectacle of an old man seated by a table" envisaged by Maeterlinck could easily anticipate Beckett's monologue, KRAPP'S LAST TAPE, a work
which was not actually written until 1958. Maeterlinck could not have known just how 'dramatic' such a spectacle could be. Similarly, another short play by Beckett entitled HAPPY DAYS is even more static, in that its heroine is completely immobilised throughout the work in a grassy-mound which is situated centre-stage. With such works it is surely the quality of the text which is all-important, which gives the pieces movement and interest, and has very little to do with how much physical action is actually taking place. Mamet has expressed his irritation at the frequent accusations he receives of writing static, plotless and amorphously structured plays. He told Ross Wetzsteon

One critic in Chicago...says I write the kind of plays where a character wakes up in Act One and finally gets around to putting on his bath robe in Act Three and elsewhere he has noted how

even after Beckett and Pinter, there are people... who think that three men talking for two acts about a break-in which they do not commit does not constitute plot.

Eugene O'Neill - an avowed influence on Mamet's work - once observed how, in THE ICEMAN COMETH, he had used

no plot in the ordinary sense...I didn't need plot; the people are enough.

Teach, Don and Bobby are almost enough for Mamet in AMERICAN BUFFALO; it is certainly a play which concentrates upon character exposition rather than plot mechanics although it does, clearly, have a discernible plot and, despite criticism, considerable pace and movement. It is quite understandable, therefore, that Mamet should feel irritated at critics such as John Simon who declare in frustration:

I'm not asking for unity of action. I'm asking for any bloody kind of action whatsoever.

It has been stated elsewhere that Mamet's is a theatre of language; it is through this medium that he shapes his plays, using words as more than a means of simple communication. Teach can, apparently, conduct all of the affairs in his life by means of speech alone; he can coerce and intimidate, wheedle and confuse. Indeed, he is so linguistically versatile that he constantly enmeshes others into his own fantasies.
One of the methods he uses to influence and entrap is his construction of what Christopher Bigsby calls an "alternative reality"; the intention is that this 'reality' should subsume the listener and sweep him along with it as though it were indeed the truth, and not merely a bizarre substitute which exists only in Teach's mind. It is not quite clear whether he himself believes in the veracity of his fabrications - he probably does once he has got into his stride - and this would, therefore, be a good example of Mamet's claim that language prescribes action rather than the other way around. As he talks himself into verbal culs-de-sac, Teach must go on and on inventing in order to extricate himself unharmed from the encounter or to ensure that his linguistic web is of the requisite tautness and immutability.

Teach gathers up what he feels to be the essence of disparate incidents until he can bind them together into a narrative with which he can work. Out of half-formulated ideas and conveniently vague events he creates new 'truths' which can be moulded, changed and developed as he so wishes. Thus, having given credibility to the notion that Bobby is a villain, the instrument of a finely wrought though obscure conspiracy which could impinge upon his and Don's affairs, he gives vent to a terrifying display of violence. He viciously beats the boy, ignoring his pleas for mercy. The situation he has created by words alone has been given more weight by language than by any palpable evidence. When his story is weakened by subsequent events, and proves to have been totally wrong, he immediately begins to construct another in order to escape culpability. In this way, Teach is able to distance himself from the consequences of his own actions. When Ruthie rings to confirm Bobby's story that Fletch is indeed in the hospital, albeit not the one originally cited by Bobby, Teach switches his contempt from Bobby to Ruthie: "She's got a lot of nerve..." (Act II, p.99) and, as the truth becomes overwhelmingly obvious, he changes the subject completely and attempts to bring things back to normal day-to-day business, incidentally implying Bobby's indebtedness to him: "And you owe me twenty bucks" (Act II,
p.100). After he has wrecked Don's shop, he feels rather embarrassed by the results of his own actions - he has been made to look foolish and unnecessarily violent. Consequently, he complains of the mess and disorder which he has been instrumental in creating, suggesting that Don should "...clean this place up" (Act II, p.110). Language has therefore been used to disorientate and confuse; merely by listening to and becoming involved in Teach's 'reality', Don has forfeited his own interpretation of events and thereby become as guilty as Teach in his betrayal of Bobby. This is all the more shocking because of the obvious bond which exists between Don and the boy, and suggests the power of language to infect and corrupt.

Earlier, Don flies to the defence of Bobby when Teach criticises him for being a drug addict:

Don: ...I don't want that talk, only, Teach.
              (Pause) You understand.
Teach: I more than understand, and I apologise. (Pause)
              I'm sorry.
Don: That's the only thing.
Teach: All right. But I tell you. I'm glad I said it.
Don: Why?
Teach: 'Cause it's best for these things to be out in the open.
Don: But I don't want it out in the open.
Teach: Which is why I apologised.

(Act I, pp.35, 36)

This kind of linguistic circularity is so typical of Teach; finding himself in a corner, he flatters and then lets fall what he believes to be his 'trump card'. Should this prove ineffectual, he deftly moves the conversation round to confuse his audience into believing that they have no cause for complaint! After a long harangue during which he questions the advisability of including Fletch in the heist, Teach realises that he is losing ground. To counter this, he suddenly reverses the situation to make it seem as though it had been Don who had expressed doubts:

Teach: ...you think it's good business to call Fletch in? To help us.
Don: Yes.
Teach: Well then okay. (Pause) Are you sure?
Don: Yeah.
Teach: All right, if you're sure...
Don: I'm sure, Teach.
Teach: Then, all right, then. That's all I worry about. (Act I, pp.54,55)

Similarly, once it has been agreed that Fletch will after all be included in the deal, Teach needs to confirm whether Don is angry with him for his virulent opposition. He plaintively asks: "Are you mad at me?" (Act I, p.56) only to reverse the situation moments later by stating "I want to make one thing plain before I go, Don. I am not mad at you." (Ibid, p.58).

Perhaps the most bizarre examples of Teach's ability to conjure up an entirely fictional reality occur when he and Don are mulling over the finer points of the robbery. By saying the words aloud seems to Teach to make them true:

Teach: The man hides his coin collection, we're probably looking the guy has a study...I mean, he's not the kind of guy to keep it in the basement...So we're looking for a study...And we're looking, for, he hasn't got a safe...he's probably going to keep 'em...where? (Pause)

Don: I don't know. His desk drawer.

Teach: (You open the middle, the rest of 'em pop out?)

Don: (Yeah.) (Act I, p.48)

Eventually, Don raises the possibility that the victim may well have a safe. Teach loses no time to eradicate any worries his colleague may have in this respect:

Teach: What you do, a safe...You find the combination.

Don: Where he wrote it down.

Teach: Yes.

Don: What if he didn't write it down?

Teach: He wrote it down. He's gotta write it down. What happens he forgets it?

Don: What happens he doesn't forget it?

Teach: He's gotta forget it, Don. Human nature. The point being, even he doesn't forget it, why does he not forget it?

Don: Why?

Teach: 'Cause he got it wrote down. (Act II, pp.79,80)

Teach continues to bamboozle Don with this kind of inverse logic until Mamet concludes the whole ludicrous episode with wonderful irony:

Don: What if he didn't write it down?

Teach: He wrote it down.

Don: I know he did. But just, I'm saying, from another instance. Some made-up guy from my imagination.

Teach: You're saying in the instance of some guy... he didn't write it down?...Well this is another
thing...It's another matter. The guy, he's got the shit in the safe, he didn't write it down...How do you know he didn't write it down?

Don: (I'm, you know, making it up.)

Teach: Well, then, this is not based on fact.

(Act II, p.81)

It is clear that Don has been drawn irrevocably into Teach's linguistic web; he is nervous of his friend and afraid of antagonising him. He may still have some doubts about the validity of Teach's argument, but he dare not confront him directly. Instead, he chooses to talk of "Some made-up guy from [his] imagination". That Teach should end the discussion with the assertion that Don's postulation is not based on fact and cannot, therefore, be taken seriously, is surely evidence that he has convinced himself of the authenticity of his case. One can almost hear his mind working as he stalls for time to think of an adequate response to Don's all-too reasonable doubts and then, with what is by now predictable behaviour, turns the doubts around and blames Don for making assertions "not based on fact".

It has already been noted that the language in AMERICAN BUFFALO has been culled from countless crime films and TV shows; it also owes a lot to consumer advertising. A sentence such as Teach's "I mean the guy's got your taking a high-speed blender and a Magnavox" (Act I, p.35) not only highlights his abrupt change of grammar mid-sentence as his mind races ahead of his words, but also includes a domestic trade name like "Magnavox". This is a crucial linguistic ploy of Mamet's and is certainly not included merely to fill up space. These characters use words they have picked up from commercials and consumer magazines to give weight to their speeches, to impress and to demonstrate what they believe is their savoir faire. In the same way as teenage boys delight in the ability to name obscure makes of motor cars or to brag about their arcane knowledge of music, mechanics or even sex, so too do Mamet's characters utilise the language of consumer advertising to similarly impress. The "Magnavox" has to be precisely named to give it both substance and veracity whereas, in fact, it might not even exist! The "high-speed blender" cited by Teach is another
example of this kind of thinking. Probably this and the
"Magnavox" are items which he would dearly like to own, and
so he verbalises them as he mentally runs through the
possible contents of the victim's house. Again, by saying
such words aloud, Teach somehow believes that this will
make them become a reality.

Don, too, speaks the language of TV commercials; in clichés
which have been lifted from countless advertising sources
he tells Bobby:

    Breakfast...is the most important meal of the day...
    You may feel good, you may feel fine, but something's
    getting overworked, and you are going to pay for it.

(Act I, p.7)

He goes on to sing the praises of yoghurt, although Teach
distrusts all health foods: "You shouldn't eat that shit"
(Act I, p.21) he tells Don, but Don doesn't listen and
even cites a TV show in its defence:

    It's not health foods, Teach. It's only yogurt...
    They used to joke about it on "My Little Margie".

(Act I, p.21)

The linguistic patterns utilised by Teach often also
resemble those of TV journalism in that they share analogous
techniques of economy and contraction. TV announcers,
especially those involved in news bulletins, have begun to
develop a register peculiar to themselves: a common feature
of their syntax is to begin a sentence with a key word
and then to link it to the rest of the item in a way calcu­
lated to gain the maximum effect. For example, "Bolivia,
and it is now clear that..."57 and "Cricket, and play
resumed at Headingly this morning..."58 Teach often
arranges his sentences to gain a similar effect: when
Bobby turns up quite unexpectedly, he begins his question
with an expletive to give it full force: "Fuck is he doing
here?" (Act II, p.64) and as he expounds on the lack of
morals in their society, his mind harks back to the insult
that he believes he received from Ruthie:

    (Nowhere dyke...) And take thosefuckers in the
    concentration camps. You think they went in there by
    choice?...They were dragged in there, Don...

(Act II, p.75)
The use of slang is very marked in this play; as G.L. Brook observes, its intrusion into a language is neither wholly good nor bad, though it tends to remove delicate shades of meaning in existing words and leads to over-emphasis and a straining after effect. The Chicagoan poet Carl Sandburg once wrote that he believed that "slang is English with its sleeves rolled up" and it is undoubtedly its muscular quality that led Mamet to include so much of it in his work. In a survey, many American students said that they used slang for the sake of conciseness and emphasis, to make their speech sound lively rather than stodgy and to express a desire for intimacy with their friends. They also expressed "discontent with hackneyed words and phrases" which could no longer convey what they most wished to communicate. The need to develop slang usage between friends as an expression of intimacy seems to be the case with Mamet's characters. The following exchange is littered with slang words which have obviously been gleaned from the TV and/or film world, and are used here to bind the speakers together in understanding:

Don: So...we kept a lookout on his place, and that's the shot.
Teach: And who's the chick?
Don: What chick?
Teach: You're asking Bob about.
Don: Oh yeah. The guy, he's married. I mean (I don't know.) We think he's married. They got two names on the bell...Anyway, he's living with this chick, you know...
Teach: What the hell.
Don: And you should see this chick.
Teach: Yeah, huh?
Don: She is a knockout. I mean, she is real nice-lookin', Teach.

(Act I, p.33)

Sexual camaraderie between the two men is very high; Teach's liberal dismissal of the fact that the couple in question may not be married ("What the hell") is intended to indicate his broad-minded nature. His "Yeah, huh?" is an expression of eagerness, of his desire to know more details about "the chick". In these two words, Mamet hints at Teach's salacious and lecherous nature, whilst Don strains to convince him that he himself has been very aroused by the sight of the
The indulgence in a casual use of slang leads quite naturally on to an equally casual use of cliché. As Milton Shulman notes, in the world of AMERICAN BUFFALO, "the cliché is a way of life". Indeed, American language in general seems to have a peculiar propensity for slang and cliché, and Raymond Chandler once noted how his native tongue was much "more alive to clichés". Teach often uses the most hackneyed clichés as a means of expressing his own strangely convoluted ideas of philosophy; his ideas again derive from television, particularly the impossibly tortuous world of the TV soap operas. In these programmes, the cliché rules as nowhere else: there are very few shades of meaning, and the world is seen only in shades of black and white. Emotional responses are minimised or exaggerated to fit in with plot lines, extremely traumatic events being given similar weight to minor problems and an ordinary set of moral values does not seem to exist. When Teach argues with Don about Fletch's part in their projected crime, he tells him

...you are full of shit...I'm sorry. You want me to hold your hand? This is how you keep score...I talk straight to you 'cause I respect you. It's kickass or kissass, Don, and I'd be lying if I told you any different.

(Act II, pp.75,76)

Teach reels off clichés as truths with remarkable speed. In fact, this entire speech is constructed of them. His terminology is contrived, artificial and reflects a totally immoral world in which truth is prostituted as the most banal cliché. The use of "kickass or kissass" as a philosophical tenet is merely a vulgar way of expressing what so many soap opera heroes and heroines daily articulate. Theirs is a
world of big business, of oil deals, broken marriages and illegitimate children. To exist in such a world, one must either succumb to pressure or fight back: Teach has internalised these values and chosen the latter course of action. He evidently sees himself as one of the heroes: hard, remorseless and determined. His mental picture of himself is a very different one from that perceived by the audience.

A highly sensitive individual in some ways, Teach's emotions have been blunted over the years by constant media battering; he utters the words that he does not because they serve as genuine communication but because his thoughts are guided by artificial standards. Sometimes, his use of cliché is entirely inappropriate and ridiculous as when he remarks of a man he has never met "Some people never change" (Act I, p.32) and sometimes superfluous: holding up the dead pig-leg spreader, he quizzes Bob on what he thinks the object is. He finally informs him, in tones reminiscent of John Wayne: "Things are what they are" (Act I, p.40). Clichés are scattered throughout the play, relentless and absurd, "nobody's perfect" (Act I, p.52) and "can't take the truth" (Act II, p.83) being just two more examples. As Archie Rice would have it, in this play, clichés have a habit of "...dropping like bats from the ceiling".

Teach seriously considers himself to be a philosopher but Mamet constantly deflates his spurious ontological speculations with a deadly irony. He tells Don

"Man is a creature of habits. Man does not change his habits overnight. This is not like him. (And if he does, he has a very good reason)...

(Act II, p.80)

Mamet milks Teach's grave tone for all it's worth. First, he gets the cliché wrong by adding an 's' to "habit" and then, just to make quite sure that there is no way in which he can lose this particular argument, Teach qualifies his statement in a parenthetical aside which (unintentionally) negates what he has just said. Don catches some of Teach's philosophical pretension. When he and Bob are discussing the cost of valuable coins, Don declares that they are
This bizarre statement reveals Don as being as much of an ignorant braggart as Teach. As a coin is a man-made object, it cannot at the same time be a freak of nature! Don's attempts to impress Bob with his knowledge of numismatics ironically probably does succeed; Bob is even more ignorant than Don and no doubt believes he is hearing the important opinions of an expert. When Teach has looked at a book on coin identification for less than a minute, he similarly professes himself to be something of a numismatic buff:

Teach: You got to have a feeling for your subject.
Don: The book can give you that.
Teach: This is what I'm saying to you. One thing. Makes all the difference in the world.
Don: What?
Teach: Knowing what the fuck you're talking about. And it's so rare, Don. So rare.

(Act I, p.50)

Minutes later, when he realises that he cannot possibly learn anything of value in so short a time, he becomes derisive and completely negates what he has just said:

...fuck the book. What am I going to do, leaf through the book for hours on end? The important thing is to have the idea... (Ibid, p.51)

Teach is the prime example of what have been referred to as Mamet's "Teach-like characters". During an interview, Colin Stinton talked about Mamet's use of this particular type of character:

The Teach-like character - in both the sense of Teach in AMERICAN BUFFALO and in the instructor sense of the phrase - is one which recurs again and again in Mamet's work. He is a man who pretends he knows something of value when, more often than not, he knows very little. What he does not know, he makes up...this is usually a great deal. Why such characters exist derives from one of Mamet's central concerns: that is, all his characters are trying to identify their roles in life, to try to gain control and to find their place in the world. They are all trying to identify themselves and, in so doing, part of the theory behind the Teach-mentality is revealed. Their thoughts run along the following lines: if I can teach it, then it must be true. If it can be passed along, it must exist. I teach therefore I am! The imparting of knowledge, true or false, gives some sense of substantiality to their lives. By adopting the role of instructor, they give themselves status and importance which
certainly lasts as long as they are 'teaching'. There are many, many people like this in David's work: obviously Teach in AMERICAN BUFFALO but also Robert in A LIFE IN THE THEATRE, Bernie in SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO and, after a while, EDMOND.

In an article concerning Mamet's style and the "Teach-like" characters of which Stinton has spoken, Richard Eder almost echoes his words in asserting that the maxim and governing motto of such characters is "I speak, therefore I am". On the same subject, Clive Barnes refers to the characters' "wise guy stupidity" which he observes is very neatly observed, with sentences being stretched and strained, turn[ing] back on one another, and all with a grotesquely humorous repetitiousness.

AMERICAN BUFFALO has become known as a classic of American theatre. It is a sobering thought that when it was premiered, it was seen by some critics as little more than a foul-mouthed expose of the criminal underworld, well-rendered but fundamentally meaningless. Indeed, some subsequent productions have been similarly described. When he first saw the play in 1977, John Beaufort praised Mamet's knack for accurately recording the scabrous vocabulary, jerky rhythms, half-formulated thoughts and non-sequiturs of his ludicrously inept hoodlums but considered that the playwright's observations (psychological, sociological etc.) were too superficial to waste time upon.

To him, the play was merely "a very thin slice of low life". When he saw a revival in 1983, he termed the play as an indulgent study of three bungling burglars obsessed with the fantasy of the big strike. Edwin Wilson described Mamet's characters as failed, small-time crooks...one is hard put to find anything of redeeming social value in their behaviour. Also the play is as limited in its vocabulary as it is in its plot...given the restricted nature of the characters and their situation...there is a limit to how much Mr. Mamet can say...The meaning in a play must reside somewhere - in the depth of the characters, in the poetry of the words or in the action - notions Mr. Mamet has largely eschewed.

Jack Tinker considered that [It is] difficult to guess why...any theatre audience of average sophistication [should be moved] to anything other than the distance between indifference and irritation...the play might make a mildly interesting
short lunchtime exercise [but] when we arrive all we learn is what we already knew: that in any jungle each creature must attend to its own survival.73

while Brendan Gill described the play as

curiously offensive piece of writing...every third word is either scatalogical or obscene; street language attempting in vain to perform the office of eloquence...it is presumptuous...The playwright, having dared to ask for our attention, provides only the most meagre crumbs of nourishment for our minds. Three characters of low intelligence and alley-cat morals exchange tiresome small-talk for a couple of hours, and the play stumbles to a halt in a monosyllabic colloquy intended to convey the message that life, rotten as it is, is all we have.74

Gordon Rogoff was equally unimpressed with the language in Mamet's work: he claimed that the characters "speak of macho frustrations almost entirely in four-letter words"75 and Christopher Porterfield felt that Mamet "revels a bit too much in...scatology and blasphemy";76 indeed, he believed that if one was to Delete the most common four-letter Anglo-Saxonism from the script...his drama might last only one hour instead of two.77

For Nicholas de Jongh,

Mamet...is here merely possessed by the small-talk tensions of minor villains, and his relish of their idiom almost becomes a dramatic end in itself...so engrossed is he by these three slightly characterised and underdeveloped people that he loses sight of the fact that the play's process becomes repetitive and arid.78

The misunderstandings and misinterpretations of these critics are instructive. For them, AMERICAN BUFFALO represents only simple naturalism which is poorly plotted and cast with inarticulate characters who indulge in tiresome and disgusting small-talk to no apparent end. To them, it is a play in which reality is all-important and in which nothing happens. Mamet believes that the initially poor critical response was due both to these kind of misunderstandings and also to the unwillingness of the reviewers to grant the work metaphorical status. This could be due, he feels, to the fact that it touched an uncomfortable nerve. He notes how

In this country [America] we only understand plays as dope, whose purpose is anaesthetic, meant to blot out consciousness...A play which does not soothe or
reinforce certain preconceived notions in an audience...simply baffles them.79

Elsewhere, he muses on how it was acceptable

in the fifties to do plays about junkies and longshoremen who were understood as a metaphor for ourselves; and in the seventies to present plays about people who were dying of cancer but the criminal subclass was not at that time a generally accepted metaphor, so that it was difficult for a lot of people to accept it as a play about ourselves, because the convention wasn't current.80

AMERICAN BUFFALO is, in fact, a deeply symbolic play. Not only does the junk shop reflect what Mamet sees as the detritus of modern America but June Schlueter and Elizabeth Forsyth note an earlier echo of this image in Nathaniel West's MISS LONELYHEARTS. They observe that

The America of Nathaniel West's MISS LONELYHEARTS is a spiritual wasteland, the suffering of its people chronicled in the doleful letters received by 'Miss Lonelyhearts', the newspaper advice columnist. Psychologically exhausted by the pleas of his readers, Miss Lonelyhearts imagines himself gazing at the 'paraphernalia of suffering' through a pawnshop window, seeing among its accumulated objects the remnants of America's broken dreams.81

Mamet surely had this work in mind when he wrote not only AMERICAN BUFFALO but also MR. HAPPINESS, a play which deals with a radio equivalent of Miss Lonelyhearts who similarly dispenses clichéd wisdom and platitudes to his desperate listeners. Significantly, however, Mr. Happiness does not appear to suffer the same pangs of agony endured by Nathaniel West's creation: he has become part of the show business enterprise in which he operates which airs the problems of its pathetic audience as a form of entertainment.

To carry the junkshop metaphor a little further, Christopher Porterfield notes how Don and Bobby draw together at the conclusion of the play in

a fragile bond of shared futility, human castoffs alongside the inanimate ones.82

The very title of AMERICAN BUFFALO is itself symbolic.

In a review of the play, Harold Clurman writes

Look at the face of the coin...The buffalo looks stunned, baffled, dejected, ready for slaughter. The animal is antiquated, and the would-be robbers are a mess. The combination is symbolic.83
The coin of the title is symbolic because of the very fact that it is of monetary value; the characters are guided by the rules of the business world and their whole fantasy robbery revolves around the sale of what was once considered to be worthless. Further, it has been observed that Mamet's choice of the buffalo coin offers a further irony, for the buffalo, which once roamed the American plains in abundance...has declined to near extinction [and is now] reduced to a relief on the back of a coin, its value as a powerful presence in the expansion of the American West and the attainment of the American dream transformed into money.

Perhaps another level of symbolism is intended by Mamet in that the American slang word for intimidation is 'to buffalo'; there is certainly a great deal of intimidation in the work, most notably on the part of Teach.

Happily, there were a number of reviewers who recognised the play as an important and serious work when it was premiered, and many more who came to similar conclusions at subsequent performances of the piece. Robert Storey considers that AMERICAN BUFFALO is arguably Mamet's best play...Perhaps because he is working within a continuous 2-act structure, perhaps also because he is not insisting self-consciously upon the comedy in his material...he makes his characters behave with a consistency and economy of function...85

and Malcolm Hay believes that the play is an excoriating comic study of the great American drive to make a buck whatever way you can [It is] startling and effective.86

Carole Woodis asserts that Mamet's classic study of three small-time crooks, planning and bungling a coin robbery is a funny, bitter-sweet variation on the old theme of the tarnished American dream.87

whilst Rosemary Say refers to it as "a 100 per cent dramatic piece".88 Giles Gordon calls it "funny and compassionate" and Frank Rich opines that it is one of the best American plays of the last decade... with such terse means, Mr. Mamet has created a combustible and sympathetic portrait of inarticulate American underclass dreamers...90

Clive Barnes writes that It really is a lovely play - if you twist my arm,
a meaningful play. Mamet has caught a moment in our
Judeo-Christian civilisation. It is not flattering -
but I fear it is accurate.91

Many critics commented upon the brilliance of the dialogue,
and the following is but a very small selection. Howard
Kissel notes how

Mamet is an actor's playwright...he senses the
possibilities inarticulateness affords a savvy actor....
Generally in the theatre, the relationship between
language and action is over-simplified - here the
distance between the two is stimulating92

and Mike Renton believes that

Mamet's main strength lies in his precisely observed
dialogue capturing perfectly the characters' tortu­
ously logical philosophies of life.93

Victoria Radin refers to the characters'
solecisms, bits of mis-remembered truisms, misapplied
homilies, tautologies and simple vagueness...Mamet's
ear is tuned with transcriptive accuracy...the language
of these men...holds a mirror to the complete moral
disorder of American life.94

and Christopher Edwards comments on Mamet's
remarkable ear for tough, dirty Chicago dialogue
[which is full of] freshness and verve...95

When Clive Barnes first saw the play in 1981 he described
its language as a "poetic, almost choral use of words"96
and by the time he came to see GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS in
1983, he claimed that

Mamet makes poetry out of common usage. [The speech
he uses] is not ordinary speech...it is more ordinary
than that, it is ordinary speech raised to its basic
potential.97

It is instructive to analyse Barnes' use of the phrase
"raised to its basic potential" as opposed to 'lowered';
this suggests Mamet's ability to move mundane and banal
language onto a higher level where it perhaps becomes
suggestive of the subtext beneath, or where its rhythms
are so seductive that the listener is carried away with
them despite the actual meaning of the words. It is also
interesting to note just how often Mamet's work is given
a musical analogy; for Robert Cushman, AMERICAN BUFFALO
"is a Chicago jazz opera"98 whilst for Howard Kissel it is

jam session, in which the music (here often cacophon­
ously vulgar language) is tossed off with spontaneity
and verve.99
For Dennis Cunningham it is "very like intricate music, a wonderfully profane fugue...a song" and David Skerritt described the play as "A Fugue for Three Voices in a Junk Shop". Indeed, Victoria Radin observes that David Mamet's play...is scored rather than written in something like interior monologues for three voices.

Martin Gottfried states that Mamet has rarified his characters' street language into non-stop vulgarity which comes out as sound rather than meaning, a synthesiser-like stream of inarticulate confusion...raising the naturalism...to the mythic level.

AMERICAN BUFFALO is not the only play of Mamet's which has been likened to a musical score. Peter Stothard, writing about THE DUCK VARIATIONS, notes how Mamet's two old men...spin out rhythmic exchanges like the interlocking themes of a symphony, neither sticking to the same tune for long but passing it between themselves for extension and development... and Jack Shepherd feels that the dialogue in GLENGARRY, GLEN ROSS is like a drum solo by Philly Joe Jones...

Connie Booth recalls that when she saw GLENGARRY, GLEN ROSS, she was struck as to the musicality of the piece. She felt that it was "like an unfinished symphony...in the way that it suddenly stopped". She also noted that the dialogue in EDMOND called for "octave leaps" from the actor involved in order to find the correct rhythm and sense of the text. Ross Wetzsteon described SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO as "a series of fugue-like vignettes" and Jack Kroll called the same play "a sleazy sonata of seduction".

Mamet's use of obscene language as a means of depicting far more than a deliberately shocking scenario occurs in AMERICAN BUFFALO when Teach has been incensed by Ruthie's mildly sarcastic remark "Help yourself" when he took a piece of toast from the plate of her friend, Grace. This scene, I believe, completely demolishes the views of those critics who aver that his text is unnecessarily and arbitrarily foul-mouthed. Teach appears in the doorway of Don's junk shop, and then "walks around the store a bit in silence" before muttering "Fuckin' Ruthie" six times (Act I, p.9). He then
sets about describing the circumstances which have led to such abuse and, after a cursory explanation, launches into what Jack V. Barbera describes as a hail of "hammering trochees":

Only (and I tell you this, Don). Only, and I'm not, I don't think, casting anything on anyone: from the mouth of a Southern bulldyke asshole ingrate of a vicious nowhere cunt can this trash come.

(Ibid, p.10)

Teach has been onstage for a very short time when this tirade is unleashed. With great economy, Mamet tells the audience a great deal about his character's paranoid, highly neurotic personality as well as hinting at his sexism, cunning, childishness and easily ruffled sensitivity. He begins his attack in a politely diffident way, being careful to slow down his words with commas and parenthetical comments before he builds rapidly into what almost amounts to a stream-of-consciousness crescendo of hatred. He is concerned that Don will agree that he has been sorely slighted - Teach's need to be regarded as a victim of the viciousness of those around him is unveiled again and again in the play - and he wants to sound as convincing as possible to bring Don (and, less importantly, Bobby) into the event. He does this by calling Don by his Christian name to personalise the issue just that crucial touch more and strains to appear reasonable and kind, a man who has been cruelly and unjustly maligned. A trifle such as this has caused him extreme pain, for he has interpreted it as a cruel blow to what he considers to be his own pristine and exemplary friendship. As the play progresses, the audience becomes cognizant of how easily this 'friendship' can become corrupted, particularly when any business interests are involved. At this stage, however, the only clues are Teach's over-solemn manner and contrasting offensive language. It is rather absurd that he should be so angry about a throw-away remark and his behaviour points to his insecurity and fear that his friends may not, after all, really be his friends. He fully intends to destroy Ruthie for raising such doubts in his mind, and the effect of his speech is both funny and frightening. In his careful syntactical
construction, Mamet manipulates his words to achieve the right tone of self-righteousness and violence, two aspects of Teach's personality which are explored throughout the play. It is enlightening to look at the really abusive part of the speech in some detail to see how Mamet builds violence and disgust into Teach's words. At first, Ruthie is referred to as a "Southern bullydyke". The word "Southern" implies the supposed ignorance of the Southern population of the United States, the 'red necks' to whom Northern Americans traditionally feel superior. The crass name "bulldyke" which follows infers not only gross ugliness but also masculinity, "dyke" being a familiar slang term for Lesbian. Ruthie has become for Teach an alien creature. She is no longer a woman who deserves respect and some delicacy of description, but a manly freak. Having established her as less than normal, he goes on to describe her in words which become more savage with every breath. Ruthie then becomes an "asshole", paradoxically the most common and certainly the least cruel of Teach's descriptions of her; this word is used so much in daily discourse in urban America that it has practically lost its meaning altogether. It is included here, I feel, as a substitute word, a random obscenity dragged out by Teach to fall in with his rhythm, to fill in a gap he cannot, for the moment, satisfy with a better, more violent word. The choice of "ingrate" is strange, yet believable. It has a weird, archaic sound to it and yet somehow fits in perfectly with the rest. Mamet's characters frequently interject learned, 'big' words into their otherwise demotic conversations in order to impress, deceive and/or disorientate. This is, I believe, another example of this although there remains a sense of Teach's disgust at Ruthie's profound ingratitude for all his help and friendship over the years. Teach later reminds Don how unfairly he has been treated when he observes

(I'm wondering were they eating...and thinking 'This guy's an idiot to blow a fucking quarter on his friends'...)  

(Act I, p.10)

With this in mind, it is then little wonder that Teach should refer to Ruthie as being "vicious" in the next step
of his denunciation of her. As his anger mounts, his language increases in ferocity. Although the word "nowhere" is not in itself an obscenity, it becomes one within this context. Ruthie is placed right out of existence; by so insulting Teach, she has forfeited her right to live. Whatever this unfortunate woman may have been or done in the past, she has lost her credibility as a human being. As though to compound this, she finally becomes no more than a crude word for the female sexual organs, "a cunt". Since this is probably the most chauvinistic insult a man can give, it acts as a fitting addition to this verbal destruction. Ruthie is now deprived of all identity except that of a sexual orifice, in this context an object of contempt so vile and loathsome that the very sound of the word being spat out suggests its meaning as something obscene. That this term is commonly held to be the worst insult that can be paid speaks volumes about a society which so designates it; it is testimony to the fear and ignorance of women of those who choose it as the ultimate denigration.

After his demolition of Ruthie as a person, Teach then turns to the issue which has caused all this ire - her mildly chiding and probably teasing remark. Her comment is termed as "trash"; not only is she all of the terrible things Teach has labelled her, her very speech is mere rubbish and unworthy of consideration. Thus, Ruthie has been totally and utterly destroyed by Teach's onslaught. In this short but bitterly effective scene, Mamet has established the weird sense of priorities and values held by Teach and his associates. Cheating and deception turn out to be quite admissable, even admirable, when utilised in the name of business efficiency; violent injury can be excused if there are sufficient grounds - or at least, the suspicion that there are sufficient grounds, but a chance remark like Ruthie's can be truly unforgiveable.

Although the setting for AMERICAN BUFFALO is given only as "Don's Resale Shop" (Act I, p.2), there are enough clues, verbal and otherwise, to set the action very precisely in
Chicago. Near the beginning of the play, Mamet includes a favourite allusion of his: the Century of Progress Chicago Exposition of 1933, an era which at once represented hope and progress for America and embodied all that he holds to be ironic about Chicago's grip on history. He explores the ironies of the lack of any real progress in American society much further in THE WATER ENGINE, a play set in 1933 which deals with one man's attempts to patent a machine which runs on water. Although his machine really does work, it never sees the light of day because of the vested interests of corrupt big businessmen whose interests would be threatened by such a device.

The characters in AMERICAN BUFFALO exclude history from their lives; they live in a marginal sub-culture which does not recognise its importance other than as the source of a few clichéd expressions occasionally dragged out to make a point. As Christopher Bigsby observes:

They are the residue of a past which has no meaning for them except in terms of discarded objects and a dysfunctional language.\footnote{111}

It is significant that the exhibition is referred to by the characters only as "the thing" (Act I, p.17). This is an indication both of their apathy and their sense of dis-possession; the 'progress' which the event symbolised has passed them by and so is not even dignified with a proper name. Once again, Mamet is here making a point more substantial than merely illustrating his characters' inability to speak properly.

Jack V. Barbera points to a number of purely verbal clues which place the action firmly in Chicago. He notes how Teach refers to a "sweet roll" instead of a bun, and to "pop" rather than soda.\footnote{112} The reference to "Lake Shore Drive" (Act I, p.42), a well-to-do and desirable neighbourhood in Chicago would also suggest a particular social milieu to anyone familiar with that city. Chicago has been called America's most American city, and the poet Carl Sandburg's epithets "stormy, husky, brawling, City of the big shoulders"\footnote{113} suit it perfectly. Indeed, Bill Zehme calls "Chicago theatre
...big-shouldered theatre". It is loud, vulgar and hard-working. Everything is constantly on the move in Chicago, and everyone is engaged in a quest for success. Mamet's petty criminals also seek that success; they, too, want to be the "excellent men" whom Mamet describes but, as he told the director of a recent production of the play, "society hasn't offered them any context to be excellent in."

Living in a big city affects not only the personalities of Mamet's characters but also their language. One of the reasons for his elliptical stylisation is to suggest pace and bustle, and Teach constantly leaves out words in his haste to convey meaning. When Bobby is thought to have betrayed his and Don's scheme, Teach declares: "Loyalty does not mean shit a situation like this" (Act II, p.97); as he begins to describe the incident at the Riverside Cafe, he begins: "I sit down at the table Grace and Ruthie" (Act I, p.9); as he stalls for time when attempting to eliminate Fletch from their deal, he asks "He don't got the address the guy?" (Act II, p.85) and as Don questions his abilities as a housebreaker, he cries: "What the fuck they live in Fort Knox?" (Act II, p.79). Mamet infers the tension and paranoia of Teach with these clipped sentences; paradoxically, Bobby's language is slow and painfully self-conscious. He, too, has been infected by big city life, but his exposure to it has led him to depend upon drugs as a means of escape. Although Bobby's sentences are often fragmented like those of Teach, Mamet writes them in such a way that to speak them quickly and neurotically would be to lose their flavour. Bobby's mind has been slowed down by narcotics in much the same way as was Aston's in Pinter's THE CARTEAKER. When Bobby comes to tell Don and Teach that Fletch has been mugged, he picks his words carefully and nervously. He explains:

Grace and Ruthie...he's in the hospital, Fletch. (Pause) I only wanted to, like, come here. I know you guys are only playing cards this...now. I didn't want to disturb you like up, but they just I found out he was in the hospital and I came over here to... tell you...He got mugged.

(Act II, p.90)
Bobby mixes up his words and offers information which is not required before he finally gets to the point: "He got mugged". His tone is apologetic, stalling; he tries to buy time but succeeds only in enraging Teach to the point of violence. It is interesting to note how Mamet uses both very rapid, paranoiac speech and slow, stumbling words to convey fear and trepidation. Both are most convincing, particularly in the breakdown of grammar and syntax. Bobby's insecurity and constant fear that he will inadvertently alienate those he most depends upon is evident in the following scene. He turns up at the junk shop quite unexpectedly and seems to be afraid - rather like Davies in THE CARETAKER - to say too much in case it is the wrong thing or it will somehow incriminate him. The trouble is, he is so vague and takes such a long time to get to the point that he exasperates Don:

Don: ...What are you doing here?
Bob: I came here.
Don: For what?
Bob: I got to talk to you.
Don: Why?
Bob: Business.
Don: Yeah?
Bob: I need some money.
Don: What for?
Bob: Nothing. I can pay for it.
Don: For what?
Bob: This guy. I found a coin.
Don: A coin?
Bob: A buffalo-head.
Don: Nickel?
Bob: Yeah. You want it? (Pause)
Don: What are you doing here, Bob?

(Act II, pp.60,61)

Bobby speaks in short, staccato sentences which reflect his nervousness. His fear is poignantly obvious, particularly when he asks Don for money and then, when Don asks why, he responds: "Nothing. I can pay for it." His rhythms are evasive, edgy and jittery, and his tone very abject and apologetic. Bobby seems to feel that his very presence is annoying and almost apologises for his existence. When he finally gets around to mentioning the coin, he is so nervous that he offers it to Don in an attempt to ingratiate himself and to buy the older man's friendship.
Of the three men, Don seems to be the most relaxed. He only becomes edgy when confronted with Teach, which is hardly surprising. When he is alone with Bobby, he speaks mostly in paternal, kindly rhythms which seem designed to put the boy at ease although, as John Ditsky points out, there is still a kind of Pinteresque power-play going on between them:

One character constantly defines himself as dependent, inferior, questioning, eager to learn — even going to the point of asking questions or making repetitions that merely continue the rhythm of the scene...the power-posture apparent in language distinguishes Bob and Don from the first words of the play - "So?" - onward. As in the military, discipline is insured by making the inferior character 'recite'.

The following exchange is a good example of this:

Don: ...Now: What do you see me eat when I come in here every day?
Bob: Coffee.
Don: Come on, Bob, don't fuck with me. I drink a little coffee...but what do I eat?
Bob: Yogurt.
Don: Why?
Bob: Because it's good for you. (Act I, pp.7, 8)

As Michael Billington has observed, Pinter's plays are all verbal battles for personal dominance and conversational ascendancy and Don's treatment of Bobby in this scene certainly appears to corroborate Ditsky's observations about inferior and superior "power-postures" in the Pinteresque manner. Don's paternal yet (he thinks) unsentimental concern for Bobby is revealed very strongly when he tries to get the boy to eat properly and to take vitamins to improve his health:

Don: ...And it wouldn't kill you to take a vitamin.
Bob: They're too expensive.
Don: Don't worry about it. You should just take 'em.
Bob: I can't afford 'em.
Don: Don't worry about it.
Bob: You'll buy some for me?
Don: Do you need 'em?
Bob: Yeah.
Don: Well, then, I'll get you some. What do you think?
Bob: Thanks, Donny.
Don: It's for your own good. Don't thank me...
Bob: Okay.
Don: I just can't use you in here like a zombie. (Act I, p.8)
Don is seriously worried about Bobby's health - and not just because of his poor performance as a 'gopher' in his store - yet he carefully manipulates the conversation around to a point at which he can elicit the request for vitamins from the boy himself. This way, it seems as though Don is merely doing him a favour because he asked him to, rather than admit the truth - that it was he himself who wanted to buy the vitamins. Bobby plays his part of the dependent, child-like sycophant as he emphasises his wish to have the vitamins: "Yeah." Likewise, Don plays the reluctant father, only doing what is right and for which deed he deserves no thanks. The reference to work in the last line underscores Don's need to distance himself from the boy as far as any sentimental attachment may be concerned, but his affection is rather movingly demonstrated in the patience he displays as he repeats at least three times that Bobby should "get something to eat" (Act I, pp.11, 12) and also by his willingness to repeat what the vague Bobby has not been able to assimilate: Don tells him that Fletch won £400 at the card game and, seconds later, Bobby asks how much he won (Act I, p.4).

Writing about the work of Anton Chekhov, Robert Brustein notes that

while [Chekhov's] characters seem to exist in isolated pockets of vacancy, they are all integral parts of a close network of interlocking motives and effects. Thus, while the dialogue seems to wander aimlessly...it is economically performing a great number of functions...119

Mamet's dialogue may sometimes seem arbitrary and pointless, but there are always reasons for everything he writes. He imbues his work with recurrent leitmotifs which serve not only to comment upon the action currently taking place but also to remind the audience of past events which might have a bearing upon it. Teach simply cannot forget the insult he received at the Riverside Cafe, and he works in little paranoiac digs throughout the play, regardless of context but always when he feels insecure or threatened. In a conversation with Don about the poker game they had played the night before, Teach cites Ruthie as a cheat and Grace
as her probable accomplice. Don tries to defend her: "She's a good card player", (Act I, p.14) but Teach will not listen:

She is not a good card player, Don. She is a mooch and she is a locksmith and she plays like a woman. (Ibid)

The absurdity of accusing Ruthie of playing "like a woman" appears to completely escape Teach. Later, whilst trying to convince Don that Fletch also cheats at the game, Teach invokes the women's names again, this time in frustration: "(All day long. Grace and Ruthie Christ.)" (Act II, p.82). The women are not in any way involved in this particular conversation, but the association of cheating and lack of trust brings them again to his mind. Grace has not even done anything to upset Teach, but she becomes as guilty as Ruthie by her mere presence and friendship with the woman. As Teach prepares to attack Bobby, he cites the women again, this time in a mental association with those who, like Bobby, deserve to suffer: "...fuck around with Grace and Ruthie, and you come in here..." (Act II, p.96) and in the mounting violence of the play's conclusion, it is only when the terrified Bobby mentions their names in a terribly misguided effort to buy time that Teach physically attacks him. He lets fall a tirade of obscenity which completely stuns Bobby (and the audience) with its savagery:

Grace and Ruthie up your ass, you shithead; you don't fuck with us; I'll kick your fucking head in (I don't give a shit...). . . You twerp... I don't give a shit. (Act II, pp.97,98)

Another recurrent motif is the disappearance of Teach's hat. In Act I, he tries to ascertain its whereabouts: "You seen my hat?... You seen it?... You sure you didn't seen my hat?" (Act I, pp.16, 17). His questions are interspersed with dialogue concerning Fletch's movements and his suspected unreliability, but Mamet skilfully brings the conversation back to Teach's hat. At the play's conclusion, the subject re-surfaces amidst all the violence: "You got a hat?" he asks, "Do you have a piece of paper?" (Act II, p.109). Since Don has neither Teach's hat nor another he can borrow, "Teach walks to counter, takes a piece of newspaper, and starts making himself a paper hat." (Ibid). As he looks at himself
in the reflection of the shop's window, he observes: "I look like a sissy." (Ibid). Teach's missing hat has served several distinctly different dramatic purposes; first, it affords an early illustration of his neurotic and untrusting nature and, secondly, it acts as an anchor-subject during a conversation which has nothing whatever to do with it but, as pointed out above, Teach's thought associations probably make it something of relevance. In the last scene, it is used to diffuse the tension and to inject humour into a tragic situation. It also points to Teach's self-consciousness as he realises that he has been mistaken. In his "I look like a sissy" is both a truthful comment and a half-hearted attempt at reconciliation by making himself look faintly ridiculous. The spectacle of Teach in his home-made paper hat renders him a patently absurd figure - as Robert Storey notes, "a vain naif"\(^{120}\) - trying to hold on to his dignity and at the same time buy the sympathy of Bob and Don.

As Robert Storey has noted elsewhere in this chapter, the humour in AMERICAN BUFFALO is all the more effective for not being self-consciously paraded. The comedy arises from the simplicity of the language itself, the humour often emanating from recognition. A very amusing - and true - scene occurs at the conclusion of Act I when Teach is about to leave Don's shop to take a nap:

Teach: And I'll see you around eleven.
Don: O'clock.
Teach: Here.
Don: Right.
Teach: And don't worry about anything.
Don: I won't.
Teach: I don't want to hear you're worrying about a goddamned thing.
Don: You won't, Teach.
Teach: You're sure you want Fletch coming with us?
Don: Yes.
Teach: All right, then so long as you're sure.
Don: I'm sure, Teach.
Teach: Then I'm going to see you tonight.
Don: Goddamn right you are.
Teach: I am seeing you later.
Don: I know.
Teach: Good-bye.
Don: Good-bye.

(Act I, pp.57,58)
Mamet told Ross Wetzsteon that he was really pleased with this scene:

Some of my favourite writing is at the end of Act I...that 'See you later' scene...I'm so glad you liked that. That is exactly the kind of thing I am trying to capture in my plays. Have you ever listened to two people trying to say goodbye on the phone? Especially in a business situation. They just cannot say goodbye. And their language is so revealing of their relationship. All those quid pro quos. Who owes what to whom? They can end up saying 'okay, okay, okay' for half an hour. I think I have a gift for that kind of attenuated scene.

Mamet wrings the last ounce of humour out of his characters' pretensions at arcane knowledge. Teach sets himself up as an experienced criminal mastermind, well-versed in the ways of robbery but cannot make even a simple telephone call without going to pieces. He and Don are trying to 'case' the coin-collector's house by establishing whether or not he is at home, and Teach explains what to do should the man answer the telephone:

Now look: If he answers...Don't arouse his fucking suspicions...And the odds are he's not there, so when he answers just say you're calling for a wrong fucking number, something. Be simple.

(Act II, p.72)

When Don hesitates, Teach takes over:

Give me the phone...Gimme the card...This is his number? 221-7834?...All right, I dial, I'm calling for somebody named June, and we go interchange on number...We're gonna say like, 'Is this 221-7834?'...And they go, 'No' (I mean '7843'...It is 7834.) So we go, very simply, 'Is this 221-7843?' and they go 'No', and right away the guy is home, we still haven't blown the shot...(into phone) Hi. Yeah. I'm calling...uh...is June there? (Pause) Well, is this 221-7843? (Pause) It is? Well, look I must of got the number wrong. I'm sorry...(This is bizarre.) Read me that number...Right...Nobody home. See, this is careful operation...You wanna try it?

(Ibid, pp.72,73)

So much for Teach's proud announcement that what he and Don are now engaged in "...is planning...preparation" (Ibid, p.71). When he has completely ruined the telephone call, getting the number wrong and fluffing his 'carefully' rehearsed lines, he still refuses to acknowledge that he has failed and, trying once again and miraculously succeeding, then patronisingly hands the telephone to Don asking him:
"You wanna try it?" Choosing to completely disregard the botched job he has made of the telephone call, he once again adopts his 'professional' tone: "See, this is careful operation... I don't mind that you're careful, Don. This doesn't piss me off. What gets me mad, when you get loose." (Ibid, p.73).

AMERICAN BUFFALO is, I believe, a brilliant play which can be viewed on a number of different levels: as a satire on modern America, as a critique of the American business ethic and as an expose of the decline of communication in urban society. When asked what he hopes to achieve with his work, Mamet replied

I hope what I'm arguing for, finally and lately, has been an a priori spirituality. Let's look at the things that finally matter.

If there is little space within his plays where such 'spirituality' can thrive, there remains a faint possibility of redemption. Like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee before him, Mamet laments the debasement of the American Dream into something cheap and worthless. His country has, for him, lost an essential innocence which is very forcefully dramatised in the convoluted immorality of AMERICAN BUFFALO. Mamet believes that

...the old order...the old America is finished... no longer alive but tenaciously holds on to the hope that by confronting the immense problems head-on, he can inspire a sense of purpose, a need to create order amidst the chaos.

At the end of the play, all that is left onstage is a wrecked junk shop and an injured and bleeding boy. However, that boy is being taken to hospital by a man who sincerely cares about him, and in the company of another who needs love as much as he does.
Notes

American Buffalo

1. Folk tune quoted in David Mamet, American Buffalo, unnumbered page at beginning of play.
2. David Mamet in interview on South Bank Show.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
7. David Mamet, Lecture typescript, 7 May 1979, pp.3-5, on loan to author.
12. David Mamet in interview on South Bank Show.
13. Ibid.
15. John Ditsky, 'He Lets You See the Thought There', p.29.
19. Mel Gussow, 'The Daring Visions of Four New Young Playwrights'.
22. Ibid.
26. David Mamet cited in Richard Gottlieb, 'The Engine that Drives David Mamet'.
27. David Mamet in interview on South Bank Show.
30. David Mamet cited in Richard Gottlieb, 'The Engine that Drives David Mamet'.
31. Henry Hewes cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross, p.4.
32. David Mamet, ibid.
34. David Mamet cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross, p.4.
40. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.74.
47. Ibid, p.17.
49. Ibid.
50. David Mamet cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross, p.4.
51. Thornton Wilder, 'Some Thoughts on Playwriting' in Playwrights on Playwriting, p.112.
55. John Simon cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross, p.4.
56. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.80.
58. Ibid.
65. Colin Stinton in interview with author.
66. Ibid.
67. Richard Eber, 'David Mamet's New Realism'.
70. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
79. David Mamet cited in Richard Gottlieb, 'The Engine that Drives David Mamet'.
82. Christopher Porterfield, 'David Mamet's Bond of Futility'.
111. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.86.
115. David Mamet cited in Jennifer Allen, 'David Mamet's Hard Sell'.
116. Ibid.
117. John Ditsky, 'He Lets You See the Thought There', p.29.
120. Robert Storey, 'The Making of David Mamet'.
123. David Mamet, Lecture typescript dated 1979, p.2, on loan to author.
Without exception, all of Mamet's characters are storytellers or performers - or both. They are rather like O'Neill's gallery of misfits in THE ICEMAN COMETH; rather than face the realities of an uncertain, often threatening world, they rely upon illusion and the performance of a comforting role to get by. Actors all, they prefer the relative security and coherence of their fictional 'pipe dreams' to the incompletions and ambiguities of cold experience.

In Mamet's world, to act is also to exist, to make a mark in space. His characters take on their myriad roles to create meaning in their lives and to give themselves importance and substance. That these roles are sometimes as unsatisfactory as the reality they are designed to conceal is one of the recurring ironies of his work. In A LIFE IN THE THEATRE, Mamet's characters are literally actors, professional players who perform in public as a career. However, Robert and John do not restrict their acting abilities to the stage - they are actors both in and out of the theatre. They put on the costumes and make-up for the drama they must perform as actors, but Mamet makes it very clear that the roles they perform onstage are but a small part of their mimetic gifts. They never stop acting; from the moment they awake to the moment they go to sleep, Robert and John are each performing a role for the benefit of the other. They strive to reinforce their own self-images as they quibble, bicker and try to upstage one another throughout the play, their 'real life' performances becoming confused and merged with the characters they must represent. Christopher Bigsby notes how the backstage scenes allow the audience to detect the artifice behind the apparent order, the unreality of what is projected as real.1 When Mel Gussow first saw the play, he described it as "a comedy about the artifice of acting"2 but when, some months later, he saw a revival, he felt that "it was about the artifice of living".3 The very title of the work gives
a clue to Mamet's intentions: it is at once a parody of Stanislavski's autobiography, MY LIFE IN ART, and an indication of the analogy he intends making between life and drama. It also points to the affectionate use of pastiche that he will utilise throughout the play and subtly suggests the serious elements which both offset and contribute to its humour.

A LIFE IN THE THEATRE is primarily a comedy, but one which is not without pathos. Mamet describes the work as a "comedy about actors", but goes on to say that

As such it must be, and is, slightly sad. It is, I think, the essential and by no means unfortunate nature of the theatre that it is always dying; and the great strength and beauty of actors is their bravery and generosity in this least stable of environments. They are generous and brave not through constraint of circumstances, but by choice. They give their time in training, in rehearsal, in constant thought about their instrument and their art and the characters which they portray...

In an essay he wrote about the play, Mamet quotes Camus as saying that the actor's task

is a prime example of the Sisyphean nature of life that is to say that the actor doggedly continues with the struggle even as that metaphorical rock begins to roll backwards. Mamet wholeheartedly agrees with Camus, feeling that such an opinion is "certainly true, and certainly not novel" and observing that

additionally... a life in the theatre need not be an analogue to 'life'. It is life.

The insecurities inherent in acting as a profession are therefore seen by Mamet as being very similar to those encountered in 'real life'. For example, Robert is terrified of losing his touch, of growing old and becoming obsolete in the modern world, hence his insistence upon the necessity for actors to 'grow' and accept change although change is, ironically, the last thing he is willing to accept. At the beginning of the play, John is full of the insecurities of youth: he is naive, eager to please and reverential of his older colleague. However, as the work progresses, his reverence turns to contempt and irritation as he comes to believe - perhaps erroneously - in his own star quality.
Mamet explains how

Robert, the older actor, is trying to codify and prolong what's happened to him. The younger actor is trying to achieve, explore and enjoy.  

However, as Freddie Jones, the actor who played Robert in the 1979 Open Space production told me

It is also an allegory about death and rebirth - Robert is on the wane and the young actor is on the way up.

Evanescence is a central theme in the play; nothing is stable and nothing is sure. An actor's life is, of necessity, evanescent. At the end of the evening, his or her performance lives on only in the imagination of the audience; there is nothing fixed about it. Mamet believes that

This is why theatrical still photographs are many times stiff and uninteresting - the player in them is not acting...but posing - indicating feelings.

Actors constantly tell each other stories because

the only real history of the ephemeral art is an oral history; everything fades very quickly, and the only surety is the word of someone who was there, who talked to someone who was there, who vouches for the fact that someone told him she had spoken to a woman who knew someone who was there. It all goes very quickly, too.

As Mamet notes, Robert relies upon ephemera and nostalgia to capture important memories, recall past glories and reflect upon his career. In an ecstasy of theatrical self-indulgence, he speaks of

A life spent in the theatre...Backstage...The bars, the House, the draughty halls. The pencilled scripts...Stories. Ah, the stories that you hear.

(Scene 26, p.55)

The lack of security and uncertainty of an actor's lot is summed up by Mamet in almost existential terms. He feels that to ask "Do you remember?" must also mean "I remember. Don't I?"

The main metaphor of A LIFE IN THE THEATRE is, as the title suggests, that all life is a kind of theatre. In this play as well as his others, Mamet appears to be saying that the kind of life his characters are forced to endure is a second-hand affair, full of clichés and desperate pretentions. Not only this, but their
metaphysical position is unclear. In A LIFE IN THE THEATRE perhaps more obviously than in his other plays, Mamet depicts the absurdity of the human condition. In the image of the solitary actor speaking out into an empty space, he conveys most strongly not merely the egoistic need for posturing centre-stage by an affected narcissist, but the futility and desperation of man's uncertainty of his place in the universe. The potency of the image is clearly intended to extend far beyond the theatre. We each of us perform our many tasks each day for an unknown - and possibly non-existent purpose just as John, and later Robert, act out their own solitary parts to thin air. In ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD, Tom Stoppard touches upon a similar theme. The Player cries out in alarm that his one purpose in life as an actor has been seriously undermined - he suddenly realises that he is performing without an audience:

You don't understand the humiliation of it - to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable - that somebody is watching...14

Similarly, in Arthur Miller's THE ARCHBISHOP'S CEILING, the characters' uncertainty as to whether the seraphically decorated ceiling is bugged or not is surely intended to carry resonances beyond their immediate situation. They conduct their lives as though unseen eyes are indeed watching them, but neither they nor the audience are ever able to verify this fact.

Mamet has loved and been involved with the theatre since the age of 17 when he worked at Second City Improvisations. During this period and during the term of his involvement with the St. Nicholas Players - a small acting group formed with a few friends - he was able to build up a store of knowledge about actors and the profession in general. He describes how he came to write A LIFE IN THE THEATRE:

I would sit around my father's office in Chicago... and write scenes on his electric typewriter...Over the course of several months I accumulated 15 or 20 scenes about life in the theatre...most of them were built around two representative types - an older actor and a younger actor, both of them...in a stock rep. The
play is a comedy... It is not a realistic play. That is, it is not a play about two men... who happen to be actors, but about two actors, about two representative members of the profession, and about a turning point in the career of each.15

Robert and John are Mamet's "representative types", Robert speaking for the older generation which seeks to impose order on experience and John representing youth which often shuns restraint in an effort to explore new possibilities. A LIFE IN THE THEATRE is, therefore, partly designed to dramatise via these two characters two elements of the artistic consciousness which are, as Christopher Bigsby points out

equally two aspects of the human consciousness...

[Since] It constitutes a sustained tension between the desire for order and the need for an inventive freedom.16

The "turning point" in their artistic lives which occurs as John's career takes a turn for the better and Robert's a turn for the worse is neatly set off by their off-stage exploits, with John's marked increase in confidence and Robert's descent into despair.

The language which Mamet uses to convey the ambiguities of life both in front of and away from the footlights seems once again to be effortless and totally authentic. It is, of course, far from effortless; it is as carefully wrought and constructed as that in any of his plays. Nothing is included without a reason, every word forwards the action, or comments upon a previous action or emotion. Patrick Ryecart, who played John in the Open Space production told me that he considered that

The dialogue is quite, quite wonderful in this play... Mamet achieves... incredible economy. He must write a great deal more in the beginning and then set about bringing it right down. He must go through the words again and again and again, paring and paring, getting it right down to the narrative bone.17

Similarly, Richard Gottlieb notes how, for Mamet, "Writing... is mostly re-writing".18 Robert and John are very different characters from, say, Teach in AMERICAN BUFFALO or the inarticulate merchant seamen in LAKEBOAT. They are apparently well-educated, articulate people who are confident enough of their verbal skills to show them off to
a paying audience. They choose their words carefully, often pretentiously, adopting a tone of confidence and assurance even where none exists. There are here few of the corrosive obscenities which characterise so many of Mamet's works; Robert is occasionally moved by frustration or professional jealousy to curse a fellow performer or the much-despised critics, but on the whole the language is free from scatology or profanity. At first glance, the text seems to be little more than an accurate recording of a number of conversations, complete with linguistic idiosyncrasies and casual ellipses. Mel Gussow comments upon just this aspect of the dialogue:

Mr. Mamet knows how people talk - the short-cuts, repetitions and accidents that make American language comical and even poetic. On the other hand, John Ditsky remarks that although Mamet's dialogue may appear to be banal or completely naturalistic, it is once again

a deliberately bland language which is used to mask action of only apparent simplicity.

Mamet allows us to cut through the excesses of Robert's hyperbole and to see beneath the brevity of much of John's dialogue by his careful manipulation of every word they utter. He allows us a fascinating glimpse into the personalities of men who do all they can to hide their true feelings. Emotions may often run riot in this play, but it would be difficult without Mamet's linguistic virtuosity to ascertain those which are genuine and those which constitute yet another aspect of an unceasing performance.

A LIFE IN THE THEATRE is a kind of love letter to everything that Mamet holds dear about the stage and its performers. The lines of the text are imbued with a sweetness and affection which are not wholly negated by the often critical stance adopted by the playwright. Like Chekhov, Mamet has the ability to like and even admire his characters at the same time as exposing their weaknesses and faults. Mel Gussow describes the work as

Mamet's glorious new comedy...written with humour, affection and sophistication. It is an evening of pure theatre.
and observes that Mamet is a playwright who loves the theatre - the mystery, the illusions, the code of behaviour.22

I would consider Mel Gussow's description of the work to be an accurate one, particularly when considered alongside Mamet's own summary:

A LIFE IN THE THEATRE...is an attempt to look with love at an institution we all love, the Theatre, and at the only component of that institution (about whom our feelings are less simple), the men and women of the theatre - the world's heartiest mayflies, whom we elect and appoint to live out our dreams upon the stage.23

A LIFE IN THE THEATRE was first staged in 1975 at the Goodman Theatre, Chicago and was then produced in 1977 at the Off-Broadway Theatre-de-Lys in New York City. Since then, the play has enjoyed a number of revivals, the most recent of which was at the Open Space Theatre, London in 1979. This work has been described by Michael Coveney as being rather like Terence Rattigan's HARLEQUINADE, with a nod in the direction of Molnar [PLAY AT THE CASTLE] and Pirandello [SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR].24

Although Mamet has expressed his admiration for Rattigan's work,25 and there is certainly more than a hint of Molnar's verbal trickery in this play, the presiding genius of A LIFE IN THE THEATRE is undoubtedly Luigi Pirandello. In both his dramas and his fiction, Pirandello, like Mamet, created works which explored the many faces of reality. He examined the relationships between actor and character, self and persona and face and mask, and was a precursor of the work of writers like Anouilh (DEAR ANTOINE), Giraudoux (INTERMEZZO), Genet (THE BALCONY AND THE MAIDS) and Stoppard (ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD). He wrote:

Your reality is a mere transitory and fleeting illusion, taking this form today and that tomorrow, according to the conditions, according to your will, your sentiments, which in turn are controlled by an intellect that shows them to you today in one manner and tomorrow...who knows how? Illusions of reality, represented in this fabrous comedy of life that never ends, nor can ever end.26

In SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR, a company of actors rehearses a play, which is itself an illusion of reality. As rehearsals are in progress, six created characters - other aspects of an illusion - enter and interrupt. Raymond
Williams describes how

The resulting contrast between these various stages in the process of dramatic illusion, and the relation of the process to its context of reality, is the material of Pirandello’s play.27

Pirandello goes even further than Williams suggests in his labyrinthine layers of plot: he even brings himself into the play, as the absent author of the piece being performed:

Producer: ...What do you expect me to do if nobody writes good plays any more and we’re reduced to putting on plays by Pirandello? And if you can understand them you must be very clever. He writes them on purpose so nobody enjoys them, neither actors, nor critics nor audience.28

Adriano Tilgher seeks to explain Pirandello’s work in terms of antithesis, the fundamental motif of his work being the eternal dualism between life, which never ceases to move, and form, which seeks to fix life and to hold it in stasis. He writes:

All of modern philosophy, from Kant on, rises from this deep insight into the dualism between absolutely spontaneous Life...and the constructed Forms or moulds which tend to imprison that upsurge...To the eyes of an artist like Pirandello...reality will appear dramatic at its very roots, the essence of drama lying in the struggle between Life’s primal nakedness and the garments or masks with which men must by all means insist on clothing it. LA VITA NUDA (NAKED LIFE), MASCHERE NUDE (NAKED MASKS). The very titles of his works are telling.29

The title of Mamet’s play is equally telling, prompting Colin Ludlow to describe it as "surprisingly literal".30 Although Sheridan Morley is largely dismissive of the work, he too notes the ‘literalness’ which runs throughout. He observes how, in the process of acting many different parts, an actor can lose sight of his own identity:

A LIFE IN THE THEATRE is...[partly] about the way that an actor in taking on so many other lives in fact loses sight of his own, which then passes him by.31

Similarly, Michael Billington notes how Mamet demonstrates that

the theatre [is] a place that both imitates life and devours it...where...actors begin to feel trapped inside their stage roles...one gets so occupied with representing life one ceases to notice it passing one by.32
Certainly Robert's life has been 'spent' in the theatre in every sense that word implies. He explains to John how his life as an actor cannot be separated from that which he lives when he is not onstage - the time spent somehow merging and becoming one:

...the theatre is of course, a part of life...I'm saying, as in a grocery store that you cannot separate the time one spends...that is it's all part of one's life. (Pause) In addition to the fact that what's happening on stage is life...

(Scene 23, p.48)

Robert mentions the outside world but, as Anne Morley-Priestman points out, he seems to have no existence at all once he moves away from the footlights. She notes how Freddie Jones is [in the Open Space production] downright moving as Robert, who has no life outside the theatre.33

Robert has become so much a creature of the theatre that his own identity is unclear. Robert the man puts on the mask of Robert the actor: that Robert is himself a character played by a real actor just adds to the metadramatic ironies. Where does reality end and fantasy begin? It is very difficult to say. A mock-prayer spoken by Guildenstern in Stoppard's play accurately sums up the fantasy life into which it is all too easy for actors to retreat when he intones

Give us this day our daily mask.34

In A LIFE IN THE THEATRE, Mamet constantly blurs the boundaries between life and art just as Pirandello did in his play. Mamet's work has been described as

a triple Pirandello [in which] The actors play to [an] imaginary audience, while we, behind the scenes, see and hear the artifice - the asides, whispers and blunders.35

The real theatre audience watches two actors playing another two actors, who in turn perform to an unseen audience apparently located at the opposite end of the stage. We see Robert and John perform to their audience with their backs towards us, whereas when Mamet's play proper is in progress, they play facing outwards into the stalls. This is the way in which the first American production was staged, and Mamet has called this staging "A beautiful solution".36 He goes on to explain how it
Gregory Mosher and Michael Merritt, the play's first director and designer, respectively... decided that it might be provocative if a second curtain were installed - this one on the upstage portion of the stage. It is behind this curtain that the audience for the 'plays' in which John and Robert play sits. This curtain is opened when John and Robert are onstage, which is to say, playing in a 'play'. Thus we see the actors' backs during the onstage scenes, and we get a full-face view of them during their moments backstage.37

The theatre audience therefore listens to the characters' backstage gossip, witnesses the ambiguity between the roles they inhabit onstage and their 'real' selves, follows the inexorable shifts in power and learns to detect the artifice behind what looks real, and the artificiality of what is presented as truth. During an interview, Patrick Ryecart spoke about the metadramatic ironies within the work:

The kind of play which constantly reminds audiences that it is indeed a play can sometimes become very tedious and rather patronising...However, I think Mamet is very good with this in A LIFE IN THE THEATRE. In our production, we had a mirror at the back of the set which enclosed the audience even more within the piece, making them really feel a part of it...they were brought right into the action in a very unself-conscious, unpatronising way...Not only this, but Mamet brings them into the play in another, brilliant way: on the first page of the text you have a direct reference to them - John says: "They were very bright" and goes on to flatter them further. "They were an intelligent house", he says, "attentive" and so on. Mamet includes at least five instances of direct audience flattery within the first few moments of the play. It seems to be just a peripheral thing at first glance, but within a mock-Pirandellian context it means so very much - and it is witty and brazenly unafraid.38

Jill Burrows echoes Pirandello's own mischievous allusion to the audience's 'intelligence' (see the Producer's quip already quoted) when she notes how

Any play that opens with a discussion of a particularly acute audience has got it made.39

Mamet therefore brings the outside world right into his work, fusing theatre and reality in a memorable dramatic form. Robert's benediction at the conclusion of Mamet's play, addressed to a supposedly absent audience but in fact spoken to the real stalls, similarly signifies a gesture of incorporation. Robert stands alone centre-stage as he delivers his farewell speech:
...The lights dim. Each to his own home. Goodnight. Goodnight. Goodnight. (Scene 26, p.56)

He is, in effect, dismissing the real audience; they can now go home, as Christopher Bigsby observes to continue lives characterised precisely by that Chekhov-like ennui, or the cliched emotional, sexual or social life so effectively parodied in the various scenes enacted by the two actors. They can, like the actors playing Robert and John, resume their 'non-theatrical' lives and go back to the real world which is itself a drama whose denouement they know but of whose lines they are uncertain.

The audience is again implied as part of the action and, once again, an allusion is made to the blurred boundary between 'real' life and the theatre.

Much of the humour of the play derives from Robert's portentous efforts to link life and drama. Whereas Mamet is in no doubt whatever that direct connections do indeed exist, he invests Robert's linguistic forays on this topic with an undercutting irony and wit. Robert has a certain idea of himself as a consummate professional, what Milton Shulman has called "a flamboyant actor of the old school" and what Sheridan Morley terms as "an old Wolfitian barn-stormer", although he is also what Colin Ludlow describes as "an ageing, histrionic bombast". Patrick Ryecart comments upon Robert's self-importance and hilarious egotism, marvelling at his ability to be such a huge fish in such a tiny, insignificant building...such as the third-rate rep theatre in which he works.

Because of Robert's many years in the theatre, he feels perfectly justified to act as John's mentor and guide, endlessly pointing out the ambiguities of and the connections between life and art. He strives to maintain his sense of superiority and worldliness by prattling on incessantly about the importance of the theatre. He grandly avers:

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?...We are explorers of the soul. (Scene 5, p.23)
and later

About the theatre, and this is a wondrous thing about
the theatre, and John, one of the ways in which it's
most like life...in the theatre, as in life - and the
theatre is...a part of life...of one's life...what's
happening on stage is life...of a sort...I mean, it's
part of your life.

(Scene 23, p.48)

The way in which Robert emphatically underscores the words
"theatre", "stage" and "life" suggests the urgency he feels
in communicating some of what he believes to be his profound
insight. Mamet breaks up Robert's sentences, making him
begin again and again without finishing what he is trying
to say and inserting phrases such as "of course", "of a
sort" and "I mean". All of this serves to undercut the
portentousness - and pretentiousness - of the tone. Robert
truly believes that, as an actor, he has a deeply important
task to perform. Indeed, he has and Mamet has the greatest
respect and admiration for the acting profession. However,
Robert is shown to be full of self-delusion and evasion and
his hyperbolic remarks are therefore somewhat diminished
in the light of our knowledge of his true state of mind.

He struggles to find meaning in banality and to delude
himself that he is performing an important function because
to admit the frailty of his position is to invite terror.
Consequently, Robert tries to keep his fears at bay by any
means available. Tennessee Williams once wrote that

Fear and evasion are the two little beasts that
chase each other's tails in the revolving wire cage
of our nervous world. They distract us from feeling
too much about things.46

Fear and evasion are certainly present behind Robert's
bluster and phony air of confidence. Christopher Bigsby
describes the actor's tendency to speak in theatrical
metaphors as a desperate attempt to give meaning to his life,
a life which occasionally - and terrifyingly - reveals itself
as nothing more than a sham:

Metaphor represents his attempt to cement the pieces
of experience together, but his inflated rhetoric
has a way of imploding, linguistically, into bathos,
philosophically into banality.47

An excellent example of the triteness of Robert's 'philosophy'
occurs mid-way through the play as he pontificates about the
Robert lovingly lists the objects with which he constructs his stage persona. There is a sentimental and somewhat contrived air about the first eight items in his list which lead, quite naturally for Robert, onto an enthusiastic flourish and paen to the glories of greasepaint. At first his tone is light, even casual although one can sense that mere listing will not suffice this great orator for long. He attempts to illustrate his disregard for mere objects—a disregard which is patently untrue since these are the means by which he creates his many characters and thereby his whole life. He pretends to speak almost to himself, pacing his words carefully so that the full impact of his speech can be caught at the right moment by the now apathetic John. His sentimental attachment to "Tools. Sticks. Brushes" and so on is poignantly intense, despite the fact that he refers to them individually as "Meaningless component parts". He builds to a crescendo of what is, to him, profundity. For Robert, these objects represent coherence and meaning and, through metaphor, he constantly strives to connect himself to them.

Robert has become, through insecurity and fear, the kind of actor who gives his all to plays which do not deserve such devotion, and yet he foolishly believes himself to be worldly-wise and capable of profound philosophical insights. He struggles to find depth where none exists and to give performances of almost Shakespearian profundity in scenes which are little more than badly-scripted soap operas. Neither he nor John are exactly the toast of Broadway, each with a batch of awards under his belt. In fact, they are very far from the centre of American theatrical
excellence, playing instead to half-hearted provincial audiences who are probably among the "bloody boors", "Bloody shits" and "Boring lunatics" (Scene 10, pp.31,32) whom Robert decries in a fit of rage.

Robert tries to find meaning in the third-rate works he and John must perform, trying to fire the younger man's enthusiasm which, at times, appears to be seriously dampened. He struggles to invest the dire scripts they are given with some sort of artistic credibility and, incredibly, finds it! As the pair discuss the 'Lifeboat' scene, Robert waxes lyrical about the script's profundity:

...I'm just thinking. "Salt. Saltwater." Eh? The thought. He lets you see the thought there...Salt! Sweat. His life flows out...Then saltwater! Eh?... "Kid, we haven't got a chance in hell."..."We're never getting out of this alive." (Pause) Eh? He sets it on the sea, we are marooned, he tells us that the sea is life, and then we're never getting out of it alive. (Pause)...The man could write... Alright. Alright. (Scene 13, pp.34, 35)

Mamet invests a scene like this with just enough evidence of the tawdriness of the material Robert and John are given, and then goes on to show Robert in ecstasy at the quality of the text. All his pretensions fritter away before us, although he himself seems to remain gloriously unaware of the absurdity of his position. The heavy 'significance' of his words acts as an hilarious correlative to the sheer tackiness of the text; Robert sounds like a particularly anxious - though naive - undergraduate when faced with his first essay in literary criticism, his frequent use of "Eh?" acting as an indication of his need for approbation and a shared opinion. Mamet ends the dissection of this particular slice of dialogue with Robert's assertion that "The man could write...Alright. Alright". The repetition of the final word suggests a mind mulling over what it considers to be first-class literature, pondering on the brilliance of one who could garner so much meaning, so much life into a metaphor about the sea.

Elsewhere, Robert talks about the trite legal drama that he and John are about to perform. John asks Robert how he
is feeling as they prepare to go onstage:

John: ...How do you feel this evening?
Robert: Tight. I feel a little tight. It's going to be a vibrant show tonight. I feel coiled up.
John: Mmm.
Robert: But I don't feel tense...Never feel tense. I almost never feel tense on stage. I feel ready to act.
(Stage 8, p.25)

The repetition of the words "tight" and "tense" indicate the extent of Robert's nervousness, despite his denials to the contrary. The alliterative sound of the repeated 't' adds to the tension and demonstrates all too clearly his deep-rooted anxiety. That he should refer to the show as "vibrant" and declaim in the manner of an Olivier or a Gielgud that he is "ready to act" is quickly shown to be an absurd pretension given the inane quality of the scene which follows in which stage props refuse to work properly, cues are missed and both actors go completely to pieces. Milton Shulman recalls a good visual metaphor for the - ultimately very sad - pretensions of Robert which was incorporated into the Open Space production where Freddie Jones [frequently revealed] holes in his pants as he clamber[ed] into glamorous costumes...

This visual counterpoint to the absurdity of Robert's affected verbal mannerisms neatly and affectionately combines humour and pathos, his shabby underclothes serving as a bleakly funny reminder of his threadbare status.

Robert never wastes an opportunity to launch into a celebration in praise of the Theatre as Life. Practically anything can inspire him into producing purple passages of rhetoric which would not have been amiss on the Victorian stage. In spite of John's growing boredom with his constant speechifying, in Scene 17 Robert once again enthuses:

The Theatre's a closed society. Constantly abutting thoughts, feelings, the emotions of our colleagues. Sensibilities. (Pause) Bodies...forms evolve. An etiquette, eh? In our personal relations with each other. Eh, John? In our personal relationships. (Pause)...One generation sows the seeds. It instructs the preceding...that is to say, the following generation...from the quality of its actions. Not from its discourse, John, no, but organically. (Pause)
Robert's intense and affected diction is undercut not only by his mistake in using the word "preceding" inappropriately, but also by the reductive effect of his claim for the virtues of "keeping your mouth shut" - certainly something he has never learned to do. Such a phrase is also deeply incongruous because it sounds so prosaic when inserted among all the high-flown rhetoric which surrounds it. The use of words such as "forms", "discourse" and "organically" are suggestive of a self-conscious need to impress with his learning, as are such phrases as "Constantly abutting thoughts" and "the quality of its actions". The actor's language is forced, unnatural and wholly pretentious. Mamet invests this particular diatribe with a great deal of humour, not the least of which is found in Robert's assertion that "the following generation" can best learn "organically" rather than via "discourse". As Robert never ceases trying to inculcate the joys of the stage into the man he sees as his eager pupil, such a statement is quite obviously dishonest!

Robert may elevate the theatre into a kind of cathedral for the worship of moral values and all that is laudable and pure, but he is all too capable of indulging in spiteful and cruel denigrations of his fellow performers. Life in the theatre and life outside have merged for Robert and become hopelessly confused: when he speaks detrimentally of an actress whom he despises for her unnecessary "mugging" and "mincing", he mixes up moral standards and theatrical technique. He opines that the woman has

No soul...no humanism...No fellow-feeling...No formal training...No sense of right and wrong.

(Season 1, pp. 13,14)

As Christopher Bigsby points out

Not only are morality and manners hopelessly confused, but the line between performance and reality is eroded.49
Robert curses the actress until he is moved to announce that he would like "to kill the cunt" (Scene 1, p.13) and, if he could be certain of not being caught, he would certainly do so:

Robert: It rots my heart to look at it.
John: I know.
Robert: No soul...no humanism.
John: No.
Robert: No fellow feeling.
John: No.
Robert: I want to kill the cunt.
John: Don't let it worry you.
Robert: It doesn't worry me. It just offends my sense of fitness.
John: Mmm.
Robert: If I could do her in and be assured I'd get away with it, I'd do it with a clear and open heart.

(Ibid)

If this is intended to be an objective criticism of a fellow-actor, Robert does not appear to have much control over his objectivity! The violence of the phrase "It rots my heart to look at it" is indicative of the overtly melodramatic strain in Robert's personality; it is at once a cruel remark and evidence of the actor's tendency towards hyperbole. When he suddenly states, quite baldly: "I want to kill the cunt", it is quite unexpected. Robert's manner of speaking has thus far not prepared the audience for a crass obscenity of this kind, so venomously spat out. John's rather colourless responses to Robert's remarks point to his lack of confidence at this early stage of the play. He tries to be conciliatory and supportive but even he is moved to a doubtful "Mmm" when Robert claims that the actress does not worry him, but just "offends [his] sense of fitness". It is rather laughable that Robert should condemn the woman for a lack of "fellow feeling" when he can speak about her in this way. Similarly, when he insists that in the theatre "You learn control. Character. A sense of right from wrong" (Scene 1, p.14), he is not describing moral necessities but a list of the abilities he must bring to bear to "tune her out" (Ibid). The final absurdity occurs when he tells John "When we're on stage she isn't there for me" (Ibid). Mamet captures with great precision the bitchiness of the elder actor which is born out of fear and insecurity as well as malicious spite.
John comments that the actress relies on her looks to get by in a mistaken effort to 'side' with Robert against her:

John: She capitalises on her beauty. (Pause)
Robert: What beauty?
John: Her attractiveness.
Robert: Yes.
John: It isn't really beauty.
Robert: No.
John: Beauty comes from within.
Robert: Yes, I feel it does. (Scene 1, p.14)

Patrick Ryecart comments upon this excerpt as follows:

At this stage, John hangs on to Robert's every word. He prompts him, listens to him and sincerely believes that he is going to learn something of value...He believes that they are in league together, and plunges ahead rather recklessly, thinking that he will please Robert but actually rather annoys him. This sort of conversation is so true, so genuine...people getting themselves into corners whilst trying to flatter or please, and then having to eat their words...50

Despite his irritation, Robert knows that John is trying to please him and feels smugly secure in the knowledge that he has the young man completely on his side. He even lets him lead the conversation, a rare event indeed. It is very infrequently that Robert responds to a remark with only a monosyllable such as "Yes" or "No", but on this occasion he feels confident enough to restrict his comments. Sensing Robert's annoyance, John qualifies his statement about beauty by offering, by way of atonement, the assertion that "It isn't really beauty." He is anxious not to upset what he currently sees as the fine sensibilities of his friend. Once Robert's responses have assured him that all is not lost and that they are still 'friends', John even chances a platitude: "Beauty comes from within." It could almost be Robert speaking, clichés to the fore.

Robert's instructions for good behaviour, for "etiquette" are therefore undermined by his own blatant failure to adhere to them. When, in Scene 22, he commits the ultimate breach of etiquette and actually swears at John, calling him a "fucking twit" (Scene 22, p.47), Mamet utilises the irony in John's over-polite reply: "I beg your pardon" to further consolidate our doubts about Robert's spurious claims to embody all things fine and elevated in the theatre.
To John's remark, he coldly retorts: "I think that you heard me" (Ibid). Thus, even when challenged with a well-directed and well-deserved dig at his own pretensions, Robert remains unrepentant.

Just to make absolutely certain that the audience should not even momentarily take Robert a little too seriously, Mamet also deflates his pomposity by having him use the most hackneyed clichés ("The show goes on" Scene 1, p.13 and "Good things for good folk" Scene 14, p.37) or, more frequently, by setting his speeches in contexts which by their very nature undermine their seriousness. For example, he rambles on about the necessity to "grow" as artists, informing John that thespians "are society" (Scene 5, p.23) as John practises at the barre. John responds only sporadically - and mostly monosyllabically - and is more concerned with looking at his reflection in the mirror to see if his posture is correct, than to listen to his boring colleague spouting platitudes yet again. The scene ends with John's prosaic question "Is my back straight?" to which Robert can only reply "No" (Ibid, p.24). Elsewhere, John appears to practice selective listening, not really taking in what his colleague is saying and interrupting him with the most demotic remarks: "Please pass the bread" (Scene 14, p.36), "How's your duck?" (Ibid) and "May I use your brush?" (Scene 17, p.40). He also frequently responds to Robert's speechifying with an "Mmm", a linguistic tic which Robert himself adopts towards the end of the play, signifying the level of influence the younger man exerts over him by this time.

As the play progresses, it becomes very clear that Robert's show of confidence is only skin-deep and that beneath his veneer of assurance he is pathetically insecure. He tells John that the process of life is "A little like a play" (Scene 5, p.23) in which

You start from the beginning and go through the middle and wind up at the end.

(Ibid)

He avers that actors must ".not be afraid of process"
(Ibid) although he is clearly terrified of just that. As Robert speaks confidently and airily about his favourite analogy, Mamet imbues his words with fear and insecurity. That acting, like life, has a beginning, a middle and an end is a sobering and saddening thought for Robert. As he speaks of process, the logic of his narrative pulls him ever onward into dangerous areas he would rather avoid. As Christopher Bigsby observes

> Behind the confident analysis is a nervous appeal... Not merely has he accustomed himself to an at times humiliating dependency, but the logic of narrative... carries its own terrors."[^31]

Like Emil and George in THE DUCK VARIATIONS, Robert's speeches have a habit of wandering into the very areas he wishes most to ignore.

Mamet describes one of the play's intentions as being

> the attempt to communicate experience and love in the face of and informed by a knowledge of mortality, the attempt being made by individuals engaged in the art of acting, which is the avowal and the celebration of mortality.^[32]

Patrick Ryecart describes as "those terrible scenes"[^53] the episodes in which Robert pathetically lingers backstage to hear the voice of the new generation as it practises onstage and where, tragically, he attempts to cut his wrists. Robert is a genuinely tragic figure, but one which is drawn without sentimentality or condescension. Freddie Jones notes how

> The character of Robert is drawn with great powers of observation and completely without sentimentality...What's sentimental about getting too old?...Mamet's writing is astute and compassionate but certainly not sentimental^[54]

and Patrick Ryecart considers that the work is wholly without cloying sentimentality:

> I don't think it is at all sentimental. On the contrary, it is often very harsh. Even in those terrible scenes where Robert says he is leaving the theatre and the young actor catches him watching and listening...and where he tries to slash his wrists... these are totally unsentimental. It would have been easy for Mamet to veer over the edge on these occasions but he does not fall into such a trap...There is nothing remotely excessive or cloying or indulgent in these scenes. They arise quite naturally out of the text.^[55]
This is a view which is not shared by Milton Shulman who avers that
there is a hollow and artificial ring to this sentimentalised portrayal of the life-style of actors.\textsuperscript{56}
It is my own view that Mamet treads a fine line between genuine pathos and overt sentimentality, and mostly succeeds in avoiding the latter. Colin Stinton told me during an interview that the playwright is constantly - even pathologically - aware of and on the look-out for "creeping sentimentality"\textsuperscript{57} in his work and will go to great lengths to excise all traces of it. In A LIFE IN THE THEATRE, he wishes to demonstrate the generosity and bravery of actors but, in so doing, he realises that he must undercut any potential sentimentality with irony. Perhaps he goes a little far. He is so much at pains to show up the pretentiousness of Robert and the rampant ambition of John that, whilst we still regard them with affection, we also see them diminished as representatives of the profession by Mamet's unrelenting use of the bleakest irony. Sheridan Morley makes a similar point:

we [eventually] lose any faith we may have had in the actors...They are clearly so bad, and the theatre at which they are mysteriously allowed to perform is clearly so unbelievably awful, that nothing they have to say about theatrical life can be taken seriously or as typically representative.\textsuperscript{58}

However, in spite of his characters' inadequacies - perhaps even because of them - we do enjoy Mamet's representation of them. What is more, they like each other, even as they quarrel, contradict and strike poses. Perhaps it is the (often unstated) affection which exists between the two that makes us regard them with such warmth and empathy in spite of Mamet's ironic deflations.

The depiction of character through language is wonderfully accurate. Each actor's speech changes subtly throughout the play to indicate his present mood and John's move from what Benedict Nightingale describes as being "shy and gauche"\textsuperscript{59} at the start of the work through to being "dauntingly self-reliant"\textsuperscript{60} by the end is superbly controlled. John has less 'showy' dialogue than does Robert
but this in no way detracts from the power of his presence. Patrick Ryecart has commented upon this aspect of Mamet's writing:

John's dialogue is not as showy, but I don't think this diminishes his presence in any way. It all comes down to reaction to Robert's words...John 'speaks' just as much as if he had three pages of dialogue - you can make or break an entire speech just by your reaction which includes being able to look directly at the audience and draw them in. If reaction is not catered for in the writing then it is a different thing...but in a good play with good writing (as this is) it doesn't matter if a character has ten minutes of silence - if its relevance is there then it is fully justified. It was certainly never something to worry about in Mamet's play...I never thought, 'Oh God, what do I do now?' - it is all there for you in the writing.®!

Once John begins to believe that he may become a real success, he moves further and further away from Robert. He no longer feels that he need tolerate his colleague's endless rhetoric and patronising manner. He begins to distance himself from the older man and Mamet shows this through the almost monosyllabic quality of most of his lines, a brevity which demonstrates John's unwillingness to further encourage Robert's speechifying. However, Patrick Ryecart insists that, notwithstanding John's impatience with Robert, there remains a strong element of affection on his part. He does not see John as a cold and callous individual, merely one who is quite naturally trying to get on with his own career and to avoid the excesses of his garrulous friend. John does not mean to be cruel, Ryecart suggests, and feels that his gradual rejection of Robert is entirely legitimate and understandable. He observes how

You cannot have a relationship that goes beyond working with everyone you work with...Robert has been such a bloody old bore that, frankly, you can't blame John for his coolness, if that is what it is...I know these types like Robert. They sit in their dressing rooms with a little tin of sardines and they drone on and on and they are so boring...It isn't necessarily callousness for John to want to get away from such a person...It is necessary in the theatre to get on with everyone, but you cannot be good friends all the time and you may not have the slightest desire to be friends with some people.®

However, despite Ryecart's defence of John's character, Mamet does include many hints of John's cool nature and
his brash, ambitious manner. His language is terse, even curt and his responses to Robert's verbal excesses often give the impression of brutal impatience. He becomes patronising and sarcastic, apparently absorbing the worst aspects of Robert's personality. Where once he was eager to please and willing to hang on to every word of the man he "believed could really teach him something of value" in the later stages of the play he has become dismissive and often rude. John's actions may be completely understandable, given the often trying circumstances he has to endure, but Mamet ensures that he is seen as rather cool and calculating, or "chilly" as Sheridan Morley describes him.

A good example of the gradual change in the actors' relationship occurs during the scene in which John tries to rehearse alone onstage. Robert suddenly appears, launching into a long speech which is both dubiously flattering and critical of the younger man's work. John is irritated enough to indulge in a little sarcasm: he decides to mock Robert by echoing one of his favourite 'theatrical' terms, "fitting":

Robert: ...It's good. It's quite good. I was watching you for a while. I hope you don't mind. Do you mind?
John: I've only been here a minute or two.
Robert: And I've watched you all that time. It seemed so long. It was so full. You're very good, John. Have I told you that lately? You are becoming a very fine actor. The flaws of youth are the perquisite of the young. It is the perquisite of the Young to possess the flaws of youth.
John: It's fitting, yes...
Robert: Ah, don't mock me, John. You shouldn't mock me. It's too easy.

(Scene 23, p.48)

John can perceive the edge to Robert's 'flattering' remarks; Robert observes that he had watched John "all that time" - a period which was apparently only a minute or two. The implication is surely that John is labouring his acting, spinning out what needs to be brief and succinct. To counteract this inference, Robert immediately states that "It was so full" before launching into the main body of his critique. It is not sufficient for him to comment upon
John's prowess as a performer, he must also mention "the flaws of youth" which rather deflates the intended compliment. Robert moves up the scale from "good" to "quite good" to "very fine" although he is almost certainly insincere. His use of the word "perquisite" - twice - is another indication of his fussy and pretentious nature and here his hyperbole is summarily punctured by John's sarcastic remark. There is in this extract a sour sense of the alienation which is gradually developing between the two men: they no longer speak to one another as they once did and now expend their energies trying to falsely flatter or deflate egos. Robert's habit of referring to the "fitness" of things has obviously rankled John to the extent that he throws a mocking echo of it into Robert's face. He speaks with what seems to be malicious glee, and it would appear that he has been patiently waiting for his chance to demolish Robert's pomposity and, when the occasion arises, he seizes it joyfully. Earlier in the play, he had held his tongue when Robert had told him that the actress who had so offended him had upset his "sense of fitness" (Scene 1, p.13) and later, when rejected by John in favour of an unseen friend on the telephone had declared dramatically:

I am going to drink. For I must drink now. Do you know why?...It is fitting.

(Scene 21, p.45)

Robert's insecurity is poignantly revealed in the last line of this extract: "Ah, don't mock me, John. You shouldn't mock me. It's too easy." This plain and simple diction is in complete contrast to his usual verbose style of speech and it is clear that Mamet wishes to show us that this is indeed the real Robert. The mask of pretence has been momentarily cast aside and the true identity of the man revealed. It is a glimpse at an almost unbearable sadness which lies just beneath the surface bluster of the professional player.

The reversal in dependence which occurs in Robert and John's relationship in fact begins much earlier in the play. Patrick Ryecart told me that, in his opinion, one of the most powerful aspects of the work was the brilliantly
executed role delineation and subsequent reversal which begins on the very first page of the script and is concluded, neatly and succinctly, on the last. He comments upon the wonderful sparring match right through the play...every few lines there is a little twist or barb and both men do indeed spar with language, using words as weapons with which to score points off one another. John's confident sarcasm in Scene 21 would have been unthinkable in the early scenes when he listened eagerly to everything Robert had to say, flattering and encouraging him, and believing that he had been accepted into a very exclusive coterie indeed. Ryecart notes how

There are two little instances of dialogue, right at the beginning and right at the end, which convey what the whole play is about. At the beginning, Robert says to John: 'I thought the bedroom scene tonight was brilliant' to which John eagerly replies 'Did you?' He is at this point delighted to have the praise of a respected colleague, eager to please and oh, so innocent. In the last scene, Robert says: 'I loved the staircase scene tonight' to which John now replies: 'You did?'. It's totally different. The nuance is entirely changed. John's new-found confidence and maturity just shines out...so Mamet, with those four little words, two at the start and two at the finish, conveys the essence of the piece. It took a very long time in rehearsals to get the inflection and nuance just right...The role reversal happens throughout the play but is set off by those opening words...There are probably examples on every page in which you can see how Mamet builds up this sense of change. It is so subtle but so very effective.

Jill Burrows comments on the same issue:

The young man grows progressively more impatient with the 'advice' meted out to him by his partner...Even his stock answer to a compliment - 'You did?' when the other tells him he thought a scene went particularly well - changes from a boyish invitation to elaborate, to a self-assured actorish mannerism, still however asking for the praise to be enlarged on. A nice touch is that the earliest of these compliments is about 'the bedroom scene', but by the end of the play it's 'the execution scene'...

Robert's professional 'death' is therefore carefully and meticulously prepared for by Mamet. It is tempting to read significance, as Jill Burrows clearly has, into the choice of 'bedroom' scene - with its suggestions of intimacy and
even regeneration - and the 'execution' scene which carries its own obvious implications.

Another good example of role reversal occurs after an audition at which John believes he has done very well. He feels secure enough in his own talent to tell Robert to "shut up" (Scene 17, p.39). A little later, he puts paid to yet another of his colleague's trite and aesthetically maudlin litanies. John has just received from the critics some good notices which have, not surprisingly, made him a little conceited:

Robert: They've praised you too much. I do not mean to detract from your reviews, you deserve praise, John, much praise...Not, however, for those things which they have praised you for.

John: In your opinion.  

(Scene 22, p.46)

Robert carries on with his advice not to take the critics too seriously until John is moved to remark:

John: I thought that they were rather to the point.
Robert: You did.
John: Yes.
Robert: Your reviews.
John: Yes.
Robert: All false modesty aside.
John: Yes.
Robert: Oh, the Young, the Young, the Young, the Young.
John: The Farmer in the Dell.

(Ibid, pp.46,47)

Mamet captures with great accuracy the slightly bitchy, though ostentatiously 'sincere' diction of an actor like Robert. There is more than a touch of effeminate spite in his remarks and Mamet picks up on his linguistic slip in "Not, however, for those things which they have praised you for", undercutting the words of a man who believes he has a superior command of language. As John defends his position, Robert half-smilingly patronises him with short statements intended to annoy him: "You did", "Your reviews" and "All false modesty aside." In case John should somehow miss the subtle deflation of all this, Robert then flounces off into what he wishes to convey as an affectionate scoff at the charming pretensions of youth: "the Young, the Young, the Young, the Young". John remains quite unamused by this, responding only with the sardonic and demotic: "The Farmer
in the Dell" with its echoes of nursery rhymes and childhood, perhaps intended to infer Robert's incipient senility and imbecilic childishness.

John quite clearly does not feel the same fear of time passing that Robert does. He is still young and in the early years of his career, whereas Robert's working life is quickly drawing to a close. However, John's imminent success is somewhat tainted by the presence of his potential future in the form of Robert, despite Patrick Ryecart's assertion that

John may well succeed where Robert has failed. There is an optimism about his character which suggests that he may well transcend his present, rather spurious, stage life and move on to better things...There is certainly the suggestion that he may be hired for films...68

and Anne Morley-Priestman's belief that

John...will probably get on quite nicely whether in soap opera or in Shakespeare.69

Both men know that they are engaged in something of an uphill struggle to survive, and this knowledge binds them together. There is friction between them, but there is also, as has been stated elsewhere, a degree of friendship which remains in spite of their differences. John's fondness of Robert is demonstrated in the scene in which the older man has "accidentally" cut his wrist with a razor. John's concern cannot be wholly discounted as an insincere demonstration of affection and his insistence that a doctor be called is only quelled by Robert's continued assertions that he is not badly hurt. There is another rather touching scene in which John removes a smear of greasepaint from behind Robert's ear:

John: Here. I'll get it...No. Wait. We'll get it off...There.

Robert: Did we get it off?

John: Yes. (Scene 1, p.17)

John's language here is rather paternalistic, even down to the plurality of "We'll get it off...". He changes from the personal pronoun to the plural in order to render the sentence somehow more intimate, something which Robert immediately notices and adopts because he then asks "Did we get it off?" However, what immediately follows returns
Robert to the 'parental' role: John throws the crumpled tissue towards the waste-basket but misses. Robert crosses the stage, picks it up

and deposits it in the appropriate receptacle murmuring: 'Alright. All gone. Let's go. (Pause) Eh?'

(Ibid)

Mamet manages to infer, rival recriminations notwithstanding, the deep bond which exists between the two men. Freddie Jones commented upon this aspect of the play, observing that

Acting together with another person is almost like being in a war...it draws you very closely together. You are engaged in a very dangerous journey, and it is essential, no matter what peripheral differences may exist between you, to build up trust, a bond, even a kind of love.

There is in the scene just discussed - and elsewhere in the play - the suggestion that there may be some latent homosexual feelings between the two men, although neither Patrick Ryecart nor Freddie Jones agreed that any such implication exists. It is difficult to completely reject any such inference when one considers the scene in which Robert's fly breaks and John tries to fix it with a safety pin. Robert's exhortations for him to hurry up surely suggest rather more than a mere plea for speed, the double entendres practically colliding with one another as they spill out. However, the scene begins innocently enough:

Robert: My zipper's broken.
John: Do you want a safety pin?
Robert: I have one.
John: Do you want me to send the woman in?

(Scene 8, p.27)

Even here there are subliminal suggestions of what may follow. Having refused the attentions of "the woman" - an almost too-bland rejection of the wardrobe assistant - Robert struggles with the pin until John is moved to offer his own assistance:

Oh, come on. I'll do it. Come on. (Pulls out chair) Get up here. Come on. Get up. (Robert gets up on the chair) Give me the pin. Come on...

(Ibid,p.28)

They lose the safety pin, but John finally sees it and begins again:
John: Stand still now.
Robert: Come on, come on. (John puts his face up against Robert's crotch) Put it in.
John: Just hold still for a moment.
Robert: Come on, for God's sake.
Robert: Oh, fuck you. Will you stick it in.
John: Hold still. There.

(Scene 8, pp.27, 28)

Apart from being wonderfully naturalistic dialogue which conveys the sense of urgency on Robert's part as he desperately tries to get ready in time for his cue, Mamet imbues the two actors' words with a subtly suggestive harmony. The repetition of pseudo-sexual phrases such as "Come on" and "Hold still" deftly contribute to the flirtatious undercurrent of the scene. As it moves towards its conclusion, and John is placed with "his face up against Robert's crotch", Mamet allows him a deliciously cheeky quip which is at once an acknowledgment of the physical intimacy of the moment and a mildly sarcastic observation of the kind frequently utilised by homosexual or effeminate men. The tone is quite different from the admiring words John had spoken in the first scene, when Robert had commented upon his weight problem. John had observed

You're having trouble with your weight?...But you're trim enough.  

(Scene 1, p.16)

He may not have been absolutely sincere in his flattery, but there was at this stage no suggestion in his tone to imply the impertinent and rather effeminate stance he later adopts. Robert's responses to John's saucy remark are suggestive and almost equally flirtatious: he responds with an obscenity (which may even be a half-unconscious wish!) and an exhortation which it is difficult to ignore as yet another possible double entendre. Patrick Ryecart believes that if Mamet had intended some sort of homosexual relationship to exist between John and Robert, he would have made such an implication quite clear. It is my opinion that in such scenes as this, he most certainly has. I do not, however, believe that such a reading of certain scenes should be viewed as the mainspring of Mamet's intention in the work. Homosexuality may well be a subtext in specific
instances but *A LIFE IN THE THEATRE* is not a work which is wholly concerned with this subject. To view it in this manner is to seriously diminish its impact and to lessen the subtlety of Mamet's characterisation. It is enough to be aware that such an element probably exists and to leave it at that.

Robert clearly enjoys John's company, and values his attentions and friendship. Although he selflessly declares that everyone must have a life outside the theatre, he is distressed when it transpires that John does indeed enjoy such a life. He comes onstage just as John is speaking on the telephone, an action which in itself prompts him to interrupt:

Robert: You ready?
John: (Covering phone) Yes. (Into phone) I'll see you then. (Pause) Bye. (He hangs up telephone)

Robert: We all must have an outside life, John. This is an essential.
John: Yes.
Robert: Who was it? (Pause)
John: A friend.

(Scene 6, p.24)

Robert makes John feel guilty by his very presence; this is evidenced by the rather nervous manner in which he covers up the telephone and quickly brings to an end his conversation with the caller. The pause which ensues after Robert's enquiry as to whom John was speaking also indicates the younger man's unease. There is something in Robert's tone which, though ostensibly friendly and encouraging, suggests artificial levity. Certainly it is enough to prompt John to respond with an ambiguous and non-committal remark: "A friend", presumably intended to be a casual statement of fact but which in fact sounds guarded and defensive.

By the last scene in the play, it is Robert who is nervous and slightly uneasy in John's company. It is Robert who now accepts John's compliments about his performance with what seems to be excessive gratitude:

John: I thought the execution scene worked beautifully.
Robert: No. You didn't...
John: Yes. I did. (Pause)
Robert: Thank you...

(Scene 26, p.54)
It is now Robert who is "not eating too well these days" because he is "Not hungry" (Ibid, p.55) as opposed to John who, in the opening scene spoke of the fact that he had not "had an appetite for several days" (Scene 1, p.10), and it is now Robert who addresses the empty auditorium with a pathos which was not evident in John's earlier solitary speech which, as Patrick Ryecart points out was merely the act of a professional performer as he quite legitimately learns his lines and practises his vocal skills.\(^71\)

Robert's final words in the play encapsulate all he has been striving to communicate throughout the work. He muses upon the ephemeral nature of theatre (and life), indulges in clichés and appears to be thanking the audience after being "given an award" (Scene 26, p.56):

\[ \text{Goodnight...Ephemeris, ephemesis...'An actor's life for me.'...You've been so kind, Thank you, you've really been so kind. You know, and I speak, I am sure, not for myself alone, but on behalf of all of us...All of us here, when I say that these, these moments make it all...they make it all worthwhile.} \]

(Ibid)

In A LIFE IN THE THEATRE, Mamet's dialogue is, once again, taut with invention. Michael Billington calls it "wry, wistful \( \text{and} \) funny"\(^72\) and Milton Shulman notes how Mr. Mamet cleverly reproduces those exchanges of hesitant compliments and sly insults that actors use when they discuss each other's performances.\(^73\)

Jill Burrows describes the text as "brittle",\(^74\) observing that it is full of the effusive theatrical expressions that are essential for morale...\( [\text{It is like}] \) an elegant game of tennis; a request for tissues is a beautifully placed high lob; a comment on the width of a make-up brush, a vicious drop-shot.\(^75\)

Mel Gussow feels that the language in this play glistens...\( [\text{It is like}] \) is a cross between the elegant and the vernacular\(^76\) and believes that Mamet has made this particular aspect of dialogue an ironic combination that is uniquely his own...\( [\text{Mamet's}] \) timing is as exact as Accutron...he is an eloquent master of two-part harmony.\(^77\)

As Robert and John's linguistic battle for supremacy gathers...
momentum, it is easy to see why Gussow should feel that their language "glistens" and why he should compare Mamet's timing to "Accutron". In the following scene, the playwright's command over rhythm and subtle inflection reaches its zenith. Robert feels that John is unfairly upstaging him during one of their scenes together and suggests that he should "do less":

Robert: (Pause) in our scene tonight...
John: Yes?
Robert: Mmmm...
John: What?
Robert: Could you...perhaps...do less.
John: Do less?
Robert: Yes.
John: Do less???
Robert: Yes... (Pause)
John: Do less what???
Robert: You know.
John: You mean...what do you mean?
Robert: (Pause) You know.
John: Do you mean I'm walking on your scene? (Pause)
What do you mean?
Robert: Nothing. It's a thought I had. An aesthetic consideration.
John: Mmm.
Robert: I thought maybe if you did less...
John: Yes?
Robert: You know...
John: If I did less.
Robert: Yes.
John: Well, thank you for the thought.
Robert: I don't think you have to be like that.

(Scene 8, pp. 26, 27)

Freddie Jones told me that he thought Mamet's writing in scenes such as this was

beautifully rhythmic...beautifully elegant writing. It is fluid, musical. We really do speak in an iambic pentameter and Mamet's work is never rhythmically erroneous

and Patrick Ryecart felt that examples like this scene confirm Mamet's position as

a superb dramatic poet. There is a true rhythm in the lines which propel the actor along...

The timing in this scene is as acute as that to be found in any music-hall patter; it is reminiscent of the verbal bantering which occurs between many of Beckett's old 'vaudevillians' as they bicker and prod one another into responsive action. Robert begins politely and even
deferentially, delaying the moment by pauses and contemplative noises, until he feels that he can 'safely' make his request. His nervousness and uncertainty as to the exact moment to choose is cleverly conveyed: he is perhaps a little unnerved by the curtness of John's "Yes?" and "What?", and believes that it might be prudent to wait a moment before stating his case. In the exchange which follows "Could you...perhaps...do less" to "Do less what??", Mamet uses rhyme as well as rhythm. The phrasing is as tight and measured as that to be found in any jazz 'rap'. Indeed, Patrick Ryecart comments upon Mamet's use of rhythm and rhyme in this extract as follows:

'Do less', 'do less', 'do less what'...the words are so musical. It's like jazz. The rhymes have the rhythms of the purest forms of jazz. I am sure Mamet listens to his texts as music...counting out the beats, working in the pauses...60

John is both outraged and indignant that he should be asked to "do less". He becomes coldly angry and his tone takes on a hint of menace. Certainly Robert senses the potential danger and negates the request by pretending it was "An aesthetic consideration." When John merely responds with a less threatening "Mmm", erroneously conveying to Robert a lull in his anger but probably intending contemptuous resignation, Robert decides to take on another tone. He tries to convey meek insecurity in an effort to buy back his alienated friend's sympathy: "I thought maybe if you did less..." The use of the uncertain "thought" and "maybe" are clearly intended to deflate the seriousness of his request and to show the unnecessarily ruffled John that it was merely a casual suggestion. Robert strains to prove that his comments in no way implied damaging implications concerning John's acting style although, plainly, they did just that. When John counters his grovelling with sarcasm, Robert again changes his tone, this time to righteous indignation. There is a sense in which he wishes to impress upon John the fact that his response is unprofessional and childish, and wholly improper for a man of his 'calling'. Thus, Robert tries to stabilise an inflammatory situation by reverting to familiar sentiments - the need for a 'mature' approach to acting in which one eschews minor
and selfish considerations and embraces criticism in an endless quest for perfection.

Robert knows that time is passing very quickly for him, and more than once can be heard muttering the words "Ephemeris. Ephemeris" (Scene 19, p.42 and Scene 26, p.56). He tells John as he practises at the barre that "The mirror is your friend. (Pause) For a few more years (Scene 4, p.23), and frequently comments upon the gap between their ages. There are moments when it appears that Robert is voicing some genuine worries about his age and others when he seems to be making the distinction as a prelude to yet another lecture about John's inexperience. In order to be considered innovative and far from old-fashioned in his ideas, Robert strives to impress upon John the need for theatrical invention and improvisation. After the performance of a particularly awkward and laboured scene, he states emphatically that new and exciting acting styles are needed:

We should do this whole frigging thing in rehearsal clothes...in blue jeans and T-shirts and give it some life, you know?...Eh? And give it some guts. (Pause) Give guts to it. (Pause) And to hell with experimentation. Artistic experimentation is shit. Huh?

(Scene 15, p.37)

The repetition of the word "guts" is an indication of the muscular and certainly non-effeminate manner of acting that Robert has in mind. He uses the demotic word as an indication that he is far from staid and is fearless of new techniques. His frequent use of the words "Eh?" and "Huh?" suggest his need to enlist support and confirm his aesthetic opinions; Robert is never the sort of individual who states his thoughts baldly and plainly without the need for some sign of corroboration (however slight) from his audience. Having declared the need to throw away convention and act the scene "in blue jeans and T-shirts", Robert then contradicts himself by averring that "Artistic experimentation is shit". It is difficult to know what to make of this, since he clearly wishes John to agree with both points of view at once, which is quite impossible. Robert is obviously tired of the endless costume changes and props with which
they must struggle. In this play, everything that can go wrong, does. His complaints are borne out in the ensuing scene when he must address an imaginary mob whilst dressed in full "French Revolution" costume. As he gets into his stride, Robert "throws his head back [and] He loses his wig". (Scene 16, p.38).

Robert's insecurity and constant need for approbation are neatly conveyed in his bitter attack upon an unspecified enemy:

Robert: The motherfucking leeches. The sots. (Pause)
The bloody boors. All of them...All of them...
John: Who?
Robert: All of them.
John: All of whom?
Robert: (Pause) What?
John: All of whom?
Robert: (Pause) You know. All of them. Bloody shits...
Why can they not leave us alone...Boring lunatics...
( Scene 10, pp. 31,32)

Robert launches into his hysterical rant without actually informing John of whom he is speaking. When John questions him, he is lost in thought, caught up in the venomous hatred he feels for his unfortunate victims. Precisely who "All of them" are is uncertain but, apart from unsympathetic audiences, they probably include the critics whom Robert so despises. Later, he describes them as

Fucking leeches...[who will] praise you for the things you never did and pan you for a split second of godliness. What do they know? They create nothing...They don't even buy a ticket.
( Scene 22, pp. 45,46)

To Robert, critics are ignorant philistines who lead a parasitic existence, living off professionals like himself. Unlike actors, "They create nothing" and do not even contribute financially to the theatrical arts. In his book about the history of The Group Theatre, Harold Clurman writes that

The reviewer always implies that he stands for nothing, that he is not responsible to anyone, that he writes as he pleases. Thus he is an honest, even unpretentious man. It is precisely in his independence, humility, and freedom that the reviewer's evil lurks. For he cannot be held to anything, he represents nothing definite, he has no intellectual identity; his mind
is a private affair, and his change of mind may be an accident...The press...at all times remain outside the theatre, parasitic and dangerous. Mamet has a rather ambivalent attitude towards the critics. On the whole, he believes he has been fairly treated by them but, as Richard Gottlieb points out, he bridles when reminded that some critics found his A LIFE IN THE THEATRE 'lightweight and trivial'.

He told Gottlieb during an interview that I would not write plays if I didn't feel they had a point. Some of my plays are slighter than others, but none is trivial.

Mamet identifies two types of critics, and considers their importance in terms of the theatre:

Criticism may be irrelevant to a happy understanding of theatre. However, it is not irrelevant to the development of theatre, because in the commercial theatre, critics have the ability to prolong the life of a piece. There are two types of criticism. There is the sort that is frequently used by friends and casual theatregoers. It is their way of co-opting the piece. They will come up after the play and say 'I see you had done this or that'. That's healthy because they identify with the piece, they've been given a licence to participate...Then, there's the supposedly non-emotional sort sometimes practised in the Press. That's a fiction, of course. Dealing with a play, non-emotionally simply distances the critic.

A LIFE IN THE THEATRE received fairly mixed reviews both here and in the United States, although the American critics were generally more favourable. Sheridan Morley considers that the play is a wonderful idea...gone disastrously wrong in the writing...We are...left with a few very old backstage jokes and the feeling that for two hours we have been hit over the head with bound volumes of 'The Stage'.

Michael Coveney notes how the audience keep waiting for an ideological crunch that never comes. The backstage scenes are not capable of bearing the weight thrust upon them...

and Benedict Nightingale feels that the play is funny, sometimes very funny, but over-dependent on easy burlesque...

Mel Gussow saw the two early American productions, both in Chicago and New York. The Chicago production he said was Mr. Mamet in a light-hearted mood. It is slight but it does not lack consequence. It has bite and it also...
has a heart [Mamet is] one of our brightest and most original young playwrights. When he saw it again in New York, he described the work as one which is written with humour, affection and sophistication. It is an evening of pure theatre [comparable to] that beautiful Zero Mostel sketch, 'An Actor Prepares', extended into Marcel Marceau's seven ages of man.

For Mel Gussow, Mamet is An abundantly gifted playwright [who] brings new life to the theatre. Some critics have remarked upon the lengthy pauses which exist between scenes, due to costume-changes and positioning of props. Michael Coveney calls these "longeurs", Michael Billington recalls the inordinate waits between scenes and a sense of people knocking things over in the dark and Jill Burrows notes how the costume changes slow the action that little bit more than is comfortable.

However, as both Patrick Ryecart and Freddie Jones point out, these 'longeurs' are crucial to the whole structure of the play. It is precisely because the audience is permitted a glimpse into a backstage world which is usually denied them that the play is so fascinating. Freddie Jones told me that he considered these moments to be as essential to the overall structure as the dialogue:

The most important thing in a work like this is not to rush. Part of the fascination of it is the drama of watching people at work. The way they put sight-holes in hoardings so that you can watch people digging a hole 60 feet below suggests the spell of watching - it is almost voyeuristic. You see bowler-hatted businessmen in the City avidly watching the labourers. The psychology of A LIFE IN THE THEATRE is identical to that. If you rush it, it makes it look like a bottleneck, a failure in the script. If you trust it, do it leisurely, the only way you really can, it works... by moving more slowly, you are smoothing the action, making it fluent... But as actors you are sorely tempted to rush, the pressure is so great.

Similarly, Patrick Ryecart told me The audience loved the hold-ups... although many critics did not. I find this strange because the pauses are very much a part of the whole... for a member of the audience, the hold-ups would probably not be seen as hold-ups at all but as an integral part of the action which, of course, they are... I think they are what Mamet
Another aspect which has caused some critical concern was the abandonment of the American accent in the British production. Steve Grant felt that "the dropping of the American accent is extremely silly" and Anne Morley-Priestman notes how there is no attempt to retain an American location or sustain American accents.

However, according to the two actors in the play, Mamet wrote the work with an English provincial repertory theatre in mind, somewhere "like Worthing or Northampton", as Patrick Ryecart notes. He goes on to explain:

The director of the production spent a lot of time ringing Mamet in the States and asking him about the play...it transpired that Mamet had made a specific point of stating that he had had a British provincial theatre in mind...a sea-side rep or something of that sort. It therefore follows that English accents are not only permissible but probably preferable. It certainly worked very well for us, although we did use American accents for certain of the little 'plays within plays'.

Freddie Jones observed that:

The play absolutely lends itself to an English interpretation; if you read the script you can see straight away that it can be read and acted in standard English...the director rang Mamet on this issue and he said that it was originally written with British actors in mind...in a sense, it is better that way...it works brilliantly and is very, very funny.

Whilst there is indeed sadness in this play, there is also a great deal of humour, the majority of which undoubtedly stems from the brief scenes from the 'plays' within the work, which Robert and John act out to their imaginary, up-stage audience. Both Freddie Jones and Patrick Ryecart remarked upon the difficulties of acting these scenes because of the constant danger of 'corpsing'. Patrick Ryecart recalls how they both used to stand on stage absolutely shaking with laughter. Time and again we just fell victim to
uncontrollable giggles, particularly in the 'doctor's scene' which, for some reason, never failed to make us quite hysterical. The audience knew that it was genuine laughter and loved it. Again, it was this kind of incorporation of them into the play. We both so genuinely loved the play that no matter how many times we played the scenes, no matter how many times we read them through, we always, always ended up in gales of laughter...101

Laughter was not the only difficulty, however: he continues

The scenes were difficult to act because the writing is so deliberately bad, whereas the backstage scenes are so brilliantly written...it is important to do the scenes awfully well because if there are any areas in the whole play where one might lose the attention of the audience, it is there. They have to be very funny and the acting style has to be quite different to the (most important) backstage scenes.102

Similarly, Freddie Jones feels that

It is fine to be 'hammy' in the playlet scenes but one must be judicious and not lose other elements in the process of hamming it up. A quite separate style of acting is necessary for both elements of the play and both are equally difficult in their own way.103

The structure of A LIFE IN THE THEATRE is quite similar to that of Clifford Odets' WAITING FOR LEFTY in that 'realistic' action is coupled with brief 'scenes within scenes' which both comment upon and forward the action of the whole. However, the playlet scenes in Mamet's work forward the action only insofar as they contribute to the sense of inexorable decay on Robert's part and the increase of confidence on John's. This becomes more evident in the later scenes when lines are fluffed, cues and missed and off-stage irritations intrude into their performance. It is interesting to look at the scenes sequentially to note the comradeship and solidarity which appears to exist between the two men in the early stages and to note its gradual deterioration until its final disintegration in the débâcle of the doctor's scene.

The scene set in the trenches

John and Robert are dressed as Doughboys and sit, in a trench, "smoking the last cigarette". Mamet has obviously seen a great many films which contain scenes of just this banal and clichéd type. The dialogue is stilted and corny in the
extreme and is redolent of B-films of the 1940s and 1950s in which actors like John Wayne and Audie Murphy conversed with a sincerity which only emphasised the dire quality of their scripts. The playwright captures perfectly the phony 'gritty' and 'macho' dialogue spoken in such films, language which is considered to be realistic by writers who have never had any direct experience upon which to base their fantasies and who have a 'tin' ear for naturalistic cadences:

John: They left him up there on the wire.
Robert: Calm down.
John: Those bastards.
Robert: Yeah.
John: My God. They stuck him on the wire and left him there for target practice...Those dirty, dirty bastards.

(Scene 3, p.19)

Mamet milks every drop of humour from what is obviously intended to be absolutely serious - even tragic - dialogue:

John: He had a home, he had a family. (Pause) Just like them. He thought that he was going home... On the last day, Johnnie, on the last day...
Robert: That's the breaks, kid.

(Ibid)

The final speech by John's character is brilliant in its accurate parody of a real version of 'true grit':

John: You hear me, heinies? Huh? This is for Richard J. Mahoney, Corporal A.E.F., from Dawson, Oklahoma. (Pause) Do you hear me? It's not over yet. Not by a long shot. Do you hear me, Huns? (John jumps over trench. John runs off right. A single shot is heard, then silence. Robert draws on his fag deeply, then stubs it out. He uncocks his rifle.)
Robert: Well, looks like that's the end of it...

(Ibid, pp.19,20)

In John's heroic last stand, he speaks a poor version of realistic dialogue with its predictable repetitions and emphases. The parody is accurate in every respect: Mamet even includes references to personal details of the supposed victim such as the fact that he is from "Dawson, Oklahoma" with all the red-neck camaraderie that it implies. It also suggests that the unfortunate Richard J. Mahoney - so pointedly named and designated - was an ordinary country boy, thereby extricating every ounce of pathos from an already bathetic situation. The melodrama of John's speech is suddenly and hilariously undercut with Robert's reductive:
"Well, looks like that's the end of it...", which serves not only to undermine the sheer corn which has preceded it, but also suggests the character's hard-bitten and world-weary attitude to life, so appropriate for this kind of 'hero'.

The lawyer scene

Mamet ensures that the audience is unable to take this scene seriously from the outset, because it has been preceded by the episode in which Robert's zipper breaks and which must then be held together with a safety pin. Robert is playing an urbane and sophisticated lawyer, a successful businessman at the peak of his career; a broken fly hardly goes along with this image. Consequently, Robert must try to conceal his embarrassment and adopt an air of sobriety and authority.

John confronts him with news of his wife's pregnancy:

  John: Gillian's going to have a baby.
  Robert: Why, this is marvellous. How long have you known?
  John: Since this morning.
  Robert: How marvellous!
  John: It isn't mine.
  Robert: It's not.
  John: No.
  Robert: Oh. (Pause) I always supposed there was something one said in these situations...but I find...Do you know, that is, have you been told who the father is?
  John: Yes.
  Robert: Really. Who is it, David?
  John: It's you, John.
  Robert: Me!
  John: You!
  Robert: No.
  John: Yes.
  Robert: How preposterous.
  John: Is it?
  Robert: You know it is.
  John: Do I?
  Robert: Yes.
  John: Oh, John, John, John...

(Scene 9, p.30)

This is purely the language of soap opera, right down to the way in which both men persist in calling each other by name at moments of stress. There is, of course, the additional joke of having John call Robert "John"; this somehow adds to the idiocy of what the two men are doing in such a play as this. The short, almost monosyllabic sentences, quickly following on one from the other adds to the phoniness of the
text, although the 'writer's' intention is undoubtedly that it should be seen as completely naturalistic. John's evasive "Do I?" and "Is it?" are precisely the kind of delaying tactic employed by all the best villains in the TV soaps. After this confrontation, everything begins to go badly wrong for both John and Robert. They try to light up cigars, a gesture which befits reasonable, civilised men in an uncomfortable situation, but find that the lighter will not work. They try in vain to light their cigars but eventually have to replace them in the humidor, unsmoked. As if this were not enough, Mamet then has Robert utter the following:

Robert: I think that I'll join you. (Pause) She's told you that I am the husband.
John: (Pause) No. (Pause)
Robert: She's told you that I am the father.

(Ibid, p.31)

Having replaced the cigars, Robert is still confused and thrown enough to say his rehearsed line: "I think that I'll join you." He then confuses "husband" and "father". John's pauses, unsure of how to deal with the breakdown of their scene, reflect perfectly his anxiety and hopeful silent prompting of his partner. At this stage, there is still enough of a bond between the men to ensure that disasters such as this can be lived through together, without blame being imparted on either side. As a final insult, the intercom then refuses to ring on cue and Robert looks at it meaningfully for an unconscionable time before it cooperates and rings:

Robert: ...we could sit and discuss this as gentlemen. Which would you prefer?
John: Which, in the end, is more civilized, John?
Robert: I don't know, David, I don't know. (Long pause. Robert sneaks a look at the intercom... Intercom rings. Into intercom.) I asked you to hold all calls. (Pause. Holding phone out to John) Perhaps you should take this.

(Ibid, p.31)

The Chekhovian scene
In this scene, Mamet manages to invoke aspects of several of Chekhov's plays whilst retaining a dialogue which is stultifying - even stupefying - in its boredom and banality. Robert is wheeled onstage in a bath-chair by John and then
asks for his robe:

John: Oh, the autumn...Oh, for the sun...
Robert: Will you pass me my robe, please?
John: Your laprobe.

(Scene 11, p.32)

In these lines, Mamet manages to suggest at least two of Chekhov's plays - THE THREE SISTERS and UNCLE VANYA. The specific - and rather clumsy - reference to a "laprobe" is no accident since Serebryakov's laprobe falls about his ankles whilst he sleeps during Act II of UNCLE VANYA. Not only does Robert and John's script suggest not even an inkling of Chekhovian subtext, it is also useless as naturalistic dialogue. All attempts at naturalism are doomed to sounding forced and contrived:

John: Maman says just one more day, one more day, yet another week.
Robert: Mmm.
John: One more week.
Robert: Would you please close the window?
John: What? I'm sorry?
Robert: Do you feel a draught?
John: A slight draught, yes. (Pause) Shall I close the window?
Robert: Would you mind?
John: No, not at all. I love this window.

(Ibid)

The blatant attempt at 'realistic' speech - "What? I'm sorry?" - fails to convince as does the puerile repetition. Mamet demonstrates how a poorly understood Chekhovian style can very easily turn into triteness and absurdity. The script strains towards a 'Russian' feel, but fails at every turn. John's assertion that "I love this window" is a weak and clichéd reference to Gayev's affectionate speech to the bookcase in Act I of THE CHERRY ORCHARD. Both are sentimental, but the difference is that Chekhov knew how to make sentimentality work as a means of character delineation whereas Mamet's imaginary dramatist does not. The scene drags on interminably, small talk being nothing more than just that and then Mamet throws in another reference to a real Chekhov play, THE THREE SISTERS:

John: If we could leave this afternoon.
Robert: Mmm?
John: If we could just call...bring the carriage round, just leave this afternoon...
Robert: It's much too cold.
John: Just throw two shirts into a bag...a scarf...
Robert: ...the roads...
John: Just meet the train. (Pause) Venice...
Robert: It's much too cold.

(Ibid, p.33)

The reason that these two will not leave what is presumably a dull and monotonous life is merely the cold! Instead of their stasis being explained by a deep-seated apathy or wilfulness, it is attributed to the state of the weather and "...the roads...". The fictional author is under the impression that he can convey longing and unhappiness by spacing out his characters' words with a few dots and pauses; far from suggesting these emotions, all he achieves is a drawn-out - and unintentionally hilarious - melodrama in which, literally, nothing happens. If the piece had genuine humour - apart from Mamet's wickedly ironic comedy - it could almost be Beckettian! The repetition of the word "Just" is probably intended to give rhythm to the scene, but only succeeds in irritating and the sudden insertion of a romantic-sounding place-name such as "Venice" only adds to the simultaneous pretentiousness and vacuity of the piece.

The French Revolution scene

Robert's lengthy soliloquy reads a little like a scene from an inferior version of Büchner's DANTON'S DEATH or Sardou's ROBESPIERRE, the play commissioned by Irving to provide him with a truly 'dramatic' role. There is certainly something of the Irving school of acting about Robert's performance here: the 'writer' clearly believes that he can display a linguistic flourish in high-flown rhetoric and cut a dash through the power of words alone. Alas, the rhetoric is empty, fatuous and frequently downright silly:

The heart cries out: the memory says man has always lived in chains...has always lived in chains...(Pause)
Bread, bread, bread, the people scream...we drown their screaming with our head in cups, in books, in newspapers...between the breasts of women...In our work...Enough.

(Scene 16, p.38)

The 'manliness' and robust nature of the speaker is meant to be conveyed in lines such as "...our head in cups... between the breasts of women" and similar bathetic exclamations.
What is actually conveyed is the limited imagination of the author. Whether the repetition in the first part of the speech is intentional or is an indication of Robert's forgetting his lines, is unclear. When, at the conclusion of this extract, Robert utters "Enough", it is difficult not to agree with him. Robert goes on to list the causes to which it is necessary to dedicate one's life in the interests of the Revolution:

...Our heads between the breasts of women, plight our troth to that security far greater than protection of mere rank or fortune. Now: we must dedicate ourselves to spirit: to the spirit of humanity: to life: (Pause) to the barricades. (Pause) Bread, bread, bread.

(Ibid)

This last part of the soliloquy appears to lean towards Shakespearian rhythms, rhythms which are plainly ill-suited to the emptiness of the rhetoric. Robert separates the 'causes' by means of colons. Unfortunately for the grandeur of the piece, the final 'cause' is "the barricades", which necessitates a change in tone and meaning. The call is surely to march to the barricades themselves, but the speech is so badly written that it could appear to be just another in the speaker's list of worthy causes. The concluding repetition of "Bread, bread, bread" merely serves to underline the true lack of passion and the sheer imbecility of the writing.

The Lifeboat scene

Mamet probably based this scene upon Steinbeck's LIFEBOAT. It is the episode to which Robert has given so much thought, finding meaning where little exists and lauding the author to the skies. Both men must sit in a raft, placed centre-stage, a situation which is given added hilarity by the fact that

John sits on one side and Robert sits on the other side and the raft, thus, rocks throughout the entire scene.

(Scene 18, pp. 40, 41)

The dialogue is trite and dull, but is rendered totally ludicrous by the actors specifically being asked to "do English accents" (Ibid, p.41). This is one occasion when
Robert (Freddie Jones) and John (Patrick Ryecart) in A LIFE IN THE THEATRE, The Open Space, 1979.
an American voice is most definitely called for:

Robert: Rain...? What do you know about it? (Pause)
I've spent my whole life on the sea, and all that I know is the length of my ignorance.
Which is complete, Sonny. (Pause) My ignorance is complete.

John: It's gotta rain.

Robert: Tell it to the marines.

John: It doesn't rain, I'm going off my nut.

Robert: Just take it easy, kid... What you don't wanna do now is sweat. (Pause) Believe me.

John: We're never getting out of this alive. (Pause) Are we?

Robert: How do you want it?

John: Give it to me straight.

Robert: Kid, we haven't got a chance in hell...

(Scene 18, p.41)

The fictional author is evidently attempting dialogue which is a hybrid of Steinbeck and Hemingway, the latter in his OLD MAN AND THE SEA period. What he actually achieves is an exaggerated, mannered version of such classic works. Mamet really piles on the irony in this scene. It probably is the best piece of writing the two actors have to perform, but that is saying very little. Why they must speak these obviously Americanised words with English accents is a mystery, and one that was noted by Patrick Ryecart:

In most of the scenes, we used fairly neutral accents; they seemed to suit the idiom better. For this one, we both put on our most 'British' voices which sounded so incongruous in the context and which never failed to elicit near hysteria from the audience.

At the conclusion of the scene, Robert spots a ship on the horizon:

Danny... Danny... A ship!!! A SHIP!!! (They both stand up on the raft and wave and yell to attract the attention of the ship.)

(Ibid, p.42)

The stage picture of John and Robert standing up in a raft which is placed on a stage, moved only by the swaying of their own bodies, waving frantically at an imaginary ship in the distance is a reminder of just how silly acting can sometimes become. The pretence and rather childish 'playing' are suddenly and succinctly revealed as basically quite absurd. Thus, Mamet moves his characters from serious performers to excited children in one fell swoop.
The Doctor scene

Here again, the language is that of the television soap opera. Both men constantly use professional-sounding words like "suction" and "retractor" to lend weight to the scene, whilst engaging in supposedly realistic conversation:

Robert: Give me some suction there, Doctor, will you... that's good.
John: Christ, what I wouldn't give for a cigarette.
Robert: Waaal, just a few more minutes and I think I'll join you in one. (Pause) Nervous, Jimmy?
John: No. Yes.
Robert: No need to be. A few years you'll be doing these in your sleep. Suction. Retractor. (Business) No, the large retractor.

(Scene 24, p.51)

Robert, though in character, is momentarily back in his paternal role. Offstage, his authority may be crumbling, but here it is he who teaches the novice 'doctor' the ropes and it is he who knows the tools of the trade, just as the real Robert knows well the tools of his own profession. All seems to go well until John, confidently at ease both as a 'doctor' and as an actor, makes the following remark:


Robert: (Improvising) Would you, uh, can you give me some sort of reading on the, uh, electro... um...on the...would you get me one, please? (Motioning John offstage) No...on the, uh... would you get me a reading on this man?

John: What's that!!!?
Robert: What is what? Eh?
John: What's that near his spleen? (A pause) A curious growth near his spleen?

Robert: What?
John: A Curious Growth Near His Spleen? (Pause) Is that one, there?
Robert: No, I think not. I think you cannot see a growth near his spleen for some time yet. So would you, as this man's in shock...would you get me, please, give me a reading on his vital statements? Uh, Functions...? Would you do that one thing for me, please?

John: (Sotto) We've done that one, Robert.
Robert: I fear I must disagree with you, Doctor. Would you give me a reading on his vital things, if you please? Would you? (Pause) For the love of God?
I have quoted from this scene at some length in order to convey some of the methods by which Mamet builds up his comedy. It would at first appear that it is John who is to blame for forgetting the sequence of events and for asking the wrong question at the wrong time. However, as the scene progresses, it becomes clear that it is Robert who is mistaken; this is borne out by his frantic attempts to improvise which become more and more absurd as he realises that John is not about to co-operate with him. He is incensed that John should think that he has forgotten what to do and continues in a barely-concealed charade of head shaking and mumbling in an effort to convey to the younger man that he is the one at fault. Robert begins to flounder; he fishes around in his mind for medical-sounding terms which will cover up the fact that he has been completely disorientated by John's 'error'. He tries with "some sort of reading on the, uh, electro", "a reading on this man", "a reading on his vital statements" and "Functions" and, finally, "a reading on his vital things". As the scene progresses, Robert runs out of inspiration altogether and can only think of the demotic and absurd "vital things". John himself begins to panic, as is evidenced by his pointed remark, highlighted in capitals by Mamet for full emphasis: "A Curious Growth Near His Spleen" and his final attempt to get through to his colleague the fact that he is seriously in error: "We've done that one, Robert." He calls Robert by name to let the actor know that he feels it is him, as opposed to himself, who is at fault, but Robert is adamant, carrying on frantically and still referring to John as "Doctor".

A final mix of reality and artifice occurs in the next few lines when Robert berates John for a lack of feeling, which one feels is intended not only for his partner's onstage self:

He's in shock. He's in shock, and I'm becoming miffed with you. Now: if you desire to work in this business
again will you give me a reading? If you wish to continue here inside the hospital? (Pause) Must I call a policeman? Have you no feeling? This man's in deepest shock!!

(Ibid, p.52)

Is Robert telling John the actor that he must co-operate if he wishes to "work in this business again"? Is it to John the actor that he expresses the fact that he is "miffed" with him? As Mel Gussow asks

Do the fluffs belong to the actors as actors or to the actors as characters? Robert tries to make his 'lines' sound as though they were written for him, whilst at the same time criticising John for what he feels is his total incompetence. When he says, "If you wish to continue here inside the hospital" (my emphasis) Robert betrays his fear of the younger man. He realises that John knows that he is criticising him directly and personally, and so in the next breath once again moves into the relative safety of fantasy and ambiguity. His final words: "This man's in deepest shock!!" underscores the ambiguity; which man is in shock? The imaginary patient or Robert himself?

Mamet prefixes his play with a short quotation from Rudyard Kipling's poem, ACTORS which, incidentally, Freddie Jones told me he would welcome as the epitaph on his tomb:

We counterfeited once for your disport,
Men's joy and sorrow; but our day has passed.
We pray you pardon all where we fell short.
Seeing we were your servants to this last.

This seems to be offered as a comment on the decline of Robert, but as Christopher Bigsby notes, it could also stand

as an ironic commentary...on the declining significance of theatre in the national imagination

a state of affairs Mamet is most anxious to prevent.

A LIFE IN THE THEATRE was cited by Michael Billington as being "a wary hymn to the theatre" and so it is. It celebrates the fleeting joys of a satisfying performance and it dramatises most touchingly the bond which exists between those who dedicate their lives to the stage. On the other hand, it offers a far from glamorous picture of theatrical life. As Mel Gussow observes, for the audience
it is a little like being in the wings watching a magic show in which all the tricks fail.¹⁰⁹

We see behind the artifice into the sometimes painful areas which usually remain concealed; as Robert rather grandly avers of one of the fictional authors in the play, the writer "lets you see the thought there" (Scene 13, p.34).

The work may be a play about two actors and their particularly specialised lives in the theatre, but it is universal in its theme. It may be about acting, but it is also about the conflicts of age and youth, rites of passage and simple human nature. Mel Gussow believes that A LIFE IN THE THEATRE is a play in which the author spoofs actors' insecurities, pretensions and illusions - the pretensions and ignominies of the profession.¹¹⁰

Whilst agreeing with this, I would also add that Mamet additionally deals with the "insecurities, pretensions and illusions" of life itself, the "ignominies of the profession" standing for the ignominies of human existence.
Notes

A Life in the Theatre

1. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.95.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
10. Freddie Jones in interview with author.
12. Ibid, p.3.
15. David Mamet, 'A Sad Comedy about Actors'.
18. Richard Gottlieb, 'The Engine that Drives David Mamet'.
19. Mel Gussow, 'Mamet Wins with A Life in the Theatre'.
21. Mel Gussow, 'Illusion Within an Illusion'.
22. Ibid.
27. Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Brecht, p.174.
31. Sheridan Morley, Punch, 1 August 1979, p.182.
34. Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Act I, p.30.
35. Mel Gussow, 'Illusion Within an Illusion'.
37. Ibid.
38. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
43. Sheridan Morley, Punch, 1 August 1979.
45. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
47. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.98.
48. Milton Shulman, 'Disasters on Cue'.
49. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.96.
50. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
52. David Mamet, 'Regarding A Life in the Theatre, p.5.
53. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
54. Freddie Jones in interview with author.
55. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
56. Milton Shulman, 'Disasters on Cue'.
57. Colin Stinton in interview with author.
58. Sheridan Morley, Punch, 1 August 1979.
60. Ibid.
61. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
62. Ibid.
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64. Sheridan Morley, Punch, 1 August 1979.
65. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
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68. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
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73. Milton Shulman, 'Disasters on Cue'.
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76. Mel Gussow, 'Illusion Within an Illusion'.
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78. Mel Gussow, 'Illusion Within an Illusion'.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.
82. Richard Gottlieb, 'The Engine that Drives David Mamet'.
83. David Mamet, ibid.
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85. Sheridan Morley, Punch, 1 August 1979.
88. Mel Gussow, 'Mamet Wins with A Life in the Theatre'.
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90. Ibid.
94. Freddie Jones in interview with author.
95. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
98. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
99. Ibid.
100. Freddie Jones in interview with author.
101. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
102. Ibid.
103. Freddie Jones in interview with author.
104. Patrick Ryecart in interview with author.
105. Mel Gussow, 'Mamet Wins with A Life in the Theatre'.
109. Mel Gussow, 'Mamet Wins with A Life in the Theatre'.
110. Ibid.
EDMOND is, perhaps, Mamet's most personal play to date, in that it truthfully and alarmingly reflects his darkest fears about modern America and its damaging effect upon the ordinary citizen. He has stated that there is a lot of himself in the character of Edmond, an ordinary man who tries to escape the mediocrity of his life for a more enriching, vital existence. Through the picaresque experiences of his (anti) hero, Mamet dramatises the confusion and panic of contemporary urban society. Edmond is the archetypal 'alienated' individual. He feels cut off from his history, his traditions and his sexuality. He has lost his sense of uniqueness since he has been schizophrenically separated out into various roles, split into a series of sexual, social and economic functions which make impossible a fully harmonious existence. Since there is no cohesion in Edmond's life, there is no real belonging. Mamet notes how, in his own adolescence, he felt deracinated and adrift:

My grandparents were Russian-Jewish immigrants. My father grew up poor but subsequently made a good living. My life was expunged of any tradition at all. Nothing old in the house. No colour in the house. The virtues expounded were not creative but remedial; let's stop being Jewish, let's stop being poor.

Mamet's early experience is surely the origin of Edmond's stark, characterless room, depicted so brilliantly by William Dudley in Richard Eyre's 1985 production of the play at The Royal Court. As Connie Booth observed during an interview,

Edmond and his wife have no real history. Their house is as sparse as their dialogue. They don't have real roots, colour, imagination in their relationship. There are 'things' in their home, but they don't form a satisfactory whole.

There are other indications of Mamet's sense of identification with his character: Edmond chooses to go against established customs and values and Mamet, too, has stated that

I had to invent my own life and my own fun. Anything that wasn't official, I knew that's where I wanted to be.
At base, Edmond simply wants to find happiness and peace; he cries out for a world which is
...full of life. And air. Where people are kind to each other, and there's work to do. Where we grow up in love, and in security we're wanted.

(Scene 21, p. 96)

How similar this is to Mamet's own ideas for a life of joy and contentment:

We need to be loved; we need to be secure; we need to help each other; we need to work.

Edmond's first action in the play is to visit a Fortune-Teller who might give him direction and purpose and, whilst there is no evidence of Mamet being similarly motivated, he has written a play which is specifically concerned with the powers of clairvoyance, THE SHAWL. Carl Jung has noted how, in modern society

it is chiefly in times of physical, political, economic, and spiritual distress that men's eyes turn with anxious hope to the future, and when anticipations, utopias, and apocalyptic visions multiply.

Lacking confidence in his own ability to make decisions, Edmond seeks guidance from one who claims future knowledge. The ever-encroaching banality of his life has forced him to seek a means of escape, and a glimpse into a better future is one way to achieve such liberation. A natural egotist, he seizes hungrily at the Fortune-Teller's suggestion that he is in some way 'special', and with this and a stranger's advice that he needs to 'get laid' in mind, Edmond sets himself adrift on a vertiginous downward spiral from which it is impossible to retreat. There is no going back and no going forward; he is trapped in a fragmented existence in which none of the components fully cohere and which, therefore, can offer him little solace. As Jack Kroll observes

Edmond is the rock-bottom man, the man who's dried up, who can't be either happy or unhappy, only enraged at his own emptiness.

Edmond leaves behind a loveless and joyless marriage, rejecting former friends and job-ties to plunge headlong into a search for sensation and satisfaction. It is his tragedy that he can no more be a part of the chaotic and somewhat anarchic sub-culture towards which he flees than
the mundane and routine domestic situation he leaves behind. He is too much a product of his upbringing, taking with him an excess of the constraints of bourgeois life. Temperamentally unsuited to disorder and unscrupulousness, he cannot deal with the opportunism he finds to be rampant. However, Edmond does lack one crucial bourgeois requirement - the ability to take responsibility for one's actions. He acts without thinking of the consequences and is, ultimately, destroyed. Whether this lack is Edmond's own deficiency as an individual is a moot point; in an industrialised and de-personalised society, Jung notes how the individual is increasingly deprived of the moral decision as to how he should live his own life, and instead is ruled, fed, clothed, and educated as a social unit, accommodated in the appropriate housing unit, and amused in accordance with the standards that give pleasure and satisfaction to the masses.

Mamet seems to suggest that Edmond is not necessarily to blame for his deficiencies as a moral being, but is the victim of the inadequacy and coldness of a brutal society.

The plight of the individual in a complex urban society is not, of course, a subject which is new to writers and philosophers. Many of the issues raised by Mamet's play have been broached and considered by some of the finest minds of our age. The playwright's specific concerns, such as a sense of uncertainty and lack of tradition, metaphysical confusion and man's sense of himself as a deracinated, de-personalised being searching for a way out of an urban labyrinth, are touched on by Saul Bellow, Erich Fromm and Norman Mailer. In his novel HERZOG, Bellow's protagonist muses on the predicament of modern man:

individual character [is] cut off at times both from facts and from values. But modern character is inconstant, divided, vacillating, lacking the stone-like certitude of archaic man...

Similarly, Fromm considers that

Post-modern man is more profoundly perplexed about the nature of man than his ancestors were. He is now on the verge of spiritual and moral insanity. He does not know who he is. And having lost the sense of who and what he is, he fails to grasp the meaning of his fellow man, of his vocation and of the nature and purpose of knowledge itself.
This sense of fundamental uncertainty and moral deterioration is echoed by Norman Mailer:

You don't have to put people in a concentration camp to de-humanise them; you can de-humanise them right down on the street - and we do. And not just in America, in all the countries in the world. The 20th century is going through the most peculiar period of men's de-humanisation, and it's too easy to say the fault is all American capitalism. In fact, it's something deeper than that. It's almost as if there's a titanic battle going on about the nature of the continuance of man.\textsuperscript{10}

Mamet sets his play in New York, a city which, to him, represents everything that is wrong with contemporary society: it is vast, impersonal, vulgar, corrupt and hopelessly violent. He has described New York variously as an "inferno \textit{which is} infested by hustlers and thugs\textsuperscript{11} and "a vision of hell".\textsuperscript{12} He sees its lack of moral standards, the high level of crime, its burgeoning vice industry and virulent drug culture as portents of the creeping decay which threatens every corner of his country. But New York is only the most extreme symptom of a general malaise which is, Mamet believes, sweeping over the entire continent: "America," he says, "is a very violent country full of a lot of hate. You can't put a Band Aid on a suppurating wound."\textsuperscript{13} He opines that the fabric holding his country together is falling apart because it no longer subscribes to values which ensure the continuity of stability and order:

It is falling away from all values...the terrible thing about America is the terrible disdain people have had for the Constitution. The document has been subverted - at least it represented the continuity of a unified nation based on fair laws.\textsuperscript{14}

During an interview with Melvin Bragg, Mamet talked about the play. He explained how Edmond precipitates himself into an individual period of destruction - into a downward slide so that he can find rest. Which is what is going to happen in society ...it is inevitable. If you take an overall view you can see that any place you care to look, whether it is destruction of the environment by economics, or destruction of the earth by nuclear weapons; we are like a child spilling its milk...we are trying to solve something by destruction \textit{in the hope of finding} a phase of rest.\textsuperscript{15}
Contemporary culture in New York is, he feels, based upon anarchic and destructive principles:

Part of the modern culture in New York has to do with destruction: graffiti art, punk music and punk styles. Performance art has to do with destruction. In an essay entitled The Undiscovered Self, Jung observes that

The development of modern art with its seemingly nihilistic trend towards disintegration must be understood as the symptom and symbol of a mood of universal destruction and renewal that has set its mark on our age. This mood makes itself felt everywhere, politically, socially, and philosophically.

Mamet believes that people are only too aware of the fact that their hold upon a stable, safe society is disintegrating before their eyes and they live in constant terror because of this. Their only chance of surviving mentally intact from day to day is to subscribe to the "intellectual idea that if we keep going, things will continue as they are". Consequently, the populace represses its fears and engages in a frantic covering-up of the real issues. The pressures are, Mamet says, quite simply "driving people nuts".

It is little wonder then that Edmond should go so tragically off the rails; he rejects the accepted notion that he should "keep going", and opts instead to 'drop out' of his respectable, middle-class life in order to look for peace elsewhere.

Edmond is a kind of parody of the self-awareness and personal liberation philosophy which flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s; he tries desperately to find truth and freedom, to once more feel "like a man" (Scene 3, p.25) but finds instead only hatred, lies and oppression. As Christopher Bigsby observes,

The rhetoric of existential liberation comes up against a reality which is crude and brutal.

The language which Mamet uses to illustrate the world Edmond inhabits is as vitiated and colourless as the emotional lives of the characters. Edmond and his wife seem unable to communicate; it is only when they are planning divorce after Edmond's arrest for murder that he observes:
I know at certain times we wished we could be... closer to each other. I can say that now. I'm sure this is the way you feel when someone near you dies. You never said the things you wanted desperately to say. It would have been so simple to say them. (Pause) But you never did.

(Scene 19, p.88)

In Edmond's confusion over his use of "I" and "You" is suggested the lack of intimacy on both sides; his final statement "But you never did" can be seen both as a declaration of his own inadequacy, or as a sad recollection of his wife's silence. If his relations with his wife are strained and almost monosyllabic, his encounters in the seedy underworld of downtown New York are barely human. Almost without exception, those he meets try to exploit him or to take advantage of his naïveté. Their language is slick, oily but strangely flat: what remains of a lively street language which must once have been so thrilling exists only in brief fragments. The majority of the discourse in these scenes consists merely of the debased slang and obscene ramblings of those whose lives absolutely lack any transcendence. The street hustlers Edmond meets utter words which are totally devoid of emotional content; their speech patterns follow those of transactional language: bleak, functional and stark. Their words act only as indications of intent or as the conveyance of some basic piece of information. When there are occasional moments of lyricism, such as in the musicality of the Three Card Monte, such instances are quickly negated as the banter turns from verbal seduction to physical violence.

Mamet's use of language in EDMOND is as skilful and subtle as in any of his other works although some critics consider that he has gone "tone deaf", and that the language is "stiff and unnatural". The language may be toneless and flat, but this is precisely the effect that the dramatist is trying to achieve. There is differentiation between the characters' speech patterns, but it is perhaps not so obvious as that employed in, say, AMERICAN BUFFALO.

In EDMOND, the episodic nature both of the play and its language reflects the discontinuity, disjunction and incoherence of modern America. EDMOND is more expressionistic
Mamet uses Edmond as a symbol of innocence and naiveté who is eventually destroyed as he kicks and shoves against the barriers which prevent him from finding happiness. He may be foolish and rash, violent and selfish but he is also recognisably human and vulnerable. He goes about seeking his salvation in the wrong way, but at least he tries, rather than wallowing in the apathy of a mediocre existence. The play is not meant to be realistic, but fabulistic, an allegory intended to enlighten and to inform. Susie Mackenzie misses so much of what Mamet is trying to achieve when she observes that the play is "an excuse for almost any kind of depraved and anti-social behaviour". It is only to be expected that Mamet should respond to such criticism by stating

I think it could be taken as an apology. But not by anyone who has read the words.

Colin Stinton, who created the role in the United States and also played it in this country, defends Mamet's play by emphasising Edmond's courage in making the first, essential, break:

There is a whole wealth of things I could go into... that Edmond is cheap, trying to get laid, etc. but what he is trying to do is to take positive action. He fails but he tries. Edmond knows that the Three Card Monte will try to take him - but he decides to try to beat him. In that critical little scene as to how to beat the game - how to beat the game of life, if you like - you pick the one you would not pick, you do the perverse thing. Throughout the play, Edmond chooses to do something perverse. There was a section at the beginning of the Glenna scene which was eventually cut...Edmond says to her: 'You got to stay up late, you got to do something you would not do.' He feels that he has found that thing one has got to do to bring one to life; the way to beat fate, to do the perverse thing, to do the thing you aren't expected to do but by doing it, it makes you alive, it makes you real. He's trying to seek out, rather heroically, that way of breaking free from those he feels would inhibit him. He has made mistakes; he is naive, he doesn't know the rules...but at least he tries.

EDMOND was written between 1981 and 1982 and was premièred at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in June 1982. It has also
been produced in New York and in November 1985 received its British première in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It then transferred to The Royal Court Theatre in London for a short season.

EDMOND is a short, episodic play made up of 23 rapid, pungent scenes which depict its protagonist's downfall. The subject of the work is reflected both in its linguistic and theatrical structure. The sounds and visions of Edmond's world are bleakly jarring and dissonant; they are as cold and functional as the black iron fire-escapes and tawdry neon signs that littered the stage in Richard Eyre's Royal Court production. EDMOND is a vision of hell, of confinement, of an hermetically sealed sub-culture which is dramatised as powerfully through its sparse dialogue as through its numbingly stark visual effects. It is, as Richard Christiansen observes,

a play of shattering, yet exhilarating ferocity. Its savagery which summons up the demons in all of us, is cleansing. And, for all its brutality, it is ultimately a most humane and compassionate work.\(^26\)

Mamet's protagonist can be seen in a number of different ways: as the dupe of a manipulative and uncaring society, as a pathetic and helpless victim of fate, as a repressed and violent man who acts out his darkest fantasies or as an all-too willing pawn drawn into a world of limitless depravity. All of these elements are present in the play - as well, of course, as Mamet's broader philosophical canvas which pictures the gradual disintegration of civilisation because of the falling away of a coherent system of values by which to live. What makes it an exceptional piece of theatre is the playwright's ability to work on all of these levels simultaneously.

In some ways, Edmond's adventures are a kind of warped version of the romantic adventure as described by Lord Byron:

The great object of life is Sensation - to feel that we exist - even though in pain.\(^27\)

For Edmond, the romantic conflation which underlies Byron's dictum disintegrates, all pleasure summarily disperses, leaving behind only the pain. His suffering recalls the
plight of Saul Bellow's HERZOG as he muses on his destiny:
when will we civilised beings become really serious? said Kierkegaard. Only when we have known hell through and through. Without this, hedonism and frivolity will diffuse hell through all our days.28

Edmond appears to be drawn to the seediness and violence he encounters in the same way that Joseph Conrad wrote about "the fascination of the abomination,"29 it attracts and repels him in equal measure. T.E. Kalem considers that Edmond's flight to the underworld
is the quest for identity based on Joseph Conrad's admonition: 'In the destructive element immerse. That is the way.' The way to what? Quite probably, the way to understand and absorb the dark tenor and temper of our age.30

Francis King believes that Edmond's downfall is at least partly self-motivated:
For almost 40 years, Edmond has lived the life of a respectable, white American, the most recent of them with a wife whom he has long since ceased to love. Through all those years he has both feared and secretly wished for squalor, promiscuity and violence.31

A key sentence in the play is undoubtedly "Every fear hides a wish." (Scene 20, p.89). Edmond tells his cell-mate when he arrives at the prison that for the first time in his life, he feels no fear:
We...when we fear things I think that we wish for them. (Pause) Death. Or 'burglars'...We mean we wish they would come. Every fear hides a wish. Don't you think? I always knew that I would end up here...What I know I think that all this fear, this fucking fear we feel must hide a wish. 'Cause I don't feel it since I'm here. I don't. I think the first time in my life. ...(Pause) In my whole adult life I don't feel fearful since I came in here.

(Scene 20, pp.89, 90)

Although Edmond is indeed a product of his society - a confused and bitter man, a bourgeois, an egocentric chauvinist - he is also, unswervingly, an innocent. In literature, there have always been innocents who endure terrible hardships and torments, experiencing the basest cruelty humanity can devise in a quest to find some meaning to life. Two obvious examples are Voltaire's CANDIDE and Cervantes' DON QUIXOTE. Their hardships are, like those of Edmond, often offset by a grimly ironic humour, black
and caustic, but irresistibly funny. Two excellent examples of Mamet's ability to invest an almost tragic situation with sardonic humour occur in Edmond's visits to the Peep Show and the Health Club. At the Peep Show, 'A girl in a spangled leotard' flatly intones the following profane little litany with palpable boredom:

    Girl: Take your dick out. (Pause)
    Take your dick out. (Pause)
    Come on. Take your dick out.
    Edmond: I'm not a cop.
    Girl: I know you're not a cop. Take your dick out. I'm gonna give you a good time.

(Scene 5, p.31)

What seems almost certain from this exchange is that Edmond is most certainly not going to have "a good time". He is separated from the girl by a plexiglass partition which negates any possibility of direct contact, other than via a small hole through which money can be shoved. Miranda Richardson, who played this role as well as that of the Fortune-Teller and Glenna in The Royal Court production, told me that she had some problems with this particular part:

    I had some problems with the Peep-Show girl - it was all voice with her. My interpretation owed more to the [Wim Wenders] film PARIS, TEXAS than to any of the research I did in Soho Peep Show joints. I did visit one or two but this wasn't as helpful. This girl is totally bored, so fed up with it all and I think Mamet captures this in the tonelessness of her voice. It really is black humour, the repetition, etc. She's thinking: can he hear me? what's he doing; why isn't he responding; this guy is a total idiot...32

When Edmond visits the 'Health Club', the Whore comes straight to the point, despite his absurdly polite manner of speaking to her:

    Whore: What shall we do?
    Edmond: I'd like to have intercourse with you.
    Whore: That sounds very nice. I'd like that, too.
    Edmond: You would?
    Whore: Yes.
    Edmond: How much would that be?
    Whore: For a straight fuck, that would be a hundred fifty.

(Scene 9, p.42)

In both of these extracts, the language of sex has been deprived of all emotional content; all that remains is the basic act. At this stage, Edmond is too green to understand
Whore (Marian McLoughlin) and Edmond (Colin Stinton) in EDMOND, The Royal Court, 1985.
the implications of buying sexual favours; he speaks to the Whore as though she were his girl-friend or even his wife. That he should choose to term what he wishes to do with her as "intercourse" humorously reflects his stuffy and straight-laced mentality. It certainly clashes with the Whore's bluntly prosaic response: "For a straight fuck, that would be a hundred fifty." She has undoubtedly said this so many times that the words come as easily and naturally as if she were ordering tea, but it is all still a new experience to Edmond. Her abbreviation of 'a hundred and fifty' to "a hundred fifty" is another indication of her casual attitude and of her desire to get the cash aspects of the negotiation quickly out of the way. Edmond seems rather surprised when she agrees that she would enjoy having sex with him; in her "I'd like that, too" is conveyed to Edmond the fantasy that there is something more in their relationship than mere sexual and fiscal exchange. He seems unable - or unwilling - to comprehend that what he is in fact witnessing is a well-worn and very well-rehearsed act.

Edmond is respectful to the low-life characters he encounters to the point of absurdity: it is little wonder that he should be so abused. He always remembers to say "please" and "thank you" even in the most inappropriate circumstances, a very telling testimony to his years of social conditioning. Even in his negotiations with the Pimp, he strives to maintain his politeness and sense of fair play:

Pimp: Give me the twenty.
Edmond: I'll give it to you when we see the girl.
Pimp: Hey, I'm not going to leave you, man, you coming with me. We goin' to see the girl.
Edmond: Good. I'll give it to you then.
Pimp: You give it to me now, you unnerstan'? Huh? (Pause) Thass the transaction. (Pause) You see? Unless you were a cop. (Pause) You give me the money, and then thass entrapment. (Pause) You understand?
Edmond: Yes. I'm not a cop.
Pimp: Alright. Do you see what I'm saying?
Edmond: I'm sorry.
Pimp: Thass alright...

(Scene 14, pp. 62,63)
Even in his suspicions, Edmond maintains his good manners. The Pimp quickly realises that in order to gain his complete trust, he too must speak politely and attempt to establish an aura of fairness. Unluckily for the Pimp, Edmond has very recently undergone some extremely debilitating experiences and, when threatened on this occasion, explodes into violence which could not possibly have been foreseen by their verbal exchanges. It is Edmond’s sense of outrage at the injustice and cruelty he sees around him that leads to his vicious attack on the Pimp - he is simply the last straw for one who merely seeks some sexual comfort and who is continually and brutally exploited.

The Fortune-Teller has, at the beginning of the play, informed Edmond that he is in some way "special" and that his true destiny lies elsewhere:

You are not where you belong. It is perhaps true none of us are, but in your case this is more true than in most. We all like to believe we are special. In your case this is true. 

(Scene 1, p.16)

As a "special" person, Edmond believes that he is entitled to pleasure and sets off on his gruelling journey in order to find it. The great irony is, of course, that he is far from special; he is so ordinary as to be almost faceless. Mamet ensures that he is completely unexceptional, blandly and blatantly ordinary. What happens to him could happen to anyone, given the circumstances and a few unlucky quirks of fate. EDMOND is an extended, monumental demonstration (not a defence) of a man who is very much a product of his time: his actions may be extreme but he speaks for us all. He is presented as an ironic, modern-day Everyman, moving doggedly through life in search of his salvation. Whilst researching for this thesis, I was struck by just how often critics likened him to the 16th century traveller. Colin Stinton was generally considered to be the perfect choice for the role. Milton Shulman describes his performance as facing almost every horror and indignity with the bland resignation of an American Everyman33

and Michael Coveney believes he brings to the part
a remarkable sense of a character wanting to break free...In his Everyman normality, Edmond is transformed into a tragic victim.34

John Beaufort refers to him as an "urban Everyman"35 and Michael Billington calls him "a modern Everyman eagerly embracing the selfish society",36 Howard Kissel remarks upon how Edmond

quite as earnestly, even as naively as Everyman went in search of his salvation37

whilst Steve Grant cites CANDIDE as the innocent abroad:

Don't be fooled by the 'Candido'-like simplicity of the piece...we have all been here. Well, almost.38

Tony Parsons was delighted with Stinton's portrayal of the doomed Edmond:

What's so great about [his] portrayal of Edmond, what makes it so believable - Mr. Average...is that Edmond starts out so reasonable.39

Jack Kroll muses on the theme of universality in the play in a lengthy review in NEWSWEEK:

We're not really nice. We let bad things happen. Maybe there's murder in our hearts. We're told there are millions of nice people. But statistics aren't the answer. Shakespeare didn't make a survey to find out how many Iagos there were in England. So, watching David Mamet's dark, stark EDMOND, we can escape the implication by mumbling 'That's not me. It's not any of my friends. Edmond's just a guy I read about in the papers.'...Edmond is neither good nor evil; he's modern man as a bundle of behaviour spasms that turns into a destructive epilepsy when the rotting social-psychological structure finally collapses.40

Colin Stinton himself remarked upon what he felt was the accuracy of Jack Kroll's reading of the play:

Kroll wrote a very sympathetic review; he got it right. He understood what David was trying to do, but others did not. Kroll understands that Edmond is ordinary, just you or me down on our luck...others want to make him into a psychopath or something.41

The very fact that Edmond is so ordinary, an apparently normal citizen, is tremendously effective. It is rather like a thriller in which a scene of absolute calm or scenic beauty is suddenly shattered by a cataclysmic event. Alfred Hitchcock knew how to extricate the maximum shock value out of an ordinary situation; in EDMOND, Mamet does something similar with his rather boring, 'normal' hero.
EDMOND is a very cinematic kind of play, with its short, sharp scenes which end in blackness and which move rapidly from one scenario to another. Sheridan Morley describes the work as a series of black-out sketches written in a kind of staccato poetry, like Feiffer cartoons printed in blood and acid and Michael Coveney notes how Mamet is, in EDMOND, writing a different kind of play. Unlike AMERICAN BUFFALO and GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS in which Mamet composed complex stage poems rooted in particular speech rhythms and argots in EDMOND he reverts to the revue shutter style of earlier plays like SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO and THE DUCK VARIATIONS while simultaneously moving into new structural and tragic dimensions. Clive Barnes believes that because of its episodic structure, the play "might have made a better film than a play" and Frank Rich likens it to selected screenplays by Paul Schrader (notably TAXI DRIVER, HARDCORE) as they might have been re-written by a Samuel Beckett parodist. The play does indeed resemble many of the films of directors like Martin Scorsese and screenwriters like Paul Schrader. TAXI DRIVER is a film which combines the talents of both men and which is very like EDMOND both in its visual and verbal style. In this film, the psychotic misfit Travis Bickle loses his grasp on sanity and reason and sets about ridding the New York streets of what he sees as their living scum. Mamet himself has cited this film as one he finds to be "exceptional". When, however, Travis displays the full extent of his violent nature in the gratuitously bloody climax of the film, the audience is hardly surprised since he has seemed decidedly unhinged from the outset. The shock-waves which reverberate throughout the auditorium when such a mild-mannered and apparently 'normal' man as Edmond suddenly lashes out are almost tangible.

Edmond may be an ordinary character driven to abnormal extremes by circumstances, but the dialogue that Mamet writes is quite the opposite: it is language which has become
abnormal through years of debasement and which is tortuously moulded into 'ordinary' speech by the characters. Milton Shulman notes how

In 23 quick scenes, written in jagged, clipped prose, Mamet reduces both speech and action to an almost Neanderthal level.

and Jim Hiley observes that

Above all, Mamet's language suggests a nation on the make, in a frenzy of self-congratulatory, non-communicative hype.

Michael Coveney comments on the play's

savage cartoonery...it is...a technically adventurous piece, pared brutally to the narrative bone, highly theatrical in its scenic ellisions. It is short, but so is Sophocles' OEDIPUS.

and Tony Parsons notes how once again,

Mamet uses language not as a means of communication, but as a means of describing the gulf between people.

Quite apart from the high level of linguistic expertise noted by these critics, Mamet's extraordinary gift for using language as an integral part of his drama as opposed to employing it merely as a means of rendering dialogue is once again evident in this play. The very structure of EDMOND reflects its verbal style. Sexual gratification and the means of achieving it are the mainspring of the work and thus Mamet ensures that both the text and the structure of the play are suggestive of this fact. The early scenes are extremely short, breathy and impatient; by their very structure and elliptical text they imply the preliminaries to sexual congress. As the play progresses, and Edmond becomes more and more sexually frustrated, so too do both the scenes and the dialogue take on an almost orgasmic - though fractured - tone. At its conclusion, once Edmond has literally 'spent' all of his passion, the scenes are slightly longer, more verbally languorous and the final scene has a quietness and sense of peace which even suggests post-coital fulfillment.

As far as its 'black-out' formula is concerned, this derives from Mamet's experience of working at Second City Improvisations, an organisation which Richard Christiansen describes as a
cradle of improvisational theatre and seedbed of Chicago theatre talent since its opening in 1959.

The black-outs and quick-fire comedy routines which Mamet watched during his time there deeply influenced his writing style and the structure of his plays, particularly the early ones, but EDMOND seems to indicate that he was still able to profitably utilise this method as late as 1982. Mamet admits that

for the next 10 years [after working at Second City] none of my scenes lasted more than eight minutes. Mamet liked the way the scenes at Second City got straight to the point, without dithering or bringing in unnecessary characters or extraneous plot devices. He explains exactly what is implied by "black-outs":

The black-out format...five or seven minutes with a punchline at the end...that is blackout. This goes back to music hall. It is also like American TV which is interrupted by commercials. There's got to be a good pay-off since there is no time for narration, only time left for drama.

In Richard Eyre's production of EDMOND, William Dudley's sets were visual counterpoints to the "black-outs"; the bleak monochrome of dark and dirty streets and subways was suddenly and unexpectedly invaded by a flash of colour. This gave an impression of extreme modernism, of an almost stylised stage picture straight from the pages of a Pop Art catalogue. The tableaux of colourless individuals leading debased and meaningless lives, speaking a vitiated and corrupt language were momentarily high-lighted or offset with a beam of fluorescent light or, more sinisterly, the scarlet of trickling blood.

As he moves through the play from one debilitating experience to another, Edmond's speech changes from his early polite chattiness to a raw, violent - almost primal - scream. As he is slowly but inexorably drawn into the hellish society of downtown New York, years of anger and frustration begin to rise to the surface and deep-rooted repressions of his racist and sexist tendencies are released in a vituperative hail of abuse. Perhaps the turning point for Edmond comes after he has been cheated and beaten by the Three Card Monte and his cohorts. He goes "torn and battered" to a Hotel
to seek help. His wallet has been stolen and he has no cash to pay for a room; the hotel clerk will not, however, help him despite the fact that it is obvious that Edmond is in deep distress:

Edmond: I lost my wallet.
Clerk: Go to the police.
Edmond: You can call up American Express.
Clerk: Go to the police. (Pause) I don't want to hear it.

(Scene 11, p. 50)

Edmond tries to bargain with what he believes to be his unimpeachable respectability - he mentions his American Express Card. However, the clerk is unimpressed; he has heard it all before. He refuses to be drawn into Edmond's problems and to become involved. However, once he realises that Edmond is going to be persistent, he suggests that he calls "the credit card people" himself:

Edmond: I have no money.
Clerk: I'm sure it's a free call.
Edmond: Do those phones require a dime?
Clerk: (Pause) I'm sure I don't know.
Edmond: You know if they need a dime or not. To get a dial tone... You know if they need a dime, for chrissake. Do you want to live in this kind of world? Do you want to live in a world like that? I've been hurt? Are you blind? Would you appreciate it if I acted this way to you? (Pause) I asked you one simple thing. Do they need a dime?
Clerk: No. They don't need a dime. Now, you make your call, and you go somewhere else.

(Ibid)

The clerk's cold and unsympathetic manner enrages Edmond; he is simply not used to being treated in this way. He is, after all, a man who can rely upon the services of American Express to get him out of difficulties, and such a man deserves respect, especially the respect of a mere clerk in a seedy hotel. What Edmond fails to realise is that he is no longer the man he was; he has no wallet and therefore no identity. He is as much a product of the tawdry streets as the man whom he asks for help. He is now just another battered individual, possibly drunk and disreputable, with whom it would be a mistake to become involved.

The clerk's tone is one of barely concealed contempt; Mamet builds a sigh of frustration and impatience into a simple
phrase like "I'm sure I don't know" which follows immediately on a pause. The boredom is almost tangible. What moves Edmond to anger is his innate sense of justice which he finds is being all too frequently outraged. He demands of the unmoved clerk whether he would like to live in such a world and whether he would appreciate it if he were treated in such a callous and brutal fashion. Edmond pleads for a world in which people help one another, where individuals treat their neighbours as they would themselves wish to be treated. Such a state of affairs has scarcely been characteristic of the world he has left behind with its cut-throat capitalism and loveless marriage. It is even less likely to be an aspect of life in the one he has chosen to enter. Later in the play, Edmond again utters a similar plea, but it is then addressed to the Prison Chaplain in whom he confides following his murder of Glenna. If one is aware of this later scene, it is impossible not to feel a frisson of macabre foreboding as Edmond pleads for a better, kinder world.

Shortly after his experience in the Hotel, Edmond finds himself on the subway. He attempts a seemingly harmless and friendly conversation with a woman who is standing on the same platform:

Edmond: (Pause) My mother had a hat like that. (Pause) My mother had a hat like that. (Pause) I... I'm not making conversation. She wore it for years. She had it when I was a child.

(Scene 13, p.58)

The woman is unnerved by him and begins to move away:

Edmond: I wasn't just making it 'up'. It happened... who the fuck do you think you are?...I'm talking to you...What am I? A stone?...Did I say, 'I want to lick your pussy'?... I said, 'My mother had that same hat... You cunt...What am I? A dog? I'd like to slash your fucking face...I'd like to slash your mother-fucking face apart...

(Ibid)

Edmond still believes that he is somehow "special" and does not deserve to be treated as he has been. He has been unable to find a woman with whom to have sex, despite visiting a singles bar, a Peep Show and a Whorehouse; he has been financially abused and emotionally violated.
He has even been beaten up by men who have stolen his money, and treated like an outcast by a mere hotel clerk. He can take no more.

Although it is quite natural that the woman should wish to desist from entering into a conversation with an unknown - and somewhat dishevelled - man, Mamet does far more with this scene than merely state the obvious terrors of rape and assault. The very fact that she is afraid even to speak to Edmond, or indeed acknowledge his existence, is indicative of the paranoia and fear that are rampant in the city. There is very good cause for her to feel fear, but Mamet seems to be commenting upon a wider and more terrible malaise. The barriers here are as palpable and real as those which Edmond had asked to be removed at the Peep Show: "How can we get this barrier to come down?" he asked then, "How does this thing come down?" (Scene 5, pp.32,33). The sad fact is that the barrier cannot come down in such a society; it is forever erected to eliminate the possibility of real communication.

To speak to someone is to enter into a sort of liaison with them; it implies an element of trust. It is interesting to note that when Edmond is arrested, it is for "speaking" to the woman in a certain way which "is construed as assault" (Scene 18, p.83). Edmond tries to elicit a friendly response from the woman by beginning his conversation with the most innocent-sounding statement that there could be: that her hat resembles one his mother used to have. He even goes so far as to include the safe and secure - and revered - image of "mother". Edmond is desperate for some comforting word; he almost begs for some response, even a mere acknowledgment of his existence. He grows nervous of the silence which forms between them and tells the woman, absurdly, that he is "not making conversation". He goes on to try to give the story even more human depth and warmth: "She wore it for years. She had it when I was a child." Once the woman begins to walk away from him, he grabs her - an action which is quite shocking in itself. It certainly terrifies the unfortunate woman. The intensity and sheer
violence of the outburst which follows owes much to Edmond's recent experiences but I feel that there is more to it than that. Years of suppressed hatred erupt in what Tony Parsons calls

a misogynist rant so filthy it makes The Stranglers seem like Gloria Steinem. Mamet uses his device of showing language as a barrier, not a bridge, between people to precipitate Edmond's downfall.55

Edmond vents his rage at all of the women who have disappointed him - including, no doubt, his dull wife whom he had stopped loving "A long time ago" (Scene 2, p.19). The structure of his outburst, with its many stressed and urgent questions, rhetorical in nature, is an indication of the savagery which is gathering force. He is incensed that an innocent remark should be construed as being somehow insulting. He cannot believe that he is being treated in this cold, unfriendly fashion and this is borne out by the emphasis he places on key words throughout the speech. He is incredulous at the woman's behaviour: "who the fuck do you think you are??...I'm talking to you...What am I? A stone??...You cunt...What am I? A dog?" and, as his anger mounts, so his words become more shocking and violent: "I'd like to slash your fucking face...I'd like to slash your motherfucking face apart..." That he should bring an extremely offensive and obscene remark such as "Did I say, 'I want to lick your pussy?...''' into his diatribe points to the extent of his sexual obsession. Edmond reveals himself to be not only a man who is driven by sexual feelings but also a true sexist. He then reduces the woman to nothing more than a crude name for female sexual anatomy in an effort to be as insulting as possible. In this way, Edmond demonstrates most tellingly his sexism and ignorance of women.

The entire scene in the subway is reminiscent of a short play written by Mamet in 1981 entitled COLD. In this work, one man - designated as 'A' - strikes up a conversation with another, called 'B', as they both wait on the platform for a train. The conversation is, at first, tentative, unsure and is concerned with totally innocuous topics such as the weather, the habits of commuters and so on. However,
as 'A' gets into his stride, he begins to ask rather personal questions which 'B' has no desire to answer. They are personal only insofar as they concern the general whereabouts of 'B's home and are not intended as an impertinence. When the conversation has taken this turn, 'B' becomes cooler and less amenable to his companion, and the edginess of their brief relationship concludes in the following way:

A: Are you going home now?
B: Yes. (Looks at sound of subway in the distance.)
A: That's the other track. (They watch the train passing.) Do you live alone?
B: No. (Pause)
A: You live with someone?
B: Yes.
A: Are you happy? (Pause)
B: Yes.
A: Are they there now?
B: (Pause) I think so. (Pause)
A: What are they called?
B: Hey, look, what business is it of yours what they're called. (Pause) You understand? (p. 151)

Again, Mamet appears to be making a statement about more than the irritation which may be caused when strangers strike up unwanted conversations. 'A' wants only to talk, to communicate with someone but, like Edmond, he does not know the rules and he goes too far. His innocent questioning is construed as prying and he is finally shouted down by 'B' and cast out of his life. 'B' may, like the lady with the hat in EDMOND, have good reason not to trust a stranger; 'A' could, after all, be a mugger, a thief or worse. But Mamet's short play once again demonstrates the gulf which exists between people in modern America: even to speak to someone can be a dangerous business. One must forever be on one's guard, never showing insecurity or vulnerability. In such a society, paranoia can mean survival.

As the play progresses, more and more of Edmond's repressed prejudices bubble to the surface, and none is more horrifying than his attack on the black Pimp who tries to mug him. Mamet reveals Edmond's pent-up racism and sexism to terrible effect; as Edmond himself later admits to Glenna:

...I wanted to KILL him. (Pause) In that moment thirty years of prejudice came out of me. (Pause)
Thirty years.  (Scene 16, p.69)

The Pimp has promised Edmond a meeting with a prostitute, but he suddenly turns on him and demands his money; at first Edmond seems as though he will go along with the Pimp's demands until he, himself, turns upon the man. As he beats him and kicks him, he screams:

YOU MOTHERFUCKING NIGGER!...You motherfucking shit...you junglebunny...You coon, you cunt, you cocksucker...
You fuck. You nigger. You dumb cunt...You shit...You shit...You fucking nigger...Don't fuck with me, you coon...I hope you're dead...(Pause. Edmond spits on him.)

(Scenario 14, pp. 64,65)

Years of suppressed hatred pour out of Edmond in a torrent of obscenity. The words he chooses to denounce his victim are a curious mixture of childish insult and corruscating vituperation. It is as though a spring of violence has been uncoiled which can only be staunched by viciousness (both verbal and physical) of the most extreme kind. Edmond not only spits on his victim, he spits out his words: the contemptuous, alliterative 'c' of "...coon...cunt...cocksucker" with the underlining stress on the first syllable is as much an ejection of bile as the beginning of a word. The content of the tirade is very telling: he constantly reduces the man to the level of excrement or the female sexual organ. He even seems to use the word "nigger" as a true obscenity, rather than merely as an ignorant, racist insult. There is some irony in Edmond's designation of the man as a "cocksucker" - this is precisely the service he wished for and had paid for before the Pimp tried to mug him. The term is interesting for another reason: when Edmond relates the episode to Glenna and she remarks upon a particular group of people she despises - "Faggots" - he quickly agrees:

Edmond: ...I hate them, too. And you know why?
Glenna: Why?
Edmond: They suck cock. (Pause) And that's the truest thing you'll ever hear.  (Scene 16, p.70)

Edmond reduces the prostrate Pimp to a term of abuse frequently applied to homosexuals. Edmond has, for the first time in living memory, carried out a deed which has
made him feel like a real man. It follows then that such an insult is not merely another in a long line of oaths, but has been chosen to make a particular point: Edmond is now the man - the Pimp, the feared black man, is now a mere 'faggot'. Edmond tells Glenn:

Something spoke to me, I got a shock (I don't know, I got mad...), I got a shock, and I spoke back to him. 'Up your ass, you coon...you want to fight, I'll fight you, I'll cut out your fuckin' heart, eh, I don't give a fuck...I got some warlike blood in my veins, too, you fucking spade, you coon...'. The blood ran down his neck...if there is a god he may love the weak, Glenn, (Pause) but he respects the strong. And if you are a man you should be feared. (Pause) You should be feared...You just know you command respect.

(Scene 16, pp. 68, 69 and 71)

As Jim Hiley observes, Edmond has changed from a mild-mannered liberal into a violent reactionary and notes that Edmond reveals not just a vast suppressed racism, but also the fact that only in violence does he feel fully alive.56

Similarly, Michael Coveney notes how he is "elated at coming alive in violence".57 Edmond now eschews what he has come to see as the stultifying liberalism which has long oppressed him and made him feel guilty and afraid. As Christopher Bigsby points out, such liberalism has deprived him of individual will...[and he therefore] asserts his own interests over those around him. The result is sexual and racial arrogance, a reversion to primitivism that he imagines to be therapeutic.58

Mamet conveys Edmond's sense of liberation through his language. His tentative, insecure manner of speaking is suddenly replaced by one of confidence and arrogance. Sitting in the Coffee House just after the incident with the Pimp, Edmond is a changed man: his tone is clear and decisive and completely in keeping with his new positive image:

Glenna: Irish whiskey.
Glenna: You're in a peppy mood today.
Edmond: You're goddamn right I am, and you want me to tell you why? Because I am alive. You know how much of our life we're alive, you and me? Nothing. Two minutes out of the year. You know, you know, we're sheltered...Sit down...
Glenna: I can't. I'm working.

Edmond: ...you can do anything you want to do, you don't sit down because you're 'working', the reason you don't sit down is you don't want to sit down, because it's more comfortable to accept a law than question it and live your life. All of us. All of us. We've bred the life out of ourselves. And we live in a fog. We live in a dream. Our life is a school-house, and we're dead.

(Scene 15, pp. 66, 67)

In his new-found masculinity, Edmond rejects his first thought that he should order a coffee; instead, he moves up the scale through acceptably 'macho' alcoholic beverages which are available to him until he reaches "Irish whiskey" of which he orders "A double". His manner is sufficiently buoyant to prompt Glenna to comment upon his "peppy mood", which encourages Edmond to launch into a diatribe about the need to break free from life's banal restrictions. Edmond becomes Glenna's adviser and teacher, just as the man in the bar had become Edmond's mentor. As Colin Stinton points out,

Edmond is a character who becomes a teacher. He is another in a long line of such people in Mamet's plays. I said to David once that Edmond is rather like a 'Teach' without a pupil - he wants to convey what he has learned - and he said that this was true and that once he finds Glenna, he becomes the worst kind of 'Teach'.

Edmond's sentences now run on effortlessly, articulately and with complete confidence; he continually asks rhetorical questions which he loses no time in answering himself. He wants to pass on some of his joyous discovery to Glenna, to make her accept what he has come to accept, that is, that it is essential to take action and move out of mediocrity into truthful experience. He equates his past with "a school-house", which suggests that he was a mere child before his discovery, and even goes so far as to observe that until this moment, he has been dead. In complete contrast to his earlier over-polite manner, Edmond now comes straight to the point:

Edmond: I want to go home with you tonight.

Glenna: Why?

Edmond: Why do you think? I want to fuck you. (Pause)

Glenna: Why do you think? I want to fuck you. (Pause)

It's as simple as that. What's your name?

Glenna: Glenna. (Pause) What's yours?
Edmond: Edmond. (Ibid, p.67)

In that announcement of his name, articulated for the first time in the play, Edmond establishes his new identity. What had earlier been referred to as "intercourse" is now described as his desire to "fuck" Glenna. Life is now simple, without hindrance and without inhibition. As Edmond says: "It's as simple as that."

Edmond's sudden 'breakthrough' into a sense of psychic well-being and superiority is a kind of parody of the self-awareness and personal liberation philosophy which flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like the heroes in films like EASY RIDER and DRIVE, HE SAID, Edmond tries to find truth and freedom through a quest for self-realisation. Indeed, he believes he has found the truth, but this discovery quickly evaporates and he finds instead only bitterness, hatred and oppression.

The 1970s were a period of personal discovery for many people, particularly in America where the media screamed 'self-improvement' and 'self-awareness' from every corner. The ex-radical Jerry Rubin observes how

In five years, from 1971 to 1975, I directly experienced est, gestalt therapy, bioenergetics, rolfing, massage, jogging, health foods, tai chi, Esalen, hypnotism, modern dance, meditation, Silva Mind Control, Arica, acupuncture, sex therapy, Reichian therapy and More House.

In his book, THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM - AMERICAN LIFE IN AN AGE OF DIMINISHING EXPECTATIONS, Christopher Lasch, like Mamet, writes about life in this decade. Lasch notes how

the culture of competitive individualism which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war against all [has resulted in] the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self.

It was not for nothing that Tom Wolfe should have described the 1970s as "the me decade". There was a kind of renaissance of individualism and a turning away from social issues, politics and anything which did not offer an
immediate solution. The preoccupation with the self became all-important. The terrible problems facing America as a nation, including the Vietnam debacle and its implications for a country used to winning, were so immense that many people chose not to think about them at all, at least in any real sense, and chose instead to devote their energies inward, to concentrate upon themselves. In the screenplay for the film, MANHATTAN, Woody Allen's character muses on

An idea for a short story...about...people in Manhattan who, uh, who are constantly creating these real, uh, unnecessary neurotic problems for themselves 'cause it keeps them from dealing with, uh, more unsolvable, terrifying problems about, uh, the universe.63

What results from such "neurotic problems" and self-obsession is the cult of self-realisation, of the search for self-knowledge and an all-consuming concern for physical and spiritual well-being. Lasch observes how

Americans...feel themselves overwhelmed by an annihilating boredom...they long for a more vigorous instinctual existence...They cultivate more vivid experiences, seek to beat a sluggish flesh to life, attempt to revive jaded appetites.64

If lip-service was paid to important societal and political issues, that was all it very often turned out to be - lip service. Mamet explains how egocentricity became a cult:

The reason that the populace at large is terrified, is that the problems seem insoluble...So what we devote our energies to is ourselves and our feelings.65

Many turned away from the ugliness of their society, nuclear threat and relentless violence towards a concern with beauty of both mind and body. A rather public 'private' image became crucial and there was a massive increase in the sales of 'self-help' goods such as health foods, exercise regimes of the Jane Fonda/Raquel Welch variety and books on yoga, meditation and personal astrology. Lasch calls this trend the "culture of narcissism".66 Mamet defines a similar, though essentially negative, kind of self-obsession - the "hypochondriachal" syndrome. He explains:

A hypochondriac is some person who is so terrified of the universe that he or she takes all those terrors and says 'wait a second, it's not the universe. I don't even have the energy to deal with that. It's me. There are bad things in myself. Let me
therefore devote my energy to myself to stop me from devoting my energy to any real problems. Edmond is both Mamet's hypochondriac and Lasch's cultural narcissist. When the Whore at the brothel tells him that he has a good body, he proudly replies: "I jog" (Scene 9, p.41). These two words speak volumes about the kind of man Edmond is; he has internalised all of the 'body beautiful' propaganda which proliferates around him and, like many others who have come to rely upon self-obsession as a cure-all, participates in an activity which is designed to demonstrate publically one's good health and vitality. An essentially private occupation such as physical exercise has been taken out into the streets and has turned image-conscious.

The permissive sexuality which thrived during the 1960s was seen in the 1970s as a natural form of self-actualisation: an obsessive interest in sex detracted from outside issues. It would probably have been unthinkable for Edmond to even consider 'dropping out' of respectable society were it not for the precedents set by the previous decade's alternative culture and the lure of freedom that it implied. Certainly the sexual liberation pioneered during that period has carried over into Edmond's plans for what he should do once he has taken the step of leaving his wife; he agrees wholeheartedly with the man in the bar that he needs to "get laid" and that he feels as though his "balls were cut off...A long, long time ago." (Scene 3, p.25).

In the amoral world Edmond enters, quantity and intensity of experience become values in their own right; it matters very little how these are attained, since selfishness overrides all other considerations. Mamet has expressed distaste for the modern-day views that "the whole universe is created just for you...no-one is accountable for anything [and that] sexuality is fine" no matter what the circumstances. Edmond's adventures repeatedly confirm both his innate ignorance and his selfishness. When Glenna refuses to take part in his 'declaration-of-truth' game, he cannot cope; he believes he has seen the light and,
therefore, everyone else should, too. Glenna becomes very nervous when he pushes her to admit that she is nothing more than a waitress, despite her protestations that she is an actress:

Glenna: I think that you better go.
Edmond: If you want me to go I'll go. Say it with me. Say what you are. And I'll say what I am.
Glenna: ...What you are...
Edmond: I've made that discovery. Now; I want you to change your life with me. Right now, for whatever that we can be. I don't know what that is, you don't know. Speak with me. Right now. Say it...

Glenna reaches for her tranquilisers:

Glenna: I have this tendency to get anxious.
Edmond: (knocks them from her hand) Don't take them. Go through it. Go through with me.
Glenna: You're scaring me.
Edmond: I am not. I know when I'm scaring you. Believe me.

(Scene 16, p.76)

Edmond simply refuses to listen to the distraught girl; he claims that he knows better than she does what she really wants: "I know when I'm scaring you." He lies that he will go if that is what she wishes and then carries on as though he had not spoken those words at all. He speaks with all the enthusiasm and fervour of a born-again Christian; indeed, his language resembles that of the Preacher in the next scene. Edmond denies Glenna any rights at all other than the fact that she must speak the truth; she must confess to him that she is merely a waitress and eschew her fantasy of being an actress. She cannot do this and her self-delusion leads to her death. She refuses to acknowledge that she is 'just' a waitress; an elaborate curtain of self-defence and self-confidence will collapse should she admit to such a thing. During an interview, Miranda Richardson talked about Glenna’s character and her desperate vulnerability:

Glenna is trying very, very hard to be an actress - or at least to convince herself that she has a chance. It could all be a pose. She is younger than Edmond and she could very well find that attractive; the teacher/pupil relationship runs right through Mamet’s work and EDMOND is no exception. Glenna likes the idea of Edmond being her teacher. Who hasn't heard of the teacher and pupil who get it together in a short time, who really find something of value in
their relationship because they are mutually feeding off one another...The sad thing is they think they are communicating, but they are not. Girls like her are so desperate for love, for affection that if someone comes into their lives who looks even half-decent, they clutch at them. He might be able to get her work, or help her along, or become emotionally attached. Poor Glenna has surrounded herself with this awful brightness, this falseness to get by. I think she has probably had numerous bad meetings, one-night stands. She has thought they might lead somewhere, either emotionally or professionally but she has been constantly let down...Glenna tries to get by in a very fast-moving city with neon lights flashing all night and about two cubic feet of space to herself. No wonder she is on tranquilisers and no wonder she takes Edmond home, hoping he might be her salvation. Unless you are very strong, how do you get by? A woman alone is in such an insecure and dangerous position in such a society.

Edmond is too wrapped up in himself and his crusading truth-telling to notice just how terrified the girl is:

Glenna: Get out! GET OUT GET OUT! LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!!! WHAT DID I DO, PLEDGE MY LIFE TO YOU! I LET YOU FUCK ME. GO AWAY.
Edmond: Listen to me: You know what madness is?
Glenna: I told you to go away. (Goes to phone. Dials.)
Edmond: I'm lonely, too. I know what it is, too. Believe me. Do you know what madness is?...It's self-indulgence.

(Ibid, p.77)

Despite Glenna's hysteria, Edmond presses on. He even turns on her and brings the subject of madness into the conversation, presumably in an effort to make her see her 'irrationality'. It is by the repeated use of the words "I" and "me" that Mamet conveys Edmond's self-obsession. He blames Glenna for getting upset, although he is palpably the reason for her anxiety:

Glenna: Don't hurt me. No. No. I can't deal with this.
Edmond: Don't be ridic...
Edmond: ...You're being...
Glenna: ...HELP!
Edmond: ...are you insane? What the fuck are you trying to do, for godsake...You want to wake the neighbours?...Shut up shut up!

(Ibid, pp.77,78)

Edmond's old concerns momentarily intrude on his new-found identity: he exhorts Glenna to stop making a noise in case she wakes the neighbours! Her panic is, to Edmond, totally incomprehensible: he can see no valid reason for her hysteria.
and again mentions insanity. Even when he has, albeit unintentionally, stabbed and killed her, he shifts the blame from himself, rather as Torek says in OEDIPUS REX after he has destroyed Don't's shoes with the piggery. Edmond's last words in this scene, though fragmentary, are: 

The use of power, and we agree... 

The scene then continues to show the use of power, perhaps, has an element of panic. 

Glaire seems to have been taken aback by Edmond's actions. She begins to protest, more quietly away from them only to return to their subject moments later in the middle of another. Perhaps Edmond's actions have thrown her into the action of the scene. As Edmond moves towards her, Glaire's panic mounts and leads him to depute him with the devil and all that is satanic and evil. Colin Stinton comments on this aspect of
and again mentions insanity. Even when he has, albeit unintentionally, stabbed and killed her, he switches the blame from himself, rather as Teach does in AMERICAN BUFFALO after he has destroyed Don's shop with the pig-iron. Edmond's last words in this scene illustrate both his astonishment at what he has done, and how he automatically shifts the blame:

You stupid fucking bitch...
You stupid fucking... now look what you've done.
(Pause) Now look what you've blood fucking done.

(Ibid, p.78)

The use of the word "blood" in the last sentence is very powerful. Edmond is gazing at the girl he has murdered and watching the blood flow out of her. At first, it seems as though he is merely going to use the word "bloody", but the exclusion of the final 'y' of that word makes a far stronger impact. Mamet manipulates every word to achieve the maximum emotional impact: Edmond's clipped, frantic sentences, full of anger and confusion, emphasise his panic and fear. His blame-shifting is indicative not only of his growing terror but also of his refusal to take responsibility for his actions.

Glenna's murder comes about because Edmond cannot tolerate the fact that she does not share his visionary zeal and, perhaps most importantly, because she turns everything he has come to believe is good into evil. She cries out in panic:

Will somebody help you are the get away from me!
You are the devil. I know who you are. I know what you want me to do. Get away from me I curse you, you can't kill me, get away from me I'm good.

(Ibid)

Glenna's hysteria is powerfully suggested in the way her syntax and grammar become fragmented into broken shards of speech. She begins sentences, veers wildly away from them only to return to their subject moments later in the middle of another. Mamet builds the action of the scene into the lines: as Edmond moves towards her, Glenna's panic mounts and leads her to equate him with the Devil and all that is satanic and evil. Colin Stinton comments on this aspect of
the scene as follows:

Edmond suddenly realises he has learned something. He feels that he has knowledge now because of what he has done and now, if he can pass it along, it must be true. In trying to pass on his new sense of liberation to Glenna, he comes up against not only a rejection of it but an identification of what he has learned with evil rather than with good...I think this is the answer to the much-asked question of why he kills her...'You are the Devil' she tells him and he simply cannot cope. His solution to the problems of life has been decried as evil. All that he has come to aspire to is horrible. To have someone graphically identify his sense of achievement with evil makes him white with rage and, in a moment of impetuosity and turmoil, he stabs her.70

Miranda Richardson has a similar interpretation of the event:

I saw it as his need to shut her up...He does intend to shut her up but he doesn't intend to kill her. He is saying 'I don't want it, it's not happening, take it away, it's not real' and the only way he can momentarily carry on with his 'liberating' belief, the only way he can stop the fear, is by striking her. By silencing her, he can wallow in his fantasy for a moment longer, unsullied by accusations of evil.71

That Edmond should have come to commit such a brutal crime has been due to his inexorable descent into a literal Hell and his absorption of some of its horrors. As Clive Barnes notes, he has been like Dante without a Virgil to guide him...[he is alone in New York's special inferno...72

Miranda Richardson believes that the tragedy is, at base, due to a complete lack of communication between the two lovers:

The murder scene is symbolic - the lashing out is symbolic...again, as in so much of Mamet, the subject is lack of communication. All the way through it is the same thing...Edmond and Glenna could have had a good relationship, it could all have been so different. Things could have gone this way instead of that, a word here might have prevented a calamity there. It is all random. The real misunderstandings and twitchings begin when they start talking about her acting...they keep missing each other by inches all the way through, but there is a real sense of danger at this point.73

Michael Billington points to the same moment when a stomach-churning sense of danger enters into the proceedings. He notes Mamet's ability to pinpoint "the way conversations...can lurch into unpredictable violence".74 During their
post-coital chat, Glenna tells Edmond that she once played the part of Juliet:

Glenna: In college I played Juliet.
Edmond: In Shakespeare?
Glenna: Yes. In Shakespeare. What do you think?

(Ibid, p.73)

The edginess of Glenna's reply, pregnant with indignation that Edmond may not believe her claim, ignites the spark of misunderstanding. During an interview, Connie Booth observed how Mamet's work is written for the 'moment to moment' style of acting; there are shifts at every line...

This is nowhere more noticeable than in the prelude to Glenna's murder when the text is so dense - it changes all the time [there are so many] mood changes.

Miranda Richardson felt that Glenna's life hinged on just one verbal error:

Just one little word and she has had it. Her doom is imminent when they start talking about her acting experiences; it is a mistake to get into such a potentially touchy - and personal - area after such a short acquaintance but in the 'reveal-all' atmosphere which is prevailing at the time, it is easy to see how it happens.

Edmond makes matters worse by refusing to acknowledge that his question was a stupid one, and goes on to say, arrogantly:

Edmond: Well, I mean, there's plays named Juliet.
Glenna: There are?
Edmond: Yes.
Glenna: I don't think so.

(Ibid, pp.73,74)

There is a slight hint of sarcasm in Glenna's "There are?" which Edmond cannot deal with. He insists that such plays exist, but Glenna is equally persistent in what she feels to be her superior knowledge of theatre. The couple have moved from the casual languor of satisfied relaxation to a tetchy, potentially explosive hostility in a very short space of time. Edmond has challenged Glenna on a subject which she feels she knows something about, even though she has only ever done "scenes" for her "peers", and this has led to a coldness, a sense of danger creeping into their conversation. Everything was fine so long as they both kept on agreeing with each other, bolstering each other's ego and opinions with concurrence. Whether their talk led into an admission of hatred for 'faggots' or the joys of standing
up for one's rights against a mugger in the Charles Bronson/DEATH WISH type of situation, all was well in happy agreement:

Glenna: Did you kill him?
Edmond: Did I kill him?
Glenna: Yes.
Edmond: I don't care. (Pause)
Glenna: That's wonderful. (Ibid, p.69)

Edmond's admission of brutality is somehow seductive for Glenna. As a frightened, lonely woman who lives alone in New York City, it is perhaps not difficult to understand why she should express admiration for someone who has 'fought back'. Edmond's new-found courage is very reminiscent of the state of affairs discussed by Wallace Shawn in an essay written about his play, AUNT DAN AND LEMON. Shawn observes how easily morality can become totally inverted and how even one act of violence or hostility perpetrated in an atmosphere of self-justification can radically alter an individual's outlook. Suddenly, this new way of life is the only way to live, all previous considerations being summarily discounted. Shawn writes about those friends of his who have made the 'choice' to act in a new, 'immoral' way:

The amazing thing I've noticed about those friends of mind who've made that choice is that as soon as they've made it, they begin to blossom, to flower, because they are no longer hiding, from themselves or anyone else, the true facts about their own lives. They become very frank about human nature. They freely admit that man is a predatory creature, a hunter and a fighter, and they admit that it can warm a human's heart to trick an enemy, to make him cry, to make him do what he doesn't want to do, and even to make him crawl in the mud and die in agony...They admit that there's a skill involved in playing life's game, and they admit that it's exciting to bully and threaten and outwit and defeat all the other people who are playing against you. And as they learn to admit these things, and they lose the habit of looking over their shoulder in fear at what exists in their own souls, they develop the charm and grace which shine out from all people who are truly comfortable with themselves, who are not worried, who are not ashamed of their own actions.

It is interesting to note that Wallace Shawn is one of the dedicatees to whom Mamet inscribes EDMOND; it is fairly obvious to see why in reading the above extract - Shawn could almost be referring to Edmond's confused and unfocussed
morality and his sense of joy and achievement once he has made an irrevocable move in an alien direction.

The anarchy which would result from an entire society's decision to ignore the constraints of morality is something which clearly terrifies Mamet. He is a staunch supporter of old-fashioned, middle-class values: good education, a home and a job as rewards for hard work, money in the bank, a comfortable standard of living and so on. He says:

I'd like to think that [in a few years' time] my money will still be in the bank and my daughter can still get a job, etc.  

In EDMOND, he explores the crisis and potential destruction of all that was worthy in America's past by an unthinking, immoral culture. Edmond is named after Edmund Burke, the 18th century English Conservative writer and political philosopher. In Scene 18, Mamet's protagonist declares his name to be "Edmond Burke" and later refers to himself as "Eddie Burke" (Scene 22, p.98) as he writes to the mother of a childhood sweetheart. There seems little doubt that a direct connection is intended, despite the fact that Mamet's Edmond spells his Christian name with an 'o' instead of a 'u'. Since Mamet has made it very clear that he fears his country's descent into a kind of chaotic anarchy, it is perhaps not really surprising that he should ironically name his hero after a man who pleaded throughout his life for order and stability. Edmond is a product of an age which has found neither order nor peace; he foolishly and naively believes that he can find peace of mind and a better existence by moving out of his mundane, business-orientated world into one which is exciting and unknown. What he finds there, however, is pain and misery. Edmond's freedom becomes so negligible, long before he is incarcerated for murder, as hardly to exist at all; perhaps Mamet had in mind the following quotation of Edmund Burke's when he conceived of his character:

The extreme of liberty obtains nowhere; nor ought it to obtain anywhere; because extremes, as we all know ...are destructive both to virtue and enjoyment.

Liberty, too, must be limited in order to be possessed. 

He could also have been inspired by Burke's observation that
"Good order is the foundation of all things". Both of these quotations speak plainly for the need for order and restraint, two elements that Mamet feels are sadly lacking in modern American society.

Edmund Burke also wrote a great deal about the United States, and his comments upon that country seem curiously apposite when applied to the world Mamet evokes in EDMOND. Burke observed that

America, at this day serves for little more than to amuse you with stories of savage men and uncouth manners.

Edmond certainly mixes with "savage men" and, tragically, becomes one of them himself. EDMOND has frequently been called a kind of morality play - or, as Michael Coveney would have it, an "amorality play" and it can, indeed, be viewed in that way. Mamet shows up what Burke so quaintly calls "uncouth manners" for all they are worth, and proves that a life without emotional or moral content is really no life at all.

It has been suggested that Edmond is merely acting out in reality the fantasies that he has always enjoyed in private; again, Burke is relevant. He observed that

all men that are ruined are ruined on the side of their natural propensities

and it is quite possible that Edmond has always harboured desires for seedy sexuality and gratuitous violence. Burke's quotations provide a kind of framework for Mamet's play: they concern a need for order and stability, the necessity for some limits to freedom (without which there would be nothing short of anarchy), the possibility that a man like Edmond seeks his own doom due to his "natural propensities" and the airing of an opinion that America is both "savage" and "uncouth". It becomes very clear why Mamet should have so entitled his play, and leaves none of the mystery felt by Clive Barnes when he writes

There are nuggets of puzzlement here; why is the simple hero called Edmond Burke, with all the historical suggestions that implies...
Edmond's dissatisfaction with his life reaches an intolerable level, and his frustrations become actualised when he leaves the Fortune-Teller's establishment for his own, boring home. Her opinion of him as "special" is very seductive; it enables him to justify his subordination of the interests of others and to fully concentrate upon his own self-fulfillment, irrespective of the effect it may have upon those who share his life. Unlike Joey in Mamet's play, THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE JEWS, Edmond takes what he believes to be positive action and leaves his wife. Joey tells Bobby about his boredom with life and his marriage:

...I walk out of the door I say 'If I never saw them again, it would be fine'...I'll tell you that I think a feeling gets so overpowering it becomes a fact, and you don't even know you did it. Sometimes I think, 'Well, if they were killed...if they died...' and sometimes I think I'll do it myself...But I can't get it up. I'm going to die like this. A schmuck. I know that there is power in me. But it's not coming out. It's never coming out. The only bar between me and what I would like to do is doing it. I'll never do it, though.\[5\]

The impotence (possibly literal) which imbues every one of Joey's words is the same sense of paralysis felt by Edmond. Perhaps he, too, has fantasized about murdering his wife but has resisted the temptation through an innate conviction about right and wrong. However, he metaphorically kills her with a few, bald words when he decides to leave:

Edmond: I'm going, and I'm not going to come back. (Pause)
Wife: You're not ever coming back?
Edmond: No.
Wife: Why not? (Pause)
Edmond: I don't want to live this kind of life.
Wife: What does that mean?
Edmond: That I can't live this life.

(Scene 2, p.18)

Edmond at first hints at his selfishness by his admission that he no longer wants to live the life he has thus far led and then, moments later, bolsters his case by stressing the impossibility of continuance: "I can't live this life." His wife is incredulous: she had thought he had meant he was going out for a few minutes, even asking him to bring "back some cigarettes...". It is with total disbelief that she continues the conversation:
Wife: 'You can't live this life' so you're leaving me.
Edmond: Yes.
Wife: Ah. Ah. Ah.
And what about ME?
Don't you love me anymore?  
(Ibid, pp.18,19)

The astonished woman is so shocked and outraged that she swerves verbally between stunned outrage and cutting sarcasm. Her bitter parody of a line one might hear in a soap opera, "Don't you love me anymore?" points to her wish to belittle the infuriatingly calm Edmond and to make him feel ridiculous. Connie Booth, who played Edmond's wife in the Royal Court production, told me that she had found great difficulty with this part since Mamet gives very little guidance in how the role should be played:

In some ways I felt that Mamet was rather sadistic to his actors - he gives you so very little to go on. It is necessary to make huge octave leaps with his text, particularly in the role of the Wife. Sudden changes of mood and tone are called for which are very difficult to act. Every little movement has to be orchestrated because the dialogue is so spare. It was, in rehearsals, like a translation from another language...I needed to rely upon Richard Eyre, the director a great deal, but once we had got it right, it was perfect. Richard gave me so much help with a line such as 'You're going and you're never coming back'. He gave me certain movements, when to turn, when to move. He gave me physical 'business' which to an audience might look small but which gave the woman substance and reality...I think it is obvious that something is terribly awry with Edmond and his wife's relationship right from the first moment you see them sitting there...helpful direction and an innate knowledge of the motivations of each character eventually made it work.

When Edmond tells his wife that he has long since stopped loving her, and that she does not interest him "spiritually or sexually", she is crushed, devastated. She is so outraged by his cool behaviour and his disregard for the effect such news might have upon her that it is she who leaves the room, despite the following final - and bleakly sarcastic - admonition:

...Goodbye. Thank you. Goodbye. (Pause) Goodbye. (Pause)
Get out. Get out of here.
And don't you ever come back.
Do you hear me? (Wife exits. Closing the door on him.)

(Ibid, p.21)
She begins her dismissal of Edmond almost as though she were taking leave of a salesman; the tight politeness of her words is contrasted with the heart-broken sob which Mamet writes into the lines. The distraught woman does not trust herself with sentences of longer than two words at a time; it is only after pauses for breath which allow an opportunity for bolstering her strength that she dares to say more. The lines are set out like verse, indicating to the actress that rhythm here is all-important. The Wife's distress rises as the timbre of her voice is elevated almost to a scream of despair which is stemmed only as she quickly leaves the stage, closing the door which, for her husband, symbolises the severance of 'normal' ties. Connie Booth likens the power behind the sparseness of Mamet's dialogue to the difference between the lush orchestration of a piece of music and a dynamic, pared down rendition:

The dialogue reminds me of the sort of difference which exists, say, between Rodgers and Hart and Stephen Sondheim. You might not come out of a Sondheim musical humming the tunes - they are often too dense and complex for that - but they will stay with you, deep in your sub-conscious. The Rodgers and Hart music might be more accessible, superficial, catchy...but it won't make the impact of Sondheim's best work. This type of complexity is what makes Mamet a great writer.87

One of the methods employed by Mamet to convey growing hysteria and confusion occurs in the Wife's habit of frequently responding to Edmond's statements not with questions, which would seem to be the obvious choice, but with flat, toneless statements of her own:

Wife: ...Don't you love me anymore?
Edmond: No.
Wife: You don't.
Edmond: No.
Wife: And why is that?
Edmond: I don't know.
Wife: And when did you find this out?
Edmond: A long time ago.
Wife: You did.
Edmond: Yes.
Wife: How long ago?
Edmond: Years ago.
Wife: You've known for years that you don't love me.

(Ibid, p.19)

The way in which Edmond and his wife react to one another's words is set out like an ironic question-and-answer game, or
like the rapid verbal interplay which sometimes occurs between doctor and patient. The Wife's combination of questions and flat statements imbue the passage with an aura of ominous foreboding; her sardonic retorts, counter-balanced with Edmond's brief, bleak announcements force the scene along like a vicious verbal tennis game and give pace and movement to a static (in every sense of the word) situation.

Connie Booth likens Mamet's dialogue - and indeed the entire play - to an on-rushing train:

PRAIRIE DU CHIEN is actually set on board a train, the Storyteller's tale gaining impetus from the movement of the journey...EDMOND, too, has a similar compulsion, that inexorable feeling of onward movement. I have a feeling that both the text and content of Mamet's work are like a relentless train journey. EDMOND doesn't really end, but just goes on and on, off into the distance...

Certainly the Wife's growing terror as she realises what Edmond intends to do is most forcefully conveyed in her hay-wire linguistic confusion; her words rush ahead of her in an hysterical breakdown of grammar and punctuation:

And why didn't you leave then?
Why didn't you leave then, you stupid shit!!!
All of these years you say that you've been living here?...
(Pause) Eh? You idiot...

(Ibid, p.20)

The woman is at her wit's end and, in an effort to pour out the contempt she feels for her husband, she begins to speak nonsense: "All of these years you say that you've been living here?..." Her profanities and insults are wild and somehow unconvincing; she just does not seem comfortable with such language and her descent into it here poignantly demonstrates her pain. There is, however, a suggestion that the blame for this sad and loveless marriage is not all one-sided; Edmond's wife appears to be cold and uncommunicative, nagging and petty. Her news about the broken lamp, so curtly delivered, could be the final straw for him, but there is still some ambiguity. He seems at first to be ready to try and patch up the situation:

Wife: That lamp cost over two hundred and twenty dollars.
Edmond: (Pause) Maybe we can get it fixed.
Wife: We're never going to get it fixed, I think that's the point...I think that's why she [the maid] did it.

(Ibid, pp.17,18)
Edmond does not seem to have quite made up his mind to leave home since he still includes his wife in the "we" part of the sentence. It is only when she responds so coldly that he suddenly declares: "Yes. Alright - I'm going." Perhaps this is too strong a reminder of mediocrity for Edmond at this stage or perhaps, more mysteriously, it relates to an idea Mamet postulates in a short play entitled YES, BUT SO WHAT? In this work, two men discuss the possibility that thoughts can somehow be transmitted; one of them has been fantasising about a young girl he has seen and tells his friend that he would rather be going home with her than to his boring wife:

A: ...If I had a desire, alright, and I come home, and she's...I'm saying: 'I wish I was going home with this broad. That would make me happy...It would be a simple answer to a lot of things and hurt no-one.' I come in the door, and I think, 'What's stopping me?' the fact that I'm going home to someone...My wife, yes, and she's on the ladder with the lamp. I don't mean the lamp. With the plate...I don't mean the plate. Having dropped the plate. 'The girl, your plate is smashed.' What smashed the plate? (Pause) My hostility?

(p.55)

The similarities with EDMOND are striking; the speaker here obviously feels hostility against his wife whom he resents. He refers to her without even mentioning her name, and with derisive emphasis: "she's...". Not only this, but the first object he says that his wife has broken is a lamp, which he later changes to a plate which "the girl" has in fact smashed. In both cases, "the girl" has broken something of value to the husband; Edmond's £220 lamp and 'A's ornamental plate. Is Mamet saying that the hostile thoughts of both husbands actually brought about the destruction of the objects in question? It is difficult to say, but the similarities between the two incidents are so remarkable that attention must be drawn to the possibility.

Edmond rejects all his past ties and sets out, like an uncerebral version of Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, to prove to himself his worth and existence through the extremes of experience. Because he does not care to confront the problems in his life head-on, he merely leaves them all behind. In so doing, he demonstrates all too clearly Mamet's "hypo-
chondriachal" theory; life for him has become both tedious and worthless. Instead of trying to find a way out by relating his problems and frustrations to a wider perspective or, perhaps, by confiding in friends, he chooses to retreat into self-obsession. Evasion is the only antidote to suffering for such a man.

In turning his back upon the competitive world of business and domestic life, Edmond becomes exactly like Lasch's narcissist:

Acquisitive in the sense that his cravings have no limits, he does not accumulate goods and provisions against the future...but demands immediate gratification, and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire.89

As Tony Parsons observes, Edmond goes "wherever his erection leads him".90 Unfortunately for Edmond, it leads to murder.

Mamet has written a series of short plays and monologues entitled THE BLUE HOUR: CITY SKETCHES, which deal with alienation and loneliness in big cities. Finding himself in a sleazy bar in what Bill Bryden has termed "the blue hour...when people get the blues",91 Edmond is drawn into a conversation with a stranger which closely reflects the kind of dialogue found in his CITY SKETCHES:

Edmond: What do you do?...What do you do to get out?...

Man: What are the things to do? What are the things anyone does?...(Pause) Pussy...I don't know...Pussy...Power...Money...uh...adventure...

(Pause) I think that's it...self-destruction...I think that's it, don't you?...

Edmond: Yes.

Man: ...uh, religion...I suppose that's it, uh, release, uh, ratification...

(Scene 3, pp.23, 24)

What is interesting about this particular exchange is the way in which Edmond is blithely prepared to accept as gospel truth everything the man tells him. This is no doubt because it is advice which massages his fantasies; it concurs with his own ideas of how to have a good time, to really 'live'. It is significant that the first way of 'getting out' advocated by the stranger is to find "Pussy", a word which is repeated twice and which is closely followed
by "Power". The alliterative element here serves to highlight the man's 'seen-it-all' attitude; the words roll off his tongue with a well-worn rhythm. Since "Money" is the stumbling block for so many of Edmond's attempted "adventures", it is ironic that Mamet should have included these escapes just prior to "self-destruction". Even deeper irony occurs in "religion", since it is on his way to a revivalist Mission that Edmond is finally arrested. Quite what his "ratification" finally amounts to is unclear; perhaps it is merely that he has no longer any choices to make at the end of the play - his decisions are all made for him and thereby his actions have been somehow ratified. What is truly remarkable about this short speech is that it succinctly and acidly delineates the concerns of the entire play. All of Edmond's experiences are therein contained. It is a kind of brief summary of his post-domestic life.

Edmond goes off, on the man's advice, to "The Allegro" in order to find a woman and have sexual relations with her. He quickly finds that commercial sex is both expensive and unsatisfactory; in fact, in his attempts to indulge in it, he is constantly thwarted because he has brought with him too much of his middle-class, business mentality. He constantly quibbles about the current market rate for sexual gratification and, at The Allegro, he argues about the price of the B-girl's company and the drinks he must buy. The combined price for the girl's drink and her sexual favours turns out to be more than Edmond is prepared to pay:

Edmond: I'll give you five. I'll give you the five you'd get for the drink if I gave them ten. But I'm not going to give them ten.
B-girl: But you have to buy me a drink.
Edmond: I'm sorry. No.
B-girl: Alright. (Pause) Give me ten.
Edmond: On top of the ten?
B-girl: Yeah. You give me twenty.
Edmond: I should give you twenty.
B-girl: Yes.
Edmond: To you.
B-girl: Yes.
Edmond: And then you give him the five?
B-girl: Yes. I got to give him the five.
Edmond: No. (Scene 4, pp.28,29)
This sounds more like the business negotiations of two executives than a dialogue between a prostitute and her client. Mamet ensures that the language is prosaic, sharp and to the point; not for one moment does any emotion enter into the conversation. Edmond is adamant that he should not be exploited, but at the same time there is a hint of his concern that the girl herself should not be abused at the hands of pimps and bar-room 'managers'. Throughout the play, he emphasises his respect for those who work and takes the trouble to try and find the best deal for the 'worker' in question. Edmond may be foolish, but he has an unswerving sense of justice and fairness. This may be due to his intense respect for the work ethic, although it is unclear exactly what he intends regarding his own career. To Edmond, to work is to be a good, respectable citizen who is prepared to pull his weight. Perhaps the most striking example of his need to believe in the unimpeachability of work occurs when the woman in the subway has run away from him, screaming for help. Edmond has terrified her, probably appearing as yet another disreputable psychopath who roams the subways looking for victims. He is incensed that she should think of him in such a way:

You don't know who I am... Is everybody in this town insane? Fuck you... fuck you... fuck you... fuck the lot of you... fuck you all... I don't need you... I worked all of my life! (Scene 13, p.59)

The repeated obscenities only serve to emphasise the helplessness that Edmond feels. His reaction is to shout abuse at nobody in particular - rather like a pathetic drunk in the middle of the road. Onstage at The Royal Court, this was vividly and dramatically actualised by the sight of Edmond standing alone centre stage, almost in tears at the pathos of his situation. Colin Stinton caught with great accuracy the desperation in Edmond's voice, and spoke brokenly in the sobs which Mamet has written into the lines. Edmond's respect for the work ethic surfaces again just before he fatally wounds Glenna. He sings the praises of working women:

...A working woman. Who brought life to what she did. Who took a moment to joke with me. That's... that's... that's... god bless you what you are. (Scene 16, p.75)
Edmond is profoundly grateful for the fact that at least one person he has met has treated him well; he is so ecstatic that he can hardly articulate his words, and he stammers the word "that's" three times without concluding the sentence. To Edmond at this moment, Glenna is the ideal being: an open, kind-hearted woman with no malice or cruelty in mind. The terrible irony is that, like Büchner's WOYZECK, he kills the one person with whom he might have found lasting happiness and contentment.

Mamet's play has frequently been compared to WOYZECK; in his review of the work, Matt Wolf observes that Edmond's journey is one

of Büchnerian bleakness that truly suggests [the opera] 'Wozzeck' without the music.92

Michael Billington finds EDMOND

fascinating [in] its persuasive echoes of Büchner's WOYZECK, in its fragmentation and stark emphasis on human destruction93

and Douglas Watt believes that EDMOND has an

obvious kinship with Büchner's early 19th century dramatic shocker [and this fact] emphasises the somewhat Germanic tone (even the dialogue sounds like a translation at times) and that it could effectively be fleshed out by a Berg-like score.94

Frank Rich notes how the play

looks like Georg Büchner's WOYZECK...and...its clipped, vague form of speech approximates the manner of Beckett (and at times, Büchner).95

WOYZECK is a fragmentary, unfinished play about a simple - even imbecilic - army private who murders his unfaithful wife. It powerfully depicts the social and economic iniquities that lead both to the wife's faithlessness and Woyzeck's murder of her. Like EDMOND, it is extraordinarily compact and economic in style, comprising of a quick succession of short, powerful scenes which are executed in pared down yet brilliantly realistic language. There are striking similarities between the two plays on a purely verbal level as well as in the atmosphere of fatalism which runs through them. Woyzeck purchases in the shop of an old Jew the knife he will use to murder his wife:
Woyzeck: The gun's too dear.
Jew: You buy or you don't buy, which is it?
Woyzeck: How much is the knife?
Jew: Lovely and straight it is. You want to cut your throat with it? - So what's the matter? I give it to you as cheap as anybody else. Cheap you can have your death, but not for nothing. What's the matter? You'll have your death all right, very economical.
Woyzeck: It'll cut more than bread.
Jew: Tuppence.
Woyzeck: There.

When Edmond pawns his ring, he overhears another customer enquiring about a knife; he becomes interested and enquires himself:

Edmond: Why is it so expensive?
Owner: Why is it so expensive?...This is a survival knife. G.I. issue. World War Two. And that is why.
Edmond: Survival knife.
Owner: That is correct.
Edmond: Is it a good knife?
Owner: It is the best knife that money can buy...You want it?
Edmond: Let me think about it for a moment.

(Scene 12, p.57)

There are obvious similarities here; the brief, clipped sentences, the inference in both cases that the knife might be used for more than, say, "cutting bread", the impatience on the part of the knife-seller and the Jewish-sounding rhythms that both dramatists incorporate into this character's speech. What is perhaps most striking about these extracts is the extraordinary sense of menace that each writer manages to incorporate into a seemingly simple exchange.

Woyzeck, like Edmond, wishes he could read the signs of fate which would make the meaning of life clear:
It's all in the toadstools, Doctor. Have you ever noticed how the toadstools grow in patterns? If only we could read them.

The Fortune-Teller plants a similar idea in Edmond's mind:
If things are pre-determined surely they must manifest themselves. When we look back - as we look back - we see that we could never have done otherwise than as we did. (Pause) Surely, then there must have been signs. If only we could have read them.

(Scene 1, p.15)
A powerful subtext of violence is present in both works. In WOYZECK, the Captain exhorts the protagonist to take more care:

What's the hurry, Woyzeck? Stop a bit. You rush through the world like an open razor. You'll give somebody a nasty cut.98

As Edmond similarly rushes towards his doom, Mamet depicts a similar image of one who has been literally 'sharpened' by life's cruelties and whose final act of murder is via a "nasty cut". Indeed, Douglas Watt observes that the entire play is like "a raw wound".99

Another source of inspiration is undoubtedly Theodore Dreiser's AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY which Mamet has cited as an important early influence and which, too, charts the downfall of an innocent. Dreiser's first and last emphasis is on enclosure, on the stifling claustrophobia of city life. The ominous beginning of the novel describes "the tall walls of the commercial heart of an American city"100 and the dark epilogue again details "the tall walls of the commercial heart of the City of San Francisco - tall and grey in the evening shade".101 As Alfred Kazin observes,

Enclosure is fundamental to the social logic behind AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY. It is a logic that Dreiser's method forces us to accept...Dreiser does not leave anything out of his almost one thousand pages...The compulsion behind Clyde's life has transferred itself to the narrative. The inevitability that Dreiser brings to every detail is like Clyde's progress to the chair. The reader feels as trapped as Clyde.102

Mamet's script for EDMOND contains a similar compulsion; it begins and ends with a discussion about destiny and all that comes between seems to follow an inexorable, already established pattern. Like Clyde, Edmond remains to the last an unconscious prisoner of fate. Raskolnikov, the intellectual murderer in Dostoyevsky's CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, was Dreiser's favourite character in fiction. Although he based the character of Clyde upon Dostoyevsky's creation to some extent, the two men could hardly be more different, one being an intellectual and the other an easily confused, far from intelligent shop-worker. Although the reasons that Raskolnikov, Clyde and Edmond commit murder are at first sight dissimilar, they are in fact closely linked. Raskolnikov
strikes at the mediocrity and cheapness he sees as characterising his society, and thus decides to murder to show the world — and himself — the triumph of his will. Clyde rids himself of the girl who stands between him and his ambitions, his self-realisation: to him, she represents all that is pallid and half-hearted about the world he wishes to leave behind. Edmond kills Glenna because of his unshakeable egotism: she clutches at the threads of comfort that her banal life has offered and thereby denies Edmond the means of vindicating his new, truly 'liberated' lifestyle. The common denominators in each work are the need to break free from a restrictive and suffocating society, and the selfishness of each man.

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY was dramatised by Erwin Piscator and entitled THE CASE OF CLYDE GRIFFITHS. Since this play was eventually staged by The Group Theatre with Lee Strasberg directing, it is possible that Mamet became aware of the novel through his involvement with founder member Sanford Meisner and his association with Harold Clurman. The play was poorly received as Clurman recalls; in THE FERVENT YEARS, he observes that

The reason for the reviewers' dislike of the play... was not that it was a poor piece of writing, but that it interpreted the plot of AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY... in terms of the class struggle. The Piscator dramatisation employed a Speaker who dunned the audience with a single refrain: 'We have given a name to Fate. It is the Economic System'.

It is not difficult to understand how Mamet, with his concern over the capitalist system in his country and his interest in fate, should have been drawn to such sources.

Despite the almost universal acclaim that Mamet has received for this play, there remain a few critics for whom it was a grave disappointment. Frank Rich felt that Mamet was off-form when he wrote EDMOND, suggesting that he was "spinning hooey and neglecting his valuable gifts". He goes on to compare what he sees as the failure of EDMOND to plays such as AMERICAN BUFFALO, SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO and THE WATER ENGINE:

[In these plays] Mr. Mamet has demonstrated an
uncommon ability to hear the voices of inarticulate Americans and to limn the society that oppresses them. Though the thematic concerns are similar in EDMOND, the author's ear has gone tone deaf, and his social observations have devolved into clichés.

Frank Rich seems to have completely missed the point of what Mamet is trying to achieve here: if the characters speak in what he describes as dialogue which is "tone deaf", it is because they are incapable of speaking in any other way. They are part of the society which has created them and which has taken away the beauty of language in its never-ending pursuance of the prosaic and functional. Communication is reduced to bare essentials in which not a word is wasted to get from point A to point B. Where there is a suggestion of lyricism in their speech, it quickly becomes apparent that this is part of a verbal strategy, designed to entrap a listener in its intrigues. For example, the Three Card Monte speaks in a beguiling and mesmeric rhythm, but this has been carefully cultivated to persuade and coerce naïve would-be gamblers to participate in his game. He sounds seductive - like the Whore before she gets down to basics - and mesmerising as he sets about spinning his linguistic web. The sheer hypnotic pull of his words draws Edmond closer to the game; he has been advised to "...figure out which card has got to win...and bet the other one" (Scene 6, pp.35,36). As Colin Stinton has observed, this becomes Edmond's life-strategy as well as his gambling technique - he takes action which is unexpected, perverse in an effort to "beat life's game". The Sharper notices Edmond loitering on the side-lines and senses a possible quarry:

Sharper: You going to try me again?...
Edmond: Again?...
Sharper: I remember you beat me out of that fifty that time with your girlfriend...
Edmond: ...When was this?
Sharper: On fourteenf street...You going to try me one more time?...

(Scene 10, p.46)

The Sharper draws Edmond towards him by utilising in one short sentence two forms of flattery which will almost certainly have the desired effect: he gives a puff to Edmond's supposed gambling expertise and to his sexual vanity in the
assumption that he had with him "a girlfriend" and all that implies to such a man. He takes a chance by referring to a fictional past game in which Edmond "beat" him out of "fifty", but there is a sense here that both men know that the other is fully aware that this is a lie, but are each willing to participate in it. Mamet places the Sharper socially by his pronunciation of "fourteenf" street and by the negroid inflections in his voice as well as by stressing his 'street-wise' manner of speaking. As soon as he has Edmond's attention, he moves into the linguistic routine specifically designed to catch his prey once and for all: 

...Play you for that fifty...Fifty get you one hundred, we see you as fast as you was...Pay on the red, pass on the black...Where is the queen?...You pick the queen you win...Where is the queen?...Who saw the queen?...You put up fifty, win a hundred...Now: who saw the queen?... (Ibid, p.47)

The Shill loses his money, and Edmond decides to try his luck. Again, the Sharper uses flattery:

Ah, shit, man, you too fass for me. (Ibid)

But Edmond's choice is the wrong one and he loses his money. The Sharper's sequence of words beginning "Where is the queen?" and ending "Who saw the queen?" works as a kind of mesmeric chant. It is reminiscent of the rhythms used by black Baptist preachers at prayer meetings, where the flow and harmonic elements of their speech are crucial to engage the sympathies and responses of the congregation. Indeed, the speech of the Preacher in EDMOND follows very similar lines: the following extract from his exhortations for a sinner to come up to the dais to testify indicates just how close the two methods of coercive speech truly are:

'Oh no, not me', You say, 'Oh no, not me. Not me, Lord, to whom you hold out your hand. Not me to whom you offer your eternal grace. Not me who can be saved...' But who but you, I ask you? Who but you? (Scene 17, p.79)

In both excerpts, there are many strong vowel sounds; in the Sharper's speech, the dominating sound is "ee" as in "queen" and, in the Preacher's oration, it is "oo" as in "who" and "you". The rhyming quality of their words lulls
the listener and engages him in a rhythmic confection intended to elicit a response.

Mamet also uses a kind of Orwellian inversion in EDMOND. Not only have words changed their meaning or, at least, taken on new implications, they also serve to demonstrate how little ordinary discourse can be taken at face value. In an essay in which he discusses the misappropriation of much contemporary language, Mamet observes how

My generation grew up in a time where constant aggression publicly avowed came to be the norm of our foreign policy. We had changed the name of the Department of War to the Department of Defence, and went about making war continually and calling it defence until today we doubt if there is such a thing as defence; or if, in fact, the real meaning of defence is not 'aggression'. We have come to accept all sorts of semantic inversions, as George Orwell told us we had.107

When Edmond buys the knife that he will use to murder Glenna, the weapon is referred to as a "survival" knife, the boundaries between life and death becoming semantically blurred. He declares the necessity to "live" moments before he stabs Glenna to death, his new-found sense of life-affirmation being tragically transposed to self-destruction. The word "pledge" no longer refers to human commitment but to an object to be left with a pawnbroker for an agreed sum of money. When the item is once again required, it can then be "redeemed". Thus, two words which originally indicated a serious undertaking and a kind of salvation have been reduced to merely fiscal terms. The Manager at the 'Health Club' is really the Madame of a Brothel - Edmond's activities there will be billed to him only as having occurred in "Atlantic Ski and Tennis". When Edmond is accosted outside the Peep Show by the Pimp, he enquires whether the whore in question will be "clean"; even a word like this has taken on a new and sinister meaning. What used to refer only to hygiene or fastidiousness now relates to someone who is free from venereal disease and who is honest, up to no tricks. Actions, as well as words have been similarly inverted or altered: all attempts to make contact with another individual are seen as incipient threats, games have been devalued into fraudulent con-tricks and affection, in
The Manager (Connie Booth) in EDMOND, The Royal Court, 1985.
the form of prostitution, must be bought.

In spite of Mamet's sophisticated and meticulous use of language, Frank Rich is far from convinced about EDMOND'S worth:

Mr. Mamet dishes out his stylization as if he, too, were a 3-card monte dealer; it is a shell game designed to distract us from the fact that he is not playing with a full deck.108

He also derides the playwright's toothless ambiguity [which] is duplicated in the play's many incidents, which are impaled by the monochromatic dialogue and performances.109

Mr. Rich is not the only critic who was disappointed by EDMOND. Clive Barnes refers to its pretentious Pinteresque patina...[it] lacks the poetic resonance it needs110 and, whilst Matt Wolf enjoyed the play, he felt that it lacked the conversational ease that [Mamet] took to revelatory heights in GLENGARRY, GLEN ROSS, AMERICAN BUFFALO and DUCK VARIATIONS.111

Lyn Gardner believes that Mamet's unanalytical script is stiff with omen and it doesn't go anywhere112 and Susie Mackenzie dislikes the play intensely, describing it as a brutal, toneless, misogynistic and, possibly, sadistic piece of work.113

It is difficult not to feel that these reviewers have been extremely unfair to Mamet's play. Even if one quibbles about the work's bluntness and its harshly prosaic verbal style, there is still much to admire. In the same way that AMERICAN BUFFALO was misunderstood as nothing more than a slice of realism when it was premiered, it would appear from these comments that something similar has occurred with EDMOND. The play simply cannot be viewed as stark realism, a slice of 'low life', if only because of the exceptionally compact and economic structure both of its text and its scenes. One cannot possibly view Edmond's downfall in purely naturalistic terms, since he moves so rapidly from one crisis to another; his destruction is almost surrealistic in its intensity and nightmare-like imagery. The play
is an allegory; as Mamet himself has pointed out, "an American Rake's Progress". As Edmond wanders frightened and alone through the Nighttown-like darkness of New York's red light areas, he becomes rather like Bunyan's Pilgrim whose progress, it will be recalled, led him to Vanity Fair, where all the empty things of the world were sold. Edmond, too, encounters emptiness and desolation on his journey but unlike Bunyan's adventurer, his wanderings do not end in heaven but in prison. However, he does find a kind of peace at the play's conclusion, and this is another aspect of the work which has much troubled its adverse critics.

The end of Mamet's play is rather far-fetched, but only if it is viewed as the culmination of a series of real-life escapades. If it is meant as a haunting picture of a man who has, because of the intolerable pressures upon him, brought about his own ruin but inadvertently found peace, then it is completely believable. Edmond finds a spurious kind of happiness in prison, even though he has been made to confront each of his prejudices and to accept what before he had found abhorrent. His sexism, racism and contemptuous attitude towards homosexuals are all inverted when he is forced into becoming the 'wife' of a black, homosexual prisoner. At first, he is devastated by his experiences and seems to have become a mere shadow of his former self. He tells the Prison Chaplain that he is "so empty..." (Scene 21, p.95) and that he is "sorry about everything" (Ibid, p.96). All anger and frustration seems to disintegrate; it is as though Edmond has died inside. When the Chaplain asks him why he murdered Glenna, Edmond does not know. He can only respond with inarticulate stutters, the collapse of his sensibility being reflected in the breakdown of his language:

I...(Pause) I...(Pause) I don't...I...I don't...(Pause)
I...(Pause) I don't...(Pause) I don't...(Pause) I don't think...(Pause) I...(Pause)

(Ibid, p.97)

The repetition of the personal pronoun which had so recently been used to boldly announce Edmond's new-found confidence is now an indication of his struggle to make sense of what
Prisoner (George Harris) and Edmond (Colin Stinton) in EDMOND, The Royal Court, 1985.
has happened to his life. His sense of selfhood has dissolved, leaving behind only an impotent stammering which is terrible in its desperation.

Once Edmond has recovered from these dreadful early days in prison, which ironically follow on from his admission that he thinks he will enjoy life there, there does seem to be a real change in him. It is as though he has been somehow cleansed; his optimistic ideas about freedom of choice and the need for self-expression are negated as he is confined in a prison even more inhibiting than the one he chose to leave, but he insists that he is at last content. He has undergone what appears to be an extreme kind of behaviour modification in which he has been exposed to his fears and prejudices until they have been either decimated or reversed. His sexism and racism appear to have been replaced by compassion and understanding and his personality seems to take on a reflective, meditative aspect. Edmond is at last at peace because there are no longer any pressures upon him other than those which he has apparently come to accept as part of his life. All choices are now made for him, all decisions are taken from his hands. In a perverse way, Edmond is happy for the first time in his life. He is free as he has never been since prison has allowed him a liberation of spirit which has been markedly absent from his previous life. As Edmond had agreed with the man in the bar, "...the pressure is too much" in modern society (Scene 3, p.23) and, when he tells his wife the reasons for his murder of Glenna, he says "I think I'd just had too much coffee." (Scene 19, p.87). In a sense this is true; Edmond has had too much of modern life and, since coffee symbolises at least a part of the exhausting ritual that urban life can become, these strange words are in fact quite accurate. Prison allows Edmond release from reality, away from everything that had oppressed him. As Miranda Richardson points out Edmond's world has been so busy, so fraught. There has been so little time for him to be himself. In the prison, he weeps when he wants to, gets angry when he wants to. It is an ordered society; he need take no responsibility for his actions, and he can at last relax.115
This sense of release and relaxation is powerfully apparent in the play's final scene when Edmond and his cell-mate (his prison 'husband') lie on their bunks and philosophise about life and death. For the first time, Edmond can talk about spiritual issues and there is in this scene a harmony and peace which has existed at no other time in the work. The two men cue each other's responses in the way that true friends do, and listen to each other's remarks with interest and obvious respect. At one point, they consider the possibility that animals are the creatures on earth who have within them the ultimate knowledge:

Prisoner: We say they're only dogs, or animals, and scorn them...
Edmond: ...Yes.
Prisoner: We scorn them in our fear. But...don't you think?
Edmond: ...It could very well be...
Prisoner: But on their native world...
Edmond: ...Uh-huh...
Prisoner: ...they are supreme...
Edmond: I think that's very...
Prisoner: And what we have done is to disgrace ourselves.
Edmond: We have. (Scene 23, pp. 104,105)

Edmond's humility here is a far cry from the arrogance he had displayed to the tragic Glenna. For the first time in the play, he actually listens to what another person is saying rather than perfunctorily acknowledging their contributions to conversation. When the Prisoner observes that the human race has "disgraced" itself, Edmond is quick to agree; he knows only too well what ignorance and selfishness can produce and his admission of his own culpability in the general malaise is effectively conveyed.

The play ends with the stage picture of Edmond crossing his cell to kiss goodnight the man who has made him both a sexual slave and a confidante. The peace which Edmond has at last found has been bought at the expense of his former life. Although an audience must feel some consolation that contentment of a sort has finally been gained, there is at the play's conclusion an overwhelming sense of sadness and waste. It is, therefore, with some frustration that one notes the gross reductivism of John Beaufort's analysis when...
he observes

Considering what has gone before...the notion that Edmond finds redemption and release in a homosexual relationship with his violator seems, at least, simplistically contrived and incredible.\textsuperscript{116}

and to read Frank Rich's dismissal of the work as he considers how Mamet allows the evening to end with an unearned sentimental tableau in which the hero holds hands with the cellmate who had earlier raped him.\textsuperscript{117}

Once again, a realistic interpretation of events has been forced upon an expressionistic image. It appears to be Mamet's fate to be misunderstood as a realist because of his brilliantly concise and ostensibly authentic dialogue, but it is a great pity that important allegorical issues are missed along the way.

Like Allen Ginsberg in his poem, America, Edmond takes the decision to leave behind comfort and security in search of enlightenment, even danger. Ginsberg muses on the mediocrity which sparks his rebellion:

I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet. When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid. My mind is made up there's going to be trouble.\textsuperscript{118}

EDMOND is a demonstration of what happens in Mamet's New York when an ordinary individual attempts to break from a stultifying existence into one which is free and open. Edmond's tragedy is that in the venal world that Mamet portrays, such mobility is quite impossible without destruction or annihilation. He is too much a product of his society; because of its very palpable deficiencies, he too is deficient in important respects. Arrogantly confident that he must take steps to improve his life, Edmond makes the irrevocable move into an alien landscape. An expression of hope quickly fades to sour cynicism and an encounter with a girl who might have brought some happiness terminates in a bloody murder. In the society in which he finds himself, communication has broken down into vitiated and colourless fragments, old and revered values have collapsed, love has been devalued into a cold exchange for cash and the arrogance and selfishness which are characteristic of such a society's citizenry can lead only to a dead-end.
Clearly, what Edmond rushes towards is hardly an improvement on what he leaves behind.

Edmond is all too recognisably human; in him is encapsulated all of Mamet's fears about humanity's dilemma in the modern world. He is a mass of contradictions, immoral, selfish, confused and afraid. He is, in fact, just one more frightened person in a hopelessly brutal city. Although his actions may be extreme, Edmond is a universal spokesman. He makes mistakes but at least he tries to improve his lot which, in the New York dramatised here, takes considerable courage. When Mamet asked an interviewer who was deeply unimpressed with the play, "Didn't you feel any compassion for him?" he spelt out his aim in writing the piece. Edmond is the embodiment of all the terrors of our age, a weak and desperate man with a tainted dream of happiness. In him is incorporated a warning. If Mamet's warning is missed, and the play is dismissed as an impossible fantasy or a work which fails to demonstrate the dramatist's true abilities, then a very important message will go unnoticed.
Notes

Edmond

1. David Mamet cited in 'Programme Notes' for Glengarry Glen Ross.
11. David Mamet in interview on South Bank Show.
14. David Mamet in interview on South Bank Show.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
18. David Mamet in interview on South Bank Show.
19. Ibid.
23. Susie Mackenzie, 'Base Instincts'.
24. David Mamet, ibid.


32. Miranda Richardson in interview with author.


41. Colin Stinton in interview with author.


44. Ibid.


51. Tony Parsons, The Face, p.74.

52. Richard Christiansen, 'The Young Lion of Chicago Theatre'.

53. David Mamet, ibid.

54. David Mamet in interview on South Bank Show.

55. Tony Parsons, The Face, p.75.

58. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.103.
59. Colin Stinton in interview with author.
61. Christopher Lasch, ibid, p.xv.
64. Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, p.11.
65. David Mamet, Lecture typescript (No.6) 28 April 1983, p.5 on loan to author.
66. Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism.
67. David Mamet, Lecture typescript (No.6) p.5.
69. Miranda Richardson in interview with author.
70. Colin Stinton in interview with author.
71. Miranda Richardson in interview with author.
72. Clive Barnes, 'Stark Telling of Mamet's Edmond'.
73. Miranda Richardson in interview with author.
76. Miranda Richardson in interview with author.
78. David Mamet in interview on South Bank Show.
84. Clive Barnes, 'Stark Telling of Mamet's Edmond'.
88. Ibid.
89. Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, p.xiv.
90. Tony Parsons, The Face, p.75.
91. Bill Bryden in interview on South Bank Show.
95. Frank Rich, 'Mamet's Edmond at the Provincetown'.
98. Ibid, Scene IX, p.118.
99. Douglas Watt, 'Edmond Goes Round the Bend'.
103. Harold Clurman, The Fervent Years, p.175.
104. Frank Rich, 'Mamet's Edmond at the Provincetown'.
105. Ibid.
106. Colin Stinton in interview with author.
107. David Mamet, 'Semantic Chickens' typescript, p.3.
108. Frank Rich, 'Mamet's Edmond at the Provincetown'.
109. Ibid.
110. Clive Barnes, 'Stark Telling of Mamet's Edmond'.
111. Matt Wolf, City Limits, 29 November 1985.
113. Susie Mackenzie, 'Base Instincts'.
114. David Mamet in interview on South Bank Show.
115. Miranda Richardson in interview with author.
117. Frank Rich, 'Mamet's Edmond at the Provincetown'.
119. David Mamet cited in Susie Mackenzie, 'Base Instincts'.
At the end of Arthur Miller's *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*, Charley offers a valediction on Willy Loman:

...for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life...He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoe shine...A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.¹

Like Willy, the salesmen in Mamet's *GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS* all have their dreams. They dream of the rich customer who will enable them to stop working for those who cruelly exploit them and they dream, constantly, of success. For several generations of writers who have criticised the American Dream, the salesman has symbolised its shortcomings. It is true that such a profession can be the route to great wealth, the means for an ordinary man to make good by sheer hard work, but this is not the aspect that such writers choose to emphasise. To them, a society that advocates this kind of 'self-improvement' is a consumer society based on materialism and has, at its heart, an emptiness which cannot be assuaged by yet more cash in the bank. Just as the salesman's dreams are fuelled by the promise of happiness and contentment in return for material success, so too are those of their clients; they are as much a part of the capitalist hegemony as the men from whom they purchase their own symbols of 'material success'. Their purchases are invested by the salesmen with amazing, life-enhancing properties which somehow hold the promise of a better future. The truth is, however, usually rather different. In the same way as the salesmen's endless quest for a spurious success is essentially a chimera, so the goods they sell are often quite worthless. The land in *GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS* at least exists, but is of such poor quality as to render it quite useless. The salesmen are, therefore, exploiting those who, like them, need to dream and to believe in a brighter future. It is a vicious circle.

Probably the most famous literary salesman is Willy Loman, whose frustrated dreams eventually destroy him and split his family. His relentless quest for success, together
with an unrealistic view of the world results, as Eleanor Clark puts it, in his being "done...in" largely due to "the capitalist system." Similarly, G.F. Babbitt in Sinclair Lewis's satirical novel, BABBITT, neglects his emotional life in the belief that the one purpose of the real-estate business was to make money for George F. Babbitt although he finds that success does not bring him the happiness he seeks. Hickey, that hypocritical shatterer of illusions in Eugene O'Neill's THE ICEMAN COMETH, is undone not directly through capitalism - although there is certainly a suggestion that the need for professional kudos is at least partly to blame for his tragedy - but through his need to hang on to the 'pipe dreams' he exhorts his friends to eschew. Hickey is the archetypal salesman in literature, a peculiar mixture of both victim and oppressor whose downfall is brought about by self-delusion and societal pressure.

During an interview, Mamet talked about the theme of capitalism which runs through both GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS and AMERICAN BUFFALO which was written about nine years earlier. Both plays are, he says, "set deeply in the milieu of capitalism [which is] obviously an idea whose time has come and gone". He goes on to explain how in America we're still suffering from loving a frontier ethic - that is to say, take the land from the Indians and give it to the railroad. Take the money from the blacks and give it to the rich. The ethic was always something for nothing. It never really existed when the American frontier was open... it never was anything more transcendent than something for nothing...The idea of Go West and make your fortune, there's gold lying in the ground, was an idea promulgated by the storekeepers in the gold rush and the railroads in the westward expansion as a way of enslaving the common man and woman...playing on their greed. As W.C. Fields said, you can't cheat an honest man. So, because we've been rather dishonest about our basic desire to get something for nothing in this country we've always been enslaved by the myth of the happy capitalist. Familiar American pieties are always linked to criminality. That's why they're familiar American pieties.
American capitalism comes down to one thing...The operative axiom is 'Hurrah for me and fuck you'. Anything else is a lie.  

Thus, Mamet lays the blame for modern-day greed and corruption upon ethics which have existed since the early days of the American Republic. From the outset, people have been urged to live falsely, to seek financial success by any means open to them, including cheating and stealing. Mamet believes that this has led to important emotional bonds being diminished, their value often being viewed only as a means of achieving pecuniary gain. His plays are frequently concerned with the fact that ordinary human relationships have been corrupted and subverted by social flims. The archaic - though still powerful - frontier ethic of seizing by force what is denied by right is exposed as being both immoral and callous. Through works like GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS and AMERICAN BUFFALO, Mamet reveals the deforming effect of such an ethic upon the individual; he draws attention to the obsessive quest for success whilst making it only too clear that such a quest is doomed to failure, the desired success being nothing more than a fantasy. His characters are, therefore, essentially very unhappy. On the surface they may be tough and smiling, but underneath their brittle veneer they are aware of a terrible void in their lives. He has noted how

The American ethic of business, of boosterism, never made anybody happy. It has made a lot of people rich, but it never made anybody happy. So we live in a very, very unhappy country here. I have always considered it to be part of my job to talk about the things that I see, and certainly the most pervasive aspect of America is that we are so damned unhappy over here, but we are smiling all the time.  

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS is, he says, an attempt to write a play about those guys you see on planes. They all sit together, and you can never understand what they're talking about, and they have these papers filled with columns and figures. They're all named Bob. And when they laugh, it's 'Ha ha!' - this imitation laugh.  

Elsewhere, he elaborates on this soulless - and rather desperate - picture of a business world which strives to prove its importance and vitality to the rest of society:
I had to ride on airplanes last month - and I saw a lot of people dressed in grey, the men are all dressed in grey, the women are all dressed in dark brown, and they sit there on that goddamn airplane with fifteen sheets stapled together...and the sheets all have columns of figures down them. And this is what they do, from the moment they get on to the moment they get off...and they drink at ten o'clock in the morning. Why? Because they are unhappy people? - Yeah, because they're bored. Because they're trying to create enthusiasm for something that can't possibly interest anyone.°

Mamet comments upon the artificiality on which the constant struggle is based:

If we win...we're successful and we give ourselves awards in advertising and we give ourselves awards in the motion picture academy...And if we lose, we're on the unemployment lines and we're having food stamps and poverty comes in the door and love goes out the window. But what's the difference? I mean what are we trying to succeed in aid of?10

The characters in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS cannot afford to ask this question since it implies a sense of self-doubt, a deep-seated worry about the reason for their existence. They must convince themselves that material gain is the ultimate achievement - there is simply nothing else. Mamet's intention is to portray a world in which business has become an end in itself. People frantically pursue their individual goals for success and the promise of happiness, and find it is an endless pursuit. Once they have reached one pinnacle, they must move on to another. His characters are so enmeshed in their daily rituals that they are never able to question the ultimate purpose of their activity. The capitalist ethos therefore remains unquestioned; there is simply no time to think about possible alternatives.

Mamet demonstrates how inextricably people can become enmeshed in their jobs, almost losing their identity behind a job title. Certainly, his salesmen seem to have very little outside of the office; they live for their sales conquests. One of them actually says: "A man's his job" (Act 2, p.44) suggesting that he has become a mere extension of his livelihood. There are very few moments when the characters use any language which is not expressly concerned with business, and even when they do, it quickly becomes apparent that this is usually a ploy designed to coerce a
colleague or cheat a client. When Roma talks to a client about his wife, he uses the vocabulary of the business world to make his point:

...You have a contract with your wife. You have certain things you do **jointly**, you have a **bond** there...

(Act 2, p.55)

It is almost as though the real world does not exist outside of their office. They have distorted speech so much through cunning and artifice - and downright professional obsession - that it seems as though they no longer have any need of language which does not immediately relate to business. Benedict Nightingale observes that Mamet seems to take

a pretty dim and disapproving view of his fellow-countrymen when they put on their business suits, business smiles and business selves.\(^{11}\)

But Mamet is not out to condemn his characters, merely to expose a system which has created such people. He insists that it was not his intention to offer an indictment or a commentary: "My job is to create a closed moral universe",\(^{12}\) he says, and to leave evaluation to the audience. To him, the play is about a society based on business. A society with only one bottom line: How much money you make.\(^{13}\)

The following passage was written by the American poet, Walt Whitman, but it would seem to relate almost uncannily to Mamet's own ideas about the American business world:

business (this all-devouring modern word, business), the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain... Money-making...[remain] today sole master of the field...It is as if we were somehow being endowed with a vast and more thoroughly-appointed body, and then left with little or no soul.\(^{14}\)

The premise upon which GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS is based is, in a way, a paradigm of capitalism. The company's bosses, Mitch and Murray, have organised a sales competition in which the salesman with the highest 'grosses' - financial profit - wins a Cadillac and is automatically guaranteed the best 'leads' (addresses of prospective land buyers), the runners-up win a set of steak knives and the losers are sacked. That the successful salesman is given the best 'leads' whilst the runners-up are forced to accept inferior addresses from the 'B' list or are even dismissed, serves to underline
the unfairness of a system which penalises those who are weak and needy, but rewards those who least need such support. With no other choice but to capitulate to the demands of their employers, it is not surprising that the salesmen should rail against the iniquities of an unfair system. Their jobs may be their lives, but they should be better jobs; despite their refusal to look beneath the shallowness of their lifestyle, there remains a level at which they are indeed conscious of a serious deficiency. As Jim Hiley notes, Mamet's people are small-minded and foul-mouthed, but their talk indicates an achingly vast sense of aspiration. In the tension between the two lies tragedy, and a startling critique of American life. Mamet's dialogue sparkles with wit, invention and character observation. Through their convoluted repetitions, aborted sentences and rushed phrasing, his characters offer the audience a glimpse into the hermetic - and neurotic - world of real-estate sales and negotiations. Corrupted by the constant need to beat their colleagues at any cost, these men have become expert manipulators: their ability to cajole and confuse with a superbly calculated verbal onslaught is quite mesmerising. Jack Shepherd, who played Richard Roma in the National Theatre production, remarks that they are vicious existentialists, experts in deception, superb liars...persuasive, ruthless, competitive, disloyal.

These men think nothing of trampling over not only their unwitting clients, for whom they feel only scalding contempt, but each other. It is a world in which loyalty and trust have almost no place and where language can no longer be trusted as a means of straight-forward communication. Merely listening to the wrong words can mean dire consequences as Aaronow finds out to his cost. A major theme in this play is the corruption of the function of language as a means of communication. Robert Cushman notes how Mamet drives home his point about the unreliability of language with his characters' intoxicating mixture of evasions, pleadings, brow-beatings, stonewalling and spiel... and Frank Rich feels that Mr. Mamet's command of dialogue has now reached his
What is most striking about the playwright's linguistic technique here is the almost operatic quality of some of the set pieces. The terse, sometimes stychomythic quality of much of his earlier dialogue still exists in GLENGARY GLEN ROSS, but Mamet now appears to be experimenting with new and more lengthy forms of linguistic control. There are in this work a number of bravura monologues and brilliantly sustained 'duets' which the salesmen utilise to bewilder and impress their audience. In SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO, some of Bernie Litko's absurdly inflated fantasies took a similar form, but even they were a pale prelude to the heights achieved here. Mamet demonstrates with consummate skill his ability to condense and expand salient aspects of the American language into what truly become the "taintedarias" of which Christopher Bigsby has spoken. Roma's superbly controlled and mesmerising monologue in the company of the inarticulate and baffled Lingk, Levene's poetic and almost orgasmic evocation of a 'great sale' and the brilliant entrapment of Aaronow into criminal culpability by his colleague, Moss, surpass even Mamet's own dizzying standards of linguistic invention.

By the very nature of their trade, salesmen must be expert speakers, story-tellers and embellishers of fictions, and Mamet seizes on the dramatic possibilities that such a profession suggests. In the brutally competitive world in which he moves, the salesman must become absolutely expert in linguistic technique: so long as he can keep his narrative flowing and uninterrupted, he is able to feel, momentarily at least, safe. Through the pattern of his words, he can manipulate and persuade and thus his fantasies of success and those of his client can become a reality. As Barbara Hardy observes, story-tellers of any kind must be fluent and vivid...artists who keep an eye on the subject, on the listeners, and on the occasion. They are sincerely involved and engrossed in their stories but are self-consciously practised in that manipulation of effect which belongs to all oratory and is essential to the art of narrative improvisation.
In GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, Mamet's salesmen spill out their endless, brilliant chatter to anyone who is prepared to listen, but at the heart of their manipulation lies only aridity and emptiness. As they brag, pose and relate old success stories, they often seem to be talking as much to themselves as to their audience. These men need words. Their verbal skills make them feel important, give them momentary status, fuel their energy and give point to their lives. Behind the foul-mouthed, incessantly 'macho' bravado lies only desperate bluster, a braggadocio show of power by men who are only too aware of their own powerlessness. They may live by victimising their clients and their colleagues, but the most abject victims of their trade are themselves.

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS is Mamet's most successful play to date. It was premiered at the National Theatre in London in 1983, winning two British drama awards before opening on Broadway where it won the Pulitzer Prize in 1984. It is a brief, mordantly funny satire which Robert Brustein describes as "a play without a single soft spot," and it is, indeed, harsh and uncompromising. Despite the fact that it is by far the most abrasive and scatological that he has written, Mamet's play has, once again, been praised for its poetic qualities. Benedict Nightingale comments upon the gaudy, swaggering poetry he has fashioned out of the street-wise idiom of Chicago [which] sucks us in, carries us along, bouncing over minor implausibilities like a stream over rusty cans... and Connie Booth describes the work as one of poetic brilliance [It is] caustic, sharp and tragic, its language certainly not easy or melodic... but it is certainly true poetry in every sense of the word.

Mamet was very worried about his play when he first read it through. The mixture of an episodic first act with a conventionally structured second act prompted him to send a copy to his friend Harold Pinter for his comments. Pinter told him that, in his opinion, the only thing wrong with the play was that it was not currently in production. Mamet now
believes that its structure gives the work an extra dimension, and actually adds to its appeal:

people love my new play...Because I finally had the will to write a second act. I wrote a million episodic plays. I can write them with my left hand. So what? Who cares? Fortunately, I got sick of it before [the audience] did.24

When Ros Asquith calls the work "a seedy morality play"25 she is very near the mark. Precisely because it details those whose lives lack any sense of morality, it becomes a kind of morality play. Benedict Nightingale notes that it
certainly...is a moral play [but] not a moralising one. It seeks to 'tell the truth' about the usually invisible violence men inflict on themselves and each other as they grab for gold; not to preach redundant sermons about it.26

Mamet believes that the play not only "tells the truth" but is also "a good play"27 in its own right, in that it accurately reflects the realities of the real-estate world in which he was once involved. He has stated, rather disingenuously, that

All that I set out to do was write about my experiences in a real-estate office, and I assure you that as bizarre as the behaviour in the play might seem, the behaviour in the office itself made it look tame.28

He based GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS upon his experiences of working as an assistant office manager in a "fly-by-night"29 concern in downtown Chicago. After graduating from college in Vermont, he came to Chicago to find work as an actor, but quickly discovered that "Theatrical work was scarce" and that he was "virtually unemployable in any case, being without either skills or experience".30 He decided to register with a temporary employment agency, and recalls how

The agency sent me out for a two day job as a typist in a real-estate office. I stayed a year...the office...sold tracts of undeveloped land in Arizona and Florida to gullible Chicagoans.31

He describes the firm as being

one of those offices...on the way to the airport [and one of those companies for which] you hear an ad on television that says 'Interested in the Arizona way of life? No salesman will call', and the next thing that happens is that a salesman calls.32

Mamet recalls the kind of work he undertook whilst employed there:
The firm advertised on radio and television...
Interested viewers would telephone in for the brochure and their names and numbers were given to me. My job was to call them back, assess their income and sales susceptibility, and arrange an appointment with them for one of the office salesmen... This appointment was called a lead - in the same way that a clue in a criminal case is called a lead i.e. it may lead to the suspect, the suspect in this case being a prospect. It was then my job to assess the relative worth of these leads and assign them to the salesforce. The salesmen would then take their assigned leads and go out on the appointments, which were called sits i.e. a meeting where one actually sits down with the prospects...

Mamet thoroughly enjoyed his year in the real-estate office, and expresses a deep admiration for the men with whom he worked: "I loved those guys", he says, "They made my life interesting for a year." He got so involved in the work that he even considered making real-estate his career! He says that had he stayed on after the year, he would have done it forever... be very, very wealthy... divorced and... living in Chicago and the Bahamas.

As an afterthought, he adds that he might also "have spent time in prison". The world he depicts in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS teeters on a knife-edge of immense financial reward and its concomitant professional kudos, and base criminality. In AMERICAN BUFFALO, Mamet portrayed a group of small-time crooks who thought of themselves as legitimate businessmen; in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS his subjects are businessmen but they all behave like crooks. As Benedict Nightingale points out, AMERICAN BUFFALO managed to imply that businessmen, or at least some of them, were only respectable crooks. [In GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS] his attack is similar, but more direct. Tantalize him with enough carrots, threaten him with enough sticks, and the salesman, the entrepreneur becomes a liar, a cheat, a fraud, maybe a criminal. In other words, crime is only the logic of business, extended.

He goes on to say how

The authentic crooks of AMERICAN BUFFALO felt a need for self-justification. They had to convince themselves that burglary was no 'shame' and that its victims deserved to be plundered. The salesmen of GLENGARRY have long since ditched such niceties of conscience. They don’t have one moral sentiment among them. They don't show so much as a glimmer, a flicker, a spark of feeling for those they fleece.
The very terminology used by the salesmen and already described by Mamet points to a close link with the criminal world. The ambiguity between realms is entirely deliberate; the actual break-in which is perpetrated by the desperate salesman is merely a concrete realisation of crimes brazenly carried out during working hours in the course of 'business'. The boundaries between crime and business are forever being crossed and re-crossed in this play. In an early typescript, Moss announces that "the establishment keeps you enslaved". This is not, as it might appear, a political observation; it is to be used as a justification for robbery. Elsewhere, Moss rails against those who would "go in and rob everyone blind" (Act 1, Scene 2, p.13); not only are these words uttered as he prepares to ensnare the trusting Aaronow in a real-life robbery, they are also spoken by a man who spends his days 'robbing blind' every customer he can find! Mamet really lays on the irony at times like these. Robbery is only one of the 'crimes' perpetrated by these salesmen: Levene resorts to bribery not once, but twice in a desperate effort to keep his head above water, Moss blackmails Aaronow by calmly stating that he will denounce him to the police should he decline to rob the office, and Roma explodes with a violence more suited to a gangster than a businessman when his successful deal has been ruined by an unthinking colleague.

In spite of their callousness and selfishness, Mamet's characters engage and retain our sympathies. At the end of the day, they are as much victims of coercion as their gullible clients. It is possible to despise what they represent, to bemoan what a materialistic, grasping society has made them, but it is difficult to despise them as individuals. Mamet based his characters to some extent upon the men with whom he worked at the real-estate office. He was fascinated by their dedication to their craft, their desperation and their single-minded pursuit of the big sale. The excitement of working in an environment where constant competition, albeit ruthless and corrupt, was the top priority, led Mamet to a desire to immortalise in a drama something of what he observed. He recalls how
The men I was working with could sell cancer... They were amazing. They were a force of nature. These men... were people who had spent their whole life in sales, always working for a commission, never working for a salary, dependent for their living on their wits, on their ability to charm. They sold themselves.  

This is reminiscent of Arthur Miller's response when asked what Willy Loman actually sold - he simply answers: "Himself."  

During rehearsals, Mamet tried to convey some of the power of his colleagues to the actors involved, and Jack Shepherd recalls Mamet's excitement when talking about these men. He told me:

David remembers them as being intensely dynamic men. They took cocaine to keep high, and there was an almost sexual quality to their quest for selling. The sense of release when a sale was made was quite extraordinary, almost orgasmic. During the process of selling, they became very neurotic, unattached and distanced from their families. The sale became the all-important experience. It was utterly addictive. They drank heavily and when in the throes of a big sale, indulged in lots of casual relationships. They found these easier to sustain than family ties; with a home, kids and so on there is just too much to think about, too much responsibility, so they just blocked them out and concentrated on the sale.  

The recollection of selling and drug taking is a telling one, and is borne out in Levene's desperate cry: "I NEED A SHOT...I got to get on the fucking board...I need your help" (Act 1, Scene 1, p.?).  

Shepherd also recalls the rehearsal period as being a particularly harrowing time, and often tensions rose too high and fights broke out:

We all went mad. The amount of information you had to take in was staggering. Things got very, very heated and tempers were high. A chair got thrown at one point, and everyone was very edgy to say the least. There is just so much to remember at any one moment with Mamet's work; you begin to feel like a computer that is over-loading. Mamet knows exactly what he wants and there is a sense, when he is around, of being on your best behaviour. He is very fast, very dynamic; his speech is also very quick. The rhythms in him and in his plays are very similar. In trying to pick up something of the Chicago accent from him, you cannot help but pick up his quick-fire street-wise personality as well. During rehearsals we strove to give the impression of rapid interaction,
of sharing something over a very short period. You have to struggle to remember so much about your part, the lines, the sensation, the character and so on. You feel rather like a thoroughbred horse; you tend to overstrain to compensate for feelings of bewilderment and confusion. All of this leads to nerves being frayed and tempers lost.\textsuperscript{43}

In order to add to the authenticity of the piece, Mamet gave his actors copies of Dale Carnegie's \textit{HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE} and, during rehearsals for the American production, brought in real-life sales personnel to give short lectures to the cast. In an article about the play, Samuel G. Freedman recalls how

Herb Cohen, the author of \textit{YOU CAN NEGOTIATE ANYTHING}, spoke to the actors. Salesmen from International Business Machines and Xerox and even a Fuller brush saleswoman lectured them on sales technique and taught them sales jargon.\textsuperscript{44}

and Mamet observes that

The Fuller Brush lady was great...The whole pitch was reduced to a science. They're very fond of slogans: 'Plan your work and work your plan.' Everything moves towards the close.\textsuperscript{45}

Jennifer Allen cites Gregory Mosher - the director of the play's American production - as recalling the visit of an IBM salesman who improvised selling a piece of land to actor Joe Mantegna. 'Mr. Mantegna, would you be interested in making a substantial amount of money?' asked the salesman. Mantegna said he had only six minutes. Whereupon the salesman 'sold' the property to a spellbound Mantegna not long after his six minutes were up, flabbergasting the actor and the rest of the cast.\textsuperscript{46}

In \textit{GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS}, relationships appear to exist only to facilitate commercial success and to establish which party is in control. Duplicity among friends is commonplace, and language and philosophy are casually prostituted. The first act is a superb demonstration of how a complex network of domination and submission underlies any encounter and consists of three short, almost Pinteresque scenes set in a Chinese restaurant, each of which is structured around an encounter between two characters. In any conversation, it is often not the actual content which offers the most insight into its speakers, but its emphatic and persuasive rhythms. Christopher Bigsby observes that what is exciting about these particular duologues is
the extent to which dominance and subservience are established independently of the lexical content of exchanges.

The first of these encounters provides an excellent example of this. Shelly Levene, a once-great salesman now down on his luck, and faced with the possibility of dismissal, appeals for help from Williamson, his cold-hearted and apathetic office manager:

Levene: John...John...John. Okay. John. John. Look: (Pause) The Glengarry Highland's leads, you're sending Roma out. Fine. He's a good man. We know that he is. He's fine. All I'm saying, you look at the board, he's throwing... wait, wait, wait, he's throwing them away, he's throwing the leads away. All that I'm saying, that you're wasting leads. I don't want to tell you your job. All that I'm saying, things get set, I know they do, you get a certain mindset... A guy gets a reputation. We know how this... all I'm saying, put a closer on the job. There's more than one man for the... Put a... wait a second, put a proven man out... and you watch, now wait a second - and you watch your dollar volumes... You start closing them for fifty 'stead of twenty-five... you put a closer on the...

Williamson: Shelly, you blew the last...

Levene: No. John. No. Let's wait, let's back up here, I did... will you please? Wait a second. Please. I didn't 'blow' them. No. I didn't 'blow' them. No. One kicked out, one I closed...

(Act 1, Scene 1, p.3)

To analyse this one speech of Levene's is to learn almost everything there is to know about him. The naturalistic, repetitive opening line reveals his tentative, though insistent, manner - the crafty, insidious approach of the professional salesman never leaves him. As he repeats the name "John" with varying degrees of pause and emphasis, patience and exasperation, he builds up a kind of rhythmic litany with which he hopes to nudge Williamson into sympathetic understanding. Since Williamson has the power to 'make' or 'break' him, Levene uses every scrap of his psychological know-how to achieve his effect. He tries to sound friendly, but firm; he strives to appear confident and in control. He uses subtle flattery, being very careful not to criticise his colleagues in any meaningful way, preferring instead to turn around his doubts about their
John Williamson (Karl Johnson) and Shelly Levene (Derek Newley) in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, National Theatre, 1983.
performance by referring always to the fact that he could make the company far more money. Similarly, he is at pains not to imply that Williamson might not know his job, merely that a man in his position can occasionally become a little confused, and think of only one solution to a problem. Levene struggles to strengthen his hold on a rapidly disintegrating career with nothing stronger than carefully chosen words, and his repetition of "All I'm saying" — although he is plainly going to say very much more — points not only to his calculated disingenuousness, but also to his growing nervousness.

Mamet incorporates the rhythms of desperation into Levene's lines, just as he suggests the complacency and security of Williamson's position. Williamson has nothing to lose, and his slow, reflective speech patterns reflect this. The fact that Levene does most of the talking is no accident; his refusal to let Williamson speak is further evidence of his fear. Levene prefers his audience's silence to the risk of allowing another — possibly condemning — voice to join in. Mamet builds into his speech the frantic delaying tactics of a man who is afraid to stop talking: "Wait, wait, wait...wait a second...now wait a second". There is no indication in the script that Williamson is trying to interrupt, which makes Levene's exhortations to "wait" simultaneously pitiful and funny. At the same time, Mamet can also suggest that the silent actor may be trying to say something but is being constantly beaten down by the garrulousness of the speaker. Therefore, Mamet's interruptive device can be utilised in production in two, equally amusing and telling ways.

The latter method was used to good effect in the revival of the play at the Mermaid Theatre in 1986, particularly during this first scene when Williamson was to be seen trying to say his piece but being prevented by the steamroller tactics of Levene. Bill Bryden, the director of this production, varied his approach to Mamet's interruptive strategies throughout the play to great comedic effect.
Quite often, the person who was being exhorted to "wait a second" didn't want to say anything, anyway. Time and again in Mamet's work, people are told not to interrupt, even when they are completely silent.

Levene and Williamson converse in what sounds like a kind of code. It is the almost incomprehensible jargon of the real-estate world in which 'leads', 'the board', 'Glengarry' and 'closers' are the main components of linguistic exchange. Baffled by the arcane jargonistic language used by the characters, the audience is forced to respond at a completely different level; even if we are unsure of what is taking place, it is quite clear that one of the men is in trouble and will go to any lengths to extricate himself from it. The 'salespeak' with which we are confronted is, in fact, so confusing that Mamet felt the need to add a brief glossary in the programme notes for the National Theatre production. Many critics have commented upon its 'specialist' quality: Milton Shulman calls it a "coded insider jargon", John Barber refers to it only as "gobbledygook", and Ros Asquith likens it to "a code in enemy hands [saying] as much by omission as commission". Jack Tinker refers to the salesmen's "impenetrable machine-gun conversation" and Sheridan Morley observes that they seem to have invented a whole new language of street hustling and failed confidence trickery.

Jack Kroll comments upon how Mamet's salesmen have created a lingo of their own, a semantic skullduggery that can fake out a prospective buyer with non-sequiturs, triple talk and a parody of philosophical wisdom that is breathtaking in its jackhammer effrontery and Michael Coveney notes that the salespeak [which is used] to cover the throbbing pretence of communication [is] at times...like watching a brilliantly sustained tennis rally...

As well as being thoroughly bewildering to the uninitiated, this jargonised language also begs a purely 'American' interpretation. Jack Shepherd told me that his initial reaction to Mamet's script was confusion. The elliptical sentences, stammerings and jargon seemed to him to be an indecipherable puzzle:
I remember when I first saw the script for GLENGARRY, my first reaction was that it looked like code. It made no sense if you merely read it with an English accent and with the sense of an English idiom in your head, but once you began to pick up the rhythm - and there is most definitely a rhythm in all of Mamet's writing - you can really begin to enjoy yourself.

Elsewhere, he elaborates:

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS is not an easy play to read: the language is English but the style is American. Many of the lines are incomplete. The grammar is often weird. The idiom is unfamiliar. Arcane...From the beginning then, the play sets real problems for a British actor...In this play the search for an authentic accent is made easier by the fact that the rhythms of the Chicago dialect are written into every line, on every page of the script. The rhythms are slick, fast, syncopated...what's missing is the tune.

Not only have the salesmen evolved their own esoteric jargon, Levene even makes up a jargonised word of his own: "mindset". To him, such a word sums up a state of mind which comes about through familiarity and complacency. Mamet believes that any profession which utilises jargon to a great extent has its roots in fantasy and dishonesty. He quotes "a great American" (Thorstein Veblen) who said that any profession which has a preponderance of jargon is largely make-believe and his own experience of and dealings with real-estate salesmen would seem to corroborate this belief.

Levene's verbal helter-skelter establishes at a very early stage of the play that Mamet's salesmen have only one subject of conversation - selling - whether the sale is a piece of worthless land or, tragically, themselves. As Mamet has observed, the salesmen themselves in some way become the merchandise; he recalls how every imaginable trick is used not only to sell land [but to facilitate the fact that] Everybody is always selling to everybody.

The scene between Levene and Williamson recalls a similar situation in DEATH OF A SALESMAN when Willy Loman faces dismissal because of his poor performance. But whereas Willy is reluctantly fired by what Dennis Welland describes as a 'nice guy' forced into a situation that he doesn't
know how to handle 'nicely'.

Levene comes up against the frigidity of modern-day business in the shape of the reptilian Williamson. Although Levene finally manages to retain his job through desperate bribery, Mamet is still able to suggest that the business world faced by his salesmen is a far bleaker prospect than that endured by Willy Loman.

The second scene also dramatises the plight of a salesman down on his luck. Aaronow is worried that his sales figures are so low that he will not be able to get 'on the board' and will probably lose his job. Moss plans to break into the office or, rather, coerce someone else to break in for him, and to steal the all-important leads. As he sits in the restaurant with Aaronow, he begins to insidiously work on his colleague's sensibilities; he gradually moves the conversation round to hypothesising about a possible robbery, sometimes drowning out Aaronow's rather weak and monosyllabic responses altogether and sometimes turning his words around to flatter him into thinking that the thoughts expressed in them were his ideas, rather than his own:

Moss: The whole fuckin' thing...The pressure's just too great. You're ab...you're absolu...

(Act 1, Scene 2, p.12)

and later:

Moss: You don't axe your sales force.
Aaronow: No.
Moss: You...
Aaronow: You...
Moss: You build it!
Aaronow: That's what I...
Moss: You fucking build it! Men come...
Aaronow: Men come work for you...
Moss: ...you're absolutely right.
Aaronow: They...
Moss: They have...
Aaronow: When they...
Moss: Look look look look, when they build your business, then you can't fucking turn around, enslave them, treat them like children, fuck them up the ass, leave them to fend for themselves...no. (Pause) You're absolutely right, and I want to tell you something. I want to tell you what somebody should do...Someone should stand up and strike back.

(Ibid, pp.16,17)
This is not only brilliantly crafted 'naturalistic' dialogue with its broken-off sentences which are returned to several clauses later, its incoherences and its illustration of Moss's bullying and aggressive style of speaking, it is also meticulously calculated to achieve its ends - to flatter and ultimately entrap Aaronow. As he plants the seeds of the idea in his colleague's mind, Moss tells him that the leads could be easily sold to a rival of Mitch and Murray's, Jerry Graff, and there then follows an hilarious exchange during which Aaronow questions Moss as to whether he is actually "talking" about the possibility of a robbery, or merely "speaking" about it:

Aaronow: ...I mean are you actually talking about this, or are we just...
Moss: No, we're just...
Aaronow: We're just 'talking' about it.
Moss: We're just speaking about it. (Pause) As an idea.
Aaronow: As an idea.
Moss: Yes.
Aaronow: We're not actually talking about it.
Moss: No.
Aaronow: Talking about it as a...
Moss: No.
Aaronow: As a robbery.
Moss: As a 'robbery'? No.
Aaronow: Well. Well...
Moss: Hey. (Pause)
Aaronow: So all this, um, you didn't, actually, you didn't actually go talk to Graff.
Moss: Not actually, no. (Pause)
Aaronow: You didn't?
Moss: No. Not actually.
Aaronow: Did you?
Moss: What did I say?
Aaronow: What did you say?
Moss: Yes. (Pause) I said 'Not actually'. The fuck you care, George? We're just talking...
Aaronow: We are?
Moss: Yes. (Pause)
Aaronow: Because, because, you know, it's a crime.
Moss: That's right. It's a crime. It is a crime. It's also very safe.
Aaronow: You're actually talking about this?
Moss: That's right.

(Ibid, pp.18,19)

Mamet identifies the kind of thought processes which can make such a conversation possible: there is no distinction between "talking" and "speaking" about the robbery, but the characters need to find a distinction must be fulfilled. When I spoke to Colin Stinton about Mamet's use of language, he commented
at some length upon the writer's use of emphasis as a means of denoting distinction and quoted this particular extract from GLENGARRY. GLEN ROSS as a good example:

Through his superlative command over language, Mamet can identify, via words, the mental processes through which characters move. His characters sometimes "hit" on a word which they feel will give their conversation the emphasis and meaning they desire, but that word can be quite random and arbitrary. Sometimes a character will give weight to a particular word to achieve a weird kind of emphasis, to show that this is really the thing that he is talking about. Lacking the eloquence to talk about the topic to a greater degree, he may then talk about it to a greater degree merely by verbally underlining it. There are wonderful examples of this in GLENGARRY. GLEN ROSS... for example, when the two salesmen make a distinction between whether they are actually 'talking' about committing a crime or merely 'speaking' about it. In their minds there is some differentiation between the two, although none really exists. To 'talk' about it implies that they are actually planning to do it, but to 'speak' about it means only that they are entertaining the possibility of it being done! A distinction - which is absolutely non-existent - has been created by the fiction of 'hitting' on a certain word.61

Despite his admission at the end of the "talking about" and "speaking about" excerpt, Moss will still not be button-holed into an admission that he is seriously considering a robbery, and his responses to Aaronow's questions indicate the slipperiness of his technique:

Aaronow: You're going to steal the leads?
Moss: Have I said that? (Pause)
Aaronow: Are you? (Pause)
Moss: Did I say that?
Aaronow: Did you talk to Graff?
Moss: Is that what I said?
Aaronow: What did he say?
Moss: What did he say? He'd buy them.

(Ibid, p.19)

Eventually, Aaronow is caught. Moss informs him that if he does not comply with his request, he will tell the police:

Moss: ...to the law, you're an accessory. Before the fact.
Aaronow: I didn't ask to be.
Moss: Then tough luck, George, because you are.
Aaronow: Why? Why, because you only told me about it?
Moss: That's right.
Aaronow: Why are you doing this to me, Dave? Why are
you talking this way to me? I don't understand. Why are you doing this at all...?
Moss: That's none of your fucking business. (Ibid, pp.22,23)

Having implicated Aaronow in a serious crime, Moss then dismisses his pathetic complaints and questions with contempt: "That's none of your fucking business." Finally, Moss informs Aaronow of the terrible truth:

Moss: ...My end is my business. Your end's twenty-five. In or out. You tell me, you're out you take the consequences.
Aaronow: I do?
Moss: Yes. (Pause)
Aaronow: And why is that?
Moss: Because you listened. (Ibid, p.23)

This is, surely, the ultimate betrayal of the trust implied in ordinary conversation: Aaronow is designated as a criminal simply because he "listened".

Mamet's characters have so thoroughly moulded and deformed language to suit their own ends that it is quite impossible to be sure of the truth of anything they say - or, indeed, where it might lead as the tragic Aaronow finds out to his cost. In THE CARETAKER, Mick accuses Davies of duplicity and, as he coolly regards the trembling vagrant, observes:

...I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations. Most of what you say is lies.62

He could be speaking to one of the salesmen in Mamet's play. In their efforts to manipulate and persuade, they have ceased to use language as a means of ordinary communication and so, in order to find out something about their genuine emotions, it is necessary to look elsewhere. As with many of Pinter's characters, it is in what they leave unsaid that they reveal most about themselves. Thus, there is an honesty in silence which is certainly absent in their endless, forced garrulousness.

Aaronow's subsequent refusal to name Moss as the probable culprit of the office break-in tells us more about his character than any of the stammerings, evasions and inarticularities we have thus far heard. We know already that he
is a weak and gullible man, but we are quite unaware of any of his strengths. There is a sense of loyalty inherent in Aaronow which he chooses to demonstrate simply by keeping quiet. Glenna Syse notes how Mamet is able to depict character out of silence, as well as out of language:

Mamet has listened to the sound of the cheap chiseler and the slick swindler...He has listened to desperation in every key from the first little finger of suspicion to the hammerlock of the last resort. The silky, phony compliment, the frightened boast, the whine of the weasel, the ejaculation of rage, the finesse of exploitation - he's heard them all and locked them in the trap of his muse. [Mamet] takes this talk and he does dramatic surgery on it, ripping it open to expose the cavity of man's soul and carefully stitching it up so that we can look at the character and know more about him than his own mother...He can even do it with silence - which is no mean trick.63

The notion of honesty through silence is something which Strindberg touches on in his *GHOST SONATA* when the Old Man observes

...I prefer silence. Then one can hear thoughts, and see the past. Silence hides nothing. Words conceal...64

There is no moral law at work in this real-estate office, merely a system of reward and punishment. Such an environment is necessarily almost completely devoid of morals or honour; what is of sole importance is to sell enough land to earn a place on the famous "board". The world Mamet portrays is truly a Darwinian jungle in which the survival of the fittest is the prevailing maxim, a point picked up by Jennifer Allen who notes that

The system is foul at the core, debasing its participants until they are little more than their appetites - for money, power, a rung up the Darwinian ladder.65

Because they are all in the same position, Mamet's salesmen can legitimise the most horrendous acts of betrayal without a flinch. They are merely doing their jobs, and so, as Christopher Bigsby observes

In the name of a social function, an idea or an organisation, they are willing to betray an essential humanity.66

Mamet has observed that, when connected in some way to a large organisation or state ideology, people can behave in
ways quite unacceptable to them in any other context:
The code of an institution ratifies us in acting amorally, as any guilt which might arise out of our acts would be borne not by ourselves but shared out through the institution. We have it somehow in our nature, Tolstoy wrote, to perform horrendous acts which we would never dream of as individuals, and thus if they are done in the name of some larger group, a state, a company, a team, that those vile acts are somehow magically transformed and become praiseworthy.67

This kind of mentality pervades GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS. When Levene has just cheated two elderly people out of £82,000, Roma congratulates him warmly: "That was a great sale, Shelly" (Act 2, p.43) and Levene has nothing but contempt for the couple:

...convert the mother fucker...sell him...sell him... make him sign the check. (Pause) The...Bruce, Harriett... the kitchen, blah: They got their money in government bonds...I say fuck it, we're going to go the whole route. I plat it out eight units. Eighty-two grand. (Act 2, p.42)

It is interesting to note that Levene speaks of actually 'selling' the customer himself, as though he is no longer a human being but merely a commodity to be exploited which, in Levene’s eyes, is precisely what he has become. There is a kind of frenzy in his words, the underlinings and obscenities emphasising his excitement. In his mind, Levene is back in the house with his unfortunate victims; he sees in his mind the scene he had so savoured, so much so that he refers for no apparent reason other than the fact that he is visualising it to "the kitchen". This is immediately followed with a nonsense word which illustrates Levene's contempt and impatience for the couple: he is anxious to get the cheque signed and the deal closed - everything else is a time-wasting frustration.

It is all or nothing for Levene: he ruthlessly persuades his clients to sign a contract for "the whole route", although it must be patently obvious to him that they can ill afford it, whether they have "government bonds" or not. Callousness and exploitation are commonplace aspects of a day in such a salesman's life, whether they occur during a 'sit' with a gullible client or with a weak-willed colleague.
Richard Roma (Kevin McNally) and Shelly Levene (Derek Newark) in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, Mermaid Theatre, 1986.
The emphasis in this entire extract is upon force; the client must be converted, to be made to sign "the check" whatever happens. It is an aspect of 'selling' which is repeated throughout the play; one character is always trying to force another character to do something.

In the third of these opening scenes, we have our first glimpse of the salesman incarnate, the ruthlessly ambitious Richard Roma. Roma is a superbly crafted character, and one which many critics have designated as the most powerful in a very powerful work. Benedict Nightingale remarks upon his ability to

dizzy a mark at 20 paces, mesmerising him into signing away a fortune

and Glenna Syse describes him as "superbly slick". Christopher Edwards marvels at his brilliant salesmanship, and notes that

Roma's fraudulence is consummate - the cheap homespun consumer philosophy, the disingenuous casualness and the ingeniously graduated approach of the true conman homing in on his prey. It is both appalling and amusing.

Michael Billington describes Roma as

a sharp hustler button-holing a total stranger almost as if he were executing a homosexual pick-up

and Martin Hoyle observes that he is "the whizz-kid sppler with the almost manic drive". To Kenneth Hurren, he is simply "slacker than oil".

In an article about GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, Mel Gussow outlines an incident which had occurred in Mamet's life; it is quite possible that Mamet based the character of Roma on one of the people mentioned therein:

Over the years, Mamet has used some of his former real-estate colleagues as the inspiration for characters. The impetus to give them a play of their own came from a conversation he had with his wife's stepfather. He told Mr. Mamet as an effect of the recession, how 'vicious the competition was for jobs and sales, especially among older men'. He described one incident in which an older salesman was so terrified about making a presentation that he had a heart attack on the spot, 'and the new president of the company stepped over his body to leave the room'.

Roma has not even the excuse of a "recession" to account for
his ruthlessness, and he is the youngest of the salesmen, in his "forties" as opposed to the "fifties" of the other men. The two actors who have played the role in this country, Jack Shepherd in the original production and Kevin McNally in the Mermaid revival, both portray Roma as a manic neurotic, although there are differences in their interpretations. As Martin Hoyle points out, Jack Shepherd played Roma as "faintly mad" whereas Kevin McNally "excels as the normal guy turned fanatic, obsessed with coming first". Christopher Edwards picks up on this point, observing that McNally makes you believe that the very soul of the man himself is caught up in the 'sell' to the point that he is no more than the sum of his bogus beliefs.

Jack Shepherd's portrayal suggested a man who has been corrupted at the very core; there was an edge of insanity to all his movements, coupled with a barely controlled sense of aggression. Michael Billington recalls a rather wild, predatory manner about him, and remembers him "backing away from people as he gets more vocally aggressive".

Both actors found Roma a very difficult part to play, particularly during the scene in the restaurant, when he and Lingk are first introduced to the audience. Shepherd told me that McNally had expressed his nervousness in having such a crucial scene as his introduction to the audience, a fear which had certainly been shared by Shepherd himself.

When this scene begins, the two men are sitting at different booths, although there is a kind of conversation already in progress. It is immediately apparent that this conversation is a very one-sided affair, with Roma completely dominating the proceedings with what is virtually a monologue, Lingk responding monosyllabically, if at all. The over-familiar manner adopted by Roma leads the audience to believe that the men are well-acquainted and it is only in the last moments of the scene that Roma introduces himself as a total stranger, and reveals his true motive - he is trying to sell land to Lingk. The audience is, therefore, as totally deceived as Lingk during this episode; we, too, have only
Roma's puzzling words as clues and it is extremely difficult to fathom what he has in mind since his speech is an amalgam of simplified existentialism, intrusive sentimental imagery and preacher-like exhortations for the necessity to stand up and be counted.

Rather perplexingly, Mamet has described this speech as "inspirational...classic Stoic philosophy" but most critics have taken it to be little more than cleverly-worded nonsense. If the piece is analysed carefully, it is difficult to disagree with them; far from being "inspirational", it is vacuous and pretentious. The only type of listener who would be impressed by such verbiage would indeed be someone like Lingk, a gullible, easily swayed individual, apparently with few opinions of his own. Jim Hiley refers to the monologue as being nothing more than "spumes of philosophical gibberish" and Howard Kissel describes the speech as a high-flown monologue as bewildering as it is impressive - the sort of glib incoherence that is fascinating despite its lack of meaning and Richard Corliss felt it to be an hilarious spiel about life, existentialism and the pleasure principle; the monologue has all the narrative logic of Dadaist graffiti.

Even Jack Shepherd denounces the speech as "gibberish...a totally phony philosophy".

Roma exhorts Lingk to live each day to the full, to accept life for what it is and to face the consequences of any mistakes:

...I say this is how we must act. I do those things which seem correct to me today. I trust myself. And if security concerns me, I do that which today I think will make me secure. And every day I do that, when that day arrives that I need a reserve, a) odds are that I have it and, b) the true reserve that I have is the strength that I have of acting each day without fear. (Pause) According to the dictates of my mind. (Pause) Stocks, bonds, objects of art, real-estate. Now: what are they? (Pause) An opportunity. To what? To make money? Perhaps. To lose money? Perhaps. To 'indulge' and to 'learn' about ourselves? Perhaps. So fucking what? What isn't? They're an opportunity. That's all. They're an event.

(Act 1, Scene 3, p.25)
There is a neurotic rhythm in Roma's words which propels his train of thought from one sentence to the next. He is utterly caught up in his performance. He constantly asks rhetorical questions, answering them before Lingk can even think of what to say. Roma's quick-fire phrasing and pretentious tone no doubt deeply impresses his innocent victim, who probably believes he is hearing the important inner thoughts of an intellectual. Roma is very careful not to mention anything which might give his game away too soon; in fact, there is a sense in which this is more than a prelude to a sales pitch - it is Roma's way of justifying his actions to himself as well as persuading Lingk of the veracity of his words. However, the thought of the 'kill' is not too far from the surface of his patter, so when he 'innocently' lets fall the words "real-estate", they occur only in conjunction with "stocks, bonds...objects of art" - items of worth which could provide a man with "opportunity". Roma proves himself to be the ultimate opportunist in this scene. Similarly, Levene's big sale could not have succeeded had not he himself been at least partially involved in his fantasies. He exhorts the elderly couple to seize their opportunities when they arise and, when we later learn that Roma has learned his craft from Levene, we see just what a good pupil he has been. The tactics of both men prove to be very similar indeed: the tone, the insistence and the mesmeric quality. Levene recalls the essence of his big sale for his former pupil:

Levene: 'What we have to do is admit to ourself that we see that opportunity...and take it. (Pause) And that's it.' And we sit there...I tell them. 'This is now. This is that thing that you've been dreaming of, you're going to find that suitcase on the train, the guy comes in the door, the bag that's full of money. This is it, Harriett...

Roma: (reflectively) Harriett...

Levene: Bruce... 'I don't want to fuck around with you. I don't want to go round this, and pussyfoot around the thing, you have to look back on this. I do, too. I came here to do good for you and me. For both of us. Why take an interim position?...I know if I left you... you'd sit down...and you'd think 'let's be safe...'' and not to disappoint me you'd go one unit or maybe two, because you'd become scared because you'd met possibility.

(Act 2, pp.41,42)
There is here a sense that Levene wishes that he was the man who could find "the suitcase on the train" or the "bag that's full of money". It is necessary for these men to believe in the worth of what they are selling, at least whilst they are selling it; for a while, at least, their hopes and dreams are mingled with those of their clients. Roma's reflective echo of Levene's "Harriett" suggests just how much he is re-living some of his own sales conquests. He is not only listening to the tale of glory, but is, like Levene, imaginatively present at the sale. Levene's spurious 'sincere' manner is given wonderfully ironic exposure here. He strives to give the impression that he is as much concerned with getting a 'good deal' for the couple as he is for himself. It is the essence of good salesmanship to make the customer believe that he has the advantage over the salesman, that he is in a position to take advantage of him. Levene's strategy incorporates this tactic at the same time as flattering his clients into believing that they are astute business negotiators. Like Roma, he urges them not to be afraid of "possibility". The necessity to take risks in order to get ahead in life is the main thrust of Roma's advice to Lingk:

Roma: ...When you die you're going to regret the things you don't do. You think you're queer...? I'm going to tell you something: we're all queer. You think that you're a thief? So what? You get befuddled by a middle-class morality...? Get shut of it. Shut it out. You cheated on your wife...? You did it, live with it. (Pause) You fuck little girls, so be it. There's an absolute morality? May be. And then what? If you think there is, then be that thing. Bad people go to hell? I don't think so. If you think that, act that way. A hell exists on earth? Yes. I won't live in it. That's me. You ever take a dump made you feel you'd just slept for twelve hours...?

Lingk: Did I...?
Roma: Yes.
Lingk: I don't know.
Roma: Or a piss...? A great meal fades in reflection. Everything else gains. You know why? Cause it's only food. This shit we eat, it keeps us going. But it's only food. The great fucks that you may have had. What do you remember about them?

Lingk: What do I...?
Roma: Yes.
Lingk: Mmmmm...?
Roma: I don't know. For me, I'm saying, what it is, it's probably not the orgasm. Some broads, forearms on your neck, something her eyes did. There was a sound she made...or, me, lying, in the, I'll tell you: me lying in bed: the next day she brought me cafe au lait. She gives me a cigarette, my balls feel like concrete.

Eh? What I'm saying, what is our life: (Pause) it's looking forward or it's looking back. And that's our life. That's it. Where is the moment?

(Act 1, Scene 3, pp.23,24)

Roma casually infers that Lingk may be "queer", "a thief" or be inclined to "fuck little girls", without pausing to consider that these notions could be taken as grossly offensive remarks. He phrases his speech so that Lingk does not have the opportunity to object; he seems to implicate himself in the offensive acts as much as Lingk - or, indeed, anyone else. By framing these remarks as pseudo-hypothetical questions, and by speaking quickly and without many pauses, Roma hypnotises his prey. As he notices Lingk's growing confusion at all the talk of "middle-class morality" and "hell on earth", Roma suddenly moves the monologue onto another tack: he begins to talk about bodily functions and sex, two subjects with which even the most inarticulate of men can identify. However, Lingk is still desperately unsure as to how he should respond to his new 'friend's' bewildering verbal display, and can only offer unfinished questions such as "Did I...?" and "What do I...?" as a means of reply. Tony Haygarth, the actor who played Lingk in both the original National Theatre production and in the Mermaid's revival of the play made much of the character's insecurity and nervousness, at the same time as conveying his pathetic attempts at bonhomie and 'macho' understanding. By taking Roma's lead, he responded to his words with a kind of desperate mime, opening and closing his arms, grimacing and frowning when he believed it was appropriate to do so. It was a touching, though hilarious, performance in which Lingk was established as a lovable dupe. Roma's cruel manipulation of a man who so clearly wanted to make a true friend - and indeed believed that he had found one - was consequently truly horrifying.
Mamet is able to show how Roma's mind works as he casts about in his subconscious for the next piece in his linguistic jigsaw. The most common punctuation mark in the text of GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS is the comma, and Roma uses it relentlessly. As Christopher Bigsby notes, the comma allows mismatched phrases and random ideas to be strung together in a protective flow of sound.

As Roma tells Lingk about his experiences with women, he begins a sentence only to leave it after a word or two and then moves on to another, and yet another: "There was a sound she made...or, me, lying, in the, I'll tell you". The pauses afforded by the use of the comma allow him to further build up his story, to embroider it and to render it effective for the attentive - though confused - ears of his victim.

Taking careful note of Lingk's obvious insecurity, Roma then begins to talk about just that:

And what is it that we're afraid of? Loss. What else? (Pause) The bank closes. We get sick, my wife died on a plane, the stock market collapsed...the house burnt down...what of these happen...? None of 'em. We worry anyway. What does this mean? I'm not secure. How can I be secure? (Pause) Through amassing wealth beyond all measure? No. And what's beyond all measure? That's a sickness. That's a trap. There is no measure. Only greed.

(Rbid, pp.24,25)

Roma's falseness apparently knows no bounds! He speaks of wealth being "a trap" and "greed" being something which is despicable, as he casually turns the conversation into what will eventually be a means of trapping Lingk and adding to his own greed. He carries on:

How can we act? The right way, we would say, to deal with this: 'there is a one-in-a-million chance that so and so will happen...Fuck it, it won't happen to me'...No. We know that's not right, I think, we say the correct way to deal with this is 'There is a one in so-and-so chance this will happen...God protect me. I am powerless, let it not happen to me....' But no to that. I say. There's something else. What is it? 'If it happens, AS IT MAY for that is not within our powers, I will deal with it, just as I do today with what draws my concern today'.

(Rbid, p.25)
He urges Lingk to act without fear, but whether Lingk fully understands what Roma's convoluted speech means is another matter. The call to action, to face facts and proceed with life fills Mamet's plays. Roma's speech is, as Jennifer Allen points out,

similar to one of Teach's in AMERICAN BUFFALO ('We must face the facts and act on them') and to a declaration by the eponymous hero of EDMOND, who invites a woman to 'change [her] life' with him (and, unstrung before this incident, stabs her when she refuses)...85

Roma moves rapidly towards the moment when he will metaphorically impale Lingk with a verbal coup de grace so slick and efficient it could hardly be bettered. In the face of such an onslaught, the unfortunate man is quite helpless. It is almost like watching a spider edge ever closer to the fly caught in its net:

...I want to show you something. (Pause) It might mean nothing to you...and it might not. I don't know. I don't know anymore. (Pause. He takes out a small map and spreads it on a table.) What is that? Florida? Glengarry Highlands. Florida. 'Florida. Bullshit.' And maybe that's true; and that's what I said; but look here: What is this; This is a piece of land. Listen to what I'm going to tell you now:

(Ibid, p.26)

Lingk is caught; he has no choice but to "Listen". The linguistic slip in Roma's "It might mean nothing to you... and it might not" suggests his mounting excitement. The double negative in the sentence makes no sense but he is beyond worrying about such trifles. He knows that Lingk is incapable of fighting back and so plunges ahead with breathless abandon. The tone is one of camaraderie and sincerity, Roma implying that he himself had once been sceptical about the value of such land, but that was before he had learned the truth - possibly the same 'truth' with which he has been trying to imbue Lingk during his bravura performance. He casually lets drop the mellifluous words "Glengarry Highlands"; to "Florida" he ascribes the term "Bullshit" but allows Lingk a moment to savour "Glengarry". Both "Glengarry" and "Glen Ross" sound, and are intended to sound, reliable and romantic; they are probably the softest, most serene words which are uttered in the entire play. In the same way that Charles Dickens created a
symbol of American greed in MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT by calling
the phony real-estate venture "Eden," so too does Mamet
choose his title with some care. Those who might be
tempted to invest in some land would, in all likelihood,
be most attracted to areas with pleasing and substantial
names as though, by their very sound, they guaranteed
satisfaction. It is probably no coincidence that there
is an acreage development in Sinclair Lewis's BABBIT
which is called "Glen Oriole".

Roma's betrayal of Lingk's trust has extended to the
audience; what was taken to be genuine, if bewildering,
conversation must now be re-evaluated as lies and fatuous
platitudes. The function of language as a means of
communication has once again been subverted and forced to
serve corrupt ends. It is with a mixture of horror and
admiration that we finally understand Roma for what he is
- yet another desperate salesman who will do anything to
succeed. There is a deep fascination in witnessing those
who can invent a whole world with their verbal skills,
which is not wholly negated by our realisation of the
motives involved.

Another superb example of Mamet's dazzling linguistic control
occurs in Levene's ecstatic evocation of his successful
sale. He generates an almost sexual excitement as he details
the moment when the clients signed the all-important contract:

Levene: ...Now I handed them the pen. I held it in
my hand. I turned the contract eight units
eighty-two grand. 'Now I want you to sign.'
(Pause) I sat there. Five minutes. Then, I
sat there, Ricky, twenty-two minutes by the
kitchen clock. (Pause) Twenty-two minutes by
the kitchen clock. Not a word, not a motion.
What am I thinking? 'My arm's getting tired'? No.
I did it. I did it. Like in the old days,
Ricky. Like I was taught...Like, like, like
I used to do...I did it.

Roma: Like you taught me.
Levene: Bullshit, you're...No. That's raw...well, if
I did, then I'm glad I did. I, well. I locked
on them. All on them, nothing on me. All my
thoughts were on them. I'm holding the last
thought that I spoke: 'Now is the time.' (Pause)
They signed, Ricky. It was great. It was
fucking great. It was like they wilted all at once. No gesture...nothing. Like together. They, I swear to God, they both kind of imperceptibly slumped. And he reaches and takes the pen and signs, he passes it to her, she signs. It was so fucking solemn. I just let it sit. I nod like this. I nod again. I grasp his hands. I shake his hands. I grasp her hands. I nod at her like this. 'Bruce... Harriett...' I'm beaming at them. I'm nodding like this. I point back in the living-room, back to the sideboard. (Pause) I didn't fucking know there was a sideboard there!! He goes back, he brings us a drink. Little shotglasses. A pattern in 'em. And we toast, in silence.

Roma: That was a great sale, Shelly.
Levene: Ah, fuck. (Act 2, pp. 42, 43)

Levene's pride in his achievement flows from him, his enthusiasm irresistibly infectious. We may shudder at his sheer immorality, but it is difficult not to enjoy a frisson of excitement on his behalf as he lovingly recreates the 'moment of truth'. Mamet cleverly manipulates his audience's feelings: he knows exactly how to retain sympathy for his characters even as they are shown to be ruthless and hopelessly corrupt. Having observed Levene as a dejected underdog, we then witness his joy as he recaptures some of his past glory. Levene is, as Christopher Edwards observes, "like a man rejuvenated". The underdog has triumphed - at least momentarily.

Levene's tale is almost like a thriller: there is power and suspense written into every line. He becomes an author at such times, as fluent and confident as a Dashiell Hammett or a Raymond Chandler. There is a sense, of course, in which the entire play is a thriller: there is a robbery, police intervention and a surprising twist to the denouement, all essential components for a successful crime story. That it should be Levene who tells the most 'thrilling' story is deeply ironic, given that he is the culprit of the robbery and the ultimate victim of the piece.

Roma is impressed enough with his elder colleague's salesmanship to offer him a word of flattery: "Like you taught me." Such a remark could only reinforce Levene's sense of
pride and achievement, despite his modest dismissal. His modesty does not last very long, and Mamet captures most humorously Levene's mock-disingenuousness: "Bullshit, you're ...No. That's raw...well, if I did, then I'm glad I did." Most reluctant to leave his story for too long, Levene begins his denial of his part in Roma's own success story with an expletive. It seems as though he might say something to the effect that the younger man's prowess is entirely his own doing, but then thinks again and begins to acknowledge with pride his influence and teaching. It is difficult, in fact impossible, to tell whether Levene and Roma are expressing genuine approbation for each other's work, or whether their words are as fatuous and manipulative as those they reserve for their clients. Certainly Roma's instructions to Williamson at the end of Act 2 sound very unlike the sentiments of a man who places great emphasis upon friendship and loyalty:

...Williamson: listen to me: when the leads come in... I want my top two off the list. For me. My usual two. Anything you give Levene...I GET HIS ACTION. My stuff is mine, whatever he gets, I'm taking half ...My stuff is mine, his stuff is ours.

(Act 2, p.64)

Moments earlier, he had mooted with Levene the advantages of being 'partners', of splitting "everything right down the middle" (Ibid, p.63).

As Levene recounts his tale, his phrasing becomes more and more fluid and hypnotic; his timing is as exact as that of the kitchen clock whose movements he so accurately remembers. He elongates some moments and telescopes others. He chooses not to spell out, word for word, how he thrust the contract at the couple, but hurries the sentence in a brief, abbreviated rush: "I turned the contract eight units eighty-two grand." It contains all the information he wishes to convey. Levene dismisses the importance of grammatical accuracy in favour of highlighting the essential components of the phrase - the number of units sold and the amount involved. The actual moment of signing, on the other hand, is detailed in the most minute terms, Levene taking immense pleasure in relating how he felt Bruce and
Harriett had "kind of imperceptibly slumped" and how they "wilted all at once. No gesture...nothing. Like together." The breakdown of the couple's resolve is therefore celebrated like a battle victory; the defeated have, through constant battering, lost their will to fight and they lie down in an attitude of abject surrender. As the contract is finally signed, Levene's speech becomes almost religious, with ceremonial and liturgical overtones: "And he reaches and takes the pen and signs, he passes it to her, she signs. It was so fucking solemn."

The religiosity of his words sit very uncomfortably with the emphatic obscenity! As he moves towards the climax of his tale, a climax which seems almost orgasmic, particularly when one notes Levene's final words "Ah, fuck", it seems as though he has lost himself in a sexual dream. In the Mermaid Theatre's production, Levene's final exclamation was accompanied by his slumping side-ways across his chair as though he had, indeed, reached a kind of climax. The actor remained in this pose for some seconds, his eyes glazed and fixed straight ahead, completely taken over by the power of his own story-telling.

Before he reaches this moment of what is, to him, akin to sexual gratification, Levene moves through a period of spiritual transcendence. He recalls how, in his growing ecstasy, he pointed "back in the living-room, back to the sideboard. (Pause) I didn't fucking know there was a sideboard there!!" The irony of Levene experiencing a spiritually mesmeric moment as he fleeces a browbeaten couple out of £82,000 is captured perfectly; there is a sublime nastiness in hearing this man relate his success story in these quasi-religious terms. The final irony occurs when Levene recalls the "Little shotglasses" with which the sale is celebrated, glasses he remembers as having "A pattern in 'em." The noxious sentimentality of his words can be interpreted either as a nod towards the brilliance of his own achievement, his awareness of the "pattern" in the glasses taking place at a moment of heightened 'aesthetic' understanding, or a genuine instant of compassion for his victims, whose failure to fight him is poignantly realised in the image of their offering of libations. The final sentence, broken in the
middle by a simple comma, consolidates the mood of sentimental - and spiritual - exultation: "And we toast, in silence."

It is interesting to note that as Levene's story moves on, he changes tense. What was at first being related in the past-tense suddenly becomes an evocation of events as they are actually taking place: "I nod like this. I nod again. I grasp his hands. I shake his hands. I grasp her hands. I nod at her like this" and so on. As the story is related, both Levene and his 'pupil' re-live the sale. Levene verbally enacts the scene for Roma just as he had performed his play about selling with consummate success at the Nyborg household.

Mamet has always been extremely interested in the process of story-telling, and two plays which are particularly concerned with story - as well, of course, as GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS - are LAKEBOAT and DARK PONY. Christopher Bigsby notes how, in the face of a missing intimacy in their lives, Mamet's characters compulsively elaborate fantasies, create plots, devise scenarios or simply exchange rumour and speculation. In LAKEBOAT, the men who work on the merchant marine ship pass their time by turning mundane events into exciting adventures. Their lives are empty, passionless, and comprise mainly of drinking, gambling and chattering aimlessly about sex. They spend hours doing nothing more than gazing at sets of gauges or making sandwiches. It is not surprising that fiction should play such a large part in their daily existence, even if that fiction does not evolve from their own imaginations: nearly all their stories bear the hallmarks of routine film plots, full of hackneyed clichés. Virtually every piece of dialogue in LAKEBOAT involves story-telling. It begins with the Pierman asking "Did you hear about Skippy and the new kid?" (Scene 1, p.17) and the variations on this theme which reverberate throughout the work form the backbone of the plot. Nothing is certain; everything is hearsay or frankly made up:
I heard it. I don't actually know it...Collins tells me...I heard the Cook has two Cadillacs...I heard that...I read it...as far as I know...You probably didn't even see the movie, all you know...You know what he told me? Would you like to know?...

(Various scenes)

These men are reminiscent of James Joyce's DUBLINERS who, as Barbara Hardy observes

move through their nights and days, telling stories to themselves and to each other. However mean their existence, however thin their feelings, however numb their reflections, they are never so paralysed as to be incapable of narrative. Their language and symbolism may be feeble, second-hand or banal, but the form, function and individuality of their stories prove that they are imagined as imaginative. They tell over the past and sketch out the future. They exchange overt or covert confessions, pleas and defences...many of them are capable of fervent and energetic lies, dreams, projects, boasts, anecdotes, reminiscences, aspirations, fantasies, confidences and disclosures.90

Joyce, like Mamet, allows us to encounter the poor in spirit by letting them speak and think for themselves. In scrupulously avoiding a contrast between his style and theirs...he teaches us not to condescend.91

The sheer survival value of story-telling is powerfully depicted in LAKEBOAT; just as the salesmen in GLENGARRY, GLEN ROSS need the seductive potency of a well-rehearsed narrative with which to entrap their clients, so the men who work on Mamet's lakeboat need fiction to make life tolerable. In the half-real world they inhabit, the dislocation of both time and identity necessitates an outlet, and that outlet is realised through an on-going fictional representation about past events which may or may not have actually occurred.

DARK PONY is a short work which is totally concerned with the telling of one story. A man drives home late at night with his young daughter and, as he drives, he tells her a well-loved and familiar story about a Red Indian called Rain Boy and his adventures with his magical pony. Part of the pleasure the child feels lies in the tale's predictability and the security of knowing how it will conclude; the story is lyrical and set out in a kind of verse and, though brief, conjures up a reassuring picture of a world in which all is well in the end. It is easy to see why Mamet
should have written DARK PONY, with its insistent rhythms and vividly imaginative plot; he enjoys working with fairy tales and considers that they offer a good guide to play-writing:

Bruno Bettelheim in THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT writes that the fairy tale (i.e. the drama) has the capacity to calm, to incite, to assuage, finally, to affect, because we listen to it non-judgementally - we identify sub-consciously (i.e. non-critically) with the protagonist.\(^{92}\)

The salesmen in GLENGARRY. GLEN ROSS must rely upon their ability to tell a good story; if they are to be successful, their gambits must, like the fairy tale, be able to "incite, to assuage...to affect". Mamet has remarked on the fact that nearly all his characters use affective language in some way. He notes how

Their language has been forced to serve their terms, which is why the dialogue in most of my plays is affective; the dialogue absolutely serves the turn of the speaker - in the drama, the character - if well-written - is going to use all of the tools at his disposal to get his ends.\(^{93}\)

Elsewhere, he has said that the characters in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS all use words to influence actions. They build what's called a line of affirmatives. A customer is never allowed to say no: 'You'd like to make money, wouldn't you?' they say. Another great trick is not answering objections: 'That's an excellent point. Let's talk about that later.'\(^{94}\)

Mamet's salesmen are not only superlative story-tellers but also great actors. Their whole life is an act which is designed to impress, deceive or coerce and they take great pleasure in acting out their "war stories" (Act 2, p.38) for each other and performing their carefully manipulative sales spiel for their clients. Mamet recalls that his colleagues in the real-estate office

were primarily performers. They went into people's living rooms and performed their play about investment properties.\(^{95}\)

When the break-in necessitates the re-negotiation of existing contracts, the salesmen effortlessly invent a masquerade which will be acted out for the benefit of clients. Williamson tells them the plan:
The word from Murray is: leave them [the leads] alone.
If we have to get a new sig he'll go out himself,
he'll be the President, just come in, from out of
town...

(Act 2, p. 36)

Mamet partly based this idea on the real-life ploys used
daily in the real-estate office in which he worked:

As [the client] had been told that no salesman would
call, my basic telephone pitch went something like
this: 'Mr...This is Stewart Hodgkins from the...
agency...I'm sorry to bother you at home, but our company's
International President, Mr. Williams...is, coincident-
ally, going to be in the Chicago area for two days this
week on his way to New York, and he advised our office
that he would like to meet with some of the people out
here who expressed interest in his investment properties.
Your views on the property would be used to help guide
our development, and they would, of course, be kept
completely confidential.'

The salesmen have another opportunity to fall into their
improvisational acting routine when James Lingk unexpectedly
turns up at the office to renege on his contract. Roma,
with incredible timing and alacrity of mind, tells Levene
that they must act out a make-or-break charade. Lingk
appears at the door, and Roma quickly 'briefs' his friend:

Roma: You're a client. I just sold you five water-
front Glengarry Farms. I rub my head, throw
me the cue 'Kenilworth'.

(Act 2, p. 45)

As Lingk enters the office, Roma pretends to be deep in
conversation with Levene, who has suddenly become a much-
respected and wealthy client:

Roma: (To Levene) I own the property, my mother owns
the property. I put her into it. I'm going to
show you on the plats. You look when you get
home A-3 through A-14 and 26 through 30. You
take your time and if you still feel.

Levene: No, Mr. Roma, I don't need the time, I've made
a lot of investments in the last...

(Ibid)

Roma strives to sound professional and highly efficient
by using arcane terminology which he knows from experience
will impress the gullible Lingk. In case Lingk should fail
to understand a single word he says, he ends his spiel to
Levene with a 'reasonable' proposition: "You take your time
and if you still feel." It is interesting to note how Roma
ends the sentence; perhaps he believes that this sort of
James Lingk (Tony Haygarth), Richard Roma (Jack Shepherd) and Shelly Levene (Derek Newark) in GLENGARRY, GLEN ROSS, National Theatre, 1983.
abbreviation is characteristic of the urbane, professional salesman. He does not need to say any more, because he knows he has clinched the deal. Levene's response is equally brilliant; he is careful to apportion the correct amount of respect to Roma by referring to him as "Mr. Roma" and to emphasise the word "investments". He has been quick and astute enough to realise what he must do, and reacts with consummate professionalism. One gets the impression that this sort of play-acting is a common occurrence in this particular office. Having 'suddenly' noticed Lingk, Roma then moves effortlessly into the next stage of the routine:

Roma: (looking up) Jim! What are you doing here?
  Jim Lingk, D. Ray Morton.
Levene: Glad to meet you.
Roma: I just put Jim into Black Creek...are you acquainted with...
Levene: No...Black Creek. Yes. In Florida?
Roma: Yes.
Levene: I wanted to speak with you about...
Roma: Well, we'll do that this weekend.
Levene: My wife told me to look into...
Roma: Beautiful. Beautiful rolling land. I was telling Jim and Jinny, Ray, I want to tell you something. (To Levene) You, Ray, you eat in a lot of restaurants. I know you do... (To Lingk) Mr. Morton's with American Express...he's (To Levene) I can tell Jim what you do...
Levene: Sure.
Roma: Ray is Director of all European Sales and Services for American Exp... (To Levene) But I'm saying you haven't had a meal until you've tasted...I was at the Lingk's last...as a matter of fact, what was that Service Feature you were talking about...
Levene: Which...
Roma: 'Home Cooking'...what did you call it, you said it...it was a tag phrase that you had...
Levene: Uh...
Roma: Home...
Levene: Home cooking...
Roma: The monthly interview...?
Levene: Oh! For the magazine...
Roma: Yes. Is this something that I can talk ab...
Levene: Well, it isn't coming out until the February iss...sure. Sure, go ahead, Rick.
Roma: You're sure?
Levene: (Nods) Go ahead.

(Ibid, pp.46,47)

This is all not only brilliantly funny but also demonstrates the risks that professionals like Roma are willing to take. Levene 'thinks on his feet' but even he struggles a little
when confronted with the linguistic wizardry employed by his protegé. Roma mentions what is presumably a fictional piece of land, "Black Creek", and Levene must think for a moment how to respond. Once he realises what is expected of him, he begins to invent and embroider his own fictions, emphasising the word "Creek" as a way of demonstrating to Lingk that the name had only momentarily slipped his mind, and going on to state that this particular piece of land is one he would very much like to hear more about. Guessing Lingk to be a married man, and by his shy and uncertain presence probably a hen-pecked one at that, Levene carefully but expertly adds that his wife "told" him to look into the possibilities of such an acquisition. Roma latches on to the personalised touch, and begins to flatter Lingk with compliments about his wife's cooking. The frenetic pace of the dialogue points to his need to keep talking, no matter what happens; Roma realises that something is wrong and he cannot afford to let Lingk speak. Roma guesses correctly that the man's presence in the office can mean only one thing: that he wishes to cancel his contract, an action to be prevented at all costs. In a desperate effort to flatter, confuse and disorientate the hapless Lingk, Roma changes the subject every few seconds, seldom finishing a sentence before leading on to another: "Beautiful. Beautiful rolling land. I was telling Jim and Jinny, Ray, I want to tell you something. (To Levene) You, Ray, you eat in a lot of restaurants. I know you do. (To Lingk) Mr. Morton's with American Express...he's (To Levene) I can tell Jim what you do..." and so on. He begins the first sentence by inferring that he is going to relate something that he told "Jim and Jinny" but then veers off, still in the same sentence, into an implication that the cooking he found at their house was rather exceptional. However, he does not actually get around to saying this for some time, so involved is he in trying to impress Lingk with his friendship with a man who is ostensibly a high-flying business executive, and his offering of what almost amounts to classified information about the 'executive's' precise job title. Hilariously, later in the same scene, 'D. Ray Morton's' job title changes once again: he is suddenly promoted to
"the Senior Vice-President American Express" (Ibid, p.47).

In the full knowledge that he is playing with fire, Roma decides to throw in another invention, this time involving a "Service Feature" which will eventually be published in an American Express journal. Again, Levene is momentarily confused but once he realises how he must react, he begins to enjoy himself and again triumphs with a superbly slick show of bogus camaraderie: "Well, it isn't coming out until the February iss...sure. Sure, go ahead, Rick." By now, he is revelling in his improvisation. It is all a wonderful and exciting game in which to be a prime player. Levene decides to refer to Roma as "Rick" as opposed to the more formal and respectful "Mr. Roma" of the opening gambit. His new tone suggests intimacy, good and sound friendship and trust. If Roma wishes to tell his 'friend' Lingk about the finer details of American Express publishing, then so be it; there is more than a hint of 'any friend of yours is a friend of mine' in Levene's manner. Confronted with such a display of bonhomie and trust, poor Lingk must wonder how he can even begin to say what he has promised his wife - that he must cancel the contract and nullify the cheque. However, in a moment of extreme courage, he manages to stammer out the information that his wife has called the Attorney General; he has informed her that the contract is not binding if it is cancelled within three days. Roma is genuinely appalled:

Roma: Who did she call?
Lingk: I don't know, the Attorney Gen...the...some Consumer office, umm...
Roma: Why did she do that, Jim?
Lingk: I don't know. (Pause) They said we have three days. (Pause) They said we have three days.
Roma: Three days.
Lingk: To...you know. (Pause)
Roma: No I don't know. Tell me.
Lingk: To change our minds.
Roma: Of course you have three days. (Pause)

(Ibid, p.49)

In order to make the trembling Lingk suffer, Roma tries to give the impression that his personal feelings have been hurt: "Why did she do that, Jim?". He calls Lingk by a diminution of his christian name in order to emphasise
and try to consolidate the 'friendship' which exists between them. When Lingk stammers that he does not know why his wife would have done such a thing, Roma senses his fear and tries to undermine his confidence still further by aggressively responding: "No I don't know. Tell me."

His mind works frantically to find ways in which he can either further confuse Lingk or buy more time in which to think up other strategies. He tries to evade the issue by pretending that he is too busy to talk about the contract until the following week, by which time Lingk's legal rights will be cancelled:

Roma: Jim, Jim, you saw my book...I can't, you saw my book...
Lingk: But we have to before Monday. To get our money ba...
Roma: Three business days. They mean three business days.
Lingk: Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.
Roma: I don't understand.
Lingk: That's what they are. Three business...if I wait till Monday, my time limit runs out.
Roma: You don't count Saturday.
Lingk: I'm not.
Roma: No, I'm saying you don't include Saturday...in your three days. It's not a business day.
Lingk: But I'm not counting it. (Pause) Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. So it would have elapsed.
Roma: What would have elapsed?
Lingk: If we wait till Mon...
Roma: When did you write the cheque?
Lingk: Yest...
Roma: What was yesterday?
Lingk: Tuesday.
Roma: And when was that cheque cashed?
Lingk: I don't know.
Roma: What was the earliest it could have been cashed? (Pause)
Lingk: I don't know.
Roma: Today. (Pause) Today. Which, in any case, it was not, as there were a couple of points on the agreement I wanted to go over with you in any case.
Lingk: The cheque wasn't cashed?
Roma: I just called down-town, and it's on their desk. (Ibid, pp.49,50)

Roma tries to calm Lingk's fears by agreeing with him about the "three business days" - later going so far as to claim that he "was a member of the board when [the statute to protect client's rights was] drafted" (Act 2, p.50), and to confuse him with a lot of nonsense about what constitutes "business days". Unfortunately for him, Lingk is so terrified
by the prospect of returning to his wife with the news that he has not, after all, cancelled the deal that he doggedly persists in outlining what he believes are the days in question. Roma is momentarily stymied, but luckily seizes upon the idea of the cheque not yet having been cashed. As he realises that he is safe, he relaxes a little and Mamet suggests his lull by the breakdown of grammar:

"Today. (Pause) Today. Which, in any case, it was not, as there were a couple of points on the agreement I wanted to go over with you in any case." This is like the relief felt after the exhalation of a deep sigh. The repetition of "Today" is a signal of Roma's realisation that Lingk has accepted his word; it allows him to gather his thoughts, which have been rushing ahead in a frantic race to keep one step in front of his hapless client. Similarly, his repetition of "in any case" acts as a kind of comforting litany, both for Lingk and for Roma himself; its circularity serves as balm for their frayed and shattered nerves.

Just for good measure, Roma implies that, as an honest and decent businessman, he would not have cashed the cheque because "there were a couple of points on the agreement" which he wished to discuss with his client. Not only has Lingk misread the entire situation and distrusted Roma's intentions, he seems to be saying, but he has maligned and hurt the feelings of a 'buddy' with the ethics of a saint.

The extent of the sense of guilt that Lingk feels is evidenced later in the scene, when he actually apologises for being cheated. In spite of Roma's denials to the contrary, he learns that his cheque has, after all, been cashed. Roma has been revealed as a liar, but Lingk is incapable of rational thought at such a moment:

Oh, Christ...(He starts out the door) Don't follow me...Oh, Christ...(Pause. To Roma) I know I've let you down. I'm sorry. For...Forgive...for...I don't know anymore. (Pause) Forgive me.

(Ibid, p.56)

As Robert Cushman points out, Lingk seems to sincerely believe that he has "broken a masculine bond" and that he has badly let down a friend, even though he must be aware that he has been callously used. Such a need to believe in
the power of friendship and the unimpeachability of loyalty is Mamet's way of suggesting that there is more than the cynical, cruel and exploitative relationships enjoyed by the salesmen. Of their number, it is only Aaronow who gives any indication of a sense of loyalty; he declines to name Moss as the probable culprit in the office burglary. Such moments of possibility may be fragile, and very small given the amount of corruption which rages throughout the play, but they nevertheless persist. As Christopher Bigsby remarks:

Somehow [Mamet] wants to assert the possibility of change; he struggles to identify the small gesture which may prove the beginning of a recovery...In GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, it is the evident need for faith by characters ostensibly cheated and betrayed. It is a slender hope, but it is all that he is able or willing to validate...

Both Lingk and Aaronow know full well that they have been betrayed by someone whom they believed was a friend, and both choose not to react in a predictable manner - that is, seeking revenge via any means available to them. Instead, they blame themselves or remain silent.

Such behaviour would be absolutely unthinkable for a man like Richard Roma, whose desire to succeed overrides all emotional considerations. His feigned friendship with Lingk is perfidious in the extreme, and all the more terrible because Lingk so innocently and plaintively believes in its veracity. His manipulation of Lingk, from the moment he meets him in the Chinese restaurant to the sudden termination of their relationship in the office, is consummate. Roma is totally ruthless and unrepentant. His only reaction to Lingk's distressed and bewildered state after he has learned from Williamson that his cheque has indeed been cashed is to turn his back on him and to launch into a terrifying verbal assault upon the much despised office manager, the man responsible for losing his claim to "Six thousand dollars. And one Cadillac" (Act 2, p.56). Roma is barely able to articulate his words and to restrain himself from violence:

You stupid fucking cunt...I'm talking to you, shithead...That's right. What are you going to do
about it, asshole... You fucking shit. You stupid fucking cunt. You idiot... Whoever told you you could work with men?... I'm going to have your job, shithead... I don't care whose nephew you are, who you know, whose dick you're sucking on. You're going out, I swear to you, you're going... Anyone in this office lives on their wits... What you're hired for is to help us... Not to fuck us up... to help men who are going out there to try to earn a living. You fairy. You company man... You want to learn the first rule you'd know if you ever spent a day in life, you never open your mouth till you know what the shot is. (Pause) You fuckin' child... You fucking child.

After a vicious stream of profanities, Roma's blistering contempt is summed up as he gropes for words violent enough by the ultimate insult: "You fuckin' child...". Throughout the play, there is much emphasis upon selling being a 'man's job', a sense of being out on the streets, on the 'front line'. A little while after this outburst, Roma bitterly remarks to Levene:

I swear... it's not a world of men... it's not a world of men, Machine... it's a world of clock watchers, bureaucrats, office holders... What it is, it's a fucked-up world, there's no adventure to it... We are the members of a dying breed.

This recalls Willy Loman's nostalgia for 'the good old days' of selling. He remembers how...

... In those days there was personality in it... There was respect and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear - or personality.

It is significant that Shelly Levene's nickname is "The Machine", and the name by which Roma chooses to call him during his speech about the "world of men". There is a heady sense of tough masculinity which pervades the action of the play; as Benedict Nightingale observes, for these men the working day must be a macho adventure. They, and they alone, are 'men'. Too bad if others happen to be 'Fairies' or 'faggots' or 'children'.

Christopher Edwards notes that Mamet understands the sense [these characters] have of themselves that they are real men doing a man's job, at, so to speak, the front line of business.

Lyn Gardner comments upon Mamet's ability to create a sense of desperate caged aggression. Very tense,
very frightening and very butch. 102

The challenge of the sale is repeatedly articulated in mock-heroic language, as the salesmen elevate themselves above the rest of the world, and particularly above those who merely sit at a desk. Roma even implies in his outburst that the office manager has not really 'lived' as he has: "...if you ever spent a day in life". Williamson becomes less than a real man to Roma, who refers to him as a "cunt". This suggests his lack of masculinity and then, to take this train of thought still further, he calls him a "fairy". Roma repeats the fact that Williamson must realise that he is working with "men" who must go "out there" to earn a living; to him, Williamson is merely a "company man" with no knowledge of the world of sales outside of the office in which he (inefficiently) operates. Roma further implies Williamson's lack of masculinity as he maliciously infers that Williamson may owe his job to the fact that he grants sexual favours to his bosses: "I don't care...whose dick you're sucking on...", although there is a sense here that Roma is merely groping for the worst possible insults he can find. That he should end his tirade by calling Williamson a "child" merely underlines all that has gone before; for a man like Roma, this epitomises the office manager's incompetence, both as a man and as a colleague.

A little earlier, Levene had also insulted Williamson when the latter had implied that his successful sale might not actually go through:

Why should the sale not stick? Hey, fuck you. That's what I'm saying. You have no idea of your job. A man's his job and you're fucked at yours...You can't run an office. I don't care. You don't know what it is, you don't have the sense, you don't have the balls. You ever been on a sit? Ever? Has this cocksucker ever been...you ever sit down with a cust...

(Act 2, p.44)

Levene's pride in tackling and winning sales 'in the field' recalls Dennis Welland's observation about the romanticised nature of a salesman's calling in DEATH OF A SALESMAN. He comments on

the pioneer ideal of success in the 'great outdoors'...the idealised race-memory of the challenge of the frontier...103
This is a far cry from Levene's subsequent description of Williamson as "a secretary". After Roma's violent denunciation of Williamson, Levene is spurred to take up his case. He rounds on the office manager, telling him...

...you just fucked a good man out of six thousand dollars and his goddam bonus cause you didn't know the shot, if you can do that and you aren't man enough that it gets you, then I don't know what...you're scum, you're fucking white-bread...A child would know it, he's right.

(Act 2, p. 58)

Although the salesmen's relationships with each other are questionable so far as genuine friendship is concerned, there does remain a level at which they share admiration for one another's achievements. It may be only that by showing pride in their colleague's success that they can be guaranteed a reciprocal nod of approbation themselves; however, a sense of camaraderie and complicity is nonetheless evident. In an early typescript of the play, Levene remarks upon Roma's courage, a quality obviously lacking in Williamson's make-up:

You don't have the blood, John. You don't have the blood...You haven't been there and you can't go there...Never been out there...you don't know what it is...you don't have the balls.104

As Christopher Bigsby notes

The salesmen see themselves as existential heroes whose status and identity derive from what they do; mythic figures, they depend on their own resources and a simple world of male companionship which they describe in terms more suitable to a street cop...105

Thus, Levene tells Williamson:

You can't learn that in an office...You have to learn it on the streets. You can't buy that. You have to live it...Cause your partner depends on it...Your partner depends on you. Your partner...a man who's your 'partner' depends on you...you have to go with him and for him...or you're shit, you're shit, you can't exist alone...

(Act 2, pp. 57, 58)

As indicated earlier, even the cynical Roma shows some fellow-feeling and is capable of handing out a compliment occasionally when he thinks it is deserved. When Aaronow tells him of his fear of losing his job, and his incompetence as a salesman, Roma replies:
Roma: ...Fuck that shit, George. You're a hey, you had a bad month. You're a good man, George.

Aaronow: I am?

Roma: You hit a bad streak...

(Act 2, p.32)

When Levene is exalted at his success with the Nyborg sale, Moss all but ignores him, resenting his success. As a result of his coldness towards his colleague, Roma is incensed:

...Fuck you, Dave, you know you got a big mouth, and you make a close the whole place stinks with your farts for a week. 'How much you just ingested', what a big man you are, 'Hey let me buy you a pack of gum. I'll show you how to chew it.' Your pal closes, all that comes out of your mouth is bile, how fucked up you are...

(Act 2, p.41)

These extracts seem to indicate that, in spite of their selfishness, there does indeed exist some feeling of friendship and loyalty in the sales office. Such loyalty springs from their shared occupation and the sense they have of themselves as the "existential heroes" of which Christopher Bigsby speaks. However, such friendships are purely skin-deep; the characters identify with each other's problems and crises through work only - there is nothing outside of their salesmanship which they can share. They are, first and foremost, salesmen and any attempt to view themselves as anything other than that is doomed to failure. Thus, when Levene begs Williamson to give him some of the precious leads and to judge him independently of his current achievements as a salesman, he is bound to fail:

Levene: I'm asking you. As a favour to me? (Pause) John. (Long pause) John: my daughter...

(Act 1, Scene 2, p.10)

and later, once Williamson has realised that it is indeed Levene who has broken into the office and stolen the leads, Levene again begs for mercy:

Levene: John: John:...my daughter...

Williamson: Fuck you.

(Act 2, p.62)

Levene brings his daughter into the situation to try to sway Williamson's decision, but to no avail. The only time we hear of anything other than sales-talk is when one of the salesmen is either in trouble or working towards a sales
coup. Williamson knows this as well as Levene, and refuses to let personal considerations intrude. Besides, in the brutally existential world of the salesman, each man is only a salesman; he is not what he has done, or what his personal life has made him, but what he is at the present time. He can only be judged in terms of what he is currently capable of as a salesman, and in Levene's case, this is not very much.

Perhaps the most resonant emotion that one feels upon seeing the play performed is the terrible sense of waste which pervades every scene. It is at once a comical and terrible sight to see intelligent men grovelling towards success at any cost. They muster every scrap of their ingenuity to survive, but that survival is empty at its core. Christopher Bigsby makes an analogy between Mamet's salesmen and the ageing cowboys in Arthur Miller's film, THE MISFITS. In that work, the protagonists capture wild horses to be used as the meat in dog food. They use all their worthy talents towards that squalid end, tragically wasting both their energy and their expertise. In GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, the salesmen

stake their fortunes and possibly their lives...on nothing more adventurous than selling land (valuable or worthless) to people who are themselves seduced by an old dream, an avaricious myth of sudden profit.  

It is very sad that these salesmen, with their brilliant skills in the manipulation of language and their apparently fathomless depths of imagination cannot put their skills to more worthwhile use. As Benedict Nightingale points out, a man such as Richard Roma could, in better times, have been a highly successful buccaneer...his intellectual dexterity, imagination and creativity would qualify him for a calling more elevating and edifying than that of a real-estate hood.

Howard Kissel feels that all the salesmen are throwing themselves with all their resources at a meaningless world, battling with it in the hopes of emerging richer if not wiser. It is a world of pain, futility and comic bravado...

and Clive Barnes notes that they are certainly not untalented nor...altogether unlikeable...they are lost in the legitimate rituals of salesmanship, with all
its scoops, bonuses and disappointments. 

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS was almost universally applauded by the critics. It was generally considered that Mamet had written his best play to date, and that his linguistic abilities were unsurpassed. Christopher Edwards believed that

Anyone seriously interested in modern writing for the theatre, and anyone looking for a good night out, should ensure that they see this...production. It is by far the best thing showing in London.

and Francis King wished that

there were some modern English dramatist capable of writing with the same terseness, clarity, punch and mastery of the vernacular.

Dennis Cunningham, speaking about the play on American radio, said

David Mamet's GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS is a theatrical event, altogether extraordinary, an astonishing, exhilarating experience...a ferocious comedy, a riveting drama, even a shocking mystery.

and Michael Billington wrote that

You won't hear much better dialogue on the London stage than you get in David Mamet's GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS...what really counts is Mamet's brilliant use of language to depict character and attitudes.

Robert Cushman felt that it was

the best play in London...Here at last, carving characters and conflicts out of language, is a play with real muscle. Hereafter, all the pieces we have half-heartedly approved because they mentioned 'important' issues, as if mentioning were the same as dealing with, will seem second-rate...GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS mentions nothing, but in its depiction of a driven, conscienceless world it implies a great deal.

and Michael Coveney commented particularly on the post-Watergate paranoia of the break-in and upon the play's language:

what is particularly resonant about the play is its metaphorical exploitation of the post-Nixon break-in paranoia. The text bubbles like a poisoned froth, rival recriminations flying around the stage.

Steve Grant called Mamet's dialogue "superb, excoriating banter", Tom Valeo noted how "David Mamet writes terrific dialogue...tough and gritty, filled with profanity", Kevin Kelly calls it "a short but masterful play", John Barber nominates it as "A small masterpiece" and Gerald
Jacobs observed that "few contemporary playwrights could
catch the honest, electrifying vitality" of the work.

There remain, however, those who refuse to acknowledge the
merits of the piece. For example, Kenneth Hurren avers that

Mamet has big ideas but writes very small plays...
the foul-mouthed dialogue is about as authentic as
a three-dollar bill...as an indictment of American
capitalism it is superficial tosh

and Douglas Watt is very scathing indeed:

Down the drain once more with David Mamet... [This]
lacks the genuine humour and pathos and, especially,
the delicate balance of AMERICAN BUFFALO. To elevate
it to the status of a bitter comment on the American
dream would amount to cosmic foolishness. It is what
it is, a slice of life that sends you out of the
theatre neither transported nor even informed, just
cheerless.

Giles Gordon considers that the work is

something of a let-down...[it is as if Mamet] has
borrowed Studs Terkel's tape-recorder for too long
for his own good as an imaginative artist

whilst Edwin Wilson feels that
despite its virtues...the play is severely limited.
Mr. Mamet's lack of breadth and vision becomes
particularly apparent when GLENGARRY, GLEN ROSS is
set next to DEATH OF A SALESMAN...

Each of these reviewers seems to have missed by quite a
wide margin Mamet's intentions in the play. It seems to
me extraordinary how Kenneth Hurren can claim that the
dialogue is "about as authentic as a three-dollar bill"; it
is generally accepted among Mamet's critics that his ability
to form the American vernacular into brilliantly realistic-
sounding dialogue is his greatest gift as a playwright.
Mamet does not set out to present himself as a naturalistic
dramatist, although he has often been viewed in this way as
a result of his facility with language. What Mamet tries
to do is to write dramatic poetry which incorporates the
idiom of the American streets. Giles Gordon criticises
Mamet for just the opposite reason: to him, Mamet "has
borrowed Studs Terkel's tape-recorder for too long". It
would seem that Mamet just cannot win with these critics;
his 'tape-recorder' ear is criticised both for its
verisimilitude and its lack of authenticity! Douglas Watt's
criticisms of the play as being "a slice of life" are equally misguided for reasons already stated. Although he praises AMERICAN BUFFALO, it would appear that he viewed that work too as totally naturalistic. It is also extremely difficult to understand how he could fail to notice the "genuine humour" in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS and why he should comment upon its lack of balance. It is perhaps the most perfectly 'balanced' of all Mamet's plays, the characterisation and mood which is set up in the opening three scenes then being opened out and explored in the concluding Act. His assertion that it would be "cosmic foolishness" to elevate the work to a comment on the American Dream is also rather puzzling, as is Kenneth Hurren's view that, as "an indictment of American capitalism it is superficial tosh". The play is neither of these in isolation, but it surely implies quite serious criticism both of the debased American Dream and of the corrupting nature of capitalism.

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS can, like Mamet's other plays, be viewed on several different levels: as a black comedy, as a thriller, as a morality play with serious political overtones, as a straight-forward account of the world of real-estate sales, and as a study of male companionship and competition. For me, its chief value lies in Mamet's superb use of language; the play is an unsurpassed demonstration of linguistic skill by a playwright already lauded for his dialogue. His interest in story-telling reaches its zenith in this work, his salesmen being both fabulators and consummate actors who are able to set up a fictional 'reality' with ease. But it is not merely their ability to construct stories which makes them interesting, it is why they choose to do so. Mamet's salesmen are selling not only real-estate but hope and consolation, as much to themselves as to their hapless clients. So alone in the world are they that they need words with which to construct their alternative worlds as much as the men who toiled on Mamet's lakeboat. It is their tragedy that they have subverted language to such an extent that they can hardly articulate their genuine needs and emotions. Selling is their whole lives, and they do
not really exist outside of the work-place. Despite their corruption, they are sympathetic: a ruthless, capitalist society has set them on the wheel, and for them there is no turning back. However, the will to believe in a brighter future - both for the salesmen and their customers - is seen by Mamet as very powerful; their joint ability to create and believe in fictions in which some hope is contained is seen as the tenacity of optimism. It is a slight hope given the massive, almost insurmountable obstacles in their way, but it nonetheless persists.
Glengarry, Glen Ross


5. Ibid.

6. David Mamet cited in 'Programme Notes' for *Glengarry Glen Ross*.


10. David Mamet cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for *Glengarry Glen Ross*, p.4.

11. Benedict Nightingale, 'Is Mamet the Bard of Modern Immorality?'


13. Ibid.


22. Benedict Nightingale, 'Is Mamet the Bard of Modern Immorality?'


26. Benedict Nightingale, 'Is Mamet the Bard of Modern Immorality?'

30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. David Mamet cited in Jennifer Allen, 'David Mamet's Hard Sell'.
33. David Mamet cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross, p.6.
34. David Mamet cited in Jennifer Allen, 'David Mamet's Hard Sell'.
35. David Mamet cited in Mel Gussow, 'Real Estate World a Model for Mamet'.
36. Ibid.
37. Benedict Nightingale, 'Is Mamet the Bard of Modern Immorality?'
38. Ibid.
39. David Mamet, typescript for Glengarry Glen Ross (early unpublished draft) on loan to author, p.31.
40. David Mamet cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross, p.6.
41. Arthur Miller cited in Dennis Welland, Miller - The Playwright, p.46.
42. Jack Shepherd in interview with author.
43. Ibid.
45. David Mamet cited in Jennifer Allen, 'David Mamet's Hard Sell'.
46. Jennifer Allen, 'David Mamet's Hard Sell'.
47. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.115.
53. Jack Kroll, 'Mamet's Jackals in Jackets'.
55. Jack Shepherd in interview with author.
56. Jack Shepherd cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross, pp.7-8.

57. David Mamet, Lecture typescript (undated) p.13 on loan to author.

58. Ibid.


60. Dennis Welland, Miller - The Playwright, p.40.

61. Colin Stinton in interview with author.


63. Glenna Sÿse, 'Glengarry Glen Ross Rings up Another for Mamet', Chicago Sun Times, 7 February 1984, p.44.

64. August Strindberg, The Ghost Sonata in Strindberg: Plays One, p.179.

65. Jennifer Allen, 'David Mamet's Hard Sell'.


67. David Mamet, ibid.

68. Benedict Nightingale, 'Is Mamet the Bard of Modern Immorality?'

69. Glenna Sÿse, 'Glengarry Glen Ross Rings up Another for Mamet'.


74. Mel Gussow, 'Real Estate World a Model for Mamet'.


76. Ibid.


82. Richard Corliss, 'Pitchmen Caught in the Act'.

83. Jack Shepherd in interview with author.

84. C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet, p.124.

85. Jennifer Allen, 'David Mamet's Hard Sell'.
94. David Mamet cited in Jennifer Allen, 'David Mamet's Hard Sell'.
95. David Mamet cited in National Theatre Education Department Notes for *Glengarry Glen Ross*, p.7.
96. Ibid, p.6.
100. Benedict Nightingale, 'Is Mamet the Bard of Modern Immorality?'
104. David Mamet, typescript for early draft of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, p.83.
105. C.W.E. Bigsby, *David Mamet*, p.120.
106. Ibid.
107. Benedict Nightingale, 'Is Mamet the Bard of Modern Immorality?'

Mont is a Salesman why because via his drama the second corruption he believes exists at all levels of American society, whether in the real form of media propaganda, spurious 'business' negotiations at either end of the social spectrum, developed emotional and sexual relationships or simply an arrogant capacity for selfishness and greed. He dramatizes this all-pervading venality through the often highly obsessive and scatological) speech of his character which emotionally reflects their frustrations and fears and their futile efforts to gain some control over their lives.

The drama created by this playwright is an easy experience, either for the actors involved or the audience. It is exceptionally fast-moving and direct, its dazzling dialogue ricocheting around the auditorium like so many blue-things bullets, the obscenities almost colliding as they pour from their speakers' mouths. But whilst the picture that Nessett paints of contemporary America is a bleak and depressing one, his plays are seldom despairing; there is usually one relationship or gesture incorporated into the action which suggests the possibility of redemption.
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis has been to demonstrate how, via his very original use of free verse, David Mamet uses language as dramatic action. From the outset, he has depicted the dichotomy which exists between the mundane lifestyles of his characters and the ever-encroaching myths with which they are daily assailed. Their language has become deformed and vitiated because it takes as its model a form of communication which is already debased. Their emotions have become blunted by exposure to relentless media battering and the reliance upon popular stereotypes which they believe will provide them with both status and security. With their true feelings hidden from the public gaze, such characters struggle to believe in the lies they have adopted as truths.

Mamet is a moralist who bemoans via his drama the fecund corruption he believes exists at all levels of American society, whether this takes the form of media propaganda, spurious 'business' negotiations at either end of the social spectrum, devalued emotional and sexual relationships or simply an arrogant capacity for selfishness and greed. He dramatises this all-pervading venality through the (often highly obscene and scatalogical) speech of his characters which authentically reflects their frustrations and fears and their febrile efforts to gain some control over their lives.

The drama created by this playwright is not an easy experience, either for the actors involved or the audience: it is exceptionally fast-moving and direct, its dazzling dialogue ricocheting around the auditorium like so many blue-tinged bullets, the obscenities almost colliding as they pour from their speakers' mouths. But whilst the picture that Mamet paints of contemporary America is a bleak and depressing one, his plays are seldom despairing; there is usually one relationship or gesture incorporated into the action which suggests the possibility of redemption.
or change. In addition to this, no matter how unethical or amoral his characters may be, we empathise with and even like them. They are so real, so magnificently crafted that it is quite possible to identify with their plight at the same time as deploring what a corrupt and selfish society has made them. Furthermore, Mamet's plays are hilariously funny; even in their darkest moments, there is often injected a flash of humour which tempers the nihilism and violence.

Above all, the body of work produced by this writer is a superb demonstration of the talents of a man who is, first and foremost, concerned with language and what can be achieved by its careful manipulation. Through his imaginative and original use of idiomatic language, Mamet utilises every word to forward the action, depict character, establish mood and add to the overall shape of his work. It is my belief that, as a "language playwright", he is unsurpassed in contemporary American theatre.
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