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Mametspeak: David Mamet's Theory on the Power and Potential of Dramatic Language

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MAMETSPEAK: DAVID MAMET'S THEORY ON THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF
DRAMATIC LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines David Mamet's non-dramatic writings and interview responses to posit in an organized manner his theories about the power and potential of dramatic language in order to clarify his dramatic language strategy to improve the effectiveness of staging his plays. Mamet is a dramatic poet who uses his metaphorical language and speech rhythms to entirely create a new world for his characters to inhabit. Mamet characters create their reality through the use of labels, the physical act of speaking, gossip and lies. These Mamet theories are put to the test in an analysis of the script *Speed-the-Plow*. Mamet also uses dramatic language to create character. The actor creating a Mamet character focuses his/her analysis on three areas of analysis. The first is what do other characters say about the character? Second, what does the character say about itself? Third, what are the character's speech mannerisms? These areas are illuminated in an analysis of *Oleanna*. Mamet uses dramatic language to create society. Dramatic language creates a relationship between two characters. That relationship unit uses dramatic language to join a community. Those communities use dramatic language to communicate with other communities and form society. These theories are explored in the analysis of *Boston Marriage*.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I like David Mamet's work even when I do not know it is his. As a young man I enjoyed watching *Hill Street Blues*, a television series on the air from 1981-1987. My favorite episode, "A Wasted Weekend," originally aired 13 January 1987, and had parallel plots. One concerned three urban police officers who undertake a hilariously disastrous rural hunting trip and the second depicted a senior police officer's deadly serious abduction. Years later, in researching this dissertation, I discovered that David Mamet authored that episode. In the spring of 1988, a friend took me to a screening in an "art" movie house, usually a torturous experience for me. I missed the opening credits, so I did not realize until the great movie ended that David Mamet had written and directed *House of Games*.

It was great watching actors say Mamet's lines on the movie screen, because even though I had pored over his plays for the previous three years, I had never seen a Mamet script in production. Today as an instructor in Introduction to Theatre classes I compare a playscript to an instruction manual to illustrate that the script is not the art itself, merely a written guide for the performance. While I loved his writing, without seeing fully staged productions I felt I was not being exposed to Mamet's actual art. I have lived in Alabama, Florida, North Carolina, Illinois, Kentucky, Texas, Missouri and Rhode Island. In major cities such as Birmingham, Tallahassee, Greensboro, Lexington, Houston, St. Louis and Providence I have only had the opportunity to see *two* Mamet works onstage. Why is this?

It is not that Mamet is obscure, after all he once served as a punchline in an episode of *The Simpsons*. "Last Tap Dance in Springfield," by Julie Thacker, originally aired on 7 May 2000. When Lisa fails at tap-dancing, she laments to her parents that she will never be their "Broadway baby." Homer replies, "That's not true, honey. You can always write a depressing Broadway play of some kind." Marge suggests Lisa write about "people coming to terms with things," and Homer adds, "Hey, yeah! You could load it up with lots of swears! That's what David Mamet does" (www.snpp.com/episodes/BABF15). Despite his fame, I had to settle for reading Mamet or watching his movies. Is his work under-represented onstage because of the profane and obscene quality of his dialogue as remarked in the savvy *Simpsons* episode? Maybe, but I think the accurate answer lies in the way Mamet uses dramatic language to create everything in his plays. The verbal density of Mamet's work makes it difficult for most directors, actors and audience members to fully understand.

For instance, on 8 March 2005 I went to a lecture by Dr. David Sauer, president of the David Mamet Society, given at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama. "Staging the Postmodern: Performing David Mamet at Spring Hill College" focused on the difference in audience responses to Mamet plays versus Mamet films, emphasizing a comparison between his play *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and the movie *About Last Night*. Prior to the presentation a lady near me remarked to someone, "I loved the production, but I just can't take Mamet. He's so dark, dark, dark. Even his comedies, like this one." She thought *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* was a comedy, a position mirrored by John Lahr in *Show and Tell*. Despite some very amusing dialogue, the play's bittersweet ending in fact marks it as a tragicomedy.

During a question and answer session, a student asked Dr. Sauer why Tri-Star Pictures rejected Mamet's own *Sexual Perversity* screenplay adaptation. Dr. Sauer replied that having not read it, he could not conjecture, but based on an anecdote provided by John Lahr, drama critic, I believe I can. In *Show and Tell* Lahr tells a story about Fred Zollo, producer of most of Mamet's major plays and many of his films:

Mamet once handed Zollo a copy of *American Buffalo* to do as a movie. "Have you adapted it for the screen?" Zollo asked. "Adapted it?" said Mamet. "Have I fucking what? I'm going to adapt it right now for you." Mamet demanded the script back. "He crosses out 'A Play by David Mamet' and he writes 'A Screenplay by David Mamet,'" Zollo says. (47)

Mamet's screenplay probably varied very little from the play, including the ending's irrevocable break-up of Dan and Deb. Hollywood wanted a relationship comedy and Tri-Star thought *Sexual Perversity* fit the bill. *About Last Night* implies that Rob Lowe and Demi Moore's young lovers will reconcile. The movie ends with the two looking at each other longingly, with happy, smiling faces. The play ends with Bernie and the newly single Dan sitting at the beach, cursing women who walk by. The ending of the movie violates the central theme of Mamet's play, undermining the message that sex without affection is perverse and changing the basic nature of the lead characters from negative to positive.

Mamet's non-dramatic writings can be just as misunderstood as his plays. Mamet's insistence in *True and False* that every aspect of theatre is subservient to the written word has led directors such as Karel Reisz to criticize Mamet for his focus on the playwright's language over the input of other artists. Lahr quotes Reisz reacting to Mamet's instructions to refrain from characterization and merely recite the words:

It is completely nuts In order to get what you want from the other actor, you have to invent, color, invest it with your own feelings. I think the notion of separating words from action is very odd; words are part of the action. It's the reason why the shows he directs are so poor. The element of believability is not there; you have the sense of automata reciting the words. (*Show and Tell* 42-43)

Lahr concurs, stating that Mamet is "perhaps not the best interpreter of his own vision" (43). What both miss is that Mamet does not see the words as *part* of the action, but the action *itself*, and if one closely reads Mamet's essays one can make that connection. So while Mamet may not be the best director of his own work, I will argue that application of his theories to his drama can clarify his art and create superior productions. What is needed is an intermediary who helps elucidate how his theories work in practice.

If Mamet's work is not staged regularly outside of major urban areas like New York City and Chicago, what may be needed is a new way of analyzing and staging his work. We need a more intimate connection between his theory and his art that will prove useful to the production process. The key is Mamet's use of dramatic language. Research shows this is a common topic for many articles and books, such as Anne Dean's *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action*; however, scholars like Dean usually base their conclusions on Mamet's use of dramatic language almost solely on analysis of his dramatic works, his plays and screenplays. They decide what Mamet's theories are by looking at the final product, dissecting it, and announcing their findings. Because of this, they sometimes miss the mark or paint with a broad brush. Dean rarely makes mention of Mamet's essays

and refers to only a handful of interviews. I saw the value of a more direct approach, stemming from Mamet's own non-fiction words and decided to make it the center of my own project.

Mamet is a prolific writer, producing work as varied as novels, poetry, children's books, plays, screenplays, essay collections, and non-dramatic books on a variety of topics. Despite his extensive writings no one has really established what Mamet has to say about his theory of dramatic language or how it can be used to improve his plays in production. My dissertation aims at clarifying all of Mamet's work and at creating a new rehearsal methodology that will be useful in staging his scripts.

Rationale

Mamet is a powerful writer, generally accepted as one of the most important playwrights of his time. Since 1974 his thought-provoking and emotionally provocative work has won the Joseph Jefferson Award, the Obie Award, New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Outer Circle Award, Society of West End Theatre Award, Pulitzer Prize, Dramatists Guild Hall-Warriner Award, and the Tony Award. His films have won the Florida Film Critics Circle Award, Ft. Lauderdale International Film Festival, London Critics Circle Film Awards, Retirement and Research Foundation-USA's Wise Owl Award, Venice Film Festival's Golden Osella and Pasinetti Awards, and the Academy Award. The nominations his works for stage and screen have received are too abundant to mention in a brief introduction. His work is considered so valuable that by the year 2000 he was making \$1.5 million per film.

The quality and value of Mamet's writing cannot be denied; however, while many scholars have published observations about their theories as to Mametspeak, Mamet's own theory about the power and potential of dramatic language suffers from under-representation. There is a valuable space on the contemporary American drama scholar's bookshelf that I can fill. My dissertation, based on Mamet's direct statements in non-dramatic writings and interview responses, aids in clarifying Mamet's dramatic language strategy. Scholars and directors could have Mamet's non-dramatic writings, followed by Leslie Kane's collection of Mamet interviews, then my dissertation, followed by all the books on Mamet's dramaturgy written by scholars who cite heavily from his drama and less so from his theory. My work can span the present gap between Mamet's writings and the interpretations made by scholars, bringing the artist and his audience closer together.

One of my fondest memories at FSU is of a George Bernard Shaw class taught by Dr. Stuart Baker. There was only one other student, Dr. Baker and myself, so it was a very intense class. As part of the class we focused on analyzing Shaw in *Selected Non-Dramatic Writings of Bernard Shaw*, edited by Dan H. Laurence. It is my sincere hope that my dissertation, focused on analyzing Mamet's non-dramatic writings, can serve to aid students studying Mamet in the future as we then studied Shaw.

I want to increase and diversify productions of Mamet's work onstage. I wish to make a lasting and significant contribution to the study of contemporary American theatre. I have a clear purpose, pure motivation, and a strong desire. My dissertation needs to positively impact dramatic theory and criticism in three ways. It will for the first time collect, analyze, and draw conclusions about Mamet's dramatic language theory. Secondly it will offer in-depth analysis of Mamet's later significant full-length plays. Thirdly, it will provide a thorough and clear analysis of plays that exemplify the separate elements of Mamet's dramatic language theory, using my own analysis and the reactions of other scholars as published in books, essays and articles. Completion of this project is imperative as it can provide directors and educators a valuable resource for helping actors to bring this difficult material, Mamet's language, to life. In this way playgoers in smaller towns will not have to settle for reading

Mamet; we can rather go to a local theater, settle back, and absorb his words alive on the stage.

Description of the Project

This dissertation will explain, then examine, then put to work David Mamet's theory about the power and potential of language in his dramatic works. The dissertation will be a dramaturgical and critical analysis of the use of dramatic language in selected writings of David Mamet. Each chapter will first focus on probing what Mamet himself has written or said about the use of language in his dramatic work, then examine the play that best illustrates that chapter's theoretical point. I will demonstrate that Mamet sees dramatic language as the most valuable tool in the creation of theatrical art, and that proper analysis of the language in his plays can create dynamic productions of his scripts onstage.

As Anne Dean and others point out, all playwrights are language playwrights. Dramatic language means the individual words selected by playwrights to best express their vision, and the arrangement of those individual words into patterns that will have maximum dramatic effect. Mamet believes language is the dominating element in theatrical art, taking pre-eminence over character, plot, dramatic action, physical action, central conflict, theme, spine or through-line, performance style, scene design, costume and other technical elements. The writer's use of language – the words the playwright chooses and how the playwright arranges those words – supersedes the input of directors, actors and designers and is the spring from which all else flows. The three points of Mamet's theory as I have formulated them are that dramatic language can first be used to create reality itself, or the world of the play. Language also creates individual identity, or character. Finally, language creates the relationships in which these individuals engage, or society as a whole.

Methodology

Having read Mamet's comments on dramatic language in non-dramatic writings and interviews, I use them to identify the major points of his theory on the power and potential of dramatic language. Once the individual theory is defined I examine the play that best represents that dramatic language strategy, doing this for all three points. I explicate the theory and then show how he puts the theory into practice in a play, exploring the implications of each strategy as I see them at work in specific instances of his scripts. Where appropriate, I will offer the views of other scholars to compare and contrast with my own.

Review of Existing Scholarship

This dissertation, unlike other works, will specifically focus on David Mamet's non-dramatic writings as a means for establishing his theory as to dramatic language's capability for creating reality, character and society. Many scholars have written about Mamet's language, its many uses and the dominating role it plays in his dramaturgy, but most focus on their analysis of Mamet's dramatic works for stage and screen.

While Mamet has not written a book-length study expressing his dramatic language theory, he has published several collections of essays, including *Writing In Restaurants*, *Some Freaks*, and *Jafsie and John Henry*. These collections contain whole essays and selected passages devoted to his language theory. Mamet has also published books on acting (*True and False*), directing (*On Directing Film*), drama (*3 Uses of the Knife*) and other topics. These books contain chapters on and individual references to his language theory.

Other scholars have noted statements germane to Mamet's use of dramatic language in his non-dramatic writings. C.W.E. Bigsby in his book *David Mamet* quotes from Mamet's statement in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that "the language we use, its rhythm, actually determines the way

we behave rather than the other way around” (19). Bigsby uses this passage to illustrate how Mamet, as influenced by Sanford Meisner, came to believe that language is action. Anne Dean, in *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action*, quotes from “The Things Poker Teaches,” a Mamet article originally published in *NY Times Magazine* April 1986. Dean uses the quote to back up her theory, based on analysis of *American Buffalo*, that the play’s language mimics what Mamet hears around tough-guy poker tables, where “all parties are completely aware of the linguistic games that they and their partners play.” She observes that this “is translated into linguistic terms when Teach begins to question Don about the proposed heist” (90). Dean uses the quote to prove her theory, but focuses on Mamet’s dramatic writing, leading me to wonder if placing primary importance on the essay might instead yield deeper insight.

Mamet often provides enticing information through direct comments on his language theory made in interviews. John Lahr asks Mamet direct questions about his use of dramatic language for *Show and Tell*. Mamet replies that as he writes he hears the words onstage aloud. “The rhythms don’t just unlock something in the character ... they *are* what’s happening” (42). Lahr uses this response to illustrate Mamet’s theory that dramatic language creates character.

Dennis Carroll, in his book *David Mamet*, quotes from a Mamet interview in order to illustrate the quality of Mamet’s dialogue structure, which Carroll describes as “repetitious, [with] simultaneous delivery, overlappings, cut-ins, incomplete sentences, pronunciation oddities, and the presence in the middle of sentences of non-verbal exclamatory sounds” (127). Carroll shows that information contained in Mamet’s interviews can be used to explain Mamet’s dialogue structure.

Leslie Kane’s *David Mamet in Conversation* is a collection of 26 Mamet interviews conducted for print, radio and television media. Some of the television and radio interviews appear transcribed and published for the first time. Kane’s book, however, only collects the interviews, offering no analysis of their contents.

In my search through existing literature I discovered that so prevalent is the discussion of Mamet’s use of dramatic language that almost all writers, no matter the primary focus of their work, seem compelled to comment upon it. The range of critical topics in Mamet scholarship is extensive and covers diverse subject matter, but almost all contain precise observations relevant to my dissertation thesis. These works include books and essays by great scholars like Dean, Kane, Brewer, Hudgins, Bigsby, Carroll, David and Janice Sauer, Harriott, Roudane, and Worster. Examples of the critical gamut include Anne Dean and Leslie Kane’s separate analyses of language use in their respective works, *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action* and *Weasels and Wisemen: Ethics and Ethnicity in the Work of David Mamet*. Gay Brewer (*David Mamet and Film: Illusion/Disillusion in a Wounded Land*) looks at the films. Kane edits a collection of textual and performance analyses (*Glengarry Glen Ross: Text and Performance*) and with Christopher Hudgins co-edits a collection of essays studying Mamet’s impact on gender theory (*Gender and Genre: Essays on David Mamet*). There are also books about his overall career, such as C.W.E. Bigsby and Dennis Carroll’s books, both titled *David Mamet*, as well as David K. Sauer and Janice A. Sauer’s *David Mamet: A Research and Production Sourcebook*. Most importantly, these and other scholars provide examples of arguments that bear directly on the three elements of Mamet’s theory that I have identified.

Esther Harriott focuses on language creating reality in *American Voices: Five Contemporary Playwrights in Essays and Interviews*. She observes that the characters of *Lake Boat* have empty lives that they fill with talk. Harriott writes, “Their musings, fantasies, and anecdotes” form a device that “gives the otherwise structureless play a formal shape based entirely on the subjects, styles and

rhythms of speech. It is language as language that provides the interest,” whether the men create substitute realities of talk about booze, violence, or sex (64).

Matthew Roudane and Leslie Kane address how language creates character. In *American Drama Since 1960: A Critical History*, Roudane observes specifically how Mamet characters use bravado to create their identities. He notes, “What makes the Mamet hero so theatrically engaging concerns an invisible inner drama, a subtextual crisis that haunts him: underneath his character’s hard-boiled, enameled public bravado lies a figure plagued with self-doubt and insecurities” (166). Thus bravado in the dramatic language of characters as varied as Teach (*American Buffalo*), Aaronow (*Glengarry Glen Ross*), and Carol (*Oleanna*) is employed in order to craft their public identities, or characters, with words. In *Weasels and Wisemen* Kane painstakingly points out how Mamet’s use of dramatic language exposes the moral fibre of characters, whether they are as her title suggests an unethical weasel or an ethical wise man. She also points out how dramatic language can be used to identify ethnic indicators and religious affiliation, noting which Mamet characters are Jewish or non-Jewish based on his dialogue.

Gay Brewer writes about language creating society in *David Mamet and Film: Illusion-Disillusion in a Wounded Land*. In discussing *The Shawl* she notes that exchanges between John and his customer take on an almost religious aura in that phrases offered by the leader are responded to by the congregation of one, creating the relationship between the two characters. Two-character scenes dominate Mamet’s plays because language creates a relationship between them, and relationships form the communities that in turn verbally interact to create society. Brewer quotes from two reviews to show this language strategy as she compares John to the leading con man in *House of Games*: “Like Mike ... John is ‘a man proud of his craft,’ cognizant of deep and old traditions. The confidence games in *The Shawl* are part of a greater pattern of trust and release, perhaps accounting for the dialogue’s ‘ritualistic and even unnatural sound’” (38). She concludes the sound and quality of the dialogue exchange creates the characters’ relationship/partnership and defines their societal roles.

I will be using remarks by other scholars as to the prevailing quality of Mamet’s dramatic language and the language generalship he demonstrates in Chapter Two, which introduces Mamet to the reader. I will be building on these scholarly analyses by re-orienting the methodology in my project to focus on close readings of Mamet’s non-dramatic writings coupled with close readings of select texts. Scholarly analysis devoted to these select texts will be used in each of the chapters dedicated to each theoretical point’s analysis as illustrations of that specific language technique.

Organization and Chapter Breakdown

“Chapter One: Introduction” serves as a general introduction that explains the dissertation’s point of view, thesis, major goal, methodology and chapter breakdown. “Chapter Two: Mamet and Language” introduces the reader to David Mamet by identifying his early influences, including his Jewish heritage, his home life, his father’s influence, growing up in Chicago, his early exposure to theatre, Sanford Meisner’s teachings, and the novelists and playwrights he counts as forces that molded him into the artist he is today. I will also discuss Mamet’s love for language, his respect for its power, and his evaluation of his own work’s merit. I include the opinions of various scholars as to the quality of Mamet’s work, which will give me the opportunity to define jargon specific to Mamet scholarship like “Mametspeak,” and other terms such as “embedded narrative.” I will also introduce the dispute as to whether Mamet’s dialogue is realistic or poetic. I conclude the chapter by discussing Mamet’s significance to the study of contemporary American drama.

“Chapter Three: Language Creates Reality in *Speed-the-Plow*,” focuses on this concept as

illustrated in the opening chapter of Mamet's book on drama, *3 Uses of the Knife*. Mamet discusses how people create a dramatic reality out of otherwise boring, uneventful lives. Mamet states, "It is in our nature to dramatize" (3). He demonstrates how we narrate experiences using exaggeration, irony, selectivity and focus to transform an undramatic event, such as waiting for a bus, into a dramatic moment in our lives. By doing this, one "takes the unremarkable and frames it to afford dramatic enjoyment In these small plays we make the general or the unremarkable particular and objective, i.e., part of a universe our very formulation proclaims understandable. It's good dramaturgy" (5-6). It is also an example of how we create our universe, our reality, by relating personal experiences to others using dramatic language.

Shifting my discussion from Mamet's observations about the language use of others to his own, I will explore how Mamet creates reality through language by filling his works with language symbols. Mamet's universe is underlined with iconic images that take several forms, three of which include the categories of character, theme, and objects. These symbols form the foundation and background upon and within which Mamet's characters operate, much as scenery and furniture fill the stage and create the scenic environment. He populates plays with characters who survive through language use, especially writers (*Squirrels*, *The Poet and the Rent*, *Oleanna*), and professional talkers such as a radio personality (*Mr. Happiness*), salesmen (*Glengarry Glen Ross*), a barker (*Water Engine*), fortune-tellers (*The Shawl*, *Boston Marriage*), movie producers (*Speed-the-Plow*, *Bobby Gould in Hell*, *The Old Neighborhood*), and actors (*A Life in the Theatre*). Thematically he incorporates abundant references to written language and personal narrative, creating the sense of dramatic universes heavily dependent upon language. Objects as language symbols include *American Buffalo's* coin book, the children's books in *Dark Pony* and *The Cryptogram*, *Glengarry Glen Ross's* sales brochures and contracts, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago's* files, *A Life in the Theatre's* plays, *Speed-the-Plow's* novels and filmscripts and the list of "questionable" books presented the professor in *Oleanna*.

I have chosen *Speed-the-Plow* as the play to illustrate Mamet's first language theory point in practice. *Plow* concerns a Hollywood office affair and a power struggle between two would-be movie producers. Fox, Gould and Karen use names, labels, jargon, lies and other techniques to craft reality from words. The play illustrates the fact that there is a male world versus a female world, real world versus Hollywood, literary novel world versus screenplay world, and for these three characters, an idealized world versus dirty-nasty-gritty reality. If one reality impedes the accomplishment of the characters' objectives, the characters use language to create a new world that will aid them in their endeavor.

The next chapter is "Chapter Four: Language Creates Character in *Oleanna*." In his book on acting, *True and False*, Mamet writes, "There is no character. There are only lines upon a page. They are lines of dialogue meant to be said by the actor. When he or she says them simply, in an attempt to achieve an object more or less like that suggested by the author, the audience sees an *illusion* of a character upon the stage" (9). This elucidates Mamet's theory that dramatic language, not the actor, creates the character. He concludes by stating that it is "the juxtaposition in the mind of the audience between the spoken word of the author and the simple directed – but – uninflected action of the actor which creates the ineluctable idea of character in the mind of the audience" (10). Mamet articulates similar ideas in other non-dramatic writings and interviews, but here he is clear as to his intent.

Oleanna, our model play, stands out as an exceptional example of language creating character because of lines like the following from Act 1, where the professor, John, says to his student, Carol,

“Now look: I’m a human being...” Carol, pleading for her grade announces, “I’m stupid.” John disagrees, defining her as an “angry” person, a definition which she rejects. John has a line that serves as an indubitable example of how language creates character: “I was raised to think myself stupid ... If the young child is told he cannot understand. Then he takes it as a *description* of himself. I am *that which cannot understand*.” In all three acts John and Carol attempt to define the Other, reject the Other’s definition, and define him/herself in a manner more personally satisfying to each.

The final major chapter is “Chapter Five: Language Creates Society in *Boston Marriage*.” *Oxford English* and *American Heritage* dictionaries use the terms “society” and “community” to define each other, and *Roget’s International Thesaurus* considers the terms synonymous. However, my analysis leads me to believe that Mamet sees the connection between society and community differently. In Mamet’s world two individuals use a common language to create a relationship. A relationship’s sphere of influence enlarges when its two members use their common language to connect with other relationships, forming a community. Expansion of the common language’s use transforms it into “jargon.” Different communities, all with their own specialized languages, then interlock to form a society. Support for this complex theory can be found in the essay collection *Jafsie and John Henry*, where Mamet makes the point that jargon creates community. In his musings about Hollywood jargon, Mamet decides that the use of terms such as “smash cut,” “character-driven,” and “back story” by individuals in Hollywood brings them together as a community in a “colorful and inventive” way. He also writes that “Death, defecation, sex, money – all the big ones demand and receive their own burgeoning vocabulary; they reduce us to a primitive-infantile state” (90). The goal of vocabulary choices in jargon is to mask our fear, our helplessness, and the terrifying fact that we are alone when faced with these “big ones” (90). Community language banishes a sense of isolation from the individual.

In *Boston Marriage* we can see how dramatic language creates the relationships and communities which comprise society. *Boston Marriage*’s cast features Anna and Claire, two characters living on the fringe of upper class society, and their interactions with Catherine, an immigrant maid representing a lower class. Anna and Claire speak the same “language,” have a very close relationship, and in their dialogue refer to other relationships that together form their community. Because Catherine does not speak the same “language” as Anna, she is denied an actual relationship with the other women, which excludes Catherine from Anna and Claire’s social circle. The maid is not alone, however, as she speaks of a community to which she belongs offstage. These various communities, made distinct through individuated language use, when grouped together create society. Mamet’s pessimistic view of American society is expressed in language that depicts not a peaceful and harmonious existence, but a cacophonous clash of discordant communities, elements of society in conflict that results in the creation of an unhealthy state.

“Chapter Six: Conclusion” reviews the major findings of the dissertation. The chapter also demonstrates how directors can weld theory to practice, using the fruits of my play analysis method in rehearsal to positively impact on the efforts of actors to make Mamet’s language come alive on any stage anywhere.

CHAPTER TWO

MAMET AND LANGUAGE

My mother tells me I taught myself how to read when I was three years old. My memory does not go back that far, so I cannot remember a time when I did not love the power of the written word. In a short play called *L.A. Sketches*, David Mamet demonstrates his belief in the power of words. A character says, “Words of power. Words with power. Words with power.” The speaker tells the story of a man who reads a fable to his child with the warning, “You shall be evermore, until you *say* at anytime I am The King.” The king remains king eternal unless he brags about his status. Ignoring the moral, the man who reads to his child goes on television and announces he is “the best” at what he does. The speaker says of this man, “He’s spoken out. You say: ‘A Secret Name.’ ‘What power is it?’ There’s power for a reason.” The man in the story has spoken out that he is “king.” As a result his previously popular work is now shunned; “no one will do his work” because “he’s violated them” with the power of his words. The speaker goes on to conclude, “His wife leaves him. Everything is gone. The worst, of course, is he knows why – although he’d like to – it was his own doing.... And that’s why I say you should pay close attention to the stories that you read your kid” (*No One Will Be Immune* 78-79).

Mamet obviously believes in the power of words, so in this chapter I describe Mamet using his own words. First he speaks about his early influences, the environment, people and literary works which together over time forged him into the artist he is today. We will hear of Mamet’s affection for language and his belief in the importance and power of dramatic language. We will hear Mamet critique the qualities of his own writing, and compare his assessment with scholars’ thoughts about his stage dialogue. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the impact Mamet’s work has had on contemporary American theatrical artistry. My goal is to increase the frequency and quality of productions of his plays in smaller communities across America.

Varied forces shaped Mamet into an artist. These forces include his family and the experience of growing up in Chicago. As a young man he was exposed to theatre at Hull House. He studied under the acting teacher Sanford Meisner. He was also influenced by a variety of writers. His father, more than other members of Mamet’s family, exerted an influence in his early development as a playwright. Mamet says, “My dad was a, a labor lawyer, a one-man labor lawyer, and [*Hoffa*] was really a movie about him. I didn’t know Hoffa, but it was about my dad and the way he spoke and the way he comported himself” (Rose, “On Theatre” 167). Many of Mamet’s charismatic male characters talk like his dad, and more than one share his name, Bernard. Mamet saw his father as a man of legendary proportions, perhaps mostly because of the linguistic hoops he made his children jump through on a daily basis.

Theatre scholar Dennis Carroll describes Mamet’s father as an amateur semanticist who often insisted at dinner that Mamet and his sister “find the exact words to best express themselves.” Carroll concludes that this training influenced Mamet’s verbal precision. A combination of piano lessons and Mamet’s own study of rhyming jingles on records put out by the International Society of Semanticists sharpened his talent for the “sound of words and their rhythm” (*David Mamet* 4).

Bernard was an “amateur semanticist” because he was a professional lawyer whose survival depended on his abilities to communicate. Bernard wanted to make sure his children were effective communicators. Theatre critic John Lahr notes that Bernard “preached an exacting semantic gospel of

precision, nuance, and observation,” and played games to build up the children’s powers of observation and memory.

In the crossfire of family conversation, David grew quickly into an agile sparring partner for his parents, and also learned to listen defensively. “From the earliest age, one had to think, be careful about what one was going to say, and also how the other person was going to respond,” says Mamet, whose celebrated “ear for dialogue” evolved out of listening for danger. (*Show and Tell* 31)

Mamet adds that he and his family entertained themselves by making each other miserable “solely based on our ability to speak the language viciously” (31).

His father was not the only one who played games. Mamet based Donny, the mother in his most personally intimate play, *The Cryptogram*, on his mother, Lee. Mamet literally had to learn to read between the lines because Lee often refused the option of direct communication. Similarly, Donny never speaks directly of what she desires; she speaks what she believes is most likely to achieve her desire. Mamet learned at an early age that a rhetorical question, such as “Why must boys be so difficult?” was actually a reprimand, and he had to figure out for himself what Lee believed he had done wrong. As Lahr says, “Lee had elusive verbal ways of parrying her children’s demands, and this mystification, where what was being said wasn’t what was meant, brought with it a sense of helplessness and frustration” (*Show and Tell* 31).

One reason why Mamet makes his characters communicate by relating personal experiences is because his grandfather was a storyteller. Examples include Emil and George in *The Duck Variations*. Mamet says of his grandfather, “He was a traveling salesman. He traveled in the Midwest, and he was in clothing, just like Willy Loman. He came home one day a week. He was also a great storyteller” (Holmberg 94-95). When asked to explain sources for his “feeling for speech,” Mamet replies, “I had a grandfather who was a great talker and storyteller. His name was Naphtali. I was reading in the Bible the story of when Jacob is about to die and he is giving his sons his blessings. One of the sons, whose people became the tribe Naphtali, was given the blessing of speech, of being able to talk the birds out of the trees” (Norman and Rezek 141).

Mamet credits his entire family as influencing his dialogue skills. When Terry Gross asked if his family were good talkers, he replied:

Mamet: Oh no, they were great talkers. Good wasn’t even . . . They were, and the surviving members continue to be, the best talkers that ever lived.

Gross: What made them great?

Mamet: Well, many things. Our Ashkenazi Jewish heritage. The fact that my parents both grew up in the Depression in poverty. Perhaps a disrupted family life. And a six-thousand-year-old Jewish tradition of a love of argument. (Gross 158)

Mamet sees his Jewish heritage as shaping his dramatic speech patterns because drama is a Jewish tradition. “In the United States you go back to comedians more than dramatists, but people involved in the theatre – directors, certainly. Racially the tradition of being quick-witted and silver-tongued and rooting and tooting, as it were, was one which was held up to me as a Jewish kid, or which I held up to myself.” He lists performers such as Jack Benny, Phil Silvers, Milton Berle and Lenny Bruce, stating, “So all these people were Jewish, and I’m Jewish, so there you are. I guess to some extent they were my heroes” (Harriott 87).

Growing up in Chicago also significantly shaped Mamet as a writer. Concerning the “American” rhythms of his dialogue, Mamet says he picked them up from real people. “Well, people

talk them. I mean that's what people say on the street." The streets to which he refers are not those of Anytown, U.S.A. "I grew up in Chicago, and the patterns of speech around the country, even in spite of television, are different" (Isaacs 214). The streets were his playwriting classroom. Mamet recalls hustling pool, ping-pong, and exploring the streets of Chicago. Lahr writes that Mamet "explored the city's gritty corners, whose vernacular he savored and kept note of . . ." Mamet hated the high culture in which he was raised and so as he grew older he was drawn to those whom he described as "people who don't institutionalize their thought" (*Show and Tell* 39). He hung out with a group of criminals playing poker in a North Side junk shop that served as the model for *American Buffalo*. These men even referred to Mamet, once he began teaching drama at a nearby penal institution, as "Teach." Of these Chicago gangsters, Mamet says, "They speak their own language" (40).

When not on the streets, Mamet was pursuing his theatrical education through practical experience in the Chicago theatre scene. At the age of sixteen, Mamet was baptized in theatre at Chicago's famous Hull House. He writes:

We were all amateurs, and so we worked nights – from six PM till three or four AM [. . .]. I was a member of the chorus. I tore tickets. I was on the scene crew. I fetched coffee . . . We were proud of ourselves in some nameless way . . . we didn't call ourselves artists, but we knew we were something. We were proud to be engaged in the business of a collaborative art. We didn't think of it as Great Theater which happened only very long ago or far away; and we wouldn't demean it by thinking of it as "Theater," which happened down town and was boring and stunk of culture . . . We were the community talking to itself, and we learned (I learned) that when the community goes home, it had better have either been reduced to thoughtfulness or had a damn good laugh. And we learned that if you could do both, God bless you. ("Why I Write" 1)

Do good work. Or as actor Joe Mantegna put it, don't do bullshit, because the Chicago scene will not abide it. Mantegna credits this low tolerance with enhancing Mamet's early success. "Well, I think it probably, perhaps in a way, helped shape David in his writing and his attitude about this business as much as it's done mine and all of us from there . . . Chicago has a low bullshit tolerance, so you work a little harder because it's not easy. The only way to exist is by success" (Kane, *Casebook* 250-251).

Moving outside of Chicago to New York City, the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theatre's Sanford Meisner influenced Mamet heavily in spite of the fact that Meisner was not able to teach Mamet to be a great actor. "While his talents as an actor were minimal at best, Mamet had an ear for the rhythms of language, whose cadences were greatly enhanced by Meisner" (Roudane, *American Drama* 163). Exercises that utilized word or sound repetition to communicate emotions without a literary text strengthened his attention to rhythm and repetition. Of particular importance was . . . the Word Repetition Game, in which two actors play off each other, each repeating exactly the words the other has just said, in order to bring out real emotion and impulsive shifts in behavior. Mamet wasn't chosen by Meisner to go on to the next year of classes, but when he began writing plays his distinctive fractured cadences and overlapping dialogue gradually transferred the rigors of the Word Repetition Game from the stage to the page. (Lahr, *Show and Tell* 36)

The most powerful impression made on young Mamet, though, comes from those who would become his peers. His original title for the filmscript *The Edge* was *The Bookworm*, possibly because

Mamet is himself a voracious reader worthy of the label. Admiration and respect combine when Mamet refers to writers who showed him that the written word could serve as a beacon of delight. In “A Thank-You Note,” Mamet describes how he “devoured the world’s literature” and “loved those books” (*Some Freaks* 66). He spent all of his after-school time in the library and pitied people as fools for “missing the pleasures of literature” (67). Mamet enjoyed these pleasures and marked the “days of my youth, and the beginning of my Love of Literature.” He concludes with thanks to specific printed paladins: “I have great gratitude to George Eliot, to Willa Cather, to the men and women beyond genius These people have been my great friends, my teachers, my advisers To those writers – *how* can I feel they are dead – Thank you for the insight that the only purpose of literature is to delight us” (68).

From novelist Ernest Hemingway Mamet learned that the good writer is one who uses words sparingly. Mamet cites Hemingway’s advice: “Tell the story, take out the good lines, and see if it still works,” as “the best advice I ever heard about writing; for, to get esoteric for a moment, if the struggle for the writer to describe is markedly easier than the struggle of the protagonist to accomplish, the result must be trash – a paternalistic exercise” (*Make Believe Town* 90). Hemingway made Mamet believe that all words in the work must propel it forward, and that the writer’s duty is to struggle mightily to get the right words arranged in just the right order.

George Eliot was the nom de plume of the 19th century English novelist Mary Ann Evans, who did not “regard the novel as a vehicle for entertainment alone, but rather as a means of revealing the human condition” (Allingham 1). Cather is another novelist, most famous for her prairie heroine in *My Antonia*. The forward to the 1995 Houghton Mifflin volume notes that most Cather criticism focuses “on the primacy of landscape Certainly she speaks of nature, but she also writes the most intimate pictures of the inner setting – the heart, the soul, the home. Cather’s work is not so much about ‘the prairie’ but about the humans who lived there, and the human relationships that followed” (Norris 1). While Mamet does not explicitly state why Eliot and Cather were powerful influences on him, I deduce that Mamet was influenced by these novelists in matters of style and purpose.

Mamet identifies playwrights who inspired him: “Lanford Wilson was a big influence on me, the collections of his early plays, like *Rimers of Eldritch* and *The Madness of Lady Bright*. *Waiting for Godot* was the most influential play. A lot of the plays from Grove Press in the ’60s, Pinter’s *A Night Out*, and *Revue Sketches* and Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*.” He goes on to mention Brecht: “He influenced me a great deal. *Edmond*, again, is a good example of that. I used to teach the works of Brecht and was fascinated by him” (Savran, “Trading in the American” 15).

Mamet makes it clear, however, that Beckett and Pinter exerted the most powerful pull on his use of dramatic language. Discussing Beckett’s ability to write dialogue, Mamet says, “Yeah, and he wrote about an interchange on a bus and two people talking about what stop they get off of and that was – it didn’t have to be about Mary, Queen of Scots. He said that the small interchanges between people carry all the drama of the bombastic, of Shakespeare’s histories or of . . . the ‘problem plays’ of the 1930s” (Rose “A Great Longing” 190).

Mamet says of Pinter’s language, “It was stuff you heard in the street It was the stuff you overheard in the taxicab. It wasn’t writerly” (Lahr, *Show and Tell* 36). Mamet considers Pinter a mentor to the extent that, upon finishing the writing of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and feeling dissatisfied with it, he sent the script to Pinter, asking “What’s wrong with this play?” Pinter declared that nothing was wrong with the play and arranged its production at The Cottesloe Theatre, London in 1983. The

Goodman Theatre production in Chicago came in February 1984. The play's dedication serves as a simple homage: "This play is dedicated to HAROLD PINTER" (4).

Love of Language

Mamet's family and these writers instilled in Mamet a love of language; he appreciates language as a source of joy in sound as well as content. Despite his inability to describe it, he states that people from Chicago talk differently than New Yorkers, and when he hears it he loves it. "I was just on the West Coast, and I was hanging around with Joey Mantegna, whom I hadn't seen for a while, and just to hear the rhythms and cadences of the old speech, of the old country, it made me smile. It was wonderful to hear that" (Holmberg "Acting Literary Director" 1). His love of language generates a deep respect for the powerful impact it can have on people interacting in the real world. Unlike his father, Mamet is not an amateur semanticist; he depends on dramatic language for sustenance on the professional stage, and it is there that his love and respect for language reach their zenith.

Mamet sees language as an ingredient that increases the enjoyment of any activity; a garnish adorning and embellishing activities like hunting, waiting in an elevator or attending meetings. In discussing blackpowder sport hunting's contribution to language, Mamet mentions terms and phrases like "flash-in-the-pan"; "lock, stock and barrel"; "skinflint" and "keep your powder dry." He then remarks on how language has the power to increase enjoyment of the sport. "So much of the appeal of field sports, at least to me, who practices them infrequently, is the gear and the language pertinent to the thing" (*Jafsie* 160). Were it not for the jargon, Mamet would not enjoy hunting so.

The tedium of standing in an elevator can be leavened by the spoken word. Mamet rails against the seemingly innocuous practice of playing music in elevators. He believes that playing music in a place or circumstance, such as an elevator or restaurant, where the listener cannot escape should not be done. "I would prefer street sounds, general quiet, or the lovely rhythm of human conversation to music played in a restaurant" (*Cabin* 92). Mamet goes on to say that despite years spent studying piano, he did not pursue a career as musician because to him language is a greater source of pleasure.

Mamet's love for language is so deep that he prizes the utterances of others as someone else might expensive jewelry – as a savored treasure and source of envious delight. Mamet attended a seminar on light machine guns hosted by "Machine Gun Pete" Kokalis at *Soldier of Fortune* magazine's fifth convention. Mamet describes Kokalis as "a particularly fascinating and concise lecturer . . . Pete then told us something that made my day . . . I have made my living all my adult life on my ability to retrieve bizarre and arcane information, and this was a gem if I had ever heard one. I cherish it still" (*Some Freaks* 39-40). On a separate occasion at a Scotch Malt Whisky Society meeting, Mamet toasted several varieties of whisky. Upon leaving he took a brochure and confessed that its description of the flavors gave him a bigger kick than the whisky. "What immortal hand or eye was framing these luscious descriptions? What agency was raising the status of what could arguably be described as mere booze to that of Art?" (*Jafsie* 36).

It is when Mamet speaks of his chosen profession as a playwright that one senses the true depths of his devotion to language. Writing is not something that Mamet feels is work, partly because he believes writing was his salvation during unhappy times in life. Film critic Barbara Shulgasser attributes the violent language in Mamet's early plays to his need to dissipate the emotional violence he lived in as a child. Mamet says, "Uh, maybe. It occurred to me . . . that nobody with a happy

childhood ever went into show business. And I think that that's absolutely true" (208). He goes on to say, "I like to write. It makes me feel good. It's what I do for a living. It's what I do for enjoyment" (209).

Mamet compares the craft of writing to the crafts of blacksmiths, woodworkers, potters and weavers. "For writing, like the crafts named above, is a magnificently solitary occupation. One works by oneself all day, longing, wondering, dreaming, supposing" (*South of Northeast* 46). He says writers are interested in minute, seemingly chaotic details in the creation of their craft. "In Vermont the children and I have cut goose quills into pens, made ink from soot, and written on birch bark. It is a game, but there is a seriousness in it. It is one more thing one could do cut off from industry" (48). Should civilization crumble, language could serve as salvation.

Writing gives Mamet such pleasure that he sees it as more important than winning, even the Academy Award. "The awful thing about not winning an Academy Award is this: you don't get to give your speech. It just rather sits there and festers. 'Yes,' you think, 'it's alright that I lost. That's only fair and that's the game. But there *must* be some way that, *having* lost, I can still mount the podium and give my most excellent and philosophical speech" (*Jafsie* 162).

Even the writing of titles for his plays is infused with a love of language. Much has been made of the significance of alliteration and symbology behind such titles as *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Speed-the-Plow*, and the actual word puzzle of *The Cryptogram*. Theatre historian and scholar Michael Quinn notes that the title of *Oleanna* is especially rich because it is derived "from Mamet's choice to write, as he often does, against a literary citation; in this case the framing texts are a quotation from *The Way of All Flesh* on the limits of moral vision and a verse from a folk song in which Oleanna names an ideal land, beyond the misery of the real world" (247).

Mamet's love of writing explains his acting theory, which argues that if the dramatic language is good, it does the work for the actor. Shulgasser asks, "What if you're a shy person trying to play a bore? Is there some kind of mock transformation that you have to go through in order to muster up whatever?" Mamet replies, "No, you have to say the words." She says, "And that's it?" He says, "That's it" (201).

Importance and Power

Mamet sees the power of language as the source of all beauty and effectiveness in theatre, a lesson learned in his early days Off-Broadway while watching *The Fantasticks*:

Another piece of wisdom, the first I'd ever heard about the Life of a Playwright, came from Tom Jones, one of the play's authors. I was nineteen years old, watching the end of the play from just inside the door to the lobby. I heard a sigh, and there was Mr. Jones behind me, looking at the stage and shaking his head. "If only they would just Say the Words . . ." he said. (*Make Believe Town* 33)

Joe Mantegna mentions a common error actors make with Mamet scripts: because the language seems so contemporary and natural, actors feel they can expand upon it and use the words as a leaping off point. "That's the one thing you must not *ever* do, because he has painstakingly created his dialogue so specifically to get whatever impact he expects to get out of it." With other writers the exact words may not be important, "But no, with David's words, that's part of the joy of working for him, working with him . . . my admiration for him as a writer . . . just grows" (Kane, *Casebook* 255). Mamet infuses his words with great power, and to alter his dialogue is to defuse its explosive capacity; however, he came to admire the importance of language first in real life.

Mamet learned that words have power, so to avoid being controlled by others he concealed

information. Other members of his family refused to speak of things that could become a weakness to be exploited. Mamet tells of an incident in childhood when his sister Lynn spied their stepfather, tears coursing down his cheeks, trying to force their grandfather, Jack, to tell David's mother Lee that Jack loved her.

On the floor of the closet she saw my mother, curled in a fetal position, moaning and crying and hugging herself. My stepfather was saying, "Say the words. Just say the words." And my grandfather was breathing fast and repeating, "I can't. She knows how I feel about her. I can't." And my stepfather said, "Say the words, Jack. Please. Just say you love her." At which my mother moaned louder. And my grandfather said, "I can't." (*Cabin 7*)

One interpretation of this exchange is that Jack believed saying the words could be used to hurt him. Upon discovering Lynn as a witness to this scene, her stepfather hit her in the face with a hair brush.

To articulate a personal weakness created by failure or committing a perceived wrong act gives power to others. Silence protects by withholding that power. Once during an argument young David also hit Lynn in the face, this time with a rake that cut her face. "Neither of us – myself out of guilt, of course, and my sister out of a desire to avert the terrible punishment she knew I would receive – would say what had occurred" (*Cabin 10*). Speaking about a bad act would make David vulnerable to punishment, in essence revealing a weakness in David. For fear that Lee would exercise the terrible power of punishment which could only be unleashed by their tongues, Lynn and David remained silent despite Lee's refusing Lynn medical attention for hours unless they spoke.

As a boy on a playground, Mamet learned a lesson that would later be reinforced by his reading of Thorstein Veblen's writings about society and commerce. According to Mamet, Veblen believed that American business was basically a game; jargon (specialized technical language) has the power to transform the fantasy of business into reality.

Our school yard code of honor recognized words as magical and powerful unto themselves, and it was every bit as pompous and self-satisfied in the recognition of its magic as is the copyright code or a liquidated damages clause. It was the language of games, the language of an endeavor which is, in its essence, make-believe – the language of American Business. (*Writing in Restaurants 4*)

Mamet provides examples of ten-year-old boys playing a game where one has to "call it" in order for a shot in a game, such as marbles to be considered valid. "Calling it" is an act of absolute power. Whether you are an adult financier or a ten-year-old terror, the playground may change but the rules, and the power of language, remain the same.

Mamet considers language so powerful that in his scripts the denial of oral communication is seen as the ultimate punishment. Gay Brewer observes that in the film *We're No Angels* the Warden makes prison life an abominable Hell by disallowing talking. "In a Mametic context, the punishment of forced silence essentially denies an individual his greatest weapon and tool. The unforgiven soul's enduring of silence is a curse perhaps equivalent, spiritually, to the body's subterranean destruction" (*David Mamet and Film 128*). To control one's deployment of language is to exert absolute control over that person. That is the ultimate power of language, and why Mamet carefully utilizes it.

Mamet seeks control of his artistic products as a writer and director. In reaction to the word "collaboration," Mamet says, "I don't know what it means, but I don't like it. When I write something, that's my name on it for, for good or ill . . . I've always felt that, that the term *collaboration* slights

this process [of filmmaking]. It's a hierarchy, it's absolutely a hierarchy; it's no less a hierarchy than the military" (Bragg 147-148). In film Mamet sees the director as the true "author of the film." Through the power of dramatic language he applies the same amount of control onstage as playwright as he does when directing film.

Through such devices as italics, parentheses, and beat notations Mamet seeks to control actors even when he is not directing. When asked if actors are bothered by being told where emphasis should fall and where beats should fall, Mamet replies, "I don't think so . . . it's great to be trusted. It's great to be able to give an actor a script and know that he or she will trust that the line's going to work and read the line as it's written" (Bragg 158). Mamet wants actors to trust him, even though he does not seem to trust them. He makes no apologies for seizing this power, but of his instructional writing style he does say, "Oh, well, at least I don't write stage directions" (157).

The play, not the actor, is the thing. A good play can make an actor great, but even a great actor cannot make a play good. "As a playwright and as a lover of good writing, I know that the good play does not *need* the support of the actor, in effect, narrating its psychological undertones, and that the bad play will not benefit from it" (*True and False* 12). The actor is on the stage for one purpose only: to communicate the text to the audience. "Work on your voice so that you may speak clearly and distinctly," he advises actors, because the audience paid to "hear" the play (*True and False* 99). Mamet warns actors against coloring the words in any way, because that will distort or subvert their power. The challenge for the actor is "to open the mouth, stand straight, and say the words bravely – adding nothing, denying nothing, and without the intent to manipulate anyone: himself, his fellows, [or] the audience" (*True and False* 22).

As the writer, Mamet has drawn a map of where the characters are, where they have been and where they are going. Since actors are *not* writers, they must trust the instincts of the writer who *does* understand the full power and significance of dramatic language. Mamet has even said that most plays are better when read, not performed: "Because the feelings the play awakens as we read it are called forth by the truth of the uninflected interactions of the characters." Even if the words are unchanged by the actors, the interactions are less moving because "the truth of the moment is cloyed by the preconceptions of the actors, by 'feelings' derived in solitude and persisted in, in spite of the reality of the other actor" (*True and False* 64-65). The actor working alone cannot anticipate, and therefore cannot rehearse a reaction to, the words of the other actor. Any emotion created in solitary work will ring false, because the soul of the play comes from the dramatic exchange of language between characters. Actors must strive to honor the playwright's intent and not allow their interpretations to come between the audience and the pure dramatic language.

Scenery also takes a backseat to dramatic language. Mamet says, "The best way to tell a story on stage is with words without plastic elements. You don't want car crashes, rain effects. If you've gotta put effects on the stage, you can't tell the story with words; you're doing something desperately wrong." Only language can move the plot forward or further the protagonist's quest. "In a play on stage the best way, the only way, the only way to really move the plot forward is through dialogue" (Bragg 146).

Quality of Mamet's Dramatic Language

Theatre critic John Heilpern uses the question *How Good is David Mamet, Anyway?* as the title to his book, concluding that Mamet has been rated too highly as a writer. Mamet disagrees with Heilpern, as do some other scholars. Mamet's assessment of his own craftsmanship focuses on two areas: his bare-bones minimalism and whether he is a realistic or poetic playwright. Scholars such as

Bigsby and Schvey, etc. have written about these qualities in Mamet's work, compared him to other playwrights, and pointed out the distinctness of his particular writing style. Although some critics debate whether Mamet is a realist or a poet, in fact by his own account and practice, Mamet believes he is a poet. He distills language patterns and whether the play is a city or country play, finds the words and rhythms that generate mood and affect for spectators so long as actors speak the speeches as Mamet has written them and do not get in the way.

As a critic of his own work, Mamet is an interesting mix of pride and humility. He knows he is good, but he thinks of his talent as an inborn gift.

I always had compositions in my dreams. They would be a joke, a piece of a novel, a witticism or a piece of dialogue from a play, and I would dream them. I would actually express them line by line in the dream. Sometimes after waking up I would remember a snatch or two and write them down. There's something in me that just wants to create dialogue. (Lahr, *Show and Tell* 109)

In a separate interview he expounds on the idea of being born into writing. "I seem to have a knack for writing dialogue that is independent of whatever skill I may or may not have in construction. I seem to have been born with a knack to write dialogue, which is being kind of schizophrenic" (Bragg 152). Mamet explains this is a knack at which all people excel, that writing dialogue is splitting oneself in two and then having the two selves talk to each other. Everybody does it, only it is called talking to oneself, not playwriting. Mamet says his writing is recording his self-conversations. He talks to himself, "I just do it professionally To do that and to do that effectively, I think one either has to have, to put it two different ways, either a knack or, as my countrymen say, to be crazy as a shithouse rat" (Bragg 152).

Modest as to his abilities, Mamet is proud of the results, especially of his minimalism. For example, he describes *Edmond's* language as stripped down almost to the point of harshness. Distinguished critic and scholar of American Theatre Christopher Bigsby finds the play less spare than Mamet recalls but agrees that "when characters do elaborate beyond a simple question or statement it is to become articulate in the language of self-deceit as they offer hand-me-down advice as wisdom or elaborate theories born out of paranoia" (*Modern American Drama* 230). If you take out the deception, however, the "bullshit" that doesn't walk (as Don puts it in *American Buffalo*), what is left is the harsh sparseness to which Mamet refers.

In an interview with Leslie Kane, Mantegna discusses Mamet's minimalism:

In other words, *A Life in the Theatre* is a wonderful play and there's a lot of insight into these two characters just from what they say, and David's a master of not giving you a lot of back story He doesn't waste hours of explanation As I said, the great thing about David is the way he can say so much with so little And the flip side of that is having that ability to say so much in a concise way necessitates you being able to really be on the money in translating that amount of dialogue correctly. (*Casebook* 253-255)

Mamet's minimalist approach led Ruby Cohn to answer the title question posed in her article, "How Are Things Made Round?" by saying, "How Mamet's things are made round is through his whittling way with words" (120). Cut and cut until all is eliminated but the absolutely necessary words. In his advice to young writers Mamet says that the process of playwriting involves writing a first draft, throwing away half of it, writing a second draft, throwing away half, and continuing in that

manner. Test if a scene works by picking the very best line and throwing it out. If the scene survives the loss, it is a good scene; if not, back to the writing board.

Mamet's devotion to putting new work "up on its feet" or in production, the influence of Second City's lightning fast blackout style, and his reliance on the Classic French scene, leads Chicago Theatre critic William Herman to write that Mamet's work is "actors' theatre in that it depends less on language than performance. Things are lightly sketched in Mamet, and the actor gives his work its being" (130). This contradicts Mamet's own opinion about his work, but he does agree that his work is "lightly sketched" if by "lightly sketched" one means that he is anti-literary. An anti-literary playwright is one that avoids intruding on how characters speak in order to make the dialogue grammatically correct. Drama critic John Lahr writes, "Mamet's muscular imagination strips dialogue of literary nicety. . . ." He goes on to describe the Mamet play as "a terse, streamlined orchestration of thought, language, and character which draws viewers in and makes them work for meaning" (*Show and Tell* 28). It is the audience member that has to work for meaning, however, and not the actor. Herman may disagree but all the actor has to do is say the words.

His minimalist style, however, has led some critics to ask, is he a realistic or poetic playwright? Mamet's minimalism lends itself to interpretations of the work as a transcription of real life onto the page. Most real people do not enter a room spouting a monologue about who they are, where they are from, why they are here, and what they hope to accomplish. Mamet's characters also do not do this, but Mamet's position is that he is not a realist. Michael Billington asked Mamet in an interview why he believes his work is not realistic when he has such an ability "to set down realistic conversations with uncanny accuracy?" Mamet replies, ". . . Oscar Wilde said that we did not have pea soup fogs until people started writing about them. What I would say is that perhaps you didn't hear salesmen talk until you saw *Glengarry Glen Ross*. My point is that my dialogue is not realism. It's a poetic statement of my idea of how people talk" (108).

The main reason Mamet insists his stage language is not realistic is because of the musical qualities he brings to speech. Mamet says, "It's poetic language. It's not an attempt to capture language as much as it is an attempt to create language The language in my plays is not realistic but poetic. The words sometimes have a musical quality to them. It's language that is tailor-made for the stage." While Mamet may have been influenced by how real people talk in his development as a playwright, and real people may use some of the same words as his characters, Mamet insists his stage language is an "interpretation" of how people talk and not a recreation. "It is an illusion So in this sense my plays don't mirror what's going on in the streets. It's something different" (Roudane, "David Mamet" 180).

Bigsby describes Mamet's plays as "lyrical tone poems of striking effect," "momentary lyricism buried deep inside the structure of the language," "poetry [forged] out of the sludge of language left behind by a century and more of public lies," and notes the "tendency of his prose to align itself into verse" (*David Mamet* 15-16). But many are unable to see the poetry for the profanity. In his book *American Drama 1900-1990*, Don Shiach draws attention to Mamet's words and rhythm:

The language he writes for his dramatic figures is muscular, tough street slang and frequently obscene. His plays have been criticised for their foul-mouthedness His characters are clearly meant to sound as though they are talking the everyday street language of the times without the literary intervention of the playwright. However, his

dialogue is strictly speaking not realistic, because it is self-consciously written as a kind of musical fugue with very definite rhythm. The language has been deliberately shaped and 'scored' by the dramatist. (46)

Mamet makes poetry out of everyday speech: familiar obscenities, profanity, race/gender slurs and slang. Mamet says, "The language is very stylized . . . the fact that it has a lot of four-letter words might make it difficult to see that it's written in free verse" (Bigby, *Modern American Drama* 212). Lahr concurs, noting that "In his plays Mamet relishes slang for its impoverished poetry; it helps to create the sense of energy and absence which his work dissects." He goes on to say, "out of the muck of ordinary speech – the curses, interruptions, asides, midsentence breaks, and sudden accelerations – Mamet carefully weaves a tapestry of motifs which he sees as a 'counterpoint'" (*Show and Tell* 42).

The "four-letter words" give Mamet's work great emotional impact and enrich them with a variety of interpretative possibilities. Renowned Theatre scholar Ruby Cohn thinks Mamet's use of obscenities is actually "testimony to his fecund creativity. Sometimes they function literally, but just as often they embrace several meanings listed in Partridge, and they do so with comic and graphic color" ("How Are Things" 117). She examines the various meanings implied by words like balls, shit, fuck, and son of a bitch. The various forms of these words and their richness for inference shows that Mamet uses profanity and obscenity to empower his poetry and to puncture the sensitivities of his audience with aural shock and titillation.

The main reason for the debate as to whether Mamet is a realist or poet is because he writes two distinctly different types of plays. The first type is the social/urban play; the second is the domestic/rural play. The social/urban play usually takes place in a business setting where the characters are in cut-throat, fear-filled competition with one another. The domestic/rural play is usually set in an outdoors environment or home and is concerned with individuals attempting to connect emotionally through meaningful communication. Critics describe the urban plays' language as realistic and the rural plays' language as poetic. Both types are poetry, even though the cursing in the urban plays masks this for many critics. Henry Schvey addresses this issue in an interview with the playwright: "The language of *Glengarry Glen Ross* struck people as being something new. I don't know if you saw it that way. I don't mean simply the use of obscenities but the poetry of the play." Mamet's taut reply conveys frustration: "I kind of thought that was how I was writing all along, but if people want to appreciate it I am certainly not going to stop them!" (64)

Bigby describes the language of the urban *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* as "denatured," "scatalogical," "filled with neurotic energy," and "fast-paced": ". . . the sheer speed of its dialogue, as the characters bounce remarks off one another, displaying a random energy which is their substitute for meaning" (*David Mamet* 51-52). Theatre scholar Anne Dean also comments on dialogue she sees as "powered by a pulsating neurotic energy. Its urban rhythms are merciless and relentless; its movement is conveyed by Mamet's rapid sentence structure and the fast-paced episodes" (*David Mamet* 52). Schvey also refers to pacing when he writes that "Mamet has captured the rhythms and idiosyncracies of American speech, with its casual obscenities and 'you knows' as eloquently as Pinter has the English . . ." ("Power Plays" 92).

American Buffalo contains poetic language that illustrates the urban world as a toilet and the men in it merely turds. Lahr writes of "the notion of a world and an idiom composed of waste. In the swagger of small talk [Mamet] found a metaphor for the spiritual attrition of American capitalism. His small-fry characters hilariously emulate the badinage of big business . . . Mamet's rhythms gave the

words and the pauses an unusual emotional clout.” Director Gregory Mosher describes the dialogue as “a stream of iamb, which can often be broken down into fives” (*Show and Tell* 40-41). Also prevalent in *American Buffalo* is verbal violence, amusing though it may be. According to dramatic scholar Christopher C. Hudgins, audiences laugh at Teach’s attacks on everyone and everything because of “his use of profanity, his basically uneducated patois . . . [and] the rhythms of the passage, particularly its use of repetition and parallel structure (“Comedy and Humor” 94). Leslie Kane makes a similar observation when she writes that Teach has “linguistic circularity” and a propensity for verbal violence (*Weasels* 32).

Mamet’s most famous city play remains *Glengarry Glen Ross*, where the characters’ cursing is a fearful attack on the play’s listeners. Shiach says of this sales-driven drama, “It is also an all-male world in which the linguistic currency is hard-hitting, sarcastic and competitive obscenities” (48). Says Bigsby, “Dialogue is reproduced in all its inarticulateness. Characters speak in sentence fragments, contradict themselves and abandon thoughts in mid-stream. They reach for a vocabulary that they can barely command” (*David Mamet* (123-124). Obscene language comes when a salesman feels control slipping away. As control goes, the character’s language skill disintegrates, and through these rents can be seen the truth he has so desperately tried to hide with words.

Characters in more bucolic or domestic settings have a more relaxed pace, exhibit more confident control, and curse rarely. This is true of Emil and George in *The Duck Variations*, sitting upon a park bench and expounding at leisure. Mamet’s language remains poetic, but like varying songs from a musician, these plays have a completely different sound, including a sense of the potential for creation rather than destruction. The park in *Duck Variations* serves as a rural setting, far from any office. In the play, two old men discuss a variety of topics in an effort to avoid the main topic in the minds of both: impending death. *Duck Variation*’s dialogue is “rambling, repetitive, pugnacious” and the men’s use of language is at times “poignant and pithy.” The two characters are almost soothingly “out on a stage *talking* about birds in a brilliantly stylized idiom” (Cohn, *New American* 41-42). The dialogue of *Duck* is fluid with sure rhythm, in that “there are few hesitations, collapses and dysfunctions . . .” The dialogue “appear[s] ruminative on paper, but in performance take[s] on dynamic energy” (Carroll, *David Mamet* 74). The dialogue unfolds smoothly, in contrast to urban plays where characters compete against each other rather than communicate.

This relaxed quality is present in Mamet’s most poetic play, *The Woods*. Carroll notes the difference in quality, even if he seems to prefer the city plays. He sees *The Woods* as part of a “group of plays in which the virtuosity of street-smart talk were not so apparent, plays which offered a clumsier, fissured speech with less aggressively rhythmic cadences. This dialogue was sometimes formally set in verse; it seemed stilted because of its lack of contractions; it was apt to slide into inarticulate, sometimes ‘ineffective’ silences . . .” (*David Mamet* 26). Carroll observes that the language puzzled critics, no doubt because they were expecting the same language contained in the city plays. He argues that the rural language shows characters more capable than glib characters of knowing themselves and making contact with others. The potential for meaningful contact is communicated through “nuance, implication, pause and silence; and in the will and intent that the rhythm of the words, more than the word-choice itself, portends” (27).

The Old Neighborhood represents an interesting mix in that it both contains profanity yet retains the relaxed pace and successful interpersonal contact between the characters. *The Old Neighborhood* becomes an island of domestic tranquility within the teeming metropolis. The play is a collection of three one-acts in which the main character, Bobby Gould, tries to reconnect with people

from his past because he has failed to make personal connections in Hollywood. Kane writes that the last of the three, *Deeny*, contains “some of Mamet’s most moving lyrical poetry” (*Weasels* 254).

Mamet’s poetry is driven by a rhythm that matches it to the pulse of the human heart. In an interview, British broadcast journalist Sir Jeremy Isaacs asks of Mamet in rehearsal, “Have you beaten time? Do you want [actors] to keep a tempo? Do you set a pace?” Mamet replies, “Well, I hope that the line is doing that. The line is written in a certain rhythm, and it’s probably easier to speak it in that rhythm” (213). Bibsby observes, “His work is distinguished by what is indeed almost a musical concern for tone, pitch and rhythm and a fascination with the harmonics of speech As Mamet has remarked, ‘Rhythm and action are the same . . . words are reduced to the sound and rhythm much more than the verbal content’” (*David Mamet* 28).

Beguiling, dazzling displays of verbal fireworks have earned Mamet the reputation of having deep impact on the art of American theatre. Theatre critic Ross Wetzsteon praised Mamet early in his career by saying, “In fact, I’d go so far as to say that at the age of 28 Mamet is the most promising American playwright to have emerged in the 1970s and that he has the most acute ear for dialogue of any American writer since J.D. Salinger” (10). To describe his distinctive style, scholars have even created jargon terminology specific to Mamet’s writing like “Mametspeak.”

The term “Mametspeak” is generally accepted and used by serious Mamet scholars. *FilmMakers* magazine in its biography of Mamet says, “Mamet’s dialogue is so unique that it has become known as ‘Mametspeak.’ His language is not so much ‘naturalistic’ as it is a ‘poetic’ impression of streetwise jargon” (1). Mametspeak combines individuated language use developed by certain groups in society, a concern for rhythm, and poetic precision in the choice of words for maximum communication value and emotional impact. Theatre scholar Ingrid Kerkhoff provides a clear understanding of what Mametspeak means:

David Mamet is credited with reinventing American theatrical language. His terse, cryptic dialogue is marked by a staccato rhythm and tough, often profane language . . . the style and rhythm of his dialogue has seeded an addition to the theatrical lexicon: Mametspeak, which entails the same sort of condensation found in poetry. The lack of stage directions is yet another aspect of Mametspeak’s minimalism. The power of the playwright’s characters stems from the way they reveal themselves through language that conveys its meaning as much from what is being withheld as from the words actually spoken. (3)

Mamet’s success as a wordsmith marks him as a major contributor to contemporary American drama. John Lahr states Mamet “belongs in the pantheon of this century’s greatest dramatists” (*Show and Tell* 28). Martin Esslin refers to him as one of the “outstanding playwrights” of his generation (45). Schiach refers to Mamet as “one of the two most important dramatists of his generation” (46).

David Mamet’s style and content make his plays challenging to stage. Perhaps his style and subject matter, being sparse and at times menacing, dissuade people from attempting them. In my personal experience, I have only had the opportunity to see *Oleanna* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* live in a theatre. This is a situation that I wish to rectify. I have used this chapter to explain the value Mamet attributes to dramatic language and the richness of levels in his word choices despite the sparseness of his style. I will now dig even deeper into how he puts his love of language to work in order to create action in the theatre. The next chapters look at how Mamet shapes dramatic language to create the world of the play, to create characters and finally to create the social world of the play.

CHAPTER THREE

LANGUAGE CREATES REALITY IN *SPEED-THE-PLOW*

Mamet sets out to create with his language a dream world separate from our own where the problems facing Americans today can at least be discussed if not solved. Mamet's dark world's purpose is to illustrate the causes and effects of America's death throes, and it angers him when critics mistake his stylized dramatic poetry for realistic dialogue. Mamet is not a realist recreating our world, but through the metaphorical power of poetry creating his own. Of the cool reception his play *The Woods* received, Mamet said, "We don't have a great tradition of liking American poetic drama It is a dreamy play, full of the symbology of dream and the symbology of myth, which are basically the same thing" (Schvey, "Celebrating the Capacity" 68). The play is full of symbols, but not visual ones, for Mamet describes the set as simply the front porch of a cabin set on a lakeshore in a remote forest area. The symbols to which Mamet refers are his words, symbols that create a dream reality through his lyrical use of language.

Mamet rarely writes stage directions and often gives no set description other than location. *Lakeboat* and *Edmond* are meant to be played on nearly bare stages with varying platform heights, while plays like *Oleanna* require only a couple of chairs, a desk and a telephone. Mamet creates his world not with the clutter of a realistic set and property lists of infinite length, but through a variety of language techniques.

David Mamet writes about America as a land created by myths and lies, the same land Charley Reese writes about in his syndicated newspaper column: "We live in the Age of Lies. The status quo is built on lies. Careers are built on lies. Foreign policy is based on lies. Domestic policy is based on lies. When you are profiting from lies, then the truth becomes an enemy" (14A). American theatre specialist David Savran described Mamet's body of work as being aimed at the "demystification of the American Dream." Mamet sees the capitalistic dream as exploitative and self-destructive. "All of Mamet's plays, to varying degrees, explore this process of self-destruction and the extraordinary inequities and hypocrisies that flourish in a society in its deaththroes" (*In Their Own Words* 133). America is dying precisely because it is a reality created through words, an artificial reality with no more chance of organic growth than a plastic rose perched in rich, loamy soil. This is a subject particularly suited to drama, which Mamet defined as the essence of mistruth: "Drama is basically about lies, somebody lying to somebody" (Brewer 40).

The reason Mamet's dramatic works focus so much on lies can be found in non-dramatic works where Mamet opines about the power of language to create reality. In this chapter I will show that Mamet believes there are four techniques by which actual people use language to create reality in the everyday world. The playwright creates theatrical characters who use these same techniques to "create" a world onstage. The first way that language creates reality is through the use of labels or identifying phrases. Another way language creates reality is through speech; if a person says something aloud, saying it creates it. The third technique is through gossip, and the fourth technique is the telling of lies. All of these techniques create the imagined stage world for the three characters chronicled in *Speed-the-Plow*, a play where a newly promoted Hollywood producer finds himself caught between an assistant producer and a temporary secretary, each pushing to get the producer to approve his/her movie for production. The play uses this conflict to illustrate the differences between business and art.

Labels

The first way language creates reality is through the use of labels and identifying phrases. The person who defines an object or idea by naming it controls its perception, manipulating its nature through the act of identification. Being able to name something is akin to birthing a reality, and a necessary survival skill, so much so that Mamet states that “the inability to call things by their right name is a great sign of decadence” (Stayton 97).

Mamet writes of high school classes where *discipline* was the byword of success. The label “discipline” transforms the boring tedium of class work into serious and important work.

Discipline – that fear word of my youth. “Those who do not succeed lack discipline. Those who lack discipline cannot succeed. They are weak, and will go through life a failure.” In retrospect, perhaps the more disciplined of my colleagues merely lacked the emotional makeup to be depressed or confused by the meaningless, the sham, the arbitrary. (*South of Northeast* 53)

Labeling one “disciplined” or “undisciplined” made that person a success or failure. Naming the high school experience “disciplined activity” transformed busy-work into important efforts.

Howard Fitzpatrick, Mamet’s longtime Vermont neighbor, retired from work repeatedly. Mamet writes:

He was a twenty-five year veteran of the NYPD. He’d moved, as a retiree, to Vermont, and had become an investigator for the state. On retirement from that position, he became a private eye. He recently retired again, and he and Betty moved to New Jersey. The worst word in the English language, he told me, was “retired.” (*South of Northeast* 115-116)

The word creates for Howard an unpleasant reality, a universe in which he is superfluous. Howard strove constantly to change his label “retired” with a string of positions, letting his job title create a reality where he was vitally important.

In addition to labels, phrases – especially political catch phrases – also have the power of creation. In an essay entitled “Cleansed by Death,” Mamet attacks Nixon’s use of the phrase “Peace with Honor” during Viet Nam, calling it “. . . an Orwellian phrase cloaking the desire of a man and his cronies to keep political power at absolutely any cost They helped codify our unfortunate American redefinition of honor as ‘the wish to be seen [as] right at all costs’” (*Make Believe Town* 178-179). Mamet calls Nixon a mudslinger who knew there was no Communist threat to America, “but he rode the red card to power and hounded the innocent to jail, to poverty, and to their graves” (179). He attacks “the liberal and moderate press” for saying nice phrases about Nixon upon his death. Mamet indicts Nixon and the media, the former for creating an unpleasant and false reality through his manipulation of language’s power, the latter for transforming dirty Nixon into clean Nixon with pretty phrases noting his passing. “But reviewing his professional life, I have to say that he was a very bad man, indeed, and it is an act of wish fulfillment or worse on the part of the liberal establishment to say otherwise” (180). Mamet refuses to let Nixon and the press create reality with catch phrases, and so seeks to set his interpretation of events and his definition of Nixon in stone by contradicting their labels.

So important an ingredient in reality creation is the ability to name that Mamet says, “The power of the dramatist, and of the political flack therefore, resides in the ability to state the problem” (*3 Uses of Knife* 30). The ability to state the problem, giving it a name, is what Mamet defines as humanity’s most valuable survival skill. The name’s accuracy enables the audience to consider several

options and implement the best plan of action. “That is the power and joy of the drama. That is why the drama that is second-rate, that is not structured as the quest of the hero for a single goal, is forgettable” (*3 Uses of Knife* 31). Effective dramatic reality emerges from plays where problems are given names by the audience who puzzle out the labels based on the artist’s lead. Artists who create vaguely, or mislead with inappropriate labels, betray their audiences, especially when they present their “second-rate dramas” as prime theatre events.

Mamet assumes that human perception works in a way that echoes the dramatic structure he identifies with Aristotle. In discussing how he understands the workings of the dramatic structure often described as rising/falling action, Mamet states that this is how human perception works so plays should be written that way. “Human beings are very suggestible. If we are told something is a dramatic event, we see it as a dramatic event We perceive it as such if we’re told it’s a dramatic event” (Harriott 93). However, if the play is only a meaningless collage of material slung together by irresponsible artists and not truly a dramatic event, the audience is led astray by the label and looks for meaning in a dramatic world that fails to coalesce. The audience can be forced to form order out of the chaos, but Mamet believes this is the responsibility of the artist.

The theory that naming something creates its reality is exemplified in *Speed-the-Plow*’s second act as Karen reads from a novel about the end of the world that she proposes turning into a film. Karen reads, “What does the Tramp say? ‘All our fears are one fear. Just the fear of death. And we accept it, then we are at peace’” (47). The ability to distill all fears into one and then name it as “the fear of death” gives one control and brings peace. Karen says that being able to name her fear relieved her of it and made her feel “empowered.” The play contains debates over the name of Fox’s proposed movie project, Karen’s proposed book adaptation, and character names.

In discussing their pitch to Gould’s boss, Gould describes Fox’s movie project succinctly. “One sentence. ‘Doug Brown, Buddy Film’” (17). Brown’s name adds credence to the project, but the film must have an attractive label or it will never come into being. Later in the scene Gould abbreviates the phrase to “the Doug Brown Script.” When Karen senses that Gould will not make her movie, she attacks the Brown script by calling it “degradation . . . it’s despicable It’s degrading to the human spirit . . .” (55). She tries to push Fox’s movie off the table with these labels. The movie script, however, comes from the Hollywood world; since Karen is pushing a novel from the East Coast, an artifact from an alien world, the book’s name receives much more attention than does its West Coast competition, the Doug Brown screenplay.

The book’s title is the unwieldy and overly long *The Bridge: or, Radiation and the Half-Life of Society. A Study of Decay*. Gould and Fox lampoon it as a title that would never sell a movie ticket. Karen calls it “The Book” with capital letters (49). Before and after that she calls it “the story.” Gould says, “You shared this thing with me,” and she corrects him, forcing him to once more refer to it as a book and not a thing. Gould repeatedly refers to the book as “a courtesy read,” a name that crushes any hope for Karen to use it to create a new reality where she can escape her label of “a temporary girl.” Courtesy reads are *never* made into films, so Karen counters by calling it not only a book, but a “pearl.” She calls it a “manuscript,” an elevated synonym which causes Gould to concede and call it “This book. Your book” (53). The book is hers, not his. Gould retreats to the label he and Fox gave the book in Act One, “something people will not watch,” but Karen says he is wrong and labels it something for which people *will* purchase tickets. Karen offers bribes of sexual gratification and spiritual salvation at the

end of the second act, effectively swaying Gould to her side of the argument. This triumph is reflected when Karen and Gould's labels reach an accord and both start calling it "the book."

The important thing for Fox is not that the nameless Doug Brown prison movie be made, but that Fox's name is attached to its success. Gould says, "I know what you're going to ask, and I'm going to see you get it. Absolutely right: You go on this package as the co-producer. (Pause.) The name above the title" (14). The pause is there because Fox is waiting for the promise that his name will be elevated above the film's title. The movie exists to promote Fox; Fox does not exist to promote the movie. This idea is reinforced at the play's end:

FOX. Well, so we learn a lesson. But we aren't here to "pine," Bob, we aren't put here to *mope*. What are we here to do (pause) Bob? After everything is said and done. What are we put on earth to do?

GOULD. We're here to make a movie.

FOX. Whose name goes above the title?

GOULD. Fox and Gould.

FOX. Then how bad can life be? (82)

Fox's mention of earth solidifies the concept that language creates the subjective world. It is significant that Fox says "name" singular, not the plural "names" – Gould senses this and puts Fox's name first. Since Gould is a producer and Fox an assistant producer, this is quite a concession on Gould's part. Fox's name above the title creates for him a great world where life is indeed not bad at all.

The centerpiece of Gould's world is not his personal name; it is his job title. Rhapsodically envious, Fox asks, "Oh, you Beauty . . . What's it like being Head of Production? I mean, is it more fun than miniature golf?" (30). In Act Two Karen and Gould debate what is his job. The one who defines Gould's job creates reality, in that if Gould is successful in his defining efforts, he will make Fox's guaranteed hit of a film; if Karen succeeds, Gould will greenlight her project, which is expected to fail at the box office. Gould says, ". . . my new job . . . is not even to 'make,' it is to 'suggest,' to 'push,' to champion . . . choosing *from* Those Things Which the Public Will Come In To See" (54). He clarifies with, "*Make the thing everyone made last year. Make that image people want to see . . . That's my job*" 56). Karen counters by using the novel to define his job. "Do you know what it says? It says that you were put here to make stories people need to see. To make them less afraid. It says in *spite* of our transgressions – that we could do something. Which would bring us alive. So that we needn't feel ashamed" (59-60). She offers him a job definition that will save his soul. Karen wins this exchange, as this is the job description Gould carries with him into Act Three.

Fox joins the job definition game in Act Three once he learns that Gould has dropped his movie for Karen's project. "Bob, what you're paid to do . . . now, listen to me now: is make films that make money – you are paid to *make films people like* . . . excuse me, I'm talking to you like some Eastern Fruit, but *this*, what I've just told you, is your job" (65-66). It is this label that holds as the play ends, with Fox and Gould agreeing that both men exist in reality to simply make movies, not change people's lives or change the world.

Karen's professional label initially comes under discussion in Act One when Fox tells Gould Karen is too good for him. Gould attempts to negate this reality by making Fox give Karen a belittling name. Gould says if she is so good, "Then what's she doing in this office?" Fox answers, "She's a Temporary Worker" (36). This strips her of power, and is a label Karen uses on herself in Act Two. "A temporary girl," she says (59). She uses the label ironically in that she is on the verge of seducing

Gould and becoming a permanent fixture, if not in his life then in the world of the studio. When Fox gets the inkling Karen has upset his plans, he begins calling her names, labeling her in order to dehumanize her and weaken her influence with Gould. “The broad come to your house?” is followed by “You fuck the temporary girl?” (63). He intensifies his argument and labels her “a piece of *pussy*,” but the most scathing name in this macho world where you are who you fuck, is that of woman. Fox calls Karen not just a woman, but “A beautiful and ambitious woman,” and this label proves her undoing (71). Fox responds to Karen’s use of the label “we” in reference to herself and Gould: “‘We’? ‘We’ . . . ? I know who *he* is, who are *you*? Some broad from the Temporary Pool. A Tight Pussy wrapped around Ambition. That’s who *you* are, Pal” (78). Describing her as only sex and ambition connects her to the people Gould rails against throughout the play. “But *you*. Yes. Everyone Is Trying To ‘Promote’ Me . . . Don’t you *know* that? Don’t you *care*? *Every move I make*, do you understand? Everyone *wants* something from me” (57). The label transforms her into someone who only wants to use Gould to gain personal advantage. Her confession to ambition leads Gould to reject her, causing her world to come tumbling down. Fox exiles her from Hollywood forever:

KAREN. I don’t belong here.

FOX. Well, I can help you out on that. You ever come on the lot again, I’m going to have you killed. Goodbye. See you at the A and P. (80)

Karen must now leave Hollywood’s land of make-believe to return to her own world.

Saying It Makes It So

Naming something becomes an even more potent way to create reality when combined with the second way language creates reality, which is through the act of speaking aloud. In an essay entitled “Stanislavsky and the Bearer Bonds,” Mamet expresses his belief that by saying something aloud one makes it so. “In the words of Mr. Wilde, ‘We didn’t have these pea soup fogs [in London] till someone described them’ (*Some Freaks* 71). Describing the fog creates it in the mind of the listener, revealing to the senses what was only vaguely intuited. By bringing these stimuli into conscious awareness, the act of speaking in essence creates reality by shaping perception.

Fortunetellers can create reality by speaking of the great unknown, the future. Mamet uses the dramatic device of palm readers to shape the future reality of his characters in *Edmond* and *The Shawl*. In an essay called “Cold Toast,” Mamet describes how palm readers create a positive future for him by saying it out loud.

I drink in this information so gratefully. He goes on for an hour. I know he is giving me a stock “crossroads” reading; that he will give the same reading to virtually everyone who comes into his shop. I know that people come into his shop because and only because they find themselves at a crossroads. I know all these things and I don’t care. I drink it in. I thank him. I pay him. (*The Cabin* 74)

The stock reading tells the listener that God is protecting them, and this year will be their life’s luckiest. These words create a reality that reassures the hearer, a comfort zone at the uncomfortable crossroad. And the words change Mamet’s reality, as he says “I feel inspired to live through this year gratefully and, if I can, gracefully” (74).

Fortunetellers and others can create reality for us by speaking, but we may create our own realities by speaking them aloud ourselves. In an interview, Melvin Bragg attempted to identify Mamet’s motivation for quitting acting in favor of writing and directing. Mamet replied, “Well, all of us in the theater, on day one and on day twenty and thirty years

later and fifty years later and eighty years later, still get together every night and one could say (a) with a sense of wonder at the world around us, or one could say equally (b) bitching at the very interesting and the very exacting life we've chosen" (162). What we say about our experiences defines our experiences. We can make of the events in our lives something positive or negative by how we describe them aloud.

The same holds true of actors self-critiquing performances. Mamet advises actors coming offstage not to berate their own performance.

Don't "confess" when you come offstage. If you have gained an insight, *use* it. They say "silence builds a fence for wisdom." To keep one's own council is difficult. "Oh, how terrible I was . . ." How difficult to keep those words in – how comforting they are. In saying them one creates an imaginary group interested in one's progress. (*True and False* 50)

The actor who comments aloud on his performance creates a reality intended to reduce performance anxiety, a reality where the actor has much greater prominence than in a reality wherein the actor does not exist because no one discussed his performance aloud. In order for the actor to exist, someone must discuss his performance, so the actor guarantees existence through the indulgence of self-critique. By saying "I was horrible," the actor also invites someone to disagree and say, "No, you were wonderful." The actor's negative self-statement generates the positive statement of the other and creates a reality where the actor has great skill.

Mamet's belief that language creates reality by the act of saying words can be seen in his entire body of work, perhaps because his writings while in college were encouraged by an oral critique. Mamet's first contact with a performer who was "the real thing," came in the form of a teacher who had worked successfully in the arts. Mamet gave his first play to the teacher, who said the play was as good as any play by Tennessee Williams. "I could not completely assimilate and credit the praise, yet neither could I discount it. I just had to live with it; and so I left the meeting very much having been changed with the responsibility of making the endorsement true" ("David Mamet: Writer" 202). The power of language created a new world for Mamet, a world where he was a great writer. He strove to live in the world created by his teacher's words, because he wanted to live up to the words spoken aloud by someone he respected and admired.

Speed-the-Plow illustrates how speaking dramatic language creates reality in five plot phases. In Act One Gould says Fox will receive co-producer credit on a major film, which prompts Fox to mention sequels so that they become inevitable. Gould tells Karen secrets that gain her a foothold in Hollywood's world; then Karen converts Gould by praying aloud with him. Fox then forces Karen to speak an unpleasant truth, making his label for the world triumphant. First, Gould promises Fox co-producer credit on a proposed film project. In response to the promise Fox says, "No, but the thing is that you *thought* of it. You thought of me. You thought to *say* it" (14). Fox is obviously genuinely touched by Gould's words, and because "say it" comes last it is most important that Gould said it aloud, thus making it real. Mamet's path is that thought creates spoken word creates reality.

Fox predicts aloud his personal windfall from the movie deal when Gould advises Fox not to forget sequels. Fox asks if he and Gould are included in sequels and Gould replies, "Are we tied in to that, Charl? Welcome to the world" (20). Fox must mention sequels in the discussion of this new world for sequels to be included. Fox's new world, to which Gould welcomes him, is one created by the language of the scripts, language not complete until spoken aloud on film by actors.

Alone with Karen, Gould tells her that a Hollywood producer's life "is an exciting world," one he can give her a glimpse of by telling her a secret. "Now, you want to know a secret?" When she says yes, Gould says, "I'll *tell* you one" (40). The emphasis is Mamet's, showing that the telling of the secret is Karen's gateway into Gould's world.

In exchange, Karen gives Gould the key to her world, one created through the act of praying aloud. In her world, prayer creates reality. Gould unknowingly prompts Karen when he says, "I did, I said God give me the job as Head of Production. Give me a platform to be 'good,' and I'll be good. They gave me the job, I'm here one day and *look* at me: a Big Fat Whore" (43). The prayer made his job a reality, but Gould has not fulfilled his promise to God. The conversation with Karen puts him back on the good path, thus the prayer created reality and the conversation with Karen strengthens it.

In Act Two Karen reiterates the power of prayer, telling Gould his asking for a sign caused her to enter his life. Karen labors to create a new world through prayer. When Gould says he does not understand, she replies "You can if you wish to. In the world. Dying. We prayed for a sign. A temporary girl. You asked me read the book. I read the book. Do you know what it says? It says that you were put here to make stories people need to see" (59). A dying world can be reborn with the power of storytelling. She persuades Gould with Act Two's final words: "The wild animal dies with pride. He didn't make the world. God made the world. You say that you prayed to be pure. What if your prayers were answered? You asked me to come. Here I am" (60). The animal cannot speak, thus cannot create the world. God creates the world, but in *Speed-the-Plow's* universe God seems to act only at humanity's behest, the uttered prayer. If prayer makes the world, perhaps earth itself was literally created in answer to the first prayer?

By Act Three, Gould is in Karen's world of prayer and divine intervention. Gould tells Fox that Gould has been thinking about "The . . . why I was called to my new job" (67). The new job exists because of the "call," presumably spoken by God. Gould concludes that his world prior to being "called" was only a dream. He says, "My life is a sham, it's true" (69). This sham, or fake world, is created by Gould and the other denizens of Hollywood through what they say.

Gould and Fox's Hollywood world is created by their speaking just as Karen creates hers. Emphasis is given to their separate realities by Gould's line to Karen, when she hesitates to answer Fox's climactic question. Fox asks her if she would still have slept with Gould if he had refused to make her movie. Gould says, "Without the bullshit. Just tell me. You're living in a World of Truth" (77). Her world is one of truth because he believes that is what she speaks. Fox and Gould come from a world of "garbage" because that is what they speak; and that is the world they return to as the play ends.

Gossip

A third way language creates reality is through gossip, or sensational, intimate rumors spread from person to person. In discussing Mamet's essays, Bigsby announces that Mamet believes, "Words hold a magical power to command experience; they are the tacit meeting-point where desires and fears are embraced and controlled" (*Modern American Drama* 202). "Command experience" means people can take actual events, retell them with selective changes made in the communication, and create an alternate reality. People who feel they lack power or influence in their daily lives and are possessed by fear can, through gossip, create a reality where their fears are vanquished, and anything which arouses ambivalence can be conquered.

Speaking of Vermont friends, Mamet notes, "We'd meet down at Harry's Hardware, our town's Rialto, of a morning, bum Camels off each other, and attempt to frame the existing and

inevitable oddities and evils of the day in gossip, and suggest their possible amelioration” (*South of Northeast* 67). The evil or unpleasant world can be improved through gossip. Mamet and his companions’ gossip takes the day and transforms it into one they can understand and control. Group communication makes the universe comfortable and orderly.

In an essay called “Make-Believe Town,” Mamet defines gossip as transforming the problems of others into a form of entertainment, thus creating from one reality (troubled) a new one (entertaining). Gossip is powerful, with positive and negative connotations because it can be used to create a more pleasant personal reality or an unpleasant reality for others. Mamet demonstrates the dual nature of gossip in an interview: “You know, gossip, I always felt, is the, is the need to define social norms. We need to discover what’s correct for the community, and so we gossip. And, also, we need to identify ourselves as the good people.” Mamet then shows the interviewer the negative side: “Jewish tradition calls it *leshon harad*, evil tongue, and says it’s a great, great, great crime. And, in fact, the Orthodox Jews won’t talk . . . about third parties for fear of engaging in, in *leshon harad*, evil tongue. It’s probably a very good idea” (Rose, “On Theatre, Politics and Tragedy” 180). Gossiping about someone is a great crime because your words have the power to destroy them. If a person speaks negatively about other people, the other person’s reality can be transformed into a contrary world; this great power must be respected lest one annihilate another person’s existence.

Characters in *Speed-the-Plow* gossip about the Hollywood community, the *Radiation* book’s author, and Karen, thus reshaping their world. Fox begins gossiping when he and Gould calculate how rich the Doug Brown movie will make them. Fox says of his coworkers and rivals, “We’re gonna kick the ass of a lot of them fucken’ people,” and states that he is, after “twenty years in the barrel,” going to “settle some fucken’ scores” with “a bunch of cocksuckers out there” (22). Talking about people who have injured him creates a reality where he has power to revenge himself against them.

Gould offers Fox a warning. “Yes, and you get *ready*, now: you get ready ’cause they’re going to plot, they’re going to plot against you . . . They’re going to plot against you, Charlie, like they plotted against me. They’re going back in their Tribal Caves and say ‘Chuck Fox, that *hack*’” (26). The gossip of the “cocksuckers” Fox plans revenge against will likewise be used to create a world of hurt for Fox.

Gould reveals that gossip caused his antipathy towards the radiation novel Karen supports. “A book, it may be a *fine, fine* book by a well-respected writer. And because this writer’s got the reputation being ‘artsy’ . . . artsy, you understand . . . I’m ready, everybody backs me up in this, to assume that his book is unsuitable for the screen so I look on it as a ‘courtesy read’” (43-44). The Hollywood community’s gossip about this “Very Famous Eastern Writer” makes any attempt to transform it into a film a failure. Fox echoes Gould when he rejects Fox’s movie deal. Fox attempts to strengthen his position by gossiping about his competition, the book’s writer. “I can’t get over those guys. Why do they waste our time?” (62).

When Gould insists on dropping Fox’s project for Karen’s, Fox uses gossip to paint the picture of a future world where Gould will rue his decision. “You’re going to become a laughingstock, and no one will *hire* you. Bob . . . You’ll be ‘off the Sports List.’ Why? Because they will not understand why you did what you did. You follow me . . . ? That is the *worst* pariah. Your best *friend* won’t hire you” (66). Hollywood will see Gould’s decision as so illogical that future people will gossip about it but will fail to create sense out of his actions. His decision is so insane that even gossip’s power to

create reality cannot dispel the inanity. “They’re going to invalidate you out, your name will be a punchline in this town No One Will Touch You, do you understand . . . ?” (69).

Finally, Fox and Gould gossip about the alien visitor to their world, Karen, in order to determine whether or not she would allow Gould to seduce her. Fox actually gossips positively about her early in the play, concluding she is too good for Gould:

GOULD. She’s too . . . High-line?

FOX. No, she’s, she’s too . . .

GOULD. She’s too . . .

FOX. . . . yes. (36)

Gould cannot allow this because it creates a reality where “Nobody Loves Me. Nobody loves me for myself” (37). But he lies, for he must gossip negatively about her in order to create a reality where she accepts rather than rejects his masculinity. “No, joking apart, Babe. My *perceptions* . . . Say I’m nuts, I don’t *think* so – she likes me, and she’d go out with me” (37). Mamet emphasizes Gould’s perceptions to show that this is how Gould perceives the world, and Gould then proceeds to make his perceptions reality.

Gould shows his sensitivity to the power of gossip when Fox begins to discuss Karen’s “true nature” in Act Three. Fox gossips about Karen’s Hollywood ambitions and the real reason she slept with Gould.

FOX. It’s alright, Bob. It’s okay. I see it now. It’s okay. Everything is okay. Listen to me, it’s alright. I’ll explain it to you: a beautiful, a beautiful and an ambitious woman comes to . . .

GOULD. I want you to be careful what you say about her.

FOX. It’s only words, unless they’re true. (71)

This emphasizes the primary difference between gossip and the fourth way language creates reality, lies. Gossip is by definition sensational in nature; the rumors may be exaggerated but they tend to be truer than outright lies.

Lies

Mamet believes that gossip is meant to help create a more understandable, comfortable world, while telling lies is meant to create a false reality in order to benefit the speaker or bring harm to the speaker’s subject/listener. Savran commented to Mamet, “In your plays the through-line is so strong that the characters can be saying things that are very different from what is really being communicated in the subtext.” Mamet replies, “That’s why theatre’s like life, don’t you think? No one really says what they mean, but they always mean what they mean” (*In Their Own Words* 137). There is a hidden reality the opposite of that being created by what people or dramatic characters say; real people and Mamet’s characters lie.

Mamet observes that the American legal system, which on the surface is the search for truth and justice, is crippled by the presence of untruths. “You know the whole notion of American jurisprudence is that you can’t determine who is telling the truth. That’s not the job of the jury. The jury is supposed to decide which side has made the best case” (Norman and Rezek 125). Arguably the winner at trial is the attorney who creates the most compelling version of reality, a case that may be composed of lies and distortions made in order to seek victory. As his father was a labor lawyer, Mamet has special insight into the practice of law. He believes that The Lie is part of the American system of justice, and as such it threatens to destroy any chance of finding the truth necessary for justice. Pseudo-facts are created by the best lawyer/liar, and may the best lawyer/liar win.

Mamet sees lies everywhere in America. In an essay entitled “Semantic Chickens,” he gives examples of counter-productive realities created by false modifications of terminology. One example is labeling goods “Improved” when they have only been repackaged. A second example is politicians who defend their crimes as action taken in public interest. A third example is changing the name of the “Department of War” to the “Department of Defense.” These semantic games cause people to lose faith in words by creating a transparently false reality. Mamet concludes that a thing has a specific meaning and that reality should not be changed by altering perception through semantics that seek to subvert reality by the creation of a “kindler, gentler” world (*Writing in Restaurants* 68). People need to stop lying to themselves because nothing good can come of language used inappropriately.

Mamet believes America has a habit of using lies to create reality. “We Americans delight in self-deception. We seem, in fact, to insist upon it, in our foreign policy, in our tax code, in our traffic laws, in education, in politics, time and again confusing an advertisement with a promise” (*South of Northeast* 149). Discussing the honesty of life in a small village, Mamet writes, “The rabbis, when asked, ‘If we were to obey only one rule, which would it be?’ said, ‘Don’t lie.’ For if one cannot lie, one is unlikely to do that about which one would lie” (121-122). Lying creates a reality where undesirable actions can occur. The lack of lies creates a healthy world where people act as good, decent souls because of the inability to cover unpleasant reality with one fabricated from untruths. “Perhaps this accounts for the openness in the village faces. There is enmity and strife in village life, but, I think, little hypocrisy” (122). The smaller the world is, the more accountable the people, because there is no place to hide obvious truths with “semantic chickens.”

In order to repair the damage of lies, Mamet suggests people turn off their televisions and go to a play. “Alone among community institutions the theatre possesses the power to differentiate between truth and garbage . . . Perhaps if we went to the theatre more we might regain our faith in words” (*Writing in Restaurants* 68). Actors in particular have a responsibility to put a stop to lying, which explains the title of his acting book, *True and False*. “People, though they may not know it, come to the theatre to hear the truth and celebrate it with each other . . . His task is to tell the truth” (102). By telling truth, Mamet means speaking the words of the play, truth provided by the playwright’s work. Mamet laments the fact that most theatre disappoints in this endeavor, but it is a high calling, and when accomplished the actor should feel pride.

All of Mamet’s characters lie, leading theatre scholar Matthew C. Roudane to tell Mamet during an interview that his plays focus on negativity. Mamet says:

But it’s easy to cheer people up if you lie to them. Very easy. Acting President Reagan says he’s not going to raise taxes. Of course he’s going to raise taxes, he has to raise taxes. Although it’s easy to cheer people up by lying to them, in my plays I’m not interested in doing that. I’m not a doctor; I’m a writer. (“David Mamet” 182-183)

Truth can be negative, but it does more harm than good to create a false positive reality through lies, so while Mamet’s characters lie to each other, Mamet the playwright will never lie to his audience.

In an article on American realism, Michael L. Quinn states that the theatrical act in Mamet’s plays is everyday deception, using the lie’s illusion to gain advantage. Mamet’s dialogue creates a world full of lies that must eventually come undone. Quinn refers to this process as “a dissenting American anti-theatricality, designed to affirm [Mamet’s] characters’ self-constitutive, performative actions but also to reveal the destructiveness of lies” (241). Characters lie so that audiences can infer the truth. The three characters in *Speed-the-Plow* lie, but Fox only lies about professional matters; Karen and Gould lie to each other about personal relationships.

Gould jokingly reprimands Fox for “kissing my ass,” code for telling the boss what he wants to hear, usually lies. Fox replies, “My job *is* kissing your ass,” to which Gould replies, “And don’t you forget it” (31). Fox is also the only one of the three who is honest about his deception. Gould says, “You’re full of shit,” and Fox replies, “I know I am” (72). Aware of his own deceit, Fox also serves as a bullshit detector for the audience, catching Gould in a series of lies.

Fox receives a promise before the play begins from the actor Doug Brown. He has Brown’s word, now he wants Gould’s.

FOX. Ross, Ross, Ross isn’t going to fuck me out of this . . . ?

GOULD. Absolutely not. You have my word.

FOX. I don’t need your word, Bob. I know *you* . . . (22-23).

But he did need Gould’s word, and the question was asked to elicit the promise. The next morning Fox reminds Gould of the promise: “. . . what we *meant*, what we were talking about was, I understand it, that we were to ‘share’ above-the-title, we would co-produce, because . . . that’s right, isn’t it?” (61). Gould responds by dropping Fox’s film. Fox attempts to win Gould over with candor, confessing that Fox has been jealous of Gould and secretly hoped one day to quit “riding . . . on your coattails” and to surpass Gould to be “*over* him.” This fails, so Fox reminds Gould of his word: “You told me yesterday that we were going to Ross to greenlight it.” Gould says, “Yes,” and Fox says, “You promised me” (64). Gould’s breaking his promise turns the promise into a lie.

Fox catches Gould in a lie when Gould claims he is staying in the office to work. “Work . . . ? You never did a day’s work in your life,” is followed by the truth, “You’re staying to put the moves on your new secretary” (34). Gould lies again, “I wasn’t *going* to hit on her,” but then Gould proceeds to force Fox to reveal why he thinks Gould’s seduction attempt would fail. Fox tells Gould the truth, which hurts him.

GOULD. You mean nobody loves me for myself.

FOX. No.

GOULD. No?

FOX. Not in *this* office. (36)

Gould, unable to accept truth, lies to himself that Karen likes him and bets Fox that Karen will sleep with Gould in hopes that the oral contract will make his lie into truth.

Fox also points out Karen’s central lie to Gould. Fox explains that everyone comes to Hollywood for one thing, power, and women like Karen get power through sex. “The broad wants power. How do I *know*? Look: She’s out with Albert Schweitzer working in the jungle? No: she’s here in movieland Nobody likes to be promoted; it’s ugly to see, but that’s what happened, babe. I’m sorry. She lured *you* in” (71). Gould perceives Karen as a missionary sent to save the sinners in Third World Hollywood, because that is how she presents herself. Fox pierces her deceit to see only an ambitious rival who needs to be unmasked by truth and crushed.

Gould’s lies to Karen begin when he assigns her to do the courtesy read of the Eastern writer’s book. “Let’s be frank: it’s probably, it’s almost definitely unsuitable, it probably *is* artsy. But as you said, maybe it isn’t. *You* read it, you’ll tell me, and I’ll tell Mr. Ross.” He says he’ll need a report on it that night (45). His frankness is truth, but it is camouflaged in the midst of the lie that he will seriously consider her report, and that the report is why he wants her to come to his house when he only wants sex. “Fine. Tonight, I’m going to be home. When you’re finished, you bring the report to me and we’ll discuss it” (45). This is proved a lie as the act ends and Gould directs Karen to call Fox

and tell him that “. . . he owes me five hundred bucks” (46). In his mind he has already seduced Karen and won the bet.

In response to Karen’s report, Gould lies by saying he wants to help her. “And, whatever, I’m saying, if I can, that you would like to do, in, in the *Studio*, if you would like to do it, if I can help you with it, then I would like to help you” (51). He carefully qualifies the lie so that if she confronts him with his own words in the future, he can point to his use of the word “if” in his promise to help her. Mamet treats Gould’s “if you would like to do it” as a subliminal play on words. Since Gould bet Fox he can seduce Karen, Gould does not want to help her; he wants to “do it,” or have sex with her.

Gould points out repeatedly to Karen that he is being honest or “frank” with her, but he is lying when he tells her he speaks truth. He cannot stop lying to her. When Karen confesses that she knew he asked her home for sex, he denies it. She says “Why lie? You don’t have to lie.” He ignores her, replying, “But you’re wrong” (57). Gould cannot confess to dishonesty because his entire world is a lie. Gould states in Act One that he prayed to be pure. Karen points this out in Act Two, and he replies “I was joking” – i.e. lying. Karen sees past his joke/lie. “I looked in your heart. I saw you” (59). But then, she’s lying, too. Gould’s lies hide the fact that he is not a confident, powerful movie mogul, but a weak, lonely, lost, and bad person. She promises she can dispel that, which is her lie, because that is not what she wants, as we discover at the play’s end.

Karen’s lies begin when she declares herself “naïve” upon failing to secure Gould’s lunch reservation at the Coventry. She repeats the label, prompting Gould to say it is naïve of her to assume that values and principles have anything to do with making movies. “Now, we could talk about purity or we could turn the page. What do you want to do?” Karen replies, “Talk about purity” (44). She states a preference to talk about the absence of lies, but she says this in the midst of a performance, as later she admits she only pretended naïveté. On the surface she came to his house merely to report on the book, as her employer requested, but her real reason under the subterfuge, is to get what she wants, power in Hollywood. “I knew what the deal was. I know you wanted to sleep with me. You’re right, I came anyway; you’re right” (57). She says, “I shouldn’t act as though I was naïve. I shouldn’t act as though I believed you” (58). This shows that she has now realized that her entire performance in Act One was a lie.

Karen faces Gould’s lie of an offer to help her career with the studio with an honest request, to work on the film adaptation of the radiation book. But within this is the lie, “I don’t care in what capacity . . . But I’d just like, it would be so important to me, to *be* there” (52). She goes on to say she’d even just get coffee, which she proved inept at in Act One, but the truth is she wants the same thing as Fox, co-producer credit with her name above the title.

Karen presents the radiation book’s contents as truth in the face of the world’s self-deception. The book states that the end of the world is now. “They aren’t to come, the Dark Ages – they are now. We’re living them . . . it’s true, and you needn’t deny it . . .” (49-50). Humanity has lied to itself because of the fear of death, but facing truth cures humanity of fear and doubt in ways lies never can. The book’s truth is that things in the world as we know them are over. “Of course they are. Do you see? We don’t have to *deny* it . . . The *power* that this thought will release . . .in, in *everyone*. Something which speaks to them . . . this book spoke to *me*. It *changed* me . . .” (55). This is Karen’s biggest lie because she does not believe in the book’s philosophy, calling a passage she reads by mistake, “No, that’s the wrong bit” (80). Not truth, but a bit, as in a bit of dialogue that an actor performs for an audience.

In an essay called “Between Men and Women,” Mamet writes of how different forms of the

written word can create either an environment of love or hate for people in relationships. His belief in language's power to create reality is why Mamet does not write detailed set descriptions. "I never write stage directions. I don't care about them. I figure that most of what needs to be said is being said in the dialogue. Beyond that, decisions are going to be made by the director and designer anyway" (Schvey 70).

Mamet essays like "Self-Help" illuminate his theory that language creates reality; it discusses "mind-cults, pseudoreligions, and – to a lesser extent – 'self-help' forums" as presenting "an authoritative adult to listen to." Listening to this person's use of language can do good by making a stress-free world, states Mamet, in that "the organizations to which I refer offer a great boon: they allay anxiety, the sickness of the age" (*Make-Believe Town* 163). But horrible wrongs can also be justified by the power to shape perception with words. Mamet likens these organizations to a stage magician uttering the word "Abracadabra," in that they generate "a mechanism to allow [speaker and audience] to suspend their knowledge of the world and do what they knew was wrong." Mamet offers as examples Germany's following of and delight in *Der Fuhrer*, and the Israelites' construction of the Gold Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai (165-166).

From his non-dramatic writings and interview comments to his script for *Speed-the-Plow*, this chapter has examined Mamet's theories on how characters use language to create reality. Mamet's poetic sensibilities shave off verbal layers until a new world created by language stands onstage. The characters use labels, the act of speaking, gossip and lies to create a friendlier world where their schemes can succeed, and where they can be transformed from losers to winners. The next chapter examines these attempts at transformation through dialogue by examining Mamet's theory that dramatic language creates character.

CHAPTER FOUR

LANGUAGE CREATES CHARACTER IN *OLEANNA*

“In the ten years since its original production, David Mamet’s *Oleanna* has continued to challenge and disturb its audiences,” begins a review of a production by Hydeware Theatre in St. Louis, MO in June of 2002. “While [Mamet] persists in his claims that *Oleanna* centers on the concept of academia as a utopia, critics and audiences continue to use the play as a starting point for discussions of sexual harassment, political correctness, and contemporary gender relationships” (McIntire-Strassburg 1). Why listen to the author, eh? Mamet’s play, coming out at the time of the Clarence Thomas – Anita Hill hearings about workplace sexual harassment and its relation to the judge’s character, is his most controversial and has sparked outrage.

It is rare for Mamet to come right out and state explicitly what one of his plays is about, but he did so with *Oleanna* only to have audiences and critics largely ignore him. I believe this is because directors are not leading actors in creating the characters in performance as Mamet has written them. The actors have built their stage identities out of alignment with Mamet’s conception, and so because the characters are not who they are supposed to be, the audience does not see the play as the playwright intended. Clues to character are in Mamet’s dramatic language; following the character analysis methodology I have devised in this chapter for *Oleanna* can help actors accurately build characters in all Mamet plays and films.

Mamet sees the reaction of outrage to *Oleanna* as mostly due to gender relations – men and women cannot just get along. Mamet says that men and women “seem to be terrified of each other in . . . in the main. What can one say? What can’t one say? How does one behave correctly? And I think that, that the amount of anger and repression this causes in both men and women is, is enormous . . . ” (Bragg 143-144). By repression Mamet means that people repress what they naturally want to say, which suppresses who they are because identity is created by one’s use of language. If someone controls what you say, they control who you are. It is the fear of this suppression – i.e., control – of identity that sparks the anger between genders. The physical violence of the professor John against the student Carol is precipitated by a perceived attempt to erase identity. The threat to his existence through control of language is as great as that posed by a gun, and so he protects his identity in any way possible.

The plot of *Oleanna* involves a student, Carol, who is failing a class taught by John. Carol comes to his office without an appointment seeking help. John is distracted because he is about to be awarded tenure and is making arrangements to buy a new home. After the meeting, Carol accuses John of sexual harassment, threatening his tenure appointment. In the second act, Carol comes to John’s office at his request. He hopes to persuade her into withdrawing her complaint. She refuses, and when she attempts to leave, John physically restrains her. Carol screams for help. In the third act, Carol once more comes to John’s office and the two argue. The conflict escalates until John physically assaults Carol to the point where he is about to kill her. He stops, returns to his desk, sits, and the play ends with both characters stunned at what has happened.

Because Mamet provides little or no back story about his dramatic characters, successful analysis of his characters can prove a daunting task; however, actors must know clearly what the character does and how that action contributes to the play’s action overall. By expanding upon my earlier analysis of Mamet’s use of language to create character, I have designed an approach that I

believe will restore balance to the play's action and help to ensure that the concepts Mamet hoped to address emerge clearly in production.

I will argue that Carol is *Oleanna*'s protagonist, a victim of abuse by the pedagogical empire represented by her antagonist professor, John. Carol, at first seduced by John's power, realizes she is only cringing in fear of John's use of the weapon that is language. She decides to battle his abuse of power with his own weapons, fire with fire, verbs with verbs, and labels with labels. At the play's end, John's abandonment of language in favor of a physical assault signals Carol's victory. Like a victorious sumo-linguist, she has driven him from the arena of language.

The play, however, is not as simple as my plot synopsis might indicate. One complication is that Carol's sexual harassment accusation against John is highly debatable and her rape accusation is more metaphoric than literal; John stood a good chance of successfully defending himself before the Tenure Committee and vindicating himself in a court of law. John could have won, but instead chose to undeniably assault Carol, an assault for which there will be severe punishment. Carol's tag line is also puzzling – she seems to be agreeing with John, acquiescing to a deserved spanking for being a very bad girl.

Focusing on Mamet's theories of how language creates character suggests resolutions to these complications and seeming inconsistencies. In his view, language creates identity, both our real world personalities and those of dramatic characters on stage and screen. Actors preparing to play Mamet roles have three avenues to pursue in order to establish successful interpretations of Mamet's character. These three avenues follow from the ways Mamet uses dramatic language to create character. First, what do other characters say about the character, or who others think the character is? Secondly, what does the character say about herself, or how does she define herself? Finally, what are the characters' speech mannerisms? Like characters in plays by other great playwrights, how they say what they say creates their identity more than anything else. For that reason it is especially important to attend to the significance Mamet himself places on these elements of dramaturgy and performance, and their connection to the everyday world of relationships.

What Others Say About Us

According to Mamet, one way in which language creates character onstage and identity in the real world is by what other people say about a person. This can be especially indicative of personality because the first person observes the second person's actions and based on those actions formulates an idea about the second person's identity. One character watches what another does, from these actions interprets identity, and then issues these "identity definitions" in proclamations either to us or other people. To Mamet what others say about a character is more reliable information as to identity than what the character says about herself.

Mamet's dialogue "is a major means to indicate any character's self-awareness and moral insight, and so his chance for connection with others" (Carroll, *David Mamet* 22). The characters who excel at self-description and the best talkers are also the best at self-deception. Carroll describes these characters as deluded, using "an imposed idiom which derives mostly from social masks and social role-playing" that ultimately serves as a barrier to self-knowledge (22). The better the characters are at describing themselves, the less they know about themselves, so what they say about themselves cannot be trusted.

Mamet proposes that this is true in the real world as well, with the exception of those who want something and lie to get it. Mamet believes people are more likely to lie about themselves in order to promote their personal agenda rather than lying about someone else. Exceptions could include

flattering someone in order to get something out of them, as when a salesperson lies to a customer in order to make a sale.

Mamet theorizes that the names and labels other people use when addressing us play a large part in how we see ourselves, whether this be flattery, a personal nickname, a racial epithet, or gender designation. If someone calls you something, for instance a “jerk,” to some extent you become a jerk. If someone calls a man a “great guy,” to some extent that “guy” becomes “great.” This is why the flattery of salespeople, even if we acknowledge subconsciously it is probably untrue, is so welcome. Mamet writes:

We step onto the car dealer’s lot to play out a drama. It is our infrequent opportunity to be made much of, to be courted. We don’t want to hear about the design of the engine, we want to hear how smart we are A car salesman who mocked or ignored our clamor for seduction would starve, as much as he or she was able to speak about things automotive. (*3 Uses* 23-24)

In Mamet’s view, we like to hear we are smart because someone else saying this makes us smart. Truth or merit is irrelevant. The successful sales person tells us what we want to hear about ourselves, reinforcing our sense of identity as a smart person for choosing to buy this model car, a beautiful person especially with these beauty products, or a slim person for buying these clothes or this exercise equipment. We lie to ourselves, and the salesperson reinforces our self-deception, making this concocted identity more concrete.

Nicknames can have a powerful effect on how others perceive our identity. Imagine a man is going on a blind date, and he is told the potential significant other’s nickname is “Hot Stuff.” He is more likely to be excited to meet Hot Stuff because the nickname leads him to believe s/he is someone who is sexually desirable, with a passionate, volatile nature. Whether he believes this upon meeting Hot Stuff is irrelevant, but he and Hot Stuff are more likely to accept the hotness as fact because of the reputation of the nickname which preceded Hot Stuff’s appearance. The nickname is an abbreviated description meant to be a truer reflection of someone’s personality than her given name.

Mamet writes of the power of nicknames to establish identity when he tells a story about taking a hunting class in Cabot, Vermont. A fellow student thought Mamet’s name was Mike, and so whenever the fellow ran into David he would call him Mike. Mamet never corrected the fellow because he derived pleasure from the misnomer. “I think everyone I ever met named Mike was a good fellow. Further, I think I have, if only in the restricted locus of my own fantasy, accepted it as my Cabot nickname” (*South of Northeast* 88). David likes being called Mike because the nickname makes him feel as though he is a better person, a “good fellow.”

Nicknames can have a positive or negative effect on identity, whereas name-calling based in race or gender is typically negative. Mamet is Jewish, and therefore he is most sensitive to racial slurs aimed at Jewish people, even those he writes in his own plays and films. Medved notes that the dialogue in the film *Homicide* “is brutally honest,” to which his interview subject and the movie’s star, Joe Mantegna, replies:

Absolutely. I’m not saying it was David’s intention to shock anybody, but I know people who are afraid to say the word “Jew.” It drives them nuts. It’s always the “Jewish people,” the “Jewish this.” David said, “I’m going to call a Jew a Jew. People use this word behind closed doors, so I’m going to put it in a film.” As opposed to “You can’t say that in a movie!” And that’s one reason I’m always in such awe of him. (14)

The act of calling someone a “Jew” seems to redefine that person, changing him from a person into a stereotype, erasing his individual attributes and replacing them with false qualities. Mantegna’s interview responses lead me to believe that a racial slur can be more a case of identity theft than someone who takes a person’s given name and credit card number to make illegal purchases. The latter is only stealing money, whereas the racial slur steals a person’s identity by replacing his actual characteristics with inaccurate attributes. Perhaps racial and gender slurs should be called identity assault.

Gender slurs are as common as racial slurs. While Mamet’s male characters use many more gender slurs for the women of his world than the female characters do towards the male, in an essay called “Bad Boys” Mamet examines the negative impact of sexist slurs aimed at men. The essay is an examination of male-female relationships and verbal attacks against males by women, especially when women call men “macho.” Mamet observes that in the 1970s and 1980s all men were accused of being “macho,” a bad thing synonymous with being selfish, uncaring, and unfeeling towards others, women in particular; however, Mamet believes *all* people are naturally arrogant, uncaring and selfish. “It is a trick of the controlling person or organization to accuse the individual of those traits which are universal” (*Jafsie* 96). Mamet goes on to explain that if a person were truly arrogant, he would not care about other people’s feelings or the accusation of machismo, but the person innocent of the charge “can be upset and/or controlled by accusations of arrogance and selfishness” (97). An innocent man will do all in his power to refute this label and prove he is not a “macho” man.

Mamet explores this concept further in another essay entitled “Six Hours of Perfect Poker.” The sexist slur has the power to sell, transforming a low-selling, plain tee shirt into a best-selling hot item, because the negative language label is aimed at a target approved for destruction, the “macho” male. Says Mamet, “A lot of drivel has been written in our lifetime about the word ‘macho’; which word seems to mean not only ‘male and degenerate-ludicrous’ but ‘male and therefore degenerate and ludicrous.’” While in Cambridge, Mamet spied tee shirts and bumper stickers derogatory towards men on sale in a food shop. At first he thought “such divisiveness and confrontation wasn’t very nice,” so he spoke to the clerk, pointing out where the word “men” replaced on the items being marketed by “for example, some racial designation, I think you would see that the materials in question are in rather poor taste.” The clerk replied that they sure sell “a lot of ‘em” (*Jafsie* 23). The appellation of “macho” is especially heinous to Mamet. However the label is intended, its use transforms the identity of the person to whom it is affixed, especially in the eyes of a listener told by another person that a third party is “macho.” In the eyes of the listener, the third party becomes whatever negative icon the listener believes being “macho” entails.

Once the label is affixed, says Mamet, the person to whom it adheres has a hard if not impossible task when it comes to refutation and dislodging of it, much like that old saying, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” This is how powerful the definitions of one person given by another, or what one person says about another to a third party, can be. Mamet writes:

We have all had the experience of liking a girl, or boy, from afar, and having a friend say, “Oh, he or she is a snob,” or of a potential business partner, “He’s a deadbeat,” et cetera, and it is then well-nigh impossible to separate those labels from our feelings about the person in question *irrespective of how that person acts.* (*Some Freaks* 60)

Mamet also states that if we are told that an apprentice has in secret millions of dollars, we can never see her the same again, because of the “endowment” the words have now given her.

What We Say About Ourselves

The old joke goes, “How do you tell when a politician is lying? His lips are moving.” Mamet views most political speeches as exercises in self-aggrandizement, with the politicians describing themselves in a manner that will win votes from listeners so that the politicians can win elections. They are not interested in accurately describing themselves, they are interested in a description that will win the election. They use words to paint a portrait of the politician they or their campaign managers believe the voter will like most. Mamet believes that what is true of politicians is true for the entire human race, for after all, are not our elected officials our “representatives?” Not only do they represent us at the capital and conduct the business of government on our behalf, they exemplify who we are as a people. The cover is not an accurate rendition of the book, and in Mamet’s world anyone who describes herself to you is either lying or completely ignorant of the true nature of her character.

Mamet sometimes describes himself in interviews in self-deprecating terms. Michael L. Quinn remarks about Mamet’s discomfort with success as displayed in “Mamet on Playwriting” in the 30.1 (Spring 1993) *Dramatist Guild Quarterly* where Mamet puts himself down. Quinn describes the self-deprecation as disingenuous and accuses Mamet of false modesty in order to maintain his status as a certain kind of writer. Mamet’s public comments about his own identity carefully craft a persona that is the opposite of Mamet’s identity so that his successful career as a writer continues. Says Quinn, “Yet such self-deprecation is precisely what Mamet’s public position requires, if he is going to maintain his status as an American writer, unique like others and therefore capable of critical self-expression” (251). In order to be society’s conscience Mamet must first attack himself. He cannot criticize the mainstream while wading in it. If Mamet were to boast he was some superhuman genius impervious to the faults of others and of pristine wit unassailable by doubt or vice, no one would listen to him. The response would be, “Who the heck does this guy think he is, a saint or something?” His self-deprecatory remarks create an identity which allows his career as a social critic to continue. When forced, Mamet describes himself in humble terms because he wants to be a successful writer, not an obnoxious braggart.

Mamet’s characters describe themselves in ways that will bring them a desired objective. Theatre critic Janet V. Haedicke notes Mamet’s male characters speak “not to communicate but to dominate, ‘not to speak the desire but to speak that which is most likely to bring about the desire’” (88). Haedicke writes that Mamet does not believe characters walk into rooms and tell other characters what they want. My illustration of this theory would be as follows: a character named Bob and another named Mark are onstage. Bob wants Mark’s jacket. Mamet would not have Bob say, “I am cold, give me your jacket.” There is nothing in it for Mark. Instead, Bob says, “That jacket makes you look fat. That girl you fancy is about to walk in. I’m a nice guy, why don’t you let me wear your jacket, that way she won’t think you are fat.” Mark is more likely to give up his jacket because now he has a reason.

Mamet is against others boasting as well as himself. Mamet writes that one must be smart to hunt successfully, but “The successful hunter does not boast his triumph over nature, rather he acknowledges his acceptance of its laws, and endeavors to better understand them” (*South of Northeast* 20). If you boast about your skill, your language creates your identity: it makes you a braggart. As discussed on page 18 of Chapter One in this dissertation, the king in *No One Will Be Immune* remains king until he brags about his status. The bragging transforms the king into “one who boasts” as much as frolicking with canines made Kevin Costner into he who “Dances with Wolves.” In Mamet’s example, the hunter describing his own prowess marks himself as a boaster – one who displays

negative qualities of egocentricity, narcissistic aggression towards others and nature, and a need to dominate – rather than as a noble hunter in harmony with nature.

Someone with self-awareness feels no compulsion to describe himself to others. When people describe themselves, while one cannot trust what they say, one can deduce the nature of their character. The trick, Mamet believes, is in the reflection: the truth of their identity is the opposite of their self-description. If a man tells a woman he is great in bed, the opposite is true; he is a lousy lay. Consider Mamet's description of Aaronow in *Glengarry Glen Ross*:

He's the one who comes the closest to being the character of a *raisonneur*, for throughout the play he's saying, "I don't understand what's going on," "I'm no good," "I can't fit in here," "I'm incapable of either grasping those things I should or doing those things I've grasped." Or his closing lines, "Oh, God, I hate this job." It's a kind of monody throughout the play. Aaronow has some degree of conscience, some awareness. He's troubled. Corruption troubles him. (Roudane, "David Mamet" 179)

Mamet's description of Aaronow's character and Aaronow's description of himself are diametrically opposed, but Aaronow senses his true nature as "one who does not belong in this office." That is true because he alone is not corrupt and has a working moral compass. Aaronow, however, never describes himself as a man of conscience; we cannot trust what he says about himself, we must look at what is the opposite of his self-description.

Contained in anything is its opposite. Actors building Mamet characters need to first establish how the characters define themselves then reverse that description. In *The Village* a store owner thinks about how his customers will appreciate the fire burning in his wood stove of an afternoon. "And then he was frightened, for it had been proved to him that every certainty concealed its opposite; and a goddess more wrathful and immediate than Nemesis watched for the least sign of assurance on the part of Man" (56).

Theatre scholar William DeMastes notes that Mamet shows language as a tool to create a self out of joint with reality, deceiving others and even self about one's true nature, creating character out of language rather than out of action or objective reality.

Mamet's view on language . . . is that it widens the breach, that language has reached a point where it fails to function as desired and fails ultimately not only in allowing people to communicate but also in permitting individuals even to 'communicate' to themselves. It has become an unwilling, unintentional means of self-deceit. (71)

Mamet's characters use their language as aggressive masks to hide behind while dominating and manipulating others. The characters use language to avoid ruminating about their past experiences, thus lying to themselves about what constitutes their identities; the language becomes the identity instead of the accumulation of experiences. The characters shield others and themselves from intimate knowledge. Theatre scholar Dennis Carroll claims that "Especially in the 'Chicago' plays, the verve of the dialogue which comes from the impulse to self-assertion and justification has the secondary function of typecasting various 'associates' into cartoons" (*David Mamet* 22-23). Camouflaging personal identity leads to less exposure of vulnerable spots for other characters to attack. Carroll is saying that Mamet characters use language to define themselves in a way beneficial to them while simultaneously relegating other characters into two-dimensional stereotypes who are then easily defeated.

She Says, He Says: Cross-labeling in *Oleanna*

With Mamet's theory that what we say about ourselves and what others say about us combine to create identity in mind, an actor in a Mamet play can begin character research by first stating how other characters define his/her character, and then reinforce these definitions through contrast and comparison with how the character defines him/herself. For *Oleanna*, we begin with John. The following list is compiled from character lines in the play:

Act 1

Carol on John

You don't forget things
You don't have to apologize to me
You can't fail me
You have to help me
You think I'm nothing, stupid,
 that I'll never learn
You are right to think negative
 thoughts of me
You don't and can't know what
 I am talking about
You have more important things
 to do than deal with me
You have people who are proud
 of you

John on John

I'm well aware and sure
I owe you an apology and am sorry
I forget things
I have no desire but to help you
I understand
I am a human being
I don't treat you like a child
I used to think of myself as stupid, bad,
 incapable of learning, unworthy,
 incompetent and a failure
I like you, we're similar
I hated school and teachers
I don't tell people education is a waste of
 time, I love education
I am a fuckup, no goddamn good
I ignored you, my student
I'm sorry to interrupt you
I am an oppressed, unjustly taxed White
 Man
I question the value of higher education
I'm not lecturing you, just sharing thoughts

In this act, Carol defines John as someone of great importance who has power over her and a support group who are proud of him. She is trying to get his help and is saying that which she thinks will bring her what she desires, which is a passing grade. John describes himself as a fallible human who has much in common with Carol and is a victim of the same system of higher education that is victimizing Carol. He is seeking to cast himself in a favorable light and to get her out of his office so he can pursue his new house and job security through tenure. Theatre scholar Ruby Cohn observes that John tries to craft for himself an identity which Carol refuses. "The student is deaf to the professor's repetitive insistence on the gentleness of his pedagogy . . ." (*Anglo-American Interplay* 68).

As the play progresses into the second act, the conflict between the two characters intensifies. The life and death struggle to define self and other has begun.

Act 2

Carol on John

You want to force, bribe, convince
me to retract
You are sexist, elitist, time-wasting,
self-aggrandizing, theatrical,
sexist
You closeted me to discuss sex, em-
braced me and confessed you like
me
You drag students into your office
and force them to listen to your
incorrect critiques and boring
stories
You misused your power so it has
been taken from you
You are vile, classist, manipula-
tive, pornographic
You strut, posture, perform, play
patriarch, and treat students with
whimsy
transgress norms, deviate, mock
and destroy while finding yourself
charming
You are exploitative and devoid
of inner honesty

John on John

I am a skilled teacher who loves to teach and
perform, the opposite of the cold, rigid
instructor; I go against established beliefs
I hurt, angered and humiliated you
I covet tenure and security for my family,
not for myself
We are the same
Teachers hurt me when I was a student
I am pedantic
I'm not a bogeyman, not a symbol
I am hurt, shocked, and confused by you
I have unflinching concern for your dignity
want to know how I hurt you and how to
make amends
I'm not an exploiter
I want to help you
I'm trying to save you
I am flawed
I am not the subject, I don't want to fix you You
I only want to tell you what I think
I'm talking straight with you
I have no desire to hold you, just talk to you

In Act 2 Carol defines John as a dishonest, boring bully who flaunts his superiority over his students. Carol calls John a tyrant who abuses his power over students and exploits them for his own sense of gratification. John counters Carol's definition by calling himself a rebel educator, sympathetic because he is like Carol in many ways. John identifies himself as someone Carol should trust, not fear. John claims the labels of non-exploitative, skilled, concerned, apologetic, empathetic; he says he is a selfless soul only concerned with the well-being of others, especially his family, students, and on the top of his list, Carol.

They are contesting to see who defines whom, and the one who wins and the content of their victorious label - be it sexist-paternal-classicist or concerned family man-super teacher - decides the personal and societal futures of both characters. We now see that the setting in academia - where words really matter and are the material of study - begins to achieve larger importance.

Act 3

Carol on John

You are negligent, guilty, wanting, in error, to be punished for your own actions
You want to charm me into recanting
You worked 20 years for power so you could mock and insult and be paid for it
You want unlimited power
You are not God
You believe in nothing
You believe in an elitist, protected hierarchy which rewards you and for whom you are a clown
You are wrong
You touched me with sexual content
You little yapping fool
You want to talk about your job
You are enraged
You are a Free Person
You are a sex criminal

John on John

I asked you here against my better judgment
I don't want you to leave, I want to profit you
I will owe you a debt if you stay and hear me out
I feel you are owed an apology
I never flirt
I believe in freedom of thought
I hate you
I don't understand your argument about power
I touched you devoid of sexual content
I can change, I'm not too old to learn
I am a teacher, I have a responsibility to my profession and my son
I owe you a debt for filing these charges
My job is to say no to you
I got turned around but I got it figured out and now I am fine
I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole

In Act 3, Carol says that John is negligent, mocking, insulting and power-hungry. John defines himself as a helpful teacher, one who owes Carol an apology, and one who does not abuse power over students. He says he believes in freedom of thought. However, once John sees that his attempt to persuade Carol to drop her complaint is doomed, his self-definition changes. John begins now to paint himself as a noble teacher standing up in defense of Higher Education. He calls himself an educational martyr, willing to sacrifice himself in the fight against education's Nemesis, which he now defines as Carol. The characters see one another in terms that counter their self-descriptions. The descriptions shift on both sides, which destabilizes our perception of their identities over time.

The next list focuses on Carol's self-descriptions and contrasts them with John's statements as to her identity:

Act 1

John on Carol

You are right
You are an incredibly bright girl
You're angry
You are not stupid
You want to know about your grade
You paid attention in class, you

Carol on Carol

I'm trying; I do everything I'm told
I have trouble with language in class
I have problems
I am socially and economically different
I have to pass this course
I do everything I'm told, but don't understand anything you write or say

are not a failure
I like you
You want to be exact
You believe higher education is an
unassailable good
You can understand statistics and
charts

I came here to learn
I'm stupid
Nobody wants me, I'm a failure who
produces only garbage
I am pathetic
I lack the capacity to grasp your concepts
I want to know about my grade
I am in your way and unimportant
I take notes on this conversation because I
want to do well in class
I can't understand statistics and charts
I smile all the time in class but can't
comprehend anything
I am bad

In Act 1 John describes Carol as an incredibly bright student, able to follow the language and concepts of the class. She is an attentive, scrupulous young lady who stubbornly views the current education system as unassailably good, and is angered by John's educational philosophy. John observes that Carol is one who is concerned about her grade to the extent she can't concentrate on anything else. Carol defines herself as a pathetic failure too stupid to produce anything but garbage. She states that she is an earnest student but unequal to the demands of the class because of her personal problems and challenges. At the end of the act, her definition shifts, and she calls herself a "bad" person.

Act 2

John on Carol

You don't have your own family
You have a right to make your
complaint, but it will be
dismissed
You find me pedantic. You are
angry with me
You are upset
You have filed a ludicrous complaint
You are hurt and angry
You are not a deranged revolutionary
It is not your job to fix me
You are human and imperfect
You should not feel ashamed you
needed a group's support
You will make a fool of yourself

Carol on Carol

I don't need your help
I don't think I need anything from you
I don't care what you feel or think
I am a hardworking student who slaved
and sacrificed to get to school only to be
mocked by teachers
I'm sorry I was discourteous to you
I shouldn't have come here
I need help because I'm being attacked

Carol is transformed between Act 1 and 2. From her lines we see she has discovered the power of language to create the identity of others and her own character. She is now ready to do battle with

John and begins to manipulate him. Carol and John interpret his Act 1 actions differently; he says the physical contact was benign, she calls it assault. Carol files an official complaint with the university. Theatre scholar Robert J. Andreach writes, “She becomes the teacher, instructing him in the uses and abuses of power. Losing his job, he has lost power. By reporting him to the tenure committee, which ruled in her favor, she has gained it” (99). Michael L. Quinn writes that Carol’s “accusation of the teacher may be her new discovery of the power of expressive speech to transform her into a stronger person” (247-248).

In Act 2 John defines Carol as angry and upset. Theatre critic John Lahr agrees with John’s assessment of Carol, writing that Carol “demands meaning but hasn’t the language to define her feelings to herself or to the world. Her adamant dimness is rightly interpreted by John as anger” (“Review Orpheum” 1327). John notes Carol is one who sees herself as a revolutionary out to “fix” him, but that she is actually not. He says she is one who has no family of her own, only a group, which he implies is inferior to an actual family, as support. Carol defines herself as a hardworking student who slaved and sacrificed to get to school only to be ridiculed by her teacher. In short, she defines herself as a victim.

Act 3

John on Carol

You were good to come
 You do not have feelings
 You are a frightened, repressed,
 confused, abandoned young thing
 of doubtful sexuality, hungry for
 power and revenge
 You have much good in your
 complaint against me
 You are dangerous and wrong
 You vicious little bitch; you are
 political correctness and
 destroyer of my life
 You little cunt

Carol on Carol

I don’t need to meet with you, I only
 came because you asked
 I am shocked and surprised
 I am right and will not recant
 I speak for my Group, their hurt; not for
 me and my pain
 I came here to instruct, not to gloat
 I overcame economic and sexual prejudice
 to come to school and am in danger of
 having you take it away from me
 I don’t want revenge, I want understanding
 I can be your friend if you do as I say
 I understand your rage, though I don’t feel it
 myself, don’t think I deserve it, and don’t
 resent it
 I find your book questionable
 I am only interested in your actions, not
 your feelings
 I would do what I say if I were you

In Act 3 John defines Carol as a frightened, repressed, confused (especially sexually) young “thing” hungry for power and revenge. His description sinks into insult: Carol is a dangerous, vicious, politically correct destroyer of John’s life; or as John calls her, “You little cunt.” Carol counters by claiming she is one who speaks in her Group’s interest and not her own, identifying herself as a selfless crusader. She claims she is one who seeks not revenge but understanding, and she could be his friend if John does what she says. John is the object of Carol’s power: Carol demands could be

phrased as, “Do what I say or I will punish you with termination.” Their positions are now reversed: at the play’s start, John threatened Carol by delivering a message that could be taken as, “Do what I say in my class or I will punish you with a failing grade.” Rather than give in, Carol fought back and brought her oppressor to the point where words failed him. He dropped the debate, dropped Carol with a physical blow, and very nearly beat her to death.

Throughout the play, John and Carol’s labels for each other are at war; it is a contest with shifts of power – naming and resisting such naming. Actors playing these characters must think about reciprocity in the struggle and the fact that the namings are self-interested. Just as Mamet manipulates his self-description as a writer, so might he also manipulate identity descriptions of others. By analogy, one could suggest that John shaped both self-description and definitions of Carol to serve his own interest. It would be a mistake to take her at his word, or he at hers. The words of these characters are meant to manipulate each other, but actors tasked with playing these characters can follow the lists to create dynamic and potentially complex characterizations if they fully embody each moment. Having completed this step of analysis, the actor can now compare these results with the identity created by the character’s speech mannerisms.

The Body Language of Speech Mannerisms

The most telling way that language creates character is how the character speaks, the manner in which they express word symbols that serve as the building blocks for idea transference. Mamet believes this to be true in the real world as well. People create personalities by the manner in which they communicate. How one says what one says creates one’s identity.

As noted in this dissertation’s introduction, Mamet’s acting theory as expressed in *True and False* and elsewhere has caused consternation in directors, actors and critics. By examining Mamet’s theories about how character is created by the character’s speech patterns, we can enrich the creation of his stage and film characters.

Mamet’s comments on acting cause consternation and confusion because he makes contradictory statements about acting theory and what exactly is a dramatic character; however, if we begin with the notion that Mamet believes speech creates character, then look at his contradictory statements, we may be able to reconcile the contradictions and smooth out the process by which Mamet believes character is created.

Mamet points out how different ways of speaking create four distinct characters in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. “Joan intellectualizes everything, Debbie uses catchphrases, Danny jokes things away, and Bernie tries to overpower everyone” (Wetzsteon 12). Mamet later says “If you say *cunt* or *cockteaser*, what you say influences the way you think, the way you act, not the other way around” (13). A character’s speech pattern then can serve as a clue to finding ways for the actor to construct the character. If a character talks in a certain identifiable pattern or fashion, such as using profanity, that defines the moral nature of the character. If a character disparages women, he or she becomes a misogynist because of the disparaging.

To Mamet a character is defined by his or her needs. Needs lead to actions aimed at satisfying that need. Characters are not who they say they are, but instead an accumulation of actions: you are what you do despite what you say, but not despite how you say it, because the act of speaking is a physical action. In Mamet’s program notes for *Glengarry Glen Ross* he illustrates how profanity reveals a character. Mamet defends his writing’s use of profanity because he sees it as honest. “The people who speak that way tell the truth. They don’t institutionalize thought. They speak from a sense

of need” (Dean, *David Mamet: Language as Action* 34). A character spewing profanity reveals need: “In the plays I was writing, that’s how the people actually spoke. It would have been different if I had been writing bedroom farce. But I wasn’t. I was writing about different kinds of people, people whom I knew something about.” (Norman and Rezek 126-127)

Need creates character in that a character is an accumulation of actions aimed at achieving that which is needed. In discussing Teach from *American Buffalo* Mamet shows how he uses language patterns to reveal a character’s nature:

He doesn’t communicate many of his feelings very well, but neither do the intelligentsia, nor does the middle class. He certainly makes his desires known rather vehemently. I’ve always felt that all three characters in *American Buffalo* are rather transparent in that there’s nothing occult about their desires. (Dzielak 38)

In answer to what is a character, Mamet says it is action. “It’s not what they say. It’s what they do, what they’re physically trying to accomplish on the stage. Which is exactly the same way we understand a person’s character in life: not by what they say but by what they do” (Lahr, “David Mamet: The Art” 111). It is conflicting statements like this one that tend to confuse critics. On one hand he says there is no character, only lines of dialogue on a page; on the other hand, he says characters exist, only it is not what they say but what they do that defines them. But no, they are defined by what they need. The connections among these assertions are less contradictory than it first appears. Mamet says characters are an accumulation of actions committed in pursuit of need gratification. Speaking aloud is not merely a cerebral process; it is also a physical action. Speech is an action the character commits in order to fulfill a need, so how the character speaks is as indicative of character as other physical manifestations used to convey subtext, such as body language. Mamet provides an example of a character onstage approaching someone and stating that the character is an honest person, and the audience cannot believe the character. In Mamet’s plays, *how* characters tell you they are honest is the only accurate barometer for evaluating the statement. Thus a character’s particular language pattern creates the character.

Mamet says he does not even know who his characters are until they start talking. “When I write a play . . . I start from the inside out. I write scenes, with characters, but I have no idea who these characters are. Only later do I decide what they do” (Yakir 39). Mamet starts with the dialogue, and how the characters express themselves along with what they say tells Mamet who they are, what they desire, and what actions they need to perform to achieve their objectives.

The most important element of speech in creating character is rhythm. Carroll remarks that in performance the Mamet actor must produce the correct rhythms in order to communicate character intent to the audience. Carroll bases this on Mamet’s comments in an interview for *Playboy* magazine

Even more than one hears the words, what one sees is the intention of the actor as a human being; what we see in any human being is the real intention, not their overlay and what they would try and have us believe, not their attempts to manipulate us, but their real intention, and that the real intention of a person is always expressed in the rhythm of their speech. (*David Mamet* 127.)

Mamet attributes this use of rhythms to communicate character to the influence of Raymond Chandler’s dialogue, which he worked with when adapting *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

Mamet insists that acting has nothing to do with emotions as far as the actor is concerned. Mamet compares acting to music in that acting has as little to do with emotion as playing the violin. “People don’t go to the theatre to hear the emotion; they go to hear the concerto. The emotions should

take place in the *audience*. It just doesn't have to be dealt with from the actor's viewpoint" (Roudane, "David Mamet" 182). For Mamet the concerto is the play's dramatic language, composed of individual words as a melody is a collection of notes. The rhythm and sound of the actor's voice, "playing" the script, will create the emotion in the audience.

Those who disagree, as noted in my introduction, insist an actor must invest his or her own emotion into the character. Mamet believes to invest a line with preconceived emotions is interpreting the text for the audience.

There is a school of theatrical thought which asks the player to, in effect, *interpret* each line and statement for the audience, as if the line were a word in a dictionary, and the actor's job was to perform the drawing which appeared next to it – to say the word 'love' caressingly, the word 'cold' as if shivering. This is not acting. It is doing Funny Voices. (*True and False* 61)

Mamet suggests that the actor should not generate a false emotional response in solitary rehearsal and then artificially reproduce it in a scene with another actor because this rules out communication with the other actor. The measured, artificial emotional response is an attempt by actors to retain control. Mamet writes that actors must learn to lose control.

We are of course trained in our culture to hold our tongue and control our emotions and to behave in a reasonable manner. So to act one has to unlearn these habits, to train oneself to speak out, to respond quickly, to act forcefully, irrespective of what one feels . . . to create the habit . . . of giving up control and, in so doing, giving oneself up to the play. (*True and False* 22)

It is the combination of the actor and the lines of the script that create the illusion of character in the perception of the audience. An actor playing Joan of Arc, for example, can never become Joan of Arc. The actual Joan is long dead and the character is a figment of the playwright's imagination; the actor and script *do* exist, and when combined give birth to a character. "When the audience sees the steadfastness of the actress playing Joan coupled with the words of Shaw, they see majesty" (*True and False* 22). Likewise combining an actor with Arthur Miller's language creates Willy Loman and for some in the audience, the emotion of anguish.

Six former students of Mamet's became founding members of the Atlantic Theatre Company and together authored a book on acting that codifies Mamet's acting theory for beginners. As to Mamet's assertion that character does not exist, they write, "In the theatre, character is an *illusion* created by the words and given circumstances supplied by the playwright and the physical actions of the actor." They conclude that audiences are willing to suspend disbelief when asked.

If an audience is told you are the King of France, unless you violate the spirit of the play, it will accept the fact . . . Remember that is *you* onstage, not some mythical being called the character. For your purposes, the character exists on the printed page for analysis only. If you have done your analysis and memorized your lines, you have fulfilled your obligation to the script and the illusion of your character will emerge. (Bruder, Cohn, Olnek, Pollack, Previto and Zigler 74-75)

Mamet applauded their book, stating in the 1985 introduction, "It is the best book on acting written in the last twenty years" (X).

Mamet bases his theory that the physical presence of the actor combined with the play's dramatic language creates the illusion of character on Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's theory of

montage. In explaining the way most American films are made, which is the camera following the protagonist around, documenting his actions as though he were real, Mamet offers an alternative method which sheds light on his belief that language creates the illusion of character. Mamet describes Eisenstein's method:

This method has nothing to do with following the protagonist around but rather is *a succession of images juxtaposed so that the contrast between these images moves the story forward in the mind of the audience*. This is a fairly succinct rendition of Eisenstein's theory of montage You always want to tell the story in cuts. Which is to say, through a juxtaposition of images that are basically uninflected. Mr. Eisenstein tells us that the best image is an uninflected image. A shot of a teacup. A shot of a spoon. A shot of a fork. (*On Directing Film 2*)

It is not an angry teacup, a weak spoon, or an adoring fork. When we compare the above quote to Mamet's character theory, we can decipher his meaning and give the Mamet actor a tangible and realizable goal towards which to stride.

Mamet states it is "the juxtaposition in the mind of the audience between the spoken word of the author and the simple directed-but-uninflected action of the actor which creates the ineluctable idea of character in the mind of the audience." This ineluctable idea Mamet also calls "the *illusion of character*" (*True and False* 10). As in Eisenstein's theory of montage, we have two disparate elements that, when placed in proximity, result in a third quantity created in the imagination of the audience. The uninflected image becomes the uninflected actions, a combination of speaking, physical blocking and positioning. By uninflected Mamet means the actor should not inject preconceived, artificial emotional responses.

This does not mean the actor has no emotions, as Mamet seems to suggest. It means, as Mamet's former students note, that a character is not an emotion. Actors should not describe their characters by their emotions, such as "I am Carol, I am an angry young woman," or "I am John, a smug, self-satisfied teacher." Emotion and character are both the result of action:

Once you accept that there is no such thing as a correct emotion for a given scene, you will have divested yourself of the burden of becoming emotional. When you've learned to place your attention on the other person, your inchoate feelings about the scene will manifest themselves in a way specific to the moment at hand. (Bruder, Cohn, et al. 71)

The authors warn actors against "constantly monitoring how well you are doing . . ." Instead they urge that "If you learn to act in spite of what you are feeling, you will bring yourself to life in the scene and develop a strong will in the process" (72). They conclude by stating that the actor's "one and only job is to follow through on your *action*" (73). The action, combined with words, creates the illusion of character in the mind of the audience. It is not the actor's job to create or breathe life into a character. The dramatic language in montage with the uninflected actions of the actor, are used by the audience's imagination to create character.

Speech in Oleanna

Now the actor in a Mamet play needs to put everything together: what the character says about herself, what other characters say about her, and the speech mannerisms of the character. In this section I will look at how other critics and scholars have defined the characters in *Oleanna* and contrast their conclusions with my own drawn from the analysis of Mamet's expressed theory about how dramatic language creates characters in his scripts.

Writing of Mametspeak in general, Douglas Bruster states that "Mamet's dramatic language . . .

is explosive, abrupt, staccato, and sharp. His characters also speak in short, choppy phrases indicative of their unstable mental process” (Bruster 338). This is especially true in *Oleanna*. The fragmented, interrupted, overlapping play of words between John and Carol reveals who they each are more effectively than any label – self or otherwise generated.

“Mamet has granted narrative or plot no more than a secondary role in the great majority of his works, spotlighting dialogue instead, and thereby shifting from a sort of Aristotelian philosophy that argues humans reveal themselves through their actions to one that argues humans reveal themselves through speech” (DeMastes 68). Because of this Mamet has a “sensitivity to language that defines and confines his characters” in plays that are “striking tone poems of betrayal, loss, and renewal . . .” (Kane, *Weasels* 2). Both John and Carol express betrayal by the Other: Carol says her teacher has betrayed her by ridiculing her educational goals; John expresses that he has been betrayed by a student filing (to him) false accusations to his employers. Carol expresses a loss of control and existential merit; John says that he experiences a loss of power, security and material wealth. Carol states that she experiences a sense of renewal with her gaining of power in Acts 2 and 3, and by her ultimate defeat of John at play’s end; John temporarily displays a renewal of purpose and vigor before the final mistake of physically assaulting her costs him everything. “Character matters here,” Bigsby writes of earlier Mamet plays, “but it is expressed primarily through fragmenting verbal cues: hesitations, sudden silences, tone, rhythm. Within the apparent harmonics of conversation are dissonances that suddenly expose the extent of alienation, the nature and profundity of personal and social anxieties. The plays exist for these moments” (*David Mamet* 44). The same holds true for *Oleanna*.

So who are John and Carol? Critics have posited many descriptions for each based on their analyses of Mamet’s dramatic work. Roudane uses “Carol’s confession” to describe her speaking style in Act 1, and John’s vocal pattern as taking the form of advice. Carol is a confessor and John her advisor. In Act 2 Roudane says that Carol becomes an accuser, and John a patronizing supplicant. (“David Mamet” 172-173). Roudane states that the play covers the concepts of censorship and political correctness, but Mamet denies that these concepts are at the core of the play.

Holmberg concludes that *Oleanna* is about how language blurs character. Their benign identities of teacher and student are replaced with warriors taking swings at each other with word weapons until one is vanquished; in short, lack of communication and compromise leads to misunderstanding and violence.

Formalized, repetitive, hypnotic, Mamet’s language . . . ceases to be a transparent medium of communication, translating thoughts and feelings clearly and unequivocally from one mind to another. Instead, language spins its wheels and gets nowhere. Sentences refuse to complete themselves; they run on, loop back, start over, peter out, or suspend flight mid-air as the other character butts in. This stop-and-go creates a hallucinatory rhythm, a litany of broken sentences. (“Language of Misunderstanding” 94)

I disagree. Based on their cross labels and their speech patterns, I think John and Carol communicate perfectly with each other. I agree they are in conflict, but disagree as to the subject and scope. They are not fighting because they do not understand each other, or fail to communicate. They want to occupy the same position: the one with power over the other.

David Richards states that John’s essentially male “Mametian dialogue” defines his character as a fighter – one who feints and thrusts like a boxer and intimidates by barking aggressively to

“further the impression of authority not to be toyed with.” Carol, unlike other Mamet females, “draws the line, fights back and wins, if by winning you mean psychologically annihilating your opponent She rules not only psychologically, but theatrically” (1). The fighting analogy is a good one to pursue. Boxers fight to prove who is the best fighter. The most powerful boxer wins. John and Carol fight for power. Both cannot have power, so at any given time in the play, John and Carol are either someone *with* power, or someone *without* it. They dominate or seek domination and are never at rest. The play starts with John enjoying power and ends with Carol enjoying it. John and Carol have one thing in common: both abuse power when they possess it. Mamet’s lesson on human nature is that s/he who holds power will abuse it.

Carol is powerless in Act 1. “Her language is confused and confusing” (Biggsby *Modern Am. Drama* 232). In the second act, her language skills create the image of someone with power. “In the second act she returns, her language and attitude transformed. She is now aggressively confrontational . . . deploying the jargonized language of militant feminism” (233). Lahr agrees, noting that Carol lacked words in Act 1, a state of powerlessness in Mamet’s plays, but returns in Act 2 empowered. “She has acquired a new voice and a new vocabulary, whose authority precludes ambiguity.” She advocates a “linguistic affirmative action” (“Review Orpheum Theatre” 1328). Her changed voice levels the playing field and makes Carol John’s equal in Act 2. She becomes his superior in Act 3 when she forces him to abandon words and physically strike her. Kane also observes the change in Carol’s status, “For not only is Carol now enlightened, she is linguistically empowered” (*Weasels* 162).

In Act 1 John’s speech defines him as one basking in power. While he claims he has no power over Carol, his speech patterns prove the opposite. “From the first moments, John’s character is established through a commanding voice and diction,” Kane writes, but notes that there are “subtle shifts in confidence, providing a minimalist foreshadowing of the entire play” (*Weasels* 149). By Act 3, John is shown to be an empty vessel. Andreach states that John’s speech mannerisms illustrate his emptiness: “. . . rather than being attributable to distractions, John’s mental meanderings and verbal imprecisions give shape and sound to an emptiness within him” (100). What Andreach calls emptiness I call a power vacuum. John is empty because he has no power.

It all boils down to power. Dominance shifts from John to Carol, demonstrated through the characters’ use of language.

The last scene of the play presents yet another view of the teacher-student dynamic, but subtle and substantive changes in discourse and subject reveal a New World Order in which student instructs professor. This shifting of power actualized linguistically in Mamet works such as *Squirrels* and *A Life in the Theatre* is starkly executed in *Oleanna*. (Kane, *Weasels* 173)

Kane refers to David Suchet’s comments that Carol appropriates John’s level of linguistic ability while he falls back to her level established in Act 1. They trade places in power. “Carol dominates speech, controls the agenda of the meeting, and dictates both permitted areas of discussion and the signification of terms” (174). John occupied this position in Act 1, but Carol challenges his throne in Act 2 and completes her overthrow in Act 3.

That John and Carol are defined by power or lack thereof is confirmed by Mamet when he explains how subtext is a power dynamic. Mamet notes that acting should always be about two people who want something different. “The same is true for writing If the two people don’t want

something different, the audience is going to go to sleep. Power, that's another way of putting it" (Savran, "Comics Like Me" 75).

Mamet's stage plays tend to contain some variation of the teacher-student/mentor-protégé relationship. *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* has Bernie and Dan, *American Buffalo* has Don and Bob, *A Life in the Theatre* has Robert and John, *Glengarry Glen Ross* has Levene and Roma. *Oleanna* contains an actual university student and professor, making it unique in Mamet's canon. Mamet's published views on the system of higher education provide compelling confirmation that John and Carol are merely combatants duking it out for power. Mamet's opinion of those in the teaching profession is forecast when he says, "The most important thing my father ever told me was, 'Don't trust an expert'" (Carr 95).

"There's nothing one is going to learn in school except to pander to authority," Mamet explains. "The acting agent, the fraudulent teachers . . . the unskilled teachers of voice who are going to say, 'Sit still and stay in class for the next million years, and I will tell you when you're any good.' It's an absolute fraud" (Shulgasser 200). Lest we think Mamet refers only to acting teachers, in his essay collection *Make-Believe Town* he writes of the "traditional dross of the education process" (23), and refers to students as being "those trapped in the hypocrisy of traditional education" (27). Finally, he writes:

As an undergraduate, I developed a contempt for institutions of Higher Learning that much experience as a teacher has done little to dispel: and a nostalgia for the red brick covered with ivy. Recently, I saw a newspaper ad for some large Eastern college, which announced, "We Teach Success"; and I thought, Oh Lord, if you can't teach languages, or music, or physics, or some demonstrable and practical skill, mightn't you leave the kids alone? (27-28)

Mamet's antipathy towards educators makes it difficult for a director to determine which character is the traditional protagonist and which the antagonist, since both display good and bad attributes. Since Mamet has worked as a teacher himself, it seems likely he would choose the teacher as his protagonist. But Mamet's is not a predictable mind, so we might look further.

Mamet's sympathies could be interpreted as lying with Carol because of Mamet's contempt for education, combined with his theory about self-definition. Mamet agrees with Henry Fielding's point that "education is generally worthless, except in those cases when it can be said to be superfluous." Mamet cites Thorstein Veblen's book, *Higher Education: A Study in Depravity* which, according to Mamet, stated that education "was a hazing process perpetrated on those with a little bit too much disposable income. And that's kind of been my experience" (Isaacs 218).

Carol and John discuss John's book at various points in the play, offering him the opportunity to discourse on his educational philosophy as well as define himself as a certain type of instructional anti-authority figure. John's book contains references to "The Curse of Modern Education;" college is called, "Virtual warehousing of the young," and something that artificially prolongs adolescence (11-12). John says that he finds teaching artificial. "The notion of 'I know and you do not'; and I saw an *exploitation* in the education process. I told you. I hated school, I hated teachers" (22). Later, he uses the same phrase as Mamet, referring to college as "hazing . . . a sick game . . . something-other-than-useful" (28).

The inconsistency of John's self-definition shines through. After saying he hates education and teachers, he says, "I hated everyone who was in the position of a 'boss'" – he hates not only teachers but all those who have power over him. In the past it was teachers; in Act 1 the Tenure Committee.

“Why, they had people voting on me I wouldn’t employ to wax my car” (23). He believes the real estate agent (an empowered female, foreshadowing his attitude towards Carol in Acts 2 and 3) is going to take his house away, which prompts the remark, “*Listen, screw her.*” He tells his lawyer, “I’ll be damned if I’ll sit in the same rrr . . . the next, you tell her the next time I *see* her is in court . . .” (39). He is furious when the agent, in his mind, attempts to exert power over him. After John calls education “prolonged and systematic hazing,” Carol asks why, if it is so bad, does he do it? “I do it because I love it” (35). Carol challenges this assertion in Act 3, saying he likes the power teaching gives and not the education process itself. This conclusion is confirmed in Act 3 once Carol assumes power over John’s fate. She asks him if he hates her. John says yes. Carol replies, “Why do you hate me? Because you think me wrong? No. Because I have, you think, *power* over you. Listen to me. Listen to me, Professor. (Pause) It is the power you hate” (68-69).

As John quotes Mamet’s educational philosophy, audiences and critics often take him as the play’s protagonist. However, in Mamet’s non-dramatic writing he states that anyone who describes himself is lying, so when John says he is the opposite of the “cold, rigid automaton of an instructor which I had encountered as a child,” this is to mask the fact he is exactly that kind of teacher, relishing the position because of its access to power. The play is about student underdog protagonist Carol battling a teacher oppressor antagonist obstacle in her path to desired success, fighting with words for the power to overcome. Staged in this manner, *Oleanna* becomes a raw, intimate power struggle. As good as productions focused on sexual harassment, gender wars, political correctness, and the failure of intergenerational language to communicate are valid, productions that simply stage the brutal struggle for power will achieve greater theatrical impact. All the director needs to do is stage this one battle. It serves as a metaphor and symbol for the audience. It is up to the audience to create the social, political and cultural contexts of the play, and by doing so they achieve ownership of the production along with the creative artists.

As Carol prepares to exit in Act 3, she instructs John not to call his wife baby, trying to control his wife’s identity creation through that label. It is an attack on the wife’s existence, which Lahr calls “. . . Mamet’s shrewdly placed parting shot. The throw-away line turns out to be the last straw” (“Review Orpheum” 1329). It is no throw-away, it is an attack, and John defends his wife with caveman-like ferocity, dropping the weapon of words and picking up a chair as club. Bigsby describes the play as a power struggle:

The battleground on which they meet, however, is largely linguistic. Each deploys his or her own jargon to which they seek to make the other subject. With the exception of the ambiguous physical gesture of the first act and the physical assault that concludes the second, the battle is waged entirely at the level of language. It is that which shapes them as it defines the nature of their relationship. They are both the victims of language and its arch-manipulators. (*Modern American Drama* 233)

But John abandons language. When John stops talking and strikes out physically, he exposes the identity under the mask, and it is not the one he used to define himself. “With his back to the wall, the professor discovers brutality within him he never knew existed” (Holmberg, “Language of Misunderstanding” 95). This is the character’s true face under the false identity crafted by his self-designations and revealed through his speech patterns. Carol wins, spurring her final line in the play, “Yes. That’s right . . . yes. That’s right” (80). Carol has transformed herself from failing student to victorious language gladiator. Subdued yet triumphant, these words make her a celebrator of victory.

CHAPTER FIVE

LANGUAGE CREATES SOCIETY IN *BOSTON MARRIAGE*

Mamet's theories about dramatic language creating society onstage have correlations in the real world. In a *Playboy* interview, acclaimed novelist Kurt Vonnegut once stated, "I don't mean to intimidate you, but I hold a master's degree in anthropology from the University of Chicago, so I know all human beings need tribes as much as they need food and water." He goes on to state that very few people are born into a tribe, that tribes have to be created in contemporary American society. "So a scientist, like any other kind of *Homo sapiens*, will do anything to form or join an artificial tribe – in his or her own case most likely in his or her own profession" (58). According to Mamet's theory, this professional tribe, to which I will refer to as "community" in this chapter, is created through the language device known as jargon. Mamet lists jargon as the greatest creator of communities, second only to gossip.

Mamet's theories about gossip's potential to build community for characters onstage also have real world relevance. In a newspaper column by Reverend Billy Graham, a reader refers to negative gossip she has encountered in her new assisted living facility. "I guess that's to be expected in a small community like this, but it still gets under my skin," writes Mrs. M. C., to complain that other people are using gossip to create a community which excludes her from membership. She is not complaining about the gossip but the exclusion. This reveals the dual nature of gossip, in that it can bar individuals from membership in communities as well as create community for those allowed to join. Graham states the reason why people gossip: "Often it's because they are lonely and crave friends, and they hope to gain them by appearing to be 'in the know'" (B5).

People want to be admitted to the clique. The loner individual, however, can be perceived as an oddity. It is easier to gain admittance to a community if the individual can first become part of a relationship unit. Vonnegut asserts that the relationship unit of family is not the path when he writes that "a nuclear family, with Mom and Pop and kids and a dog and a goldfish, is no sure survival scheme" (58). In addition to artificially creating a community, the contemporary American must first create a relationship unit. Based on analysis of his non-dramatic writings and interview statements, Mamet uses dramatic language to create relationship units, which bond to create communities, which bond, successfully or not, to create American society entire.

Mamet primarily writes two-person scenes, even in plays with a large number of characters such as *Edmond*, a tactic which shows the creation of the relationship unit. "A poetic dialogist, Mamet spectacularizes his stage, above all, through language," writes Roudane in 1996. "Mamet's evolving oeuvre," he continues, "spotlights not only the texture of his character's language but also the quality of human relationships defined (and confined) by that very language" (*American Drama* 162). Roudane provides several examples of plays that "outline just how difficult it is for Mamet's characters to communicate with and respect each other." Most of the plays prior to 1996 are about characters using language tactics to build relationships only to fail; however, *Boston Marriage*, first performed in 1999 at the Hasty Pudding Theatre, is an optimistic play for Mamet that shows the bright side of his language theory and the successful creation of positive relationships.

"Indeed Mamet's shorter plays are largely duets, and the critic Richard Eder has quipped that the playwright was still waiting for Sophocles to invent the third actor," notes American theatre scholar Ruby Cohn. "Mamet's longer plays resemble . . . a music-hall pattern where stage dialogues are

punctuated by a monologue. At tense moments in dramas . . . duets escalate into duels” (*Anglo-American Interplay* 60). We see these duels in *Boston Marriage*, only here, unlike in other plays, a sense of good will makes them more banter than raw attacks. In this play Anna and Claire, a pair of lesbian lovers on the fringe of mainstream society, meet at Anna’s home to inform each other that each has taken a new lover. They duel with each other in a war of words, each battle punctuated with comedic appearances by Anna’s hapless maid.

American theatre scholar Douglas Bruster has observed that Mamet’s characters, in dialogue, are creating society when they create the smallest unit of community, a two-person relationship. As they talk, Mamet’s characters not only build a relationship unit, they are also trying to better their place in society by using the jargon of a superior social class. Fox and Gould use the language of upper-echelon producers in *Speed-the-Plow*, Carol uses the jargon of her “group” in Act Three of *Oleanna* to make herself mightier than her professor, and *Boston Marriage*’s Anna uses religious phraseology to link herself and Claire to the mainstream American society that dominates her era. “Struggling in society, [Mamet’s] characters attempt to carve niches for themselves through language,” writes Bruster. “Often they try to adopt what they believe to be the formal, ordered rhetoric of a more successful class” (342).

I believe Mamet writes two-person dialogues because of his statements that dramatic language creates relationships, then these relationship units bond with other relationship units to create a community. The key to acting out the relationships in a Mamet play like *Boston Marriage* is identifying which characters connect to form relationship units, the success of those relationship units in community bonding, and finally how those relationship units fit together to form society as a whole. Society is a macrocosm of the community microcosm, in that communities are to society what relationship units are to community. Most Mamet plays contain characters who fail to connect with others. This failure to build relationships is a threat in that a lack of communication between communities results in a disjointed and dying American society. Happily, such is not the case in the comedy *Boston Marriage*.

The organizational structure of this chapter is slightly different than in previous chapters because of the size and scope of the topic. In previous chapters I first analyzed David Mamet’s expressed theory about how dramatic language created that chapter’s topic, then provided a close reading of a particular play in order to show how that theory works in his practice. With this chapter, I will examine his statements about theory and follow each immediately with examples from the play *Boston Marriage*. The amount of theory covered in this chapter demands that examples from the play be provided immediately after the theory rather than by lumping them together at the end of the theoretical discussion.

Relationships

Language creates relationships not by what is said, but by the interplay of words between two people, the way two players in a tennis match develop a relationship. Mamet’s plays resemble duet games like tennis or chess. Mamet boils the playing field down to one-on-one contact in his plays, and relationships are created through how the characters speak to each other. Mamet sees in real life a dialogic rhythm that mirrors what “Marlowe’s mighty line” brought to the English stage: people speak English colloquially and in iambic pentameter. People in a dialogue complete iambic lines for one another, an expression in language “of a naturally occurring need or disposition to structure the world as thesis/antithesis/synthesis” (*3 Uses of Knife* 66).

Every speaker needs a listener, an audience. Completing one another's lines puts the people involved in an intimate relationship, and in drama characters keep close both friend and foe. The bond exists because the dramatic language of the dialogue creates it, thus the dialogists are parents, together creating the symbiosis. Like any relationship, it can be positive or negative; regardless, relationships contain a thesis (Person A) and antithesis (Person B). What results when these disparate compounds collide, is the created relationship delineated by the language exchange style.

Mamet's comments on the good and bad relationships created by language focus on families, relationships between men and women, and how his views translate onstage into the relationships he creates between his stage characters through dialogue. One quality in families Mamet learned, enhanced by his combative childhood home environment, is that even good relationships have negative underpinnings.

I once asked a psychiatrist how it came about that intelligent, kind, perceptive people, when converted into a family, could devote themselves to ongoing, nay, eternal, silly quarrels. He smiled and said the quarrels were the landing lights at the airport; they let the travelers know they'd arrived home. (*Jafsie* 65)

The verbal back and forth is the voice of home, and the quality of the interactions determines the relationships within the family.

In an essay, Mamet reflects on the role of sex in courtship, marriage and divorce. After discussing some of the negative aspects of the courtship-marriage-divorce process, he writes (emphasis mine):

The chance discovery of the old *love letter*, the *personal erotic code*, three *words or symbols* on a florist's *card*, the *note* found in a coat unworn these years since the end of the affair that came to a bad end . . . the *curse*s of the divorce court, the *sex slanders* of the *popular press*, the *lawsuits* and totalitarian sexual *proclamations* of freedom. . . . ("Between Men and Women" 11)

The relationship, created by written or spoken language, begins as a positive one. Upon marriage, solemn oaths are given by both parties. At some point, one or the other feels the covenant which represents their relationship has been broken, and language then drives the dissolving union into a negative state. Mamet writes that language has the power to create relationships that bring us joy or anguish. That which language creates, language can also destroy; however, when dramatic language closes a door, it opens a window.

Mamet divorced actor Lindsey Crouse. He experienced disappointment and wondered where to turn when romantic language failed. He turned to friends who would use language to assuage the pain and reassure the rejected Romeo. "I called a fellow I knew and asked if I could come by. He said yes, and we talked all night, and drank two and a half fifths of Bell's scotch while doing it" (*Jafsie* 29). Talking with his friend soothed Mamet's pain. The sun rose after his all night talk to find Mamet feeling comforted. The dialogue created a positive feeling because, despite his partner's rejection, language could provide him still with acceptance and comradeship.

These are examples of people who actually connect. Most of Mamet's plays, as he has noted in interviews, are about people who fail to use language to create relationships. Mamet creates positive and negative relationships between characters through his particular flare for dialogue. In discussing the end of act one in *American Buffalo*, Mamet says:

Have you ever listened to two people trying to say goodbye on the phone? Especially in a business situation? They just *cannot* say good-bye. And the 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. (Wetzsteon 10)

Through the quid pro quo/back and forth of the dialogue, the characters create their relationship. The eavesdropping audience must deduce for themselves the nature of the relationship created. Mamet does not explain the relationship – he shows it to the audience through dramatic language.

One of his more intimate plays is *A Life in the Theatre*, which illustrates the evolving relationship between two actors over the span of years and the production of many plays. John and Robert are linked by their jobs in the theatre company and connect professionally, but not personally. This is shown in the clumsiness of their interchanges when they attempt to speak on any subject other than the arts. Mamet says:

The play is not so much about the theatrical world, although that’s the metaphor. The play concerns how youth and age talk to each other. John and Robert show something about our inability to communicate experience . . . it’s there to a certain extent in *American Buffalo* and in *Lakeboat*. (Roudane, “David Mamet” 183)

Those who cannot communicate on a personal level fail to connect, failing to form a positive relationship. The relationship is like that between Anna and her maid for most of *Boston Marriage*: purely one-sided, all business, no soul.

The characters in *Boston Marriage* are all female, and the play is set in the domesticity of Anna’s home. Mamet’s all male plays are usually set in the business world: *American Buffalo* has Don’s store, *Lakeboat* is on the commercial vessel, and *Glengarry Glen Ross* is in a real estate office. While there is a business relationship between Anna and her maid, there is not one between Anna and Claire. Undistracted by the concerns of business, the women are able to communicate and forge a positive, personal relationship.

In Mamet’s theory, we can see, then, that relationships in his plays are created by how the characters talk to each other more than by the content of their conversations. We also see that there are categories of relationships created between two people exchanging dramatic language: personal or business, positive or negative. However, Mamet’s world demonstrates his belief that even good relationships are potentially rotten underneath.

Boston Marriage begins with Claire visiting Anna, her friend and former lover. Catherine is employed as Anna’s maid. With these three characters, Mamet exemplifies his theory of how dramatic language creates the relationship between two people. Anna and Claire have love for each other, both romantic and platonic. They have a good relationship, but it is punctuated with frequent verbal spats: they verbally knock each other around and then apologize or follow insults with compliments.

Anna and Claire complete each other’s lines, build and finish thoughts together, mirror each other with lines of similar length and rhythm, and complement each other through mutual language creation. Anna informs Claire that Anna has a new male lover, while Claire announces she has replaced Anna with a younger female. Claire asks Anna if the two can use Anna’s house for trysts. Between former lovers, where one (Anna) still has feelings for the other (Claire), this is a potentially unfriendly talk, but the way the two women communicate demonstrates they still have a close relationship.

An early passage in the play reveals the closeness of their relationship. They discuss Anna’s new lover, a married man who has paid off all her debts, gives expensive gifts and provides “a monthly

stipend” (4).

CLAIRE. Good for you, good for the Side. But . . .

ANNA. Speak.

CLAIRE. This “man.”

ANNA. Yes.

CLAIRE. This, this, this . . .

ANNA. My “Protector.”

CLAIRE. Does he not know . . . does he not know your . . . “reputation”?

ANNA. He is just returned from a long sojourn abroad.

CLAIRE. What? On the Moon?

ANNA. Ha ha.

CLAIRE. Is he in commerce on the Moon?

ANNA. . . . ha. (5)

The lines intertwine sinuously, the characters intermixing thoughts and feelings, creating a back-and-forth rhythm. Claire is unable to define the man; Anna provides a label, thus one thought is completed by two speakers. Claire cracks a joke, and Anna provides the laugh track, providing the emotional reaction sought for by Claire’s attempt at humor. These are two people who like each other, are highly compatible, and work well together.

Most of Anna and Claire’s dialogues are built upon lines of equal length and similar rhythms, such as:

CLAIRE. How *practical* you are.

ANNA. For what *is* speech?

CLAIRE. I had often thought, it is as the chirping of the birds, minus their laudable disinterestedness.

ANNA. Oh what a vast, oh what a vast and pointless shithole it all is. (15)

Long and short passages mirror each other all the way through the play, as in this passage from Act Two:

ANNA. . . . and he will send an emissary to collect the Jewel.

CLAIRE. (*Takes the letter.*) And pop goes the entire weasel. (*Pause*)

ANNA. I fear I was mistaken in his steadfastness. (*Pause*)

CLAIRE. You must keep it, of course.

ANNA. Keep?

CLAIRE. The Jewel.

ANNA. The Jewel. I cannot.

CLAIRE. You Must.

ANNA. How can I?

CLAIRE. He gave it to you.

ANNA. It was not his to give. (93)

Anna and Claire’s first lines start with the same word, “and.” The number of words and syllables in the separate lines either mirror each other, or complete the rhythm. The shorter lines, like “The Jewel,” followed by, “The Jewel. I cannot,” followed by “You must,” illustrate how Anna and Claire combine to form one statement. The separate shorter lines, when combined, begin to mirror the longer

lines in construction and rhythm, showing how the characters separate and then come together in a “union” of conversation.

At other times, Claire or Anna will dominate with a long speech. Anna’s long line is followed by a succinct comment from Claire that serves as punctuation mark, effectively ending the sentence and capping the idea started and conceived by the other.

ANNA. I do not know his profession, or if, indeed, he follows one; I know that he is very rich. That he has been Abroad, and that he, willy-nilly, delights in regaling me with various kickshaws significant of the esteem in which he holds me.

CLAIRE. . . . may it continue. (5)

Later in the play, we see the same process in reverse:

CLAIRE. Yes. You shall set the scene. You shall set the scene and aid me, aid the two of us by the tone, by, by the gracious attentions . . .

ANNA. . . . that is all I asked. (39)

Mamet shows how the women create and complete each other’s thoughts by use of the ellipses, the (...) leading from Anna’s lines to Claire’s and vice versa.

While the two form a positive personal relationship, Mamet’s theory that negativity pervades all human relations is borne out. At one point, Anna refers to Claire’s conversation as “prating,” and Claire responds that Anna is “cold” (14). Anna accuses Claire of being unable to control her loins, to which Claire responds “. . . ain’t *you* an evil old bitch.” Anna replies, “You are cruel” (20). These barbs are slaps, not punches, and are always followed by compliments, or tickles. The play starts with the characters giving mutual compliments, then they abuse each other, then they return to compliments. Claire refers to Anna as “full of self-respect, inspiring . . . awe,” one worthy of emulation, one possessed of “universally known and lauded generosity” (23-26). When Anna says yes to a request, Claire replies, “Bless you, Oh Best of Friends.”

ANNA. Is it not so?

CLAIRE. It *is* so. It *is* so. (32)

Whilst scolding Claire, Anna also compliments her, inserting in the midst of a harangue that Claire is “young and beautiful” (30). Anna’s affection for Claire is so strong that even though Claire has dumped her, Anna is still willing to let Claire and her lover use Anna’s house for sex. It seems Anna cares so much for Claire that she will do anything to keep her happy.

But there is a business aspect to this personal relationship, undermined, as Mamet believes the entire American business community is, by mendacity. Claire came by to ask the use of Anna’s home, like renting a hotel room only Anna will not charge money. Anna agrees, but does have a price: she wants to watch. They reach an agreement on Claire’s use of Anna’s room, and then plan together how Claire can best seduce her overly young target. Anna and Claire bargain, cajole, abuse and plead, but finally reach a compromise. Despite the bartering nature of their conversation, the duet construction and like-mindedness continues to demonstrate the close relationship between Anna and Claire:

ANNA. Is it fair, that the sea, for example, should rage wide and savage, erasing whole towns and coastal . . .

CLAIRE. Settlements?

ANNA. No, well, yes, certainly, but I meant the . . . the . . . the sites of agriculture . . . (*Pause*)

CLAIRE. “Farms”?

ANNA. Thank you. Then retreat to that calm beauty so cherished by
painters of the second class? (60)

The relationship changes when the revelation of their love schemes threatens their societal existence. Anna's lover gave her an emerald necklace. Claire's new love recognizes the necklace as her mother's, revealing that her father is having an affair with Anna. He ends the affair, all monetary support, and demands the jewel's return. Claire loses her girl. Anna announces the jewel has been stolen; her lover does not believe this story and will report her as the thief, so she must flee or face jail. Claire agrees to join Anna in "exile." We then find out that Anna lied about the theft. The entire plot is revealed as Anna's elaborate machination to win Claire back. Claire, knowing of Anna's deception, turns down an invitation to return to her new lover, touched by the obvious depth of Anna's love as demonstrated by the lengths she went to in order to keep Claire. Anna and Claire exchange marriage vows of a sort at the play's end:

ANNA. And you are returned to me.

CLAIRE. With all my heart.

ANNA. But will your feelings never change?

CLAIRE. That is not within my gift. But I will never leave you. Will
that do?

ANNA. I am content. (112-113)

Anna and Claire's personal relationship serves as a contrast to the business relationship they have with Anna's maid, Catherine. That relationship is fraught with abuse and all attempts by Catherine to turn it into more than just business are rebuffed by the other women. When Anna and Claire feel rejected by love, they seek out Catherine as a means of support, only to find they are unable to communicate with her, unable to form a personal relationship out of the mire of professional role-playing. Usually upon her entrances, Catherine is ignored for several lines. Both women tell her to shut up, wish disease and death upon her, and belittle every aspect of her life; Anna gets her name and country of origin wrong while heaping verbal abuse upon the maid.

ANNA. What is it? What do you want? Saving national sovereignty and
reparations? What? An apology for your potato famine? IT CAME
FROM THE LACK OF ROTATION OF CROPS!!! Do you hear?
From a depletion of . . .

CLAIRE. Nitrogen.

ANNA. Nitrogen, or something, in the soil. (16)

Claire serves as partner in the abuse. Later Anna explodes upon Catherine's entrance, yelling "Oh MIGHT YOU GET OFF MY TITS? What *is* it?" Claire quickly informs Catherine, "Well, then you're going to hell" (64-65). When Anna fires the maid, Claire clarifies the message: "Are you deaf? You're sacked. Go away now, go home" (67). When they need the maid to carry out their mutual scheme, they become nice to her. Catherine doubts their veracity. Claire replies, "Oh, bullshit. Sit down, or we'll throw you in the streets to starve, pox ridden and pregnant" (84). Catherine's entrances always serve to interrupt the flow of conversation. Anna and Claire's voices harmonize, but Catherine serves as a discordant note; she is a barrier to interpersonal contact.

By play's end, balance and order have been restored in the characters' world: Anna and Claire are once more lovers as well as friends, and Catherine retains her position. Anna still gets her name wrong, calling the maid "Mary," but their business relationship is back on and there is a glimmer of a

new, possibly pleasant personal relationship. Anna gives orders, Catherine agrees with simple “Yes, mum” lines, and all is well. The personal and professional relationships are created by the three characters’ use of dramatic language.

Community

Once dramatic language creates a relationship between two individuals, the “couple” bonds with others with whom they share similarities. The term “couple” in this case is not restricted to a romantic pairing or a biological family unit. The primary uniting element in family is blood, not language, as Mamet’s *Reunion* and *The Cryptogram* make painfully apparent. In the latter two plays, characters are related by family ties but are unable to communicate with each other. They speak the same language, English, but their stage dialogue does not create relationships. The “couple” created by two individuals using language to build the relationship unit can be romantic or platonic, family or friendly. These relationship units join others with similar attributes to form an identifiable group. These groups (civic, religious or professional) are communities, the second building block in the construction of an entire society by dramatic language. Mamet sees promises, parties, gender complaints, gossip and jargon as the major methods of community construction.

Mamet has lived in large cities and small towns, and despite his fondness for Chicago’s lingo, his essays reveal he prefers life in a small town. Residents of the small town or village logically form an identifiable community because they share one thing in common, geography: they all live in the same small area. But it is language, not geography, which creates the community. People in small towns depend on the kindness not of strangers, but neighbors. In discoursing on economic systems, Mamet tells Savran, “I live in a small town in Vermont where people can do business by giving their word One reason they can do this is common sense. If you live in a community where you’re dependent on the same people day in and day out, then it’s common sense that those people would deal honestly with each other” (*In Their Own Words* 142). Common sense is community sense, and the giving, receiving and honoring of promises between people in the region create community. Other elements include the oral traditions and celebrations that bring the denizens together in civic celebrations.

In the essay “Memorial Day, Cabot, Vermont,” Mamet muses on the annual celebrations and rites observed by the community, or gatherings for community “parties.” Part of the ceremony involves speeches, the readings of poems, and song. “There is something in these same families [relationship units] performing these same traditions in the same spot for over two hundred years. In this small town, the Fourth of July and Memorial Day are observed with speeches and song. The community is not abashed by public displays of those things which unite it” (*Some Freaks* 48). The language of the speeches and songs form the core of these rituals and is the primary agent of community unification.

Boston Marriage contains examples of Mamet’s theory that the giving and receiving of promises creates community. In the early part of Act One, Anna, first talking to the maid, then to Claire, discusses the consequences of broken promises, such as being ostracized from the community. Anna says to the maid the consequences include the loss of income and “the affection of my one true love” (45). Once Claire (the true love) enters, Anna reveals that in addition to stopping her stipend, her male lover will also reclaim the expensive emerald he gave to Anna. Claire cries, “You have fucked my life into a cocked hat.” Anna replies, “We shall end life together, old and friendless, desired by no one, devoid of all save memory, and these most wistful of words. . .” (53). The maid’s entrance stops Anna from finishing the line, but the thrust of the passage is that their promises,

revealed as broken, will result in their rejection by all communities, leaving their relationship unit isolated.

In Act Two, Scene Two, Anna and Claire are awaiting the start of a fortune-telling séance they have arranged. They hope to use the subterfuge of a fortune-telling session to keep their respective paramours from rejecting them, thus ejecting them from the mainstream community of their city. Instead of attending the séance, Anna's lover sends them a letter announcing ". . . he has terminated the, the 'consultation fees,' which, of late, it has been his use to pay me . . . and he requires the immediate return of his wife's necklace . . . absent which . . . legal remedies, criminal proceedings, bailiff, theft . . . jail" (92-93). The opportunity to join the community is never created as the séance is still-born, and this illustrates the consequences in a community of broken promises. If you break a promise, the community will ostracize you because communities are built on promises.

An example of the power of promises to create community appears when Anna and Claire reach an agreement that allows Claire the use of Anna's home for a liaison.

CLAIRE. And you will afford us privacy and shelter. For the Afternoon.

ANNA. And participate,

CLAIRE. Within the limits of . . .

ANNA. . . as agreed.

CLAIRE. And you swear to divert her chaperone?

ANNA. She has come alone.

CLAIRE. Oh, Joy.

ANNA. And we are agreed to terms?

CLAIRE. We are. Urge her in. (40)

The promise makes Anna and Claire part of a marginalized sex community, apart from the mainstream represented by Claire's new lover, Anna's lover and the maid. So far we have three communities: Anna and Claire's lesbian community created by the giving and receiving of promises, the mainstream nuclear family, and the third community of immigrants from other lands or rural areas as represented by the maid and the offstage Stove Repairman.

Mamet's portrays his belief that groups create community through public gatherings with oral traditions in *Boston Marriage* through references to food and oral traditions at parties. Claire mentions she and Anna once discussed Geopolitics, prompting Anna to ask why they discussed it. Claire replies, "To pass the time. To pass the time, you vacant cow. That is what people do. When they are thrust together. During *dinner*, or . . ." (50). The meal brings them together, the community event at the table, and language seals the deal.

Anna tries to convince Claire to allow Anna to join in the seduction of Claire's new lover, and seeks to create community among them by once more referring to a party. They discuss the menu, including pies, which the two associate with "that of the bucolic" and young girls, "Her brown arms shapely from the work of the fields" (34). They describe together the sharing of a story's creation, the young girl taking flour, making dough, and finally transforming this into a pie for their mutual consumption with Claire's new lover, which would add the new lover to their community of lesbians, through the symbolic mutual consumption of each other's pie. Claire realizes this and insists on including "Ices" in order to cool Anna's ardor (35). There is also a reference to Anna and Claire socializing with others from their community in Act Two, Scene One (57).

The power of oral traditions to create community is best demonstrated by the fact it is the final weapon Anna and Claire use in order to retain their positions. Previously I discussed the fortune-

telling scene's relevance to how giving promises creates community; we now see it is also relevant to illustrate how oral traditions at parties create community. Anna and Claire concoct a scheme where they will pretend to be fortune-tellers. They plan to use a séance to unite Anna and Claire's partnership to that represented by the father and daughter, thus insuring Claire and Anna's continued membership in their community. Otherwise the two will be left alone, only a relationship unit without a community. The planning is pivotal, uniting Claire and Anna in effort, preparing for an oral tradition in the form of the telling of fortunes. Mamet demonstrates the plan's pivotal nature by stretching out its birth in Act Two, Scene One (73-83). Claire and Anna are again planning a party, this time enlisting the maid as a source of information to be used in impressing the father and daughter.

Mamet observes that communities spring up as well among those who share a gender or personal problem. The oral act of confession, whether for religious or other purposes, creates community, a point Mamet makes when he writes that:

Our plea is also a dramatic confession of that *powerlessness* made popular by the twelve-step groups. Alcoholics Anonymous creates out of the hopelessness and tragedy of alcoholism a community, and allows the individual to trade his or her feelings of helplessness and self-loathing for one of community, and so begin a cure. (*Make-Believe Town* 186)

Individuals use the oral tradition of AA, a group comprised of others with similar personal problems, to form a community of recovering alcoholics. Religious communities are at heart support groups, intended for congregations to come together and support each other as they make their way through and testify to life's hardships.

Boston Marriage provides examples of how the act of confession creates community. Claire announces, "I come to you, as I confess myself, as I beseech you, beyond shame . . . I have no merit, to plead my case, but her *mother* . . . to whom she is devoted. Do you see?" (27). Claire confesses to betraying the love of Anna. Claire does so because she has a relationship with Anna, and now is seeking to form a new relationship with a younger girl. In order to bond these relationships into a larger community, she confesses her sins to Anna. If she is successful, which in the end she is not, she will weld herself into two separate communities, the mainstream and the marginalized.

Anna confesses to her immigrant maid in the first scene of Act Two in an attempt to join the maid's community because Anna senses she will be rejected by both her lovers once her affair with the man has been found out by his daughter, Claire's new lover. Anna confesses her woes to the maid only to have her reply, "Cause I can't, the life o' me, tell what the fuck yer on about" (44). Anna's insincere attempt to bond with the representative of the immigrant community fails.

When Anna and Claire decide that the only place mainstream society has for them is prison, Anna decides to run, and Claire decides to go with her. Claire uses confession to reinforce her bonds with Anna and create a sense of community that they can carry with them in excommunication. They embrace society's fringe with their marginalized community. Claire says, "Hear my confession." Anna says, "Speak to me." Claire reveals, "I abhor chintz." After a pause, Anna points out Claire had previously stated the opposite, which Claire confesses was an attempt at humor. Anna says, "Yes, perhaps I have wronged you, too." Claire's confession elicits the start of one from Anna as a reply, so her confession gambit succeeds.

Shared gender creates a community, but according to Mamet, men come together with other men for three main reasons. One reason is to do business, which is conducted by talk, a second reason

is “male-bonding,” but the main reason is to create community with other men through the oral tradition of complaining about women. “Men also get together to bitch. We say, ‘What does she want?’ And we piss and moan, and take comfort in the fact that our fellows will, at some point, reveal that, yes, *they* are weaklings, too, and there’s no shame in it” (*Some Freaks* 87).

Renowned theatre scholar C.W.E. Bigsby notes, “In a world in which reciprocity carries implications of a feared mutuality, words are weapons or shields in an undeclared war.” He is speaking specifically of *The Woods* but then extrapolates to all other Mamet plays saying that men and women meet “across an apparently unbridgeable divide, a gulf reflected at the level of language and, in part, created by language” (*Modern American Drama* 234).

While there are no onstage male characters in *Boston Marriage*, it contains three types of “gender bitching”: women complaining about men, women complaining about women, and women complaining about men *and* women. Anna and Claire complain about both because they are lesbians who have sex with men. If they complain about men, this language gives them membership in the mainstream community of women dependent on men for survival and power. The second kind, complaining about lesbian rivals, gives them admittance to the marginalized community of women who choose female sexual partners and/or life-mates. Although Mamet focuses on men complaining about women, in *Boston Marriage* female characters share complaints about the opposite gender as a form of bonding.

Anna brings up her new relationship with a man, her “Protector” who provides her with economic security, as a reason to deny Claire’s request to meet her new lover in the safety of Anna’s house. But while Anna is happy to take his money, she is not happy to be with a man. “I did it for *you*, you ill-conditioned sow. I did it for the *cause*. He is a “man.” What possible joy or diversion for *me* in this arrangement?” (28)

Anna believes men love to be deceived. “Men live but to be deceived . . . Well, what have I done but deceive him?” She has done nothing but lie, including the foundational lie that she is heterosexual and sexually attracted to him. “My protector loves me. He requires my *aid*. How to continue with me when all the world conspires to the contrary.” Her male lover wants to continue their physical intimacy, but the rules of the community forbid his actions. “We will mint for him his excuse. And our poor simpering effort will, once again, conquer all” (79). Anna believes men are so simple that even the weakest lie is sufficient to create a reality where their relationship unit, forged through this man-bashing, can join with the mainstream community. “No need to worry,” Anna reiterates in Act Two, “For men live to be deceived. They would rather be deceived than sated” (89).

Claire assumes a man is responsible when the maid begins to cry. “What is it? You’re with child, by the man who pledged to marry you, now you discovered he’s a wife and babe at home?” Claire proceeds to list what she sees as the most likely behavior on the man’s part. Men are nothing to Claire but exploitative betrayers who lie to and victimize all women they encounter. Claire explains her complaint against men as an attempt to bond with the maid and through her join her community.

CLAIRE. All undone by Men.

MAID. Excuse me, mum.

CLAIRE. Undone by Men, I opined. Are you deaf?

MAID. What, mum?

CLAIRE. I made fair to make common cause with you, do you see? You, ravaged and abandoned. Myself done out of my birthright. By Men. (102)

The attempt at bonding extracts a confession from the maid that she is going out to have sex with her

“man” in the park. Since he is paying her attention, the maid has no inclination to complain about him, and is therefore disinclined to accept Claire into her community as they have not this in common. Claire denounces the maid: “Off you go to your Bower of Bliss. Off you go to your sweet narcotic. Two souls resubsumed in oblivion. Off you go. I will stay here” (104). The maid leaves Claire behind in isolation.

When she returns, however, the maid makes it clear that the Stove Repairman failed to satisfy her, so she too complains about the opposite gender, creating community again with Claire and Anna. A virgin, the maid gives up her maidenhood to the Stove Repairman offstage during the play. The maid complains that her new male lover is not very good. He lacks stamina, thus their encounters are brief, and he lacks talent which he seeks to hide by making the sex overpoweringly brutal. The maid sees through his shortcomings, and opines that women should be on top in sex, using their strong legs to prolong the length of sexual encounters, thereby improving the quality of the experience for women. The man on top depends on his shoulder blades, which are not as strong as the thighs of a woman. The maid exits and it is clear that Claire and Anna do not understand:

CLAIRE. You were going to say something.

ANNA. What about?

CLAIRE. How the deuce should *I* know . . . (*Pause*)

ANNA. I’ve forgotten what I was going to say. (64)

After the maid describes how callously the repairman took her maidenhood, which caused her to spill the milk, which caused the cook to quit, Anna replies, “Oh, Man – oh, Adversary Implacable. What does one not sacrifice upon the altar of your merciless caprice?” (67) She then fires the maid. When the maid says the man has ruined her, Claire says, “You ain’t ruined. Just don’t *tell* nobody. You dense *cow*. Don’t tell anyone. And pray to the gods your friend has neither given you the *pox*, or a *child*” (67). Putting motherhood in this context makes of it just another sexually transmitted disease caught from men. These complaints are forms of gossip.

Language unites both genders when they get together to gossip. Gossiping serves to relieve people in that, when they compare notes with their peers, everyone can see that how they are living their lives is not horribly wrong and receive reassurance that they are not alone. They belong to a community and belonging helps them continue existence. Mamet describes the underlying relevance of these community conversations: “. . . the meaning of the talk is: isn’t it great being here together?” (*Some Freaks* 88).

Mamet writes about gossip’s community-creating power in two essays, “The Great Chain of Being” and “Oscars.” In the latter he describes gossip in the professional community, and how after dinner of an evening he and several movie industry veterans indulged in film gossip, talking about those who were better and worse off than themselves. “And what both parts of the fugue add up to is Belowstairs Gossip.” What this gossip does is use language so that people can come to know where they fit in within the community, to know where their places are in the scheme of things, and to realize the potential for progress or self-improvement. “This feeling of *knowing one’s place* is a good feeling, and mostly absent in our contemporary culture in which one generally compares oneself to one’s peers with either vanity tinged with dread or envy tinged with dread” (*Writing in Restaurants* 150-151). Gossip allows people to identify their standing in the community’s pecking order, and if they have a place in the community, it follows they belong to the community.

In the second essay Mamet describes the Academy Awards as a ceremonial ritual that gives the public an opportunity to discuss the winners and the losers. These discussions of the ceremony’s

participants create community much more than the presence of thousands of people in the same auditorium at the same time ever can.

We are united as a community in that most satisfying and unifying of social activities – gossip – the purpose of which is to define social norms. And, just as in another time we might have met around the cracker barrel, we are meeting around the T.V. to talk about them folks who live up on the hill. (*Writing in Restaurants* 83)

The urge to talk about others brings people together; the act of gossiping about people outside our immediate community, the Hollywood Elite's community, transforms the gossipers into a cohesive social unit and identifiable group: we are not them.

Boston Marriage gossip begins when Claire asks if Anna's new man is aware of her "reputation." This means Anna is the subject of other people's gossip. The gossip about her is so widespread Claire jokes that he must have taken a long trip to the moon and asks, "Is he a Dealer in Green Cheese?" (5) Anna, as the subject of gossip, seems to be held outside of the community, but her relationship with a man has overcome that challenge. Claire threatens this position with her request to use Anna's home to have a liaison with a young girl. Anna's subsequent scolding of Claire reveals that Claire is also a subject of gossip if her abode is too dangerous a place for any assignation to take place.

Claire refers to a mutual community with Anna: "Once, yes, once we strove together . . . A small band of Freebooters, share alike. . . ." In their lesbian community, they shared everything; in that time Anna would have allowed Claire to meet her new lover in Anna's house. Then Claire begins to gossip about Anna's heterosexual lover: "And now, as you've come into your Patrimony . . . You've found a *Protector*. And the Emerald Round your Neck the ensign of that selfishness, that Jealousy Engendered by Wealth. . ." (38). The gossip is used to point out that Anna has traded her original community for a new one and to persuade her to rejoin the community that the two can share.

In Act Two Scene One Claire and Anna begin concocting a story to provide as gossip that will prevent Anna and Claire being forever barred from the mainstream community. The gossip they intend to spread is to cover their transgressions against community rules, Anna's relationship with a married man and Claire's pursuit of a lesbian affair with that man's daughter. The planning is extensive. Anna explains of the defensive gossip, "Our tale is offered, but as a fig leaf of propriety. Not to 'explain,' but to clothe with the, the . . ." Claire finishes the thought with, "Mantle of decency." Anna concurs, saying, "Yes. That behavior it would be irksome to hear explained" (74). This defense consists of getting the community to gossip about the two women in a way that will allow them to avoid banishment.

In Act Two, Scene Two, their plan seems to have failed as Claire and Anna's lovers have ignored the invitation to come to Anna's house. Anna changes tactics by inviting the wife of her lover, thus leading the wife to gossip positively about them; same plan, new target. "She is the cornerstone! With her endorsement, both the man and the girl are licensed to frequent our home" (91). The wife's favorable comment will insure Anna and Claire's place in the mainstream community even more than the gossip of the father and daughter.

The power of negative gossip in the mainstream community is also illustrated. The girl told her mother that the girl's father had given her mother's necklace to Anna. The gossip leads the wife to confront her husband, who consults his attorney, who sends Anna a notice that all financial ties are cut and that the necklace must be returned or horrible criminal penalties will be inflicted upon Anna (93). Negative gossip, people saying bad things about her, can lead to severe consequences.

At play's end, Anna asks, "Are you, indeed, resigned to accompany me into Exile?" Claire says, "The world you see is not cruel. It possesses neither falsity or guile. And it shall be my mission to protect you from it" (112). The two failed to join the mainstream community. They happily resign themselves to living in exile, part of a close-knit but marginalized lesbian community.

As noted earlier, Mamet identified gossip as the social language activity that most welds relationship units into a community; however, he states elsewhere that jargon surpasses gossip as the ultimate unifier. Jargon is the specialized, private language of an identifiable group. Jargon is the community's coded language that is inaccessible to people who do not belong to the community that speaks it. The essay "Eight Kings" is a loving tribute to jargon's ability to create a sense of community for those privy to the secret language. Mamet writes of how language creates a community between soldiers, a theory he uses in his 2004 movie, *Spartan*, and in the pilot episode of the CBS television series he co-created called *The Unit*, which debuted in March of 2006. The essay moves beyond the military to railroad switchmen, hobos, New York homicide detectives, knife traders, and actors. Mamet says, "Thorstein Veblen wrote that any profession with a preponderance of jargon was make-believe. But I love and have always loved jargon, the secret symbols, the fraternal hailing-signs, the code of the personals column. . . . To study anything else seemed to me like work" (*Make-Believe Town* 4). Mamet concludes that, "The codes mean to me that something of surpassing interest was in progress. . ." (5). If something of surpassing interest is occurring, the natural human instinct, exacerbated in Mamet who has written in *Some Freaks* and elsewhere about how he has always felt like an outsider, is to want to join in with that fascinating activity. But one cannot join unless one knows the "pass word(s)," or jargon. Mamet uses jargon in all of his dialogue because of his respect for its ability to fascinate and draw in an audience who wants to join the community created by his coded dialogue.

Mamet told Bigsby why the three scenes in *Glengarry Glen Ross*'s first act are so compelling: ". . . if you see a couple in a restaurant talking at the next table and you can't quite hear what they are talking about but it's evident that what they are talking about is important, that fact, and the fact that you don't quite understand the vocabulary, makes you listen all the harder" (*Modern American Drama* 219). He refers to the Williamson-Levene scene, but he employs this technique in all of his plays. Mamet's 2004 version of *Faustus* contains arguably the most erudite character to ever appear onstage. Only the Magus, Satan's incarnation, can speak Faustus' cerebral jargon, thus the only community Faustus can join is in Hell.

Jargon especially creates communities among American immigrants, as Mamet observes in the essay, "The Decoration of Jewish Houses." Mamet writes, "What did it mean, then, to be 'racially' Jewish? It meant that, among ourselves, we shared the wonderful, the warm, and the comforting codes, language, jokes and attitudes which make up the consolations of strangers in a strange land" (*Some Freaks* 8). When immigrants enter a new land, they can bond with the new community through jargon, which makes of the outsider an insider in that community. No matter where one finds oneself, one is never alone because one's language marks one as belonging to the established community that exists as part of the new land's society. One is never alone among strangers, and in fact is never "one," if she speaks the community's jargon.

Boston Marriage's Catherine, the maid character, is a recent immigrant searching for the comforting codes of jargon which console "strangers in a strange land." Upon her first entrance, she attempts to perform the role of her new position by saying expected phrases, including jargon of the maid trade. Her "Morning, miss," is ignored. When Anna orders tea, addressing the maid as "Bridey,"

the reply should be “Yes, miss.” Instead, she tries to correct Anna, “It’s Catherine, miss” (8). “The Maid,” which is how Mamet refers to her for line identification no matter how often Catherine states her name, does not know where she belongs in the community because she has yet to establish any relationships; she has no name, identity, relationship or group. Her lines seem to be inappropriate responses because she has not mastered the jargon of a lower-class immigrant domestic servant. Anna attempts to use the jargon she associates with Ireland to put the maid in her place, an attempt to communicate that the Scottish maid does not understand. Anna realizes she cannot access the jargon to properly scold the maid, and so dismisses her.

Other areas of miscomprehension include an emphasis on confusion between the separate jargons of lust and love. At the top of Act Two, “the fella ‘bout the stove” has returned to visit the maid. It is significant that for the first time in the play, Mamet refers to her name, “Catherine,” in stage directions; however, her line designator remains “MAID.” This is because she has formed a relationship, we will find out later in Act Two, with the stove repairman. Now part of a relationship, she is ready to join a community. However, Anna speaks the jargon of love in a monologue of woe, and the maid only understands the jargon of sex. She asks for permission to work while Anna is talking, “Cause I can’t, the life o’ me, tell what the fuck yer on about” (44). “Fuck” emphasizes her sexuality while communicating that Anna speaks a jargon unfamiliar to the maid. She attempts in turn to reach out with a saying of her grandmother, but Anna replies, “Will you stuff a sock in it?” These two exchanges demonstrate that the characters use alien jargon when discussing anything in life other than sex. The maid is desperate for human contact. She mentions her need for a “friendly word,” one who speaks the jargon of her homeland (45). All she speaks in common with the Stove Repairman is the jargon of sex. In commiseration, Anna says, “Believe me, I know the feeling.” The maid replies, “I’m sure you do” (46).

The maid begins to comprehend her role through her first learning sexual jargon with the stove repairman. Early in Act One she is offstage with him; she has found someone with whom she can make contact. His effect is immediate. Anna tells the maid, “Oh, go away” (18). She exits immediately. She is beginning to follow instructions correctly.

There is a crash in the kitchen while the maid is alone with the repairman (28). She confesses she dropped the platter, but then seems so distracted or unable to understand simple instructions that Anna has to repeatedly ask, “Are you deaf?” She begins to cry so Anna uses the jargon of Irish poverty and fails to communicate. Once Claire leaves Anna and the maid alone, Anna, infused with lust, tells the maid she is attractive.

ANNA. Aha. Do you garner the thrust of my declaration?

MAID. I think so, mum.

ANNA. But what, it repels you?

MAID. No, mum, but.

ANNA. Yes?

MAID. What would I tell my parents?

ANNA. That you had found a secure position.

MAID. May I think about it? (41-42)

When it comes to sex, they speak the same specialized code.

The clearest example of Mamet’s theory that language creates first relationships and then community is through the maid’s rise and fall in society in the play’s plot. The maid announces the Stove Man’s arrival. She lies, “You need some new parts,” to explain his return to fix an already

repaired stove. Anna rudely dismisses the maid and then informs her that the tea is cold, but the maid now feels confident enough in her community place to sassily reply “. . .nothing the matter with cold tea . . . I’ve had worse, and so, I’d think, have you. No offense . . . I only meant, in a long life, some point, it’s likely come down to Short Rations.” Anna mistakenly concludes, “Oh, how the Lesser Beasts draw strength, at the spectacle of the Lioness beset” (52). The fact is her part in a mainstream heterosexual relationship makes the maid feel a part of the ‘majority-hence-acceptable’ society; she can defend herself against Anna’s assaults.

The maid announces the arrival of the parts for the stove and disappears for some time, presumably for sex (54). While gone, to represent the offstage activity, Anna and Claire discuss “the Mating Instinct” (59). When the maid returns and sassily answers a question, she has to be reminded of her place (61). They discuss how mud used for caulking walls in Scotland, dries, falls out, and has to be moistened and replaced, symbolic of the spent penis shrinking out of the vagina, and requiring oral moistening for reinsertion. This brings the maid to tears. She confesses to her offstage sex and is fired. Before she leaves, she reveals she speaks the vocabulary of exotic lands, due to stories told her by her father. This knowledge of the language of an identifiable group gains her acceptance by the other women. Anna and Claire ask the maid to teach them her jargon, or as Anna calls it, “Women’s Wisdom, do you see? The Sayings of the Auld Grandmarm” (82). Anna now treats the maid as a peer, illustrated by Anna’s rebuke to Claire when she still speaks to the maid as a subordinate: “One must keep a civil tongue in one’s mouth” (84). For the rest of the play, the maid is no longer an alien. Her dramatic language has been used to form first a relationship with the Stove Repairman, and then she bonds with Anna’s community. Now she has a chance, through her community, to join and improve a healthy society in her newly adopted American home.

Mamet’s favorite jargon is that of the movie set or play stage. The essay “Encased by Technology,” describes the demand for jargon’s growth no matter the activity the technology surrounds. Encasing technology is the language of jargon, keeping in those who speak, and dazzling those who do not. Mamet says a fast-paced, technologically advanced society anoints as heroes those who can guide society safely through life. “We lionize not the explorer, but the pilot, not the statesman, but the president, not the writer but the director . . . we have selected to admire and envy that person who is encased by technology. . .” (*Some Freaks* 161-162). The director of film, Mamet notes, like a Mark Twain riverboat captain, uses a beautiful, private language that enables her to complete improbable tasks and garner membership in an enviable professional community. “On the movie set you hear the beautiful cadence of a specialized workers’ language The cadences sounded familiar to me . . . and gave information to the riverboat pilot, who was the most lionized and romantic representative of *his* time” (162-163). The movie director, like the pilot, takes point on a journey, using jargon to bind the community together and blaze the trail.

In the essay “Smash Cut” Mamet examines Hollywood’s specialized language. “Smash cut” is a direction to film editors, but Mamet asserts this definition is only an illusion. “These utterances of almost-meaning do serve to communicate information. The information, however, is limited to this: we’re all playing Silly Buggers” (*Jafsie and John Henry* 86). The purpose of jargon is not to convey information but to separate members of its community from non-members. He illustrates this concept by defining the coded phrases of his community, translating for outsiders. *High concept* means interesting with a claim of expertise, “But there ain’t no expertise in ‘high-concept,’ there is only arrogance passing itself off, as it will, as inside information.” *Character driven* means “the plot stinks and you better hope the star is popular enough to open the movie in spite of it.” *Production values*

means expensive waste; *backstory* means narration; and *moral dilemma* is a myth created by Hollywood bureaucrats. Mamet thinks Hollywood's secret language "is as colorful and inventive as that of any other regal or criminal pursuit. Death, defecation, sex, money – all the big ones demand and receive their own burgeoning vocabulary; they reduce us to a primitive, infantile state" (*Jafsie* 87-90). Jargon masks the helplessness that loneliness creates and conjures a community to stand with us when we face the challenges of life. As long as we know the password(s), we are never alone. Mamet includes an homage to show business in *Boston Marriage* in Act Two when Anna and Claire prepare to play the roles of fortune-tellers.

Mamet's essay, "The Shooting Auction," proves exclusion can occur if one cannot speak the jargon properly. Mamet discusses his superior first round shooting at a prestigious gun club, which should have earned him entry into the shooting fraternity, but Mamet's failure to speak the community's language cost him membership in the brotherhood. He knew his language use was leading him astray, "But I just couldn't seem to keep quiet, and I kept going on . . . I felt like a fool and knew that my chat sounded false to the other men" (*The Cabin* 106). His failure to connect, much like the maid Catherine attempting to talk to Claire and Anna in *Boston Marriage*, made Mamet feel like an outsider; and so he left the event early, having failed to bond with the community because he could not properly enter into its discourse.

At the play's beginning, Claire and Anna communicate with each other, but they fail to connect and vice-versa with Claire's maid, Catherine. Anna and Claire belonged to one community and Catherine another, and there is in the play, as in life, a failure to communicate between groups. Like Dale, the temporary worker in *Lakeboat*, who fails to enter the shipboard community; like the cop and Lingk in *Glengarry Glen Ross* who have trouble understanding and being understood by the beleaguered salesmen, the representatives of disparate communities in *Boston Marriage* can only communicate when it comes to impersonal matters of business. This bodes ill for a healthy society, which depends on inter-community communication for its robustness.

Society

The individuated communities that comprise American society must come together; they have no choice if the country is to survive. The relative health of that society is created by language. The majority of Mamet's plays serve as cautionary tales to demonstrate the consequences of a failure to connect. Don and Teach's community is excluded from society in *American Buffalo*; genders do not gel in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*; salesman Levine and management Williamson do not connect in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, like producer Gould and temporary worker Karen in *Speed-the-Plow*, and *Oleanna's* professor John and student Carol. These characters negatively impact each other because they cannot get on the same page. Mamet sees language creating an unhealthy society in America; he sees it in public places, where different communities merge into a cohesive unit. He sees it in the use of patriotic language to create a national identity, but the national "language" of America, spoken through jargon and lies, is destructive not constructive. Mamet sees only one source as capable of creating a healthy American society, and that is the language of the theatre.

Mamet sees diners and airports as especially relevant examples of public places where language creates society. In these locations representatives of different communities come together to create a microcosm of American society. Mamet sees this as particularly relevant when applied to groups who gather in diners, the equivalent of the animal world's watering hole, and airports. Mamet sees the primary benefit of diners is the creation of an arena for conversation that creates society.

We've seen and may still see the white-shirted confraternity of movers and shakers at their sacred table in the window of a morning, settling the business of a town. We've seen the waitress chatting up the trucker, the pair having their fight, and the couple previously believed happily married to others holding their preternaturally innocent conclaves. (*Make-Believe Town* 80)

But classic American diners are being replaced by chain restaurants festooned with dozens of impersonal televisions. Everyone in the chain restaurant is watching television and not talking to their fellow diners. Mamet hopes the diner will re-emerge into prominence "and lead us back to their pleasures of reading, writing, gossip, mutual observation, and whatever else, if such there be, that makes the world go round" (84). Mamet implies, with "if such there be," that only the language of "reading, writing, gossip, [and] mutual observation," where members of communities can gather to share stories and anecdotes, can make global society operate.

People from all communities gather in airports, and it is in reference to airports that Mamet discusses patriotic language as creating society. Mamet defines American patriotic language as jargon and lies. Mamet describes being in a small room in an airport with a group of people, repeatedly watching the twin towers' destruction on 9/11.

This was not the jingoism of "Tell it to the Marines" or the obscenity of "Peace with honor," nor the shameful trickery of "the liberation of Kuwait has begun" or "America – love it or leave it." This was not the fool rhetoric of "feeling another's pain," . . . This was not the America of bombast and self-congratulation, but sorrow for the good that we recognize and participate in as the fellow feeling of those who share a simple blessing. (*South of Northeast* 14-15)

With their country under attack, the people in the airport used language to form an important bond and become a society of community representatives.

But look at how Mamet characterizes the national language of American society: jingoism, shameful trickery, obscene untruths, fool rhetoric, bombastic and full of self-love. This is not the language of a healthy society. Another indication of ill health for America comes in Mamet's lament for the death of the New York he remembers as he grows older. Mamet's essay "Delsomma's," about a now-closed restaurant, sees street signs in New York as labels marking the end of American civilization. "Although they have taken to putting the nicknames of the streets upon the lampposts, beneath the street names themselves, to wit: '52nd Street – Jazz Alley,' '46th Street – Restaurant Row,' and so on – the grand hailing sign of the last stage of Urban Decay" (*Make-Believe Town* 74-75). The need to post signs to communicate these nicknames is a death knell because these should be communicated by word of mouth. The fact they must be posted means no one is talking to each other.

Theatre can save American society, states Mamet, while television only adds to the rot. Mamet believes electronic entertainment is the death of society because it serves as a barrier to human contact.

The mass media likewise corrupt the human need for culture (an admixture of art, religion, pageant drama – a celebration of the lives we lead together) and churn it into entertainment, marginalizing that which lacks immediate appeal to the mass as "stinking of culture" or "of limited appeal." (*South of Northeast* 158)

Plays bring communities together to mutually celebrate life. "The synagogue – or church-basement theatre . . . are an organic outgrowth and expression of the ad hoc group, come together to share and create a vision of the world" (158). People gather to share dramatic language in theatres and thereby create a healthy society.

Mamet celebrates actual human contact while decrying electronic alienation: “We believe gossip before we believe journalism. . . . We believe the word of a human being whom we can look in the eye – however much his testimony rests on hearsay – before the statements of a faceless press.” He goes on to say that theatre and other forms of story-telling are examples of a people sharing myths for profit; the profit is “the shared experience itself, the *celebration* of the tale, and of its truth” (*Writing in Restaurants* 107-108).

As to truth, Mamet believes that it is human nature to lie and love the act of lying. “And we have created the opportunity to face our nature, to face our deeds, to face our lies in *The Drama*. For the subject of drama is *The Lie*” (*3 Uses of Knife* 79). The drama is over when truth has prevailed. Lies fester like a cancer within American society. The cure for this cancer is dramatic language utilized by the dramatist to peel back the lie and reveal truth, creating a healthy society and protecting us from language that can doom rather than save us.

Theatre critic Michael Hinden notes that one of Mamet’s favorite themes is “the mysterious intimacy of the human voice,” and that the human voice is needed in society to create love, a sense of belonging, and communion (33). “Through the intimacy of the human voice, theater affirms interconnectedness, as do certain other group activities. . .” (34). In addition to the human voice, theatrical art creates society because the audience as a group goes through the same journey as the protagonist, which is also the journey taken by the writer, “So dramatic art raises the creators and the viewers to the status of communicants. We who made it, formed it, saw it, went through something together, now we are veterans. Now we are friends” (*3 Uses of Knife* 61). Theatre takes varied community members on a journey; the street car we ride together on the rails of existence is named not “Desire” but “Dramatic Language.”

In the theatre audiences unconsciously share experiences with one another by watching truth onstage. This sharing creates society. “The same mechanism functions when we watch Shakespeare and listen to ‘the proud man’s contumely . . . the law’s delay’; when we hear Willy Loman say, ‘He’s liked, but he’s not *deeply* liked. . .’” (*3 Uses of Knife* 56). The dramatic language used by the playwright is the muscle that gives theatre power to squeeze people together. Theatre creates a sense of communion in 21st century American audiences just as it did for London audiences during the Renaissance and for Ancient Greek audiences. Throughout human history the power to cure and create a healthy human society by discussing the truth about the human condition has emerged in theatre.

Most reviews of *Boston Marriage*, like “The New Art of Lying” by Abraham Lincoln Straw, or “Boston Marriage” by Richard Brucher, describe Anna and Claire as living on society’s fringe because they are a lesbian couple, but I see them as representing all Americans because they speak our national language of the lie. Anna and Claire’s entire relationship is based on deceit. I believe this is why Mamet chose the title *Boston Marriage*. A “Boston marriage” is a relationship between two women, living together in what amounts to a lesbian marriage. Most reviewers believe the title refers to the relationship between Anna and Claire. I see the title as having deeper significance, with an emphasis on “Boston” rather than “marriage.” I theorize that Mamet chose *Boston Marriage* as a title because Anna and Claire lie. Boston is a city associated with the birthplace of America as a free nation during the War of Independence. Contributing factors include, among others, the Boston Tea Party. Because Anna and Claire’s “marriage” is based on a lie, their relationship is a microcosm of all American relationships. The microcosm is the macrocosm.

In most Mamet plays, there is a failure to connect between the characters. “It is not merely that

Mamet has captured the rhythms and idiosyncrasies of American speech, with its casual obscenities and ‘you knows’ as eloquently as Pinter has the English, but that [*Sexual Perversity*] carries with it, for all its humor, an undercurrent of profound despair for the ugliness and sterility of what human relationships have become in our society of quick, casual sex without feeling” (Schvey “Power Plays” 92). Mamet became more optimistic as he entered his fifties, because despite the inability to establish equality, the maid and Anna have a healthier relationship and can communicate with each other by play’s end. Anna and Claire’s relationship is built on the elaborate lie that is the plot of the play, the subterfuge Anna used to win Claire back from her younger lover capped with the lie about the necklace being stolen. While their relationship has been saved by a lie, Claire no longer lies to herself about the nature of her feelings for Anna, improving the level of truth in the play’s core relationship unit. Healthier relationships, healthier community communication, these qualities make of *Boston Marriage* as close to a happy ending as I have seen in Mamet yet.

Boston Marriage has received bad reviews, possibly because directors and actors did not communicate the richness of Mamet’s dramatic language. A clear vision of the play was not created. Carolyn Clay failed to see the complex mechanisms operating through the language in her review of the original production. Clay refers to the play as “. . .but a sophisticated lark . . . [it] does not run deep nor mean to” and “all of this is delicious if slight.” She mistakes the inability of separate community members to connect as exemplified by Anna and the maid as “every conceivable cliché held by the turn-of-the-century American aristocracy about the Irish” (1-2). The critic Clay makes the same mistake as the character, Anna, about the maid’s heritage: Catherine is Scottish. William C. Boles’ review of the Donmar Warehouse production announces the play is “an uninspiring evening of theatre,” partly because the maid “is a bit scatterbrained” and he describes her attempts at inter-community communication and use of Scottish jargon as “bizarre and rambling family stories [inserted] into the conversations of Anna and Claire” (3).

Reviews from the London press include phrases such as “The play’s main problem is that its characters are armed with so many witticisms that it is impossible to penetrate the verbal weaponry to appreciate the true human beings.” “If you want David Mamet at his crisp best, this isn’t it. . . .” “The dialogue is impossible . . . Zoe Wannamaker as Anna majestically rises above this unattractive nonsense” (www.albemarle-london.com/bostonmarriage.html).

Abraham Lincoln Straw writes that the play has “frivolous arguments” and that “Effete locutions suddenly give way to more typically Mametesque gutterspeak . . . without obvious cause.” Straw describes the “extremely arch and elliptical nature of the dialogue” coupled with “the self-conscious artificiality of the acting.” He states:

[*Boston Marriage*] arrived in New York with an embarrassing thud. In Karen Kohl Haas’s production at the Public Theatre, the play seemed inert, repetitious and strained, and most critics drew the straightforward conclusion that the writing was weak. My own feeling is that *Boston Marriage* is difficult – probably the most difficult play to direct in Mamet’s tricky repertory because its playacting aspect is so fluid and variable – but the fault here was primarily the director’s. (3-4)

Directors and actors can avoid reviews like these if they use Mamet’s own theories, as I have, in their script analysis methodology. With an in-depth analysis of the many layers of this complex, compacted dramatic language, actors will be able to determine with which characters their characters feel comfortable, by which ones they feel threatened, or from whom they feel disconnected. Actors

can identify to which communities their characters belong, and who are their societal friends and enemies.

Directors can use this system to determine if the play is one where the characters are successful in making connections, or one in which the attempt at connection fails. Which characters communicate and which do not? These are indicators as to whether Mamet sees the play as serious or comic. In Mamet's world, successful communication builds a healthy society, and that is a happy ending.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation has been to examine David Mamet's opinions about the power and potential of dramatic language. The quality of Mamet's writing is of the highest order but there is a dearth of works devoted to examining Mamet's own theories about dramatic language as expressed in his non-dramatic writings and interview responses. This dissertation clarifies Mamet's dramatic language strategy so that it then can be applied to improve the effectiveness of staging his plays. My goal has been to bring the artist Mamet closer to potential directors, actors and designers so that all of the artists can better communicate with their audiences.

David Mamet believes in the power of words. From his earliest influences to the present, his affection for language and faith in its power has never wavered. He sets out to create with his language a dream world where we can discuss and hopefully solve the problems crippling American society. Mamet is a dramatic poet who uses his metaphorical language and speech rhythms to create an entirely new world for his characters to inhabit. Mamet is a master of using word symbols to create the reality of his plays. Mamet characters create their reality through the use of labels or identifying phrases. They also use the act of speaking in that if a character says something aloud, saying it creates it. Gossip and lies are two other techniques Mamet characters employ in the creation of reality. My analysis of the script demonstrated that all of these techniques create the stage world for *Speed-the-Plow*.

In addition to creating the world of the play, dramatic language also creates individual identity, or character. This dissertation made note of the conflicting statements Mamet has made about characters and the enacting of characters, as well as the complications and inconsistencies his characters tend to present, but actors can resolve these difficulties by focusing on three things. The first of these three things is: what do other characters say about the character? Second, what does the character say about itself? And lastly, what are their speech mannerisms? This dissertation demonstrated the significance of these elements of dramaturgy and performance in the analysis of *Oleanna*.

The final major point of the dissertation is that language creates society. This is a three-step method as well, in that first dramatic language creates a relationship between two characters. Then those two characters, a relationship unit, use language to bond with members of a community. Communities then use dramatic language to unite as a society. The analysis of *Boston Marriage* shows that most Mamet plays contain characters who fail to connect with others. This failure is a threat in that a lack of communication between communities results in a disjointed and dying American society. The characters of *Boston Marriage* were able to create a relationship and a community, but were rejected by mainstream society. Despite this rejection, the characters found happiness in their own corner of society.

Mamet's work has garnered critical accolades and awards, but it is deserving of more; it is deserving of a wider, more diverse and much larger audience base. I believe community theatres, colleges and universities in smaller cities avoid performing Mamet's plays because of the challenge in analyzing and grasping his complex use of dramatic language. Mamet shapes dramatic language to create everything. For readers and theater-goers who confuse his dialogue with how people really talk, and think that because sometimes *all* the characters do is talk nothing really happens, or that the

characters in *Glengarry Glen Ross* are doing nothing but screaming obscenities at each other for two hours, I ask that you read this dissertation and apply it in the staging of Mamet's plays.

I love David Mamet's work. He loves language and respects its power to fascinate, as do I. I will finish with a quote from an interview John Lahr conducted with Mamet, wherein Mamet says of *Glengarry Glen Ross*:

I was listening to conversations in the next booth, and I thought, My God, there's nothing more fascinating than the people in the next booth. You start in the middle of the conversation and wonder, What the hell are they talking about? And you listen heavily. So, I worked a bunch of these scenes with people using extremely arcane language – kind of the canting language of the real estate crowd, which I understood, having been involved with them – and I thought, well, if it fascinates me, it will probably fascinate [the audience] too." (Lahr, "David Mamet: The Art of the Theatre" 112)

I posit that it does, Mr. Mamet, and if it does not then it should.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rodney Whatley was born in Mobile, AL. He grew up in McCullough, a small community outside the town of Atmore, AL. He attended Escambia County High School before beginning his collegiate studies at Jefferson Davis Jr. College in Brewton, AL. Rodney received his BFA in Theatre-Acting from the University of Montevallo, Montevallo, AL. After graduation he took a position with a summer outdoor drama company in North Carolina, where he was the Props Master, Weapons Master and actor in *The Liberty Cart*. Upon completion of this project, Rodney moved north to Rhode Island where he joined *The Astor's Beechwood Theatre Company*. Rodney performed with the improvisational tour guide company, sang in musical revues, acted in murder mysteries and wrote two plays for *Beechwood* before deciding to attend graduate school.

Lindenwood University offered Rodney a graduate assistantship which he was happy to accept in 1989. At Lindenwood Rodney's primary duties were as Box Office Manager and as Recruiting Assistant. He acted in numerous lead roles at the university and continued to work professionally in summer stock while pursuing his MFA in Theatre with an Acting emphasis. In 1991 Rodney was proud to work with Summer Music Theatre at Western Illinois University and in 1992 with another outdoor historical drama, *The Legend of Daniel Boone* in Kentucky.

Rodney was accepted to the Ph.D. program at FSU in 1992. He completed his coursework and passed his preliminary exams in 1995; however, at this time Rodney was forced to table his dissertation work due to family obligations. He worked as a substitute teacher in Escambia County, AL during the late 1990s and early 2000s. He also became an adjunct instructor for Jefferson Davis Community College, the University of West Florida and Pensacola Jr. College until he was able to retake his preliminary exams and re-enter the doctoral program at FSU in the mid-2000s.

In 2005 Rodney became the Director of Theatre at Pensacola State College, formerly PJC. He is the Artistic Director, selecting the shows to be performed by the school each year, and directs all four mainstage productions. In addition to his artistic duties, Rodney teaches Acting I, Acting II, Dramatic Literature, Directing I, Rehearsal and Performance, Introduction to Acting, and Theatre Appreciation. In 2011 Rodney became the State Theatre Advisor for the Florida College Activities Association. Perseverance is its own reward.