



DAVID MAMET: THE SHAPING OF A PLAYWRIGHT

Dr. Ali Hasan¹

¹ Lecturer of English, Government College, Malpura(Tonk)

ABSTRACT

David Mamet is a product of regional theatre. He is considered the star of Chicago theatre. He has exposed the hollowness of American myth of success. His characters are in struggle with the existing system. They are losers and frustrated. But they are determined to achieve success. Mamet dislikes message plays. According to him, it is the duty of the Playwright to make our dreams clear. He is greatly influenced by Thorstein Veblen's views on economic activity.

Key words: Regional theatre, American myth, Business ethics, Spiritual displacement, Primordial instinct, Message plays, Ethical exercise.

The commercialisation of Broadway in sixties made it difficult for new dramatists to get a performance of their plays at Broadway. This phenomenon gave birth to regional theatres. David Mamet is a product of these theatre and is considered a star amongst them especially of Chicago theatre which revived in 1975. He is one of the most successful playwright of America. He is more popular than his colleagues like Michael Cristofer, Albert Innaurato, Patricia Cox, W.H. Macy, Steven Schachter and others. In an interview, he expresses his optimism about the growth of the regional theatres:

The American theatre is going to change a lot as it did during the thirties... particularly with the growth of the non-profit theatres around the country, we're going to start seeing an expanded professional community which is not tied to any one specific theatre in any one specific city, but which roams fairly freely creating a decentralized National theatre (Ventimiglia, 196).

The seventies were the most appropriate period for a playwright like David Mamet as people were fed up of conventional drama. They were looking for a change. Mamet presented newer themes in a new style. He opted for "new realism" as a structural device for his plays.

Mamet has exposed the hollowness of American myth of success. The majority of his plays deal with the corruption of the American myth of success. In an interview with Roudane, he expresses his views that this myth interests him because, "the national culture is founded very much on the idea of strive and succeed." Americans believe, and there is no harm in it that "instead of rising with the masses one should rise from the masses." Mamet is agonised to see people extend this notion to the level of "your extremity is my opportunity. That's what forms the basis of our economic life, and this is what forms the rest of our lives" (74). Mamet thinks one of the major causes of ethical perversity in American society is the self-centeredness of its people. The infiltration of business ethic in private lives has made the situation worse. Each individual thinks the other to be a commodity. The weakness of one is the strength of the other. One thinks of exacting the maximum benefit from the limitations of others. Mamet depicts a world in which there is no importance given to the feelings of friendship, loyalty, love and sympathy for fellow human beings. All other bonds seem to be fragile in comparison to the bonds of commercial success.

The characters of Mamet seem to struggle against the existing system, which they think has made them incapable of achieving anything substantial in life. They are all losers in the end. Disappointed by life they see only a bypass which can lead them to their goals. They are determined to achieve success whether it comes by fair or by foul means. The pursuit of money, success and power become a recurrent motif in his plays.

Mamet felt that people have wrongly interpreted the meaning of the American myth of success. They think that the myth promises success, uncontrolled power and excessive wealth. In fact, people have neglected the basic ethics which was propagated by myths that the life of industry, frugality, honesty, simplicity and sincerity lead a per-

son ultimately towards success. This perverted thinking has brought degradation in their morals, corruption in their public life and finally the dislocation of values. According to Mamet, cut throat competition is justifying unethical practices in the name of business. It has isolated people from one another. Mamet's sympathy lies with people who are described by Pascale Hubert-Liebler as the people "for whom the American dream never materialized" (561). But in the pursuit of American dream their hearts turn into stones, emotions dry up and language becomes devoid of feeling and sympathy. He found in the younger generation the problem of unemployment, livelihood, emotional and spiritual displacement. Mamet has succinctly expressed this feeling of contemporary American society in a lecture which he gave in 1979. "I think that the old order, whatever that means, the old America is finally finished... that the frontier, the commercial drive, the mercantile drive was, in effect, a fad no longer alive" (qtd. in Bigsby, David Mamet 63).

Mamet's characters live in a world of fantasy. They are unwilling to accept the failures of life. Bigsby has rightly pointed out that the "myths unify" people whereas "fantasies isolate". (A Critical Introduction, 268). There is an atmosphere of suspicion, hatred, fear and occasional violent bursts out in his plays.

He experienced a number of odd jobs to establish himself as a recognised playwright. He became acquainted with blue collar life styles and speech through labouring in the mills, driving taxicabs, working shifts in factories, even briefly joining the merchant marine, short-order cook, caption writes for the magazine *Qui* and high pressure salesman for a fly by night operation that was selling land in Arizona and Florida. These experiences and hardships had productive effects on his ability to create new meaning out of trash. He has an unmatched knowledge of practical theatre from the inside. In an interview with Wetzsteon in *Village Voice*, he talks about the impact of various odd jobs and childhood experiences on him:

First thing I learned is that the exigent speak poltry. They don't speak the language of newspaper I heard rhythms and verbal expressions that dealt with an experience not covered in anything I'd ever read. Then I read Mencken, and became fascinated by the notion of a native American language. And then through my dad he was interested in Semantics - I read Stanislavsky. That's when I first learned the correlation between language and action, that words create behaviour which is obviously crucial if you want to become a playwright (101).

Mamet tried to revert back to the early traditional theatre which consisted of fairy tales and magic stories. In an interview with Richard Gottlieb, he tells the importance of fairy tales in these words, "they get me in touch with drama as a primordial instinct rather than an intellectual exercise." According to him, "good drama is not perceived on a conscious level" (2:1). In an interview with Esther Harriott he adds, "the things which one is drawn to write about don't stem from intellectual prejudice or even affection, rather from something much deeper" (78).

The another characteristic of Mamet's plays is the "economy". According to him, a play should not be unnecessarily long. It must elaborate the single action which it has undertaken. In his opinion "the play is the embodiment of the dream life of the protagonist, so you shouldn't clutter it up" (Qtd. in Lawson 43). Mamet thinks that the play is nothing other than the action of the protagonist. Here, his views are similar to Aristotle's principle of "unity of action" expressed in *Poetics*. Like him he wants that a play must succeed "according to its own logical syllogism" (Savran 142). The solution to problems must emerge from the inner working or plot of the play. Mamet follows strictly his theories. His plays are short, crisp and pungent. None of his play are unnecessarily long and could be enacted within one hours time. Some of the plays collected in Goldberg Street are monologues. These could be enjoyed in three to ten-minutes time.

Mamet attaches great importance to the function of theatre. He dislikes message plays. He criticises the writing of great dramatists like Tennessee Williams and Arthus Miller, and refers to their plays as "a tool of conscience". In his opinion the above dramatists considered theatre "a tool for the betterment of social conditions" (Savran 136). He considers that a playwright's duty is just to draw the picture of society and people's condition in it. Any attempt beyond this, in his opinion is not drama or good art. It is advertising. He thinks that instead of commenting on some specific problems of society, a dramatist should "look at certain taboo aspect of ourselves." He thinks that the theatre tells us about our national unconscious." According to him, it is the "true responsibility" of the dramatist "to make our dreams clear" (Gottlieb 2:4). Like Albee, he does not think that the theatre is a place for relaxation or entertainment. Its Impact goes rather deep. Mamet thinks "theatre is a place of recognition. It's an ethical exercise, it's where we show ethical interchange" (Wetzsteon 103). He elaborates this views further in his book of essays *Writing in Restaurants*. He is very clear about the fact that "the purpose of the theatre is to deal with things that can't be dealt with rationally" (Savran 139). In an article titled "First principles" Mamet defines the ethical concerns of his plays in these words, "In a morally bankrupt time we can keep to change the habit of coercive and frightened action and substitute for it the habit of trust, self-reliance and cooperation" (2468).

Mamet depicts the inner spirit of individuals in his plays. In an interview with Roudane he says, "the purpose of the theatre... is to examine the paradox between the fact that everyone tries to do well but that few, if any, succeed. The theatre concerns metaphysics; our relationship to God; and ethics or our relationship to each other (77). Similarly he dislikes a theatre which is flooded with emotions. According to him, people don't go to the theatre to hear the emotions; they go to hear the concerto. The emotions should be aroused in the audience. It just doesn't have to be dealt with from the actor's viewpoint" (79).

He laments the negative attitude of people towards his theatre. It is the general human nature that the audience wants the reaffirmation of their values. They do not want to be disturbed. Mamet says, "a play which does not soothe or reinforce certain preconceived notions in an audience, simply baffles them." More importantly he is hurt at the notion that theatre people are interesting but not constructive creature" (Gottlieb, 2:4).

The man who had a big influence on him was Thorstein Veblen. Veblen was regarded an outlander, an iconoclast, more than a little mad among his colleagues. His book *The Theory of Leisure Class* which was originally published in 1899 is considered today a classic of economic and social literature. According to Veblen, "man is not a logical animal, particularly in his economic activity" (xii). The theory of leisure class elaborates diametrically opposite point of view. On the one hand, it shows people of upper class indulging in "conspicuous abstention from labour." They consider neglect of work as "the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement" (38). Simultaneously, the "conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure" (75). On the other, people of lower echelon move heaven and earth to improve their status by spending to their limits, but their efforts go in vain. In some cases, people of lower grades affiliate themselves to the great ones. By doing so, they gain some reputation in society, but they also imbibe the behaviour of their patrons of abstention from work and consumption of material things (77).

Mamet depicts many characters in his plays who are inactive. They are excellent in making plans, but they do not have the energy or will to execute them. They live in a world of fantasy. Pascale Hubert-

Leibler has rightly speculated that teacher student relationship dominates Mamet's plays. This relationship is reciprocal to Veblen's description of master and servant relationship. Mamet's criticism of the demystification of American myth of success has its roots in Veblen theory of leisure class. More importantly, Mamet was interested in Veblen's description of business ethic. In an interview he says, "a lot of business in this country is founded on the idea that if you don't exploit the possible opportunity, not only are you being silly, but in many cases you're being negligent, even legally negligent" (Roudane 75).

Mamet announced his arrival as a prominent playwright in 1974 with the opening of *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. He attracted national attention as a major playwright with *American Buffalo* (1975). The play was revived in 1983 and performed on Broadway. It received enthusiastic response from critics who acknowledged it as a classic of the modern American theatre (Biggsby, Mamet, 85). He won Pulitzer prize in 1984 for his play *Glengarry Glen Ross*. As a screenwriter, he received Oscar nomination for *The Verdict*. Although Mamet began his dramatic career in seventies but received national attention only in the eighties.

REFERENCES

- [1] Biggsby C.W.E. David Mamet. Contemporary writers series. New York: Mehuen, 1985.
- [2] Biggsby C.W.E. A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama: Beyond Broadway. Vol.3. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- [3] Gottlieb, Richard. "The Engine that Drives Playwright David Mamet". *New York Times* (15 January 1978): B1,4.
- [4] Harriott, Eshter. *American Voices: Five Contemporary Playwrights in Essays and Interviews*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1988.
- [5] Hubert-Leibler, Pascale. "Dominance and Anguish: The Teacher-Student Relationship in the plays of David Mamet". *Modern Drama* 31(1988): 557-70
- [6] Lawson, Steve. "Language Equals Action". *Horizon* (November 1977): 40-45.
- [7] Mamet, David. "First Principles." *Twentieth Century American Literature*. Vol.4, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986: 2467-8.
- [8] Roudane', Matthew C. "An Interview with David Mamet". *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present I* (1986): 73-81.
- [9] Savran, David. *In their own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988. 132-44.
- [10] Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: The Modern Library, 1934.
- [11] Ventimiglia, Peter James. "Recent Trends in American Drama: Michael Cristofer, David Mamet, Albert Innaurato". *Journal of American Culture* 1 (Spring 1978): 195-204.
- [12] Wetzsteon, Ross. "David Mamet: Remember That Name". *Village Voice* (5 July 1976): 101-104.