

CUDA BOARD

'THE TWO PARTS OF THE PROGRAM' -

FIVE SCENES

THE Q. IN $(C+R)$ IS

What IS. A Answer
How found - ?

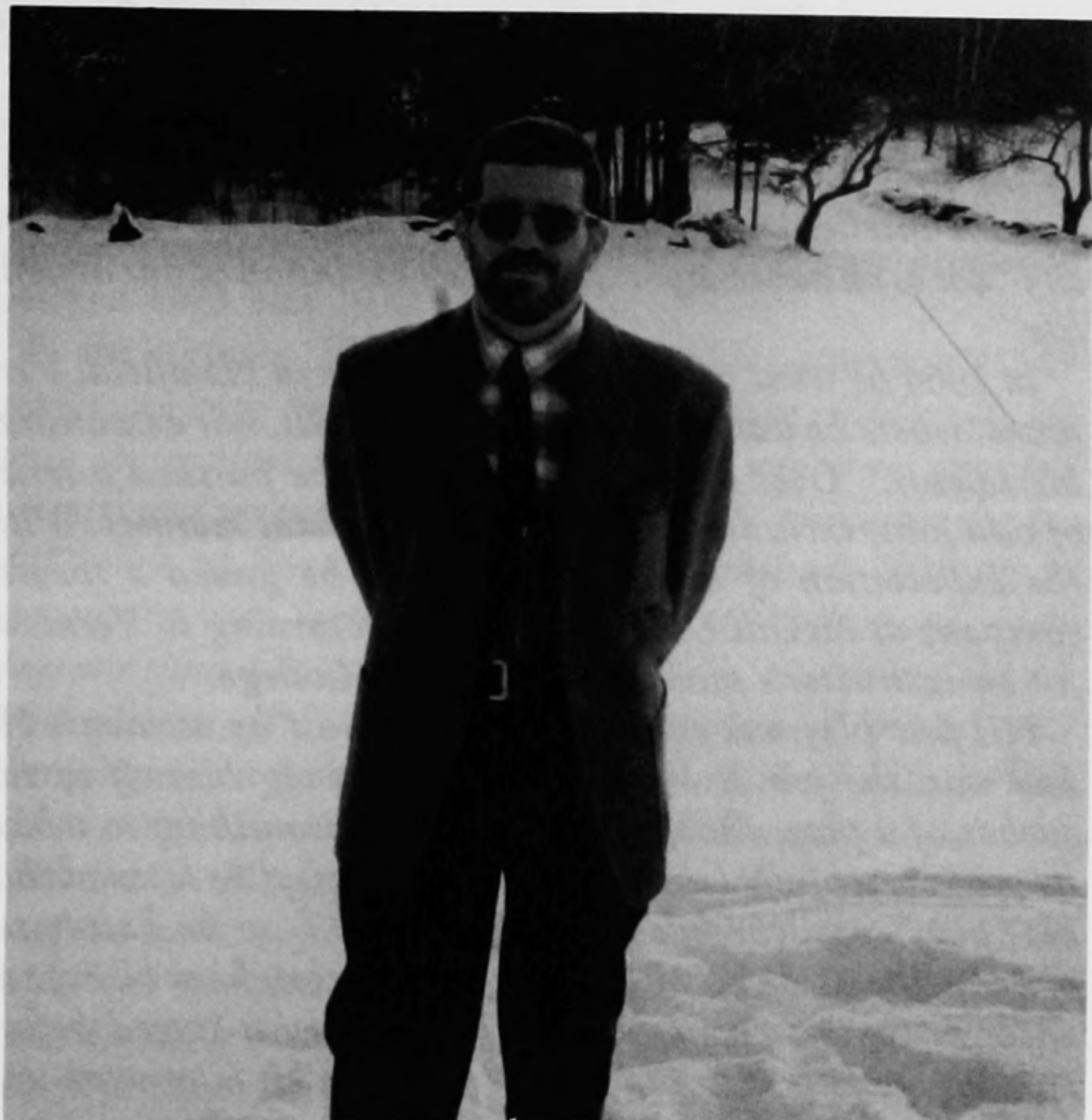
'IT ALL COMES DOWN TO NOTHING -
WHAT IF IT ALL COMES DOWN
TO NOTHING
WHAT IF IT DOES - ?

IN ANSWER?
AS IN REF -
B.F. - $(C+R)$ - ?
JUG - ?
THE DESCENT OF
(C) - $(C+R)$, $(C+R)$
IN - $(C+R)$ - ? - WHAT?

WILL IT BE A POTENTIAL LINE - AS A QUESTION
WILL IT BE A QUESTION AT THE END?
BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN? (YES)
BUT IT MEANS MY FANGS? (YES)
Does it mean any more - ?

NO
MY MIND
IS MOST

A manuscript page from the author's notebooks.



David Mamet

The Art of Theater XI

David Alan Mamet grew up in a Jewish neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, just a few blocks from Lake Michigan. His father was a labor lawyer, his mother a schoolteacher; both sides of the family came to Chicago in the 1920s, part of the city's last wave of central European immigrants. Mamet was a child actor who attended public schools on the South Side until his parents' divorce; later, as a teenager, he would

spend several unhappy years living with his mother in Olympia Fields, a Chicago suburb on the edge of the prairie.

Like many Chicago writers, he claims to have been shaped by the city's peculiar duality, "the admixture of the populist and the intellectual." He would write later of perceiving the city "not as an adversary. . . [but] as an extension of our dream-life."

In 1964 he went off to Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, where he was graduated with "no skills, nor demonstrable talents." Over the next several years he pursued a series of odd jobs, including a stint in the merchant marines. With the expectation of becoming an actor, he joined a theater company at McGill University, before returning to Vermont for an instructor's position at Marlboro College.

*His first play was staged in 1970, almost by accident. He had won the job at Marlboro by advertising himself as the author of a play, though in fact there was nothing to which he could truthfully lay claim. Upon his arrival he learned that his "play" was scheduled to be performed, so he hastily set about writing *Lakeboat*, a one-act drama taken from his experiences in the merchant marines. *Lakeboat* was staged before the year ended; it would set the tone for his later work and eventually become a full-length feature, one that is still performed today.*

*He spent only one year at Marlboro before returning to Chicago, where he worked variously as a waiter, a cabdriver and a real-estate salesman. The following autumn, having abandoned acting, he went back to Goddard, which had offered to make him its artist-in-residence. There he formed an ensemble, the St. Nicholas Theater Company, which performed the plays he had written since *Lakeboat*. In 1973 he moved back to Chicago, bringing with him a batch of new plays and the means to have them performed.*

*He spent the next four years in Chicago, writing, directing and teaching (at Pontiac State Prison and the University of Chicago). After a rough start his plays won the admiration of both critics and audiences. In 1974 he received the Joseph Jefferson Award (given each year to the best new local play) for *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. More prizes followed—two*

Obies in 1976, and in the same year a New York Drama Critics Circle Award for American Buffalo, which had its Broadway debut in 1977 at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. In all, nine of his plays—including A Life in the Theatre, The Water Engine, Prairie du Chien and Lone Canoe—were produced between 1975 and 1978.

In the eighties, Mamet turned part of his attention to the movies, a genre that had attracted him since childhood. He wrote screenplays for six movies (two of which he directed himself) and received an Academy Award nomination for his adaptation of The Verdict. He also published Writing in Restaurants and Some Freaks, both essay collections. New plays continued to appear almost annually, including the revised version of Lakeboat, Speed-the-Plow, Edmond and Glengarry Glen Ross, which received both the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

Since 1991 Mamet has lived in New England. At forty-nine he is the author of twenty-two plays, twelve scripts and four collections of essays. His recent work includes the screenplay for Louis Malle's Vanya on 42nd Street, the novel The Village and three plays: Oleanna, The Cryptogram and Death Defying Acts.

—B.R.H.

INTERVIEWER

How was it that you were drawn to the theater?

DAVID MAMET

Freud believed that our dreams sometimes recapitulate a speech, a comment we've heard or something that we've read. 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.

INTERVIEWER

Can you put a date to this?

MAMET

It's always been going on. It's something my mother used to say when I was just a little kid: "David, why must you dramatize everything?" She said it to me as a criticism: why must you *dramatize* everything?

INTERVIEWER

And did you have an answer for her?

MAMET

No, but I found out (it took me forty years) that all rhetorical questions are accusations. They're very sneaky accusations because they masquerade as a request for information. If one is not aware of the anger they provoke, one can feel not only accused but inadequate for being unable to respond to the question.

INTERVIEWER

That happens in your plays a lot. There are a lot of rhetorical challenges.

MAMET

"Why must you always . . ."

INTERVIEWER

One of the things that interests me is how uncompromising you are, both with yourself and the audience. *The Cryptogram*, for example, forces the audience to solve this puzzle that also happens to be troubling the kid in the play. You, as the author, have put the audience and the kid in essentially the same place.

MAMET

Well, that, to me, is always the trick of dramaturgy: theoretically, perfectly, what one wants to do is put the protagonist

and the audience in exactly the same position. The main question in drama, the way I was taught, is always, What does the protagonist want? That's what drama is. It comes down to that. It's not about theme, it's not about ideas, it's not about setting, but what the protagonist wants. What gives rise to the drama, what is the precipitating event, and how, at the end of the play, do we see that event culminated? Do we see the protagonist's wishes fulfilled or absolutely frustrated? That's the structure of drama. You break it down into three acts.

INTERVIEWER

Does this explain why your plays have so little exposition?

MAMET

Yes. People only speak to get something. If I say, "Let me tell you a few things about myself," already your defenses go up; you go, "Look, I wonder what he wants from me," because no one ever speaks except to obtain an objective. That's the only reason anyone ever opens their mouth, onstage or off-stage. They may use a language that *seems* revealing, but if so, it's just coincidence, because what they're trying to do is accomplish an objective. "Well, well, if it isn't my younger brother just returned from Australia . . . have a good break?" The question is where does the *dramatist* have to lead you? Answer: the place where he or she thinks the audience needs to be led. But what does the *character* think? Does the character need to convey that information? If the answer is no, then you'd better cut it out, because you aren't putting the audience in the same position with the protagonist. You're saying, in effect, "Let's stop the play." That's what the narration is doing: stopping the play.

Now, there's a certain amount of *essential* information, without which the play does not make sense . . .

INTERVIEWER

And how do you fit that information in?

MAMET

As obliquely as possible. You want to give the people information before they know it's been given to them.

INTERVIEWER

So to you a character is . . .

MAMET

It's action, as Aristotle said. That's all that it is: exactly what the person does. It's not what they "think," because we don't know what they think. 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. Say someone came up to you and said, "I'm glad to be your neighbor because I'm a very honest man. That's my character. I'm honest, I like to do things, I'm forthright, I like to be clear about everything, I like to be concise." Well, you really don't know anything about that guy's character. Or the person is onstage, and the playwright has him or her make those same claims in several subtle or not-so-subtle ways, the audience will say, "Oh yes, I understand their character now; now I understand that they are a character." But in fact you don't understand anything. You just understand that they're jabbering to try to convince you of something.

INTERVIEWER

So do you end up cutting a lot of material from your earlier drafts?

MAMET

Well, you know, Hemingway said it once: "To write the best story you can, take out all the good lines."

INTERVIEWER

But do you then sometimes find that the audience has a hard time keeping up with you? It seems to me that in this

climate one of the playwright's problems is that the audience expects things to be explained.

MAMET

I never try to make it hard for the audience. I may not succeed, but . . . Vakhtangov, who was a disciple of Stanislavsky, was asked at one point why his films were so successful, and he said, "Because I never for one moment forget about the audience." I try to adopt that as an absolute tenet. I mean, if I'm not writing for the audience, if I'm not writing to make it easier for *them*, then who the hell am I doing it for? And the way you make it easier is by following those tenets: cutting, building to a climax, leaving out exposition and always progressing toward the single goal of the protagonist. They're very stringent rules, but they are, in my estimation and experience, what makes it easier for the audience.

INTERVIEWER

What else? Are there other rules?

MAMET

Get into the scene late, get out of the scene early.

INTERVIEWER

Why? So that something's already happened?

MAMET

Yes. That's how *Glengarry* got started. 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 them too. If not, they can put me in jail.

INTERVIEWER

Going back to your roots in the theater, how did you get involved initially?

MAMET

I was a kid actor. I did amateur theatricals, television and radio in Chicago. Always loved the theater.

INTERVIEWER

You loved it, but I wonder if your plays aren't in some sort of debate with its conventions and what it should be.

MAMET

Maybe, but I always understood that as one of its conventions. Like David Ogilvy said, you don't want to create an ad that says "advertisement." That you will not look at. Concerns of content, concerns of form, it's all the same to me. It's the theatrical event. As for thinking against the sort of conventional narrative formulae of the theater . . . Well, I have the great benefit of never having learned anything in school, so a lot of this stuff . . .

INTERVIEWER

Were you a bad student?

MAMET

I was a non-student. No interest, just bored to flinders. I was like the professor in *Oleanna* who all his life had been told he was an idiot, so he behaved like an idiot. Later on I realized that I enjoy accomplishing tasks. I get a big kick out of it because I never did it as a kid. Somebody said that the reason that we all have a school dream — "I've forgotten to do my paper!" "I've forgotten to study!" — is that it's the first time that the child runs up against the expectations of the world. "The world has expectations of me, and I'm going to have to meet them or starve, meet them or die, and I'm unprepared."

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever feel unprepared?

MAMET

Much of the time. But the prescription for that is to do more, to work harder, to do more, to do it again.

INTERVIEWER

If you hadn't found the theater, what do you think you might have been?

MAMET

I think it's very likely I would have been a criminal. It seems to me to be another profession that subsumes outsiders, or perhaps more to the point, accepts people with a not-very-well-formed ego, and rewards the ability to improvise.

INTERVIEWER

Is that why con men and tricksters appear so often in your plays?

MAMET

I've always been fascinated by the picaresque. That's part of the Chicago tradition: to love our gangsters and con men, the bunko artists and so forth.

It occurred to me while I was doing *House of Games* that the difficulty of making the movie was exactly the same difficulty the confidence man has. For the confidence man it is depriving the victim of her money; for me it is misleading the audience sufficiently so they feel pleased when they find out they've been misled, tricking them so that every step is logical, and at the end they've defeated themselves. So the process of magic and the process of confidence games, and to a certain extent the process of drama, are all processes of autosuggestion. They cause the audience to autosuggest themselves in a way which seems perfectly logical, but is actually false.

You know, also being a very proud son of a bitch, I always thought that the trick was to be able to do it on a bare stage, with nothing but one or two actors. If one could do it like that, then one has done something to keep the audience's attention, make it pay off over an hour and a half, on a bare stage with nothing but two people talking.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read a lot when you were a kid?

MAMET

I always read novels. To me that was "real" writing. I liked all the midwesterners—Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson.

INTERVIEWER

Was it just that the Midwest was familiar terrain, or something in the tone?

MAMET

Both. I mean, I loved Dreiser—he talked about streets that I knew and types that I knew and the kinds of people and kinds of neighborhoods that I actually knew. But I also liked the midwestern tone. It was very legato. Perhaps the rhythm of the midwestern seasons—a long, impossibly cold winter, and then a long, impossibly hot summer. It was a vast, impossibly big lake, a huge sea of wheat. It has that same rhythm, the same legato rhythm, moved on like that. Things were going to unfold in their own time, kind of like a French movie, except not quite that drawn out.

INTERVIEWER

You held a number of odd jobs while you were starting in the theater.

MAMET

Yes. After college I worked as an actor, a cab driver, a cook, a busboy—I did all of that. At one point, after I'd been

running a theater for a couple years, this guy came up to me at a party and said, "I saw the whole play. I like it very much." I said, "Thank you." He said, "You want to come be an editor at *Oui* magazine?" I said, "Why did you ask me? I have no idea what the job entails, and also, I'm sure I'm unqualified for it." And he said, "You know, I'm not sure what it entails either, but it will be a little bit of this, little bit of that, little bit of this. Make it up. And I'm sure you *are* qualified for it." And I said, "Well, I hate sitting in an office." He said, "Don't. Come in and do the work for however long it takes you, and go home." And I said *hum, hum, hummer*. And he said, "I'll pay you twenty thousand dollars a year." This was 1975. Twenty thousand was a vast amount of money—about three times more than I'd made in my life. So I said okay. I worked there for a while. Before that I was selling carpet over the telephone. Cold calling out of the blue book, absolutely cold.

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember your spiel?

MAMET

"Mrs. Jones, this is" — you always used a fake name — "Mrs. Jones, this is Dick Richards of Walton Carpets. I don't know what you've heard about our current two-for-one special — is your husband there with you now?" "A-buh-buh." "Will he be home this evening?" "A-wah-wah-wah-wah." "Fine, which would be a better time for us to send a representative over to talk to you, seven or nine o'clock?" Because what we wanted to do, it's the same idea as the Fuller Brush men: you get your foot in the door, you offer them something, keep talking, get them in the habit of saying yes, and then you've got them in the habit of accepting what you're giving them.

INTERVIEWER

Were you a good salesman?

MAMET

No, I was terrible. I kept identifying with the people on the other end, which is something you really can't do.

INTERVIEWER

You're much more ruthless as a playwright than you would be as a salesman.



© Brigitte Lacombe

Director Gregory Mosher and David Mamet.

MAMET

I'm a fairly gentle guy. When Greg Mosher directed *Glen-garry* we had a lot of salesmen come in to talk to the cast, guys who were making five million dollars a year selling airplanes or industrial equipment. These people were superclosers. There's a whole substratum of people who are *the* closer, like the Alec

Baldwin character in the movie of *Glengarry*. But the most impressive salesman was a saleswoman, a Fuller Brush lady, who came in and showed us how to do the Fuller Brush spiel. It was great. The first thing they do is offer you a choice of two free gifts, and they make sure you take one in your hand. So it's not, "Do you want one?" It's, "Which would you rather have?" And now that you've got one of their free gifts in your hand, how could you not answer their next question, which is also going to be answered—it's going to be yes, and the next question's going to be yes, and the next . . .

INTERVIEWER

Does this follow a rule of drama too, for you?

MAMET

I don't know, but I was fascinated by it. And the idea was, you've absolutely got to stick to the pitch. Have to stick with it. There was a great book called *In Search of Myself* by Frederick Grove, a Canadian novelist, a great writer. Nobody's ever heard of him, but it's a great book. It's about the immigrant experience: coming here with nothing and what America does to that person. And one of the things he becomes is a book salesman who goes from door to door having to sell phony books. Heartbreaking, you know, that he has to do this. Heartbreaking.

INTERVIEWER

Going back to the odd jobs: did you see them as a means to getting your start in the theater, or were you just sort of rooting around?

MAMET

I knew I wanted to be in the theater, but I also knew I was a terrible actor. So I started, by dribs and drabs, forming a theater company that I could direct, because I figured it was something I could do.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start writing plays?

MAMET

I didn't really start writing till I was in my twenties. And I started because the company, the St. Nicholas Theatre, couldn't pay any royalties—we didn't have any money. I was very fortunate, coming from Chicago, because we had that tradition there of writing as a legitimate day-to-day skill, like bricklaying. You know, you need to build a house but you can't afford it, or you need to build a garage but you can't afford a bricklayer. Well, hell, figure out how to lay bricks. You need a script, well, hell, figure out how to write one. There was a great tradition flourishing in Chicago in the early seventies of the theater as an organic unit. The organic theater—in fact, the most important theater at the time was called The Organic Theater—but the organic (small o) theater consisted of a company of actors who also directed and also wrote and also designed. Everybody did everything. There was no mystery about it. One week one guy would be the director, the next week the woman would be the director and the guy would be acting, etc. So that was the community and the tradition that I came back to in the seventies in Chicago.

INTERVIEWER

Who were your dramatic influences?

MAMET

Well, primarily Pinter—*The Revue Sketches*, *A Night Out* and *The Birthday Party*. He was my first encounter with modern drama. His work sounded real to me in a way that no drama ever had.

INTERVIEWER

What was a typical drama of the old school that struck you as dead or deadly?

MAMET

It was either a Shakespeare, which I wasn't hip enough to understand at that time in my youth, or bad translations of European plays, which were very bad translations, or American poetic realism, which just bored the bloomers off me. People talking too much—I didn't understand those people. They weren't like anybody I knew. The people I knew washed dishes or drove cabs.

INTERVIEWER

Were there advantages to starting in Chicago instead of New York?

MAMET

Being in Chicago was great. It was all happening, all the time, like jazz in New Orleans. We looked at New York as two things: one was, of course, the Big Apple and the other was the world's biggest hick town. Because much of what we saw happening in New York was the equivalent of the Royal Nonesuch—you know, a bunch of people crawling around, barking and calling it theater. But the version in Chicago was people went to the theater just like they went to the ballgame: they wanted to see a show. If it was a drama, it had to be dramatic, and if it was a comedy, it had to be funny—period. And if it was those things, they'd come back. If it wasn't those things, they wouldn't come back.

INTERVIEWER

How long were you there?

MAMET

I was in Chicago from like 1973 till 1976 or 1977. And then—where that I am—I came to New York.

INTERVIEWER

The Cryptogram, can we talk a little about what that was trying to figure out?

MAMET

Well, it was trying to figure out itself, for one. It was trying to figure out what the hell the mechanism of the play was. And I had all this stuff about the kid not going to sleep, and it finally occurred to me, about the billionth draft, well, it's about why can't the kid sleep? It's not *that* the kid can't sleep, but *why* can't the kid sleep? So the kid can't sleep because he knows, subconsciously, that something's unbalanced in the household. But then why is nobody paying attention to him? I thought, Aha! Well, this is perhaps the question of the play.

INTERVIEWER

So you, as the writer inside *The Cryptogram*, you've sort of imagined my questions and led me gradually to revelation. You have certain designs on the audience's mind, you try to persuade them of certain psychological truths . . .

MAMET

No, I'm not trying to persuade them of anything; it's much more basic than that, it's much more concrete. It has to do with those black lines on the white page. Finally it comes down to—maybe this is going to sound coy—it just comes down to the writing of a play. Obviously, the point of the play is doing it for the audience—like the cook who wants to make that perfect soufflé, that perfect mousse, that perfect carbonara. Of course he isn't going to do it if he doesn't think someone's going to eat it, but the point is to cook it perfectly, not to affect the eaters in a certain way. The thing exists of itself.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a moment in one of your plays that you really didn't know was there?

MAMET

Yes. I wrote this play called *Bobby Gould in Hell*. Greg Mosher did it on a double bill with a play by Shel Silverstein

over at Lincoln Center. Bobby Gould is consigned to Hell, and he has to be interviewed to find out how long he's going to spend there. The Devil is called back from a fishing trip to interview Bobby Gould. And so the Devil is there, the Assistant Devil is there and Bobby Gould. And the Devil finally says to Bobby Gould, "You're a very bad man." And Bobby Gould says, "Nothing's black and white." And the Devil says, "Nothing's black and white, nothing's black and white—what about a panda? What about a panda, you dumb fuck! What about a fucking panda!" And when Greg directed it, he had the assistant hold up a picture of a panda, kind of pan it 180 degrees to the audience at the Vivian Beaumont Theater. That was the best moment I've ever seen in any of my plays.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of writing routine do you have? How do you operate?

MAMET

I don't know. I've actually been vehemently deluding myself, thinking that I have no set habits whatever. I know that I have very good habits of thought, and I'm trying to make them better. But as for where I go, what I do and who's around when I work—those things are never important to me.

INTERVIEWER

Those habits of thought—how do they govern your writing?

MAMET

It's really not an intellectual process. I mean, as you see, I try to apply all sorts of mechanical norms to it, and they help me order my thoughts, but finally in playwriting, you've got to be able to write dialogue. And if you write enough of it and let it flow enough, you'll probably come across something that will give you a key as to structure. I think the process of writing a play is working back and forth between the moment

and the whole. The moment and the whole, the fluidity of the dialogue and the necessity of a strict construction. Letting one predominate for a while and coming back and fixing it so that eventually what you do, like a pastry chef, is frost your mistakes, if you can.

INTERVIEWER

Are you a computer man or a pad-and-pencil man?

MAMET

Pad and pencil. I want to see it, I want to see them all out in front of me, each one of the pencil adaptations, the pencil notations, and the pencil notations crossed out, and the pen on top of the pencil, and the pages . . .

INTERVIEWER

Do you look at all twelve drafts?

MAMET

If I have to. Theoretically, one should be able to keep the whole play in one's mind. The main thing is, I want to know that they're there. The idea of taking everything and cramming it into this little electronic box designed by some nineteen-year-old in Silicon Valley . . . I can't imagine it.

INTERVIEWER

In looking back at your work, are there plays that you feel were more successful than others?

MAMET

The most challenging dramatic form, for me, is the tragedy. I think I'm proudest of the craft in the tragedies I've written — *The Cryptogram*, *Oleanna*, *American Buffalo* and *The Woods*. They are classically structured tragedies.

INTERVIEWER

How do you distinguish tragedy from drama?

MAMET

Circumstance. Drama has to do with circumstance, tragedy has to do with individual choice. The precipitating element of a drama can be a person's sexuality, their wealth, their disease . . . A tragedy can't be about any of those things. That's why we identify with a tragic hero more than with a dramatic hero: we understand the tragic hero to be ourselves. That's why it's easier for the audiences initially to form an affection for the drama rather than the tragedy. Although it seems that they're exercising a capacity for identification—"Oh, yes, I understand. So-and-so is in a shitload of difficulty and I identify with them, and I see where the going's bad and I see where the hero is good"—in effect they're distancing themselves, because they'll say, "Well, shit, I couldn't get into that situation because I'm not gay, or because I am gay, because I'm not crippled or because I am crippled . . ." They're distanced. Because I can go on with drama. That's the difference between drama and tragedy. *Glengarry*, on the other hand, falls into a very specific American genre: the gang drama or the gang comedy. The prime proponent of it, the genius proponent of it—and maybe one of its coinventors—is Sidney Kingsley. Plays like *Detective Story*, *Men in White*, *Truckline Cafe*, to some extent *Waiting for Lefty*. These are slice-of-life plays investigating a milieu of society. A good example is *Lower Depths*, where the protagonist is elaborated into many parts. In a comedy of manners like *Don Quixote*, for example, we understand that the sidekick is just another aspect of the protagonist, just like everybody in our dreams is an aspect of us. A tragedy has to be the attempt of one specific person to obtain one specific goal, and when he either gets it or doesn't get it, then we know the play is over, and we can go home and put out the baby-sitter.

INTERVIEWER

I'm interested to hear you say that you thought of *Oleanna*, which is more polemical than the other plays, as a tragedy.

MAMET

Classically it's structured as a tragedy. The professor is the main character. He undergoes absolute reversal of situation, absolute recognition at the last moment of the play. He realizes that perhaps he is the cause of the plague on Thebes.

INTERVIEWER

Did it surprise you, the way the play took off?

MAMET

It stunned them.

INTERVIEWER

You were aiming for a nerve, and you hit it.

MAMET

No, I wasn't aiming for a nerve, I was just trying to write the play. After it was finished I thought, Jesus Christ, I can't put this play on! Especially at Harvard—people were going to throw rocks through the theater windows. I was frightened. And my wife was playing the part—the part was written for her—and I was always frightened that someone was going to attack her, come over the footlights and attack her. One day we were doing some notes before the performance, and I was just looking out at the empty theater, and William Macy, who played the professor, came over and said, "Don't worry, Dave, they'll have to get through me first." I always felt they were going to put me in jail some day.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

MAMET

Well, for many reasons, not the least of which is, as a kid, I became so judgmental about the House Un-American Activities Committee. This person talked to the committee, that person talked to the committee—"How could you do that?"

How could you not do that? How could. . . .” Later on I realized that everybody has their own reasons, and that unless we’ve walked a mile in that man or woman’s moccasins it’s not for us to say, “Well, okay, here’s what you’re going to get for criticizing others’ bravery as a writer or as a creative artist.”

INTERVIEWER

I suppose all your plays, in one way or another, come very close to saying something unacceptable about society, something that’s very hard for people to hear.

MAMET

Well, you know, we did *American Buffalo* here on Broadway, right around the corner, and I remember some businessmen — night after night one or two of them would come storming out, muttering to themselves furiously, “What the *fuck* does this play have to do with me?” and words to that effect.

INTERVIEWER

Where did the idea for *American Buffalo* come from?

MAMET

Macy and I were in Chicago one time, and he was living in this wretched hovel — we’d both become screamingly poor — and I came over to talk to him about something, some play equipment. I opened the refrigerator, and there was this big piece of cheese. I hadn’t had anything to eat in a long time, so I picked it up, cut off a big chunk and started eating. And Macy said, “Hey, *help yourself*.” I was really hurt. I went away and fumed about that for several days. Then I just started writing, and out of that came this scene, which was the start of the play: Ruthie comes in furious because someone had just said to him, “Help yourself.”

INTERVIEWER

What about when you were working on *The Village*? Did that change your routine?

MAMET

With a novel it's different. It's kind of exhilarating not to have to cut to the bone constantly. "Oh, well I can go over here for a moment." I can say what I think the guy was thinking, or what the day looked like, or what the bird was doing. If you do that as a playwright, you're dead.

INTERVIEWER

Have you considered putting stage directions in your screenplays?

MAMET

No, because if you're writing a drama, to get involved in it is kind of nonsense. It's like, you read a screenplay and it says, "BRENDA comes into the room. She's beautiful, she's sassy, she's smart, she's twenty-five, she's built like a brick shithouse: this is the kind of girl that you'll leave your wife for. When you see those deep blue eyes . . ." I mean, you're going to cast an actress, and she's going to look like something, right? Some idiot script-reader from Yale is going to get a kick out of what you've thrown in, but it has nothing to do with making the movie, because you're going to cast an actress who will have qualities that are going to have nothing to do with what you made up. When you write stage directions: unless they're absolutely essential for the understanding of the action of the play ("He leaves." "She shoots him.") something else is going to happen when the actors and directors get them on the stage.

INTERVIEWER

What led you to the movies? It seems to me that the demands of the truth that can be told in the theater are so much deeper and more intense than on the screen. If you could tell stories, in my view, the way you tell stories, why bother with the cinema?

MAMET

I like it. I think it's a fascinating medium. It's so similar to the theater in many ways, and yet so very different. It's

great: it takes place with a huge number of people, which is fine; it's very technical in ways that the theater isn't; it calls for a lot of different ways of thinking, purely mechanical ways of thinking, that I find fascinating. A lot of it, directing especially, is how many boxes are hidden in this drawing? That kind of thing. It's a fascinating medium to me.

INTERVIEWER

But I feel that if you have a gift that's so enormous in a certain area, it would be very hard not to give yourself to that entirely. Is it simply a desire to make your life interesting, or to change pace, or . . . ?

MAMET

I think that's a large part of it.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you feel you have to work the hardest?

MAMET

That's a good question. I don't know the answer to it. I just feel like I have to work hard at all of it; it's not something that comes naturally to me. So maybe that's why I like it: I get a great sense of accomplishment from being able to complete a project with a certain level of technical efficiency. Frankly, I don't feel I have a lot of talent for it, but I love doing it and have a certain amount of hard-won technical ability.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a lot of unfinished work?

MAMET

I've got a lot of stuff I just shelved. Some of it I come back to and some I don't.

INTERVIEWER

It tempts you.

MAMET

It challenges me, a lot of it, and it angers me.

INTERVIEWER

But are you prepared just to write and write and write, like pissing into a well or something?

MAMET

Sometimes.

INTERVIEWER

Not knowing where you're going, trying to see what the story is.

MAMET

I think it would be a lot easier to write to a formula, but it's just not fun to me. It's not challenging.

INTERVIEWER

I find it hard to understand how you can live with the tension of knowing something is unresolved, not knowing where it's going.

MAMET

But that's great. It's like Hemingway said: give yourself something to do tomorrow.

INTERVIEWER

So you let go and wait till later for a resolution. That's very hard, isn't it, to live with that?

MAMET

Well, I think that's the difference between the Christian and the Jewish ethic. Judaism is not a religion or a culture

built on faith. You don't have to have faith. You don't have to believe anything; you just have to do it.

INTERVIEWER

But what happens when you follow a character or a situation and it doesn't pan out?

MAMET

You do it again. Or, in some instances, stick it on the shelf and either do or don't come back to it sometime.

INTERVIEWER

Do you try to put in five or six hours a day writing?

MAMET

I try to do as little writing as possible, as I look back on it. I like to talk on the telephone and, you know, read magazines.

INTERVIEWER

And sit in your office and forestall writing?

MAMET

Yes, and sometimes I like to do the opposite.

INTERVIEWER

Whatever happens, you get a lot out for somebody who doesn't write a lot, or doesn't like to write.

MAMET

I never saw the point in not.

INTERVIEWER

But you just said you spend a lot of time trying not to write.

MAMET

That's true. But the actual point of being a writer, and doing something every once in a while mechanically, I just

don't see the point in it, and it wouldn't be good for me. I've got to do it anyway. Like beavers, you know. They chop, they eat wood, because if they don't, their teeth grow too long and they die. And they hate the sound of running water. Drives them crazy. So, if you put those two ideas together, *they are going to build dams.*

—John Lahr