

# Writer David Mamet: Man overboard

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American playwright, screenwriter and film director David Mamet recently announced his conversion to “conservative” political and economic principles. In an article published in New York City’s *Village Voice* March 11, Mamet writes that “I took the liberal view for many decades, but I believe I have changed my mind.”

He explains that he has embraced the views of Milton Friedman, the late free marketer and consultant to the Chilean military dictatorship, and ultra-right-wing columnist Thomas Sowell (whom Mamet describes, apparently in all seriousness, as “our greatest contemporary philosopher”).

One’s first response is that it comes as something of a surprise to learn that Mamet until recently continued to consider himself, however vaguely, to be on the political left. The writer’s morbidity and misanthropy, his vehement support for the Israeli regime and related views, have seemed to make him more naturally a figure of the right.

That first response, however, is impressionistic. There is no reason to doubt Mamet’s sincerity in describing himself as a liberal for “many decades,” and, indeed, his best work held up certain aspects of American society to angry satirical criticism—its cut-throat commercialism, its worship of money and success, its philistinism, the general grubbiness of it all.

An extended polemic against the writer’s present arguments, much less a hand-wringing in the manner of *Guardian* theater critic and longtime Mamet champion Michael Billington (“David Mamet has swung to the right: how depressing,” March 13), would be a fruitless exercise. Mamet’s ‘death-bed conversion’ is deplorable, but the critical issue remains understanding his evolution, above all, as a product of the generally wretched cultural-intellectual atmosphere that has prevailed in the US for the past quarter-century. This is not to excuse the writer, but one must point one’s finger first and foremost at the social circumstances that helped bring about his downfall.

The sad irony should be noted, however, that Mamet is touting the values of the “free market” just as the entire rotting structure of world capitalist finance is threatening to collapse. The wholesale parasitism, the massive swindling, the build-up of giant paper fortunes, accompanied by the growth of massive social inequality, all of this justified with chatter about the “miracle of the market,” are proving ruinous and “capitalism” will become a dirty word in America, just as it was in the Great Depression. Mamet, who so often writes about cons and conmen, has fallen for one of the greatest hoaxes of our time.

To briefly summarize his arguments: in his *Village Voice* piece, Mamet reveals that he recently came to realize (at one point he refers specifically to the period prior to the 2006 election) that he is far more satisfied with the world and American society than he used to think he was.

“As a child of the ‘60s,” he writes, “I accepted as an article of faith that government is corrupt, that business is exploitative, and that people are generally good at heart.

Further on, Mamet continues: “I wondered how could I have spent decades thinking that I thought everything was always wrong at the same time that I thought I thought that people were basically good at heart? Which was it? I began to question what I actually thought and found that I do not think that people are basically good at heart; indeed, that view of

human nature has both prompted and informed my writing for the last 40 years. I think that people, in circumstances of stress, can behave like swine, and that this, indeed, is not only a fit subject, but the only subject, of drama.”

The thrust of this seems to be that Mamet intuitively, in his “gut,” always grasped that human beings were not basically good at heart, and wrote plays and film scripts along those lines, but due to certain ideological or psychological self-constraints, held back from admitting the full truth to himself. He continued for some time pretending to be, or sincerely thinking that he was, a liberal with a favorable opinion of humanity.

This may all very well be true, and there no doubt has been a tension between his skepticism about people in general (in large part associated with his response to the Holocaust, which we will discuss later) and his conscious artistic intentions, but Mamet badly misses the point about his own work.

Multiple impulses were clearly present in the writer’s early plays, some metaphysical, some moral, some already quite gloomy, but the element of social critique and protest should not be ignored. Certainly, critics at the time, and subsequently, as well as audiences, took this to be a strength in particular of works such as *American Buffalo* (1975)—about a Chicago junk-shop owner and his two inept pals, who plan and fail to carry out a robbery—and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983)—in which a collection of real estate agents ruthlessly vie for sales.

Jeanette Malkin, for instance, in *Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama* (1992), observes that Mamet’s use of stunted, obscenity-laden and banal language in those two pieces was “implicitly critical of a society, a social ethos, and a political system which can produce such a debased verbal—and moral—existence.” She continues later: “*American Buffalo* attacks the distorted morality of American capitalism metaphorically: petty crooks mouthing the vocabulary of free enterprise within a moral void.”

Mamet himself said that *American Buffalo* “is about the American ethic of business: about how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ethical compromises called business.” He said the play was concerned with “comporting oneself in a capitalist society” and noted that “Businessmen left it muttering vehemently about its inadequacies and pointlessness. But they weren’t really mad because the play was pointless ... they were angry because the play was about *them*.”

The *Guardian*’s Billington suggests that Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*, “arguably his finest ... depicts the way a group of salesmen are demeaned by a cruelly competitive, capitalist ethic.” Malkin writes: “Like *American Buffalo*, it [*Glengarry Glen Ross*] is concerned with the infiltration of individual morality and interpersonal contact by the values and jargon of business. ... Mamet claims that criminality is an inherent element of business as such.”

“No other idiom exists in this world: business terminology has invaded and colonized the minds of Mamet’s characters. Even intimacy is expressed in business terms....

“Language has only one function: to generate an advantage. Morality is a by-product of gain. To steal the company files is theft; to deceive a

client, to sell useless land to weak victims—is simply good business....

“Ethical perversity and verbal restrictedness are totally interwoven and breed a bestiality which, Mamet seems to be saying, endangers an entire society.”

Another critic refers to *The Water Engine* (1976), about an inventor who produces an engine that works on water, imagines that he’s set for life and then comes up against a couple of thug-like lawyers, as “this homily of capitalist greed and betrayal of trust.”

Mamet struck a chord initially with audiences because of what was perceived as his audacious assault on “American values,” or, more precisely, on the contrast between official values and jargon, on the one hand, and American reality, on the other. It is impossible to view *Glengarry Glen Ross* as anything but a scathing attack on the venality and cruelty of Reaganite “free enterprise,” with whose ardent latter-day defenders the play’s creator has now made common cause.

Mamet has often been a forceful writer, and occasionally a compassionate one. (A minor character like Joe in *Lakeboat*, for example, which seems an autobiographical work; the distressed lovers in *The Woods*.) Reviewing *State and Main*, a work in which he “cheerfully skewers” the film industry, in 2001, I noted, “No one would assert that Mamet is unobservant or lacks internal fire, and when he turns his attention to institutions that deserve a thorough going-over, he may be just the man for the job.”

He wrote the script for Barry Levinson’s comic *Wag the Dog* (1997), in which a US administration in Washington enlists the aid of a Hollywood producer to fabricate a war overseas, complete with suffering civilians and atrocities, to provide the pretext for a military adventure that will divert attention from the president’s sexual misconduct.

However one finally judges Mamet’s work, there seems little question but that certain of his works will endure and will be seen as a meaningful commentary on features of American life in the final decades of the 20th century.

Nonetheless, contradictions abounded in Mamet’s efforts from the outset. His current view of his artistic output—that it has always been devoted to portraying human beings as driven by the basest passions (“lust, greed, envy, sloth, and their pals,” as he puts it)—is clearly self-serving. Peculiarly, he wants to establish for the public record that he never believed in human goodness. It must be acknowledged, however, that the misanthropic, cynical element *has* been hovering over his work throughout his career.

Admirers asserted that Mamet was merely holding a mirror up to an age characterized by moral and social disintegration, that his writing contained a criticism of a dog-eat-dog economic existence, as well as the harsh realities of sexual and emotional manipulation.

A critic might have replied that rubbing the spectator’s face in aggression and backwardness was not the same as placing a mirror in front of such phenomena, that some distance and reflection were required to enable the spectator to make sense of things. Since the elements of social and historical context were generally absent in Mamet’s work, the plays or films might have left the impression that the rottenness on vivid display was nothing more nor less than the rottenness of humanity itself.

In general, however, one could argue that in the earlier work the strain of outrage about official society’s hypocrisy and criminality played a more substantial and suggestive role; even the reprehensible human beings were perceived to a certain extent as victims, helpless or otherwise, of the society and its false ethos.

Objective social conditions and the climate they generate are critical factors in an artist’s development. It is possible to fight against the stream with all one’s might, but a truly powerful current has a way of wearing one down over time. Perhaps without even being conscious of it, one finds oneself floating in the opposite direction.

The 1980s and 1990s were very difficult decades for artistic creation in

the US, particularly in film and theater. One only has to consider the limited number of truly insightful and enduring works. A filthy political and intellectual atmosphere prevailed, which endorsed ruthless individualism, the allegedly life-giving powers of the free market, and the accumulation of wealth as the mark of personal worth and related degraded values. The demise of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the social protest movements in the US and the hollowing out of liberalism under figures like Clinton, all of this made an impression. What did the artists see and experience? Apparently triumphant reaction, massive wealth accumulation, the decline of a left-wing critique of class society and the rise of retrograde “identity politics” and so forth.

Could Mamet withstand this process? He was not beginning from a position of great intellectual or ideological strength. His talent, while genuine, was not rooted in a broad or deep understanding of society or feeling for suffering humanity. His anger, also genuine, was not directed against the latter’s foundations, but against some of its more repulsive and, one must say, even obvious symptoms. Moreover, and this is no small matter, there was no political or social alternative to be seen or immediately sensed on the horizon. In these circumstances, the element of protest in his writing, so to speak, proved brittle and short-lived.

Mamet is hardly the first artist to have undergone an erosion under difficult circumstances. Increasingly, his plays left a bad taste in the mouth. A work like *Oleanna*, for example, first staged in 1992. In it he took on, depending on one’s point of view and the twists and turns of the plot, feminist “political correctness” or sexual harassment. Reportedly a response to the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearing in Washington, the piece is forceful enough. The story of a smug, vaguely post-modern professor and his confused, vindictive female student struck a chord with a middle class public, making it a great success.

But what does the play’s forcefulness largely add up to? Mamet’s version of even-handedness involves demonstrating that no one is up to any good. The student is repellent, menacing, in her self-righteousness and the professor turns to physical violence. The spell cast here by the playwright, and he is capable of casting spells, is not of the healthiest kind.

And this holds for a good many of his later works. The given play or film often seems more than anything else a vehicle for carefully, almost lovingly, unmasking the nastiness of everyone involved: conmen, liars, bullies of various sorts, as well as their victims. One feels Mamet’s dedication to his proposition that any human being will be swinish given the proper circumstances. The writer seems to see his vocation as the tracking down of those circumstances. He becomes a detective perpetually on the trail of human perfidy.

A not insignificant factor in Mamet’s morbidity and misanthropy, which was always present but perhaps grew in significance as the intellectual climate curdled, is the impact of the mass extermination of the European Jews by the Nazi regime in World War II.

The writer, one feels, has always found it almost unbearable to exist in a world capable of such an atrocity. He turns away from an objective analysis of the event, or has never attempted one, which would reveal that this horrible crime was committed by crisis-ridden German imperialism in response to the threat represented by social revolution.

The atmosphere in Cold War America when he was growing up was not conducive to a critique of the relationship between capitalism and fascism. On the contrary, in place of such a historically concrete critique, variations on a gloomy and irrationalist theme, that the Nazi crime was evidence of humanity’s essential and innate ‘heart of darkness,’ predominated. For whatever combination of personal psychological and social reasons, the writer swallowed this conception whole. His outlook has come to contain, ultimately, an especially pernicious form of Jewish identity politics, religious fanaticism and morbid pessimism.

Some of this is summed up in *The Wicked Son: Anti-Semitism, Self-*

*Hatred, and the Jews*, published in 2006, a seriously disoriented work, which opens: “As you have taken the time to read and I to write this book, I believe we should be frank: The world hates the Jews. The world has always and will continue to do so.”

Mamet, as his piece in the *Village Voice* suggests, has undergone a moral collapse. The values of the “marketplace,” which he once despised, he now avows. While humankind presents itself to him as essentially foul, large corporations inspire his admiration. His former hatred of corporations, Mamet realizes, “was but the flip side of my hunger for those goods and services they provide and without which we could not live.” The military, which he distrusted in his youth, he recognizes, “was then and is now made up of those men and women who actually risk their lives to protect the rest of us from a very hostile world.” He feels generally content with things in America, with its “wonderful and privileged circumstances.”

Mamet has succumbed to political and social reaction. He has given up. Does he really believe the stupid, superficial things he says? One doesn't know. In any case, as Trotsky noted, a sure way to become something is to pretend to be it long enough. What work of artistic value can Mamet possibly produce from now on?



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