

DOMMAR®

Study Guide for

THE CRYPTOGRAM

by **David Mamet**



Study Guide

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Cast and Creative Team

Cast

Kim Cattrall

Donny, a Chicago housewife who, at the start of the play, feels guilty about looking forward to a weekend alone while her husband and son go away. She is waiting for her husband, Robert, to return home before going fishing.

Douglas Henshall

Del, an old friend of Donny's, he tries to ease her anxiety while she waits but secretly knows the reason for Robert's lateness.

Joe Ashman

Adam J. Brown

Oliver Coopersmith

John, Donny's ten-year-old son, excited by the prospect of going away but equally troubled by his father's absence. Many of his questions remain unanswered throughout the play.

Creative Team

Josie Rourke, Director

Trained as Resident Assistant Director at the Donmar Warehouse where she assisted Michael Grandage, Nicholas Hytner, Phyllida Lloyd and Sam Mendes. She was subsequently assistant director to Peter Gill at the NT and for English Touring Theatre on tour and at the Royal Court Theatre. Theatre includes, for the Donmar: *World Music*, *Frame 312* and *Wrong Side of the Rainbow*; for the RSC: *King John* and *Believe What You Will*. Josie was also a Trainee Associate Director at the Royal Court where she directed *Crazyblackmuthafuckin'self* in the Upstairs Theatre and *Children's Day* and *Loyal Women* in the Downstairs Theatre.

Peter McKintosh, Designer

Theatre includes, in the West End: *Summer and Smoke*, *The 39 Steps*, *Donkeys' Years*, *The Home Place* and *The Birthday Party*; for the RSC: *King John*, *Brand*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Pericles*; for the NT: *Honk!* and *Widowers' Houses*. Other work includes: *Romance* (Almeida Theatre), *The Home Place* (Gate Theatre, Dublin), *The Scarlet Letter*, *Just So* and *Pal Joey* (Chichester Festival Theatre), *Hilda* (Hampstead Theatre) and *The Rivals* (Bristol Old Vic).

Neil Austin, Lighting Designer

Theatre includes, for the Donmar: *Frost/Nixon*, *The Wild Duck*, *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union*, *Henry IV*, *World Music*, *After Miss Julie* and *Caligula*; for the RSC: *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *King John* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*; for the NT: *Henry IV Parts I and II*, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, *Further than the Furthest Thing*, *The Night Season* and *The Walls*.

An introduction to the work of David Mamet

David Mamet is one of contemporary theatre's leading writer-directors. Born into a Jewish family on 30th November 1947 in Flossmoor, Illinois he studied at the Goddard College, Vermont, where he was later Artist-in-Residence, and at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theater, New York. Many of his early plays were first performed by the St. Nicholas Theater Company in Chicago, of which he was a founder member and later Artistic Director. In 1978 he became Associate Artistic Director of the Goodman Theater, also in Chicago, and enjoyed widespread critical acclaim for a number of off-Broadway productions, including *American Buffalo* (first staged at the Goodman) which subsequently won an Obie Award. In 1984 Mamet was given the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his celebrated play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which was later made into a film starring Al Pacino and Kevin Spacey.

His many plays include:

<i>Duck Variations</i>	First performed by the St. Nicholas Theater Company, Chicago in 1972. Received its British premiere at the Regent Theatre, London in 1977.
<i>Sexual Perversity in Chicago</i>	First performed by the Organic Theater Company, Chicago in 1974. Received its British premiere at the Regent Theatre, London in 1977.
<i>The Water Engine</i>	First performed by the St. Nicholas Theater Company, Chicago in 1977. Received its British premiere at the Hampstead Theatre, London in 1989.
<i>Edmond</i>	Premiered at the Goodman Theater, Chicago in 1982. Received its British premiere at the Royal Court Theatre, London in 1985. Revived at the National Theatre, London in 2003.
<i>Speed-the-Plow</i>	Premiered at the Lincoln Center Theater at the Royal Theater, Broadway, New York in 1988. Received its British premiere at the National Theatre, London in 1989. Revived at the New Ambassadors Theatre, London in 2000.
<i>Oleanna</i>	Premiered at the American Repertory Theater, Massachusetts in 1992. Received its British premiere at the Royal Court Theatre, London in 1993, transferring to the Duke of York's the same year.

DID YOU KNOW?

Mamet has also written three novels, *The Village* (1994), *The Old Religion* (1997) and *Wilson: A Consideration of the Sources* (2000), as well as several poems and children's stories.

Background to THE CRYPTOGRAM

The play in context

*'If we are true to our ideals we can help form an ideal society – not by preaching about it, but by creating it each night in front of the audience – by showing how it works. In action.'*¹

For David Mamet one of the purposes of theatre is to address the need for community and trust.

'What is missing,' he once commented about contemporary society, 'is the feeling of knowing our place and a sense of belonging. It's the theatre's job to address the question of "What is our place in the universe".'²

In this sense, suggests Mamet, theatre's purpose is less to do with social issues and more to do with spiritual ones. Quoting the celebrated Russian theatre practitioner Constantin Stanislavski he states that the function of drama is 'to bring to the stage the life of the human soul so that the community can participate there.'³ Which reminds us that, by its very nature, the theatre depends for its existence on the survival of a sense of community. It is ultimately a celebration of



what binds us together. Mamet's plays often suggest a sense of what has been lost and what needs to be regained both in society and individual lives.

His work is frequently discussed in terms of his facility for dialogue, his preoccupation with the gulf between the sexes, the character of the confidence trickster and his concern with the absence of morality at the heart of much experience. On reading Mamet's plays the first thing you encounter is his unique use of language through the characters' often fractured syntax. It has been praised for its verisimilitude but, as academic Christopher Bigsby explains, while his dialogue has a distinctive rhythm Mamet isn't interested in recording contemporary speech patterns or anything as self-conscious as poetic drama.

'The rhythm both itself contains a meaning and, like everything else, serves the plot, as does the language which may seem to shape itself into poetry, sculpted arias, but is, in fact, fully functional in terms of forwarding action and thereby revealing character or vice versa... the theatre, for Mamet, is a place where language dominates, where it becomes clear that "what you say influences the way you think, the way you act, not the other way around".'⁴

Many actors have commented on Mamet's challenging language and the importance of delivering his lines exactly as they are written. Even the most seemingly insignificant word, phrase or hesitation is essential. If an actor cuts or adds a note - an 'ah' or 'eh' - it will not work.

'[It's] so finely tuned that improvising is nearly impossible,' reflected actor and long-time collaborator William H. Macy in 1990. 'If you paraphrase it, it suddenly becomes very clunky in your mouth, as if you stumbled over the carpet.'⁵

The relentless nature of the language, words pouring out of characters' mouths, seems to be an evasion of silence for fear of the knowledge it might bring, a self-awareness they otherwise ignore.

'His characters so often fill the air with speech,' comments Bigsby, 'speech often designed less to communicate than to avoid communication, less to express meaning than to evade it.'⁶

The academic regards this as central to understanding Mamet's 'deracinated' characters - 'alienated individuals... adrift in a world not of their making, barely able to articulate feelings or thoughts... aware of their insufficiencies, the weakness of their grasp on experience, choosing to fill the voids in their lives with fantasies.'⁷

Most of these characters are men and many of Mamet's plays either exclude women altogether or focus on the apparently unbridgeable gulf between the sexes, which has led to many critics labelling him a misogynist. In truth the men in his plays are no more certain about themselves and their relationships with one another than they are about encounters across the gender divide. Although Mamet has included more female characters in his later plays he has continued to explore the imbalances between men and women, trust seeming to be especially missing from male-female relationships. The notion of trust, as both a moral and social issue, remains one of Mamet's central concerns and forms the basis of much of his work.

THE CRYPTOGRAM, which premiered at the Ambassadors Theatre, London in 1994, presents an unusual household in which a rapidly disintegrating family comes to terms with the truth of the past and its meaning for their future. Set in Chicago in the late 1950s the play depicts three characters quite different from the macho males of Mamet's earlier work: Donny, a middle-aged mother; Del, her gay friend; and John, Donny's ten-year-old son. It is difficult to resist interpreting



the play biographically. Mamet's own parents separated in 1957 when he was ten, the writer commenting later, 'I didn't know anybody who'd been divorced... let alone have it happen to my family. So there was a lot of trauma in my childhood.'⁸ He describes *THE CRYPTOGRAM* as an attempt 'to decode the message of one's childhood'.⁹ (The Oxford Dictionary definition of *cryptogram* is 'a text written in code'.)

In the play, explains Bigsby, Mamet 'tries to break the cipher of a family which should offer comfort and consolation but instead is the site of betrayal. Need is evident but not the capacity to address it. The past is inauthentic, the present uncertain, the future the source of apprehension. Desertion is merely a natural extension of the estrangement which characterises relationships.'¹⁰ Perhaps more than any other of Mamet's previous plays *THE CRYPTOGRAM* explores the shifting linguistic code spoken by adults in the presence of children.

'It is a play in which speeches rarely extend beyond a single sentence because there are secrets and privacies to be protected out of a mixture of fear and guilt,' says Bigsby. 'The characters tell stories not out of pleasure of invention but because of a kind of terror at impending desolation, evidence of that very isolation which they dread.'¹¹ When Mamet himself directed the play at the C. Walsh Theater, Boston in 1995, he instructed the actors to remain expressionless in the delivery of their lines and to exaggerate already lengthy pauses in the text. The play's repetitive three-way dialogue creates a more pronounced distance between the characters, many of whom can no longer even decode their own sentences. Towards the end of the play, in Act Three, Del reflects on their situation, 'Oh, if we could speak the truth, do you see? For one instant. Then we would be free.'

As words become increasingly elusive objects, such as the photograph and the stadium blanket, take on increasing value. Mamet refers to these as 'mementoes... survivors... archaeological artifacts'¹², revealing his predilection for a world fast disappearing. The appeal lies in the romance inherent in such objects, their intimation of a time when everything seemed more rooted, suggesting a sense both of order and purpose. This past, and nostalgia for the past, has a masculine feel, consisting as it does of sports, hunting, fishing – skills handed down through the years.

'[The] knife becomes an especially cryptic symbol towards the end of the play,' explains academic Heather Braun. 'On the one hand, it has a practical use: "to cut things" and to extricate prized objects from their hiding places. On the other hand, it is also an instrument of violence that is connected inextricably to the past. Del believed this knife to be a token of war; when he learns that John's father, Richard,

was a pilot and had purchased the knife on the streets of London, the knife is stripped of its symbolic meaning and becomes, once again, merely an object with a specific and practical function.¹³

Every artefact has a history, or story, and is accorded the respect of precise identification. A knife, for example, is a Sloyd knife. Mamet has said it is 'the seemingly innocuous, the dismissed "connective" term, which is the clue to the mystery.'¹⁴

'This is simultaneously a comment on history, on relationships, and on the aesthetic of his plays,' says Bigsby. 'What is invisible, omitted, concealed, gains particular power, as does the gap between what things appear to be and what they perhaps are.'¹⁵

THE CRYPTOGRAM leaves us with the final image of John holding the knife trying to tell the two adults that he hears voices and cannot sleep, the play ending with his unanswered plea. Audiences are struck by the lack of closure, the indeterminacy of the drama's resolution. Questions linger, uncertainties remain. Critic John Heilpern found himself exasperated by the play:

'Mr Mamet infuriates us knowingly. His psychological power plays, the repressed undercurrents of anxiety and simmering violence, the oblique, disjointed Mametspeak that has become his signature style, are meant to dislocate and disturb us.'¹⁶

Mamet, however, rejects criticism of his plays as unclear or needlessly confusing, suggesting instead that they are 'provocative'.¹⁷ His preference is for a spare aesthetic, working by a process of elimination.

'Mamet is concerned to pare down,' explains Bigsby. 'Character is action; language exists to forward the plot. Nothing must be extraneous.'¹⁸

Anything that fails to answer the driving question, 'What does the protagonist want?' is cut. Mamet's requirements for challenging and engaging drama include 'cutting, building to a climax, leaving out exposition, and always progressing toward the single goal of the protagonist.'¹⁹ He is apt to refer to Ernest Hemingway's example of concision: 'I always knew that a... good writer was one who threw out what most people kept.'²⁰

Mamet on acting

David Mamet came to writing through acting. He was, by his own admission, a 'terrible student actor'²¹ but rather than give up theatre he became first a director then a playwright. He has written extensively on the subject of acting, the most complete explication of his ideas being his 1997 book *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*. Since its publication Mamet has said he does not intend for it to be an 'instructional' manual but rather 'a book about how to think about acting'²² primarily for younger actors.

Although he never directly credits him, many of Mamet's ideas have been adapted from his studies with Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse, New York in the late 1960s.

'Emphasis was placed on intent and motive, on the practical matter of playing objectives beat by beat, according to an analysis of the through line and superobjective of the play,' explains author Dennis Carroll. 'Meisner trained his

students to focus on others on stage, to respond honestly to “the moment” as created anew through stage contact each night between actors.’²³

Ultimately, though, Mamet rejects all formal actor training and the theories of practitioners such as Constantin Stanislavski (the basis of much of Meisner’s teaching) and Lee Strasberg, arguing that the accomplishments of the celebrated ‘Method’ actors – Marlon Brando, Robert de Niro – were due to natural genius rather than a specific methodology. He advocates instead a simple, honest approach to acting.

‘However, all discussion of Mamet’s ideas on acting should be prefaced with several warnings,’ says academic Don B. Wilmeth. ‘First, Mamet is, by his own admission, contradictory and inconsistent. As a rhetorical device, his statements are often dogmatic, opinionated, hyperbolic, or absolute... He takes great pleasure in causing debate or even arousing anger from the reader or listener.’²⁴

Although he eschews many of the theories of the practitioners above, Mamet’s emphasis on finding the action in a scene (‘the physical pursuance of a specific goal’²⁵) is similar to Stanislavski’s ‘Method of Physical Action’. This is at the heart of Mamet’s ideas about acting, the belief that ‘emotion is a by-product... of the performance of the action’.²⁶ Two words recur frequently in his discussions about effective acting: simplicity and clarity. His rejection of Stanislavski, and particularly the Method, is fundamentally because he finds these methodologies too confusing:

‘You can’t act all that stuff... when one shows up on stage, that all goes out the window. One can only take on stage, “What do I want from the other person?” That’s it – period.’²⁷

The job of the actor is simply to ‘learn the lines, find a simple objective like that indicated by the author, speak the lines clearly in an attempt to achieve that objective.’²⁸ Work on character, he asserts, is the responsibility of the playwright. ‘I do not think it is the actor’s job to be interesting. I think that is the job of the script. I think it is the actor’s job to be truthful and brave.’²⁹

Ultimately Mamet is urging younger actors to question the establishment and the established, whether it be Stanislavski or the Method. Much of *True and False* reads like a deliberate attempt to challenge the reader’s complacency and provoke debate rather than offer a methodology of his own.

For a fuller understanding of Mamet’s ideas on acting it is recommended that as a companion volume to *True and False* students read *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*. Written by a group of Mamet’s own students, based upon their acting classes at New York University and the Goodman Theater in the early 1980s, it offers further explanations and examples of his work.

Directing Mamet

The director as just one member of a company expending his/her energies in bringing to the stage not their personal vision but the intention of the playwright, through the performances of the actors, has been David Mamet’s ideal of a theatre company and the role of the director from his earliest experiences of writing. The major productions of his plays have usually been directed by long-term collaborators such as Gregory Mosher (to whom *THE CRYPTOGRAM* is dedicated) in Chicago and New York and Bill Bryden in London, or by fellow playwrights such

as Harold Pinter. All share to some extent Mamet's 'practical aesthetics' that couple 'the truth of the actor struggling bravely with uncertainty, with the portrayal made by the dramatist.'³⁰

'They avoid thematic interpretations and concentrate instead on finding a relationship between the characters that will form the major action of the play,' explains academic Steven Price.³¹

The partnership between Mamet and Mosher began when Mosher was appointed Artistic Director of the Goodman Theater, Chicago in 1974. He went on to direct the premieres of *American Buffalo* in 1975 and *A Life in the Theatre* in 1977 in the small 135-seat studio before transferring to the main 700-seat theatre for the 1979 premiere of *Lone Canoe*. After many years working together the director has no difficulty in resolving the potential tension between himself and the writer:

'Ultimately he has the final say on what they [the characters] say, and I have the final say on how they say it, or on any other aspect of the production. But, it's so collegial now that it's hard to know where one of us stops and the other starts.'³²

For Mosher 'the play is not about text; it's about action'³³ - that's what you direct. This emphasis seems surprising in connection with a writer celebrated for his dialogue, although it supports Mamet's assertion that a play is 'a series of incidents in which and through which the protagonist struggles toward his or her goal'.³⁴ Whether the text is of primary concern or not it is crucial that the director carefully orchestrates the characters' dialogue so that the connections between the words, the signifiers, are maintained.

'The process is discovering the correct rhythm and intonation,' says Mosher.³⁵ With the work of a living writer the rhythm of the playwright's own speech is often a vital clue.

Bill Bryden uses a sporting analogy in discussing the challenges of directing Mamet, the sense of team spirit and interplay the director needs to instil in his actors whilst simultaneously exploiting their competitiveness and mutual interdependence:

'You have to try to get the team together, on the field and all wearing the same strip by opening night.'³⁶



Discussion Point

Mamet is well known for his rejection of formal actor training and higher education in general. In his book *True and False* he states:

'Formal education for the player [actor] is not only useless, but harmful. It stresses the academic model and denies the primacy of the interchange with the audience. The audience will teach you how to act and the audience will teach you how to write and to direct. The classroom will teach you how to obey, and obedience in the theatre will get you nowhere.' (pp. 18 - 19)

What essentially is Mamet's argument here? How far do you agree with this statement?

THE CRYPTOGRAM in performance

Practical and written exercises based on the opening of Act One

The following extract is taken from the beginning of the play. Working as a group read through it and experiment with the staging of this scene. As a director what atmosphere do you want to create? How would you direct the actors playing Del and John to establish their relationship in the scene? At this point they could be father and son or uncle and nephew. How does Donny's presence just offstage effect the conversation between the two? In what way does the dynamic of the scene change after her entrance? Particular attention must be paid to the language, in particular the overlapping lines of dialogue.

You should also take into account the other elements of production. For example, what should the lighting be like? Is any specific sound required? Once you have seen the Donmar's production of THE CRYPTOGRAM consider how the staging of this scene compares with your own.



THE CRYPTOGRAM, David Mamet.

The opening of Act One.

A living room. One door leading off to the kitchen.

One staircase leading up to the second floor.

Evening. Del is seated on the couch. John comes downstairs dressed in his pajamas.

John I couldn't find 'em.

Del ... couldn't find 'em.

John No.

Del What?

John Slippers.

Del Mmm?

John Packed.

Del ... slippers are packed.

John Yes.

Del Why did you pack them?

John Take them along.

Del How are you going to use your slippers up there?

John To keep my feet warm.

Del Mmm.

John I shouldn't of packed them?

Del Well, put something on your feet.

John What?

Del Socks.

John Put something on my feet now.

Del Yes.

John 'As long as I'm warm.'

Del That's correct.

John I have 'em. (*Produces socks. Starts putting them on.*)

Del That's good. Think ahead.

John Why did you say 'why did you pack them?'?

Del I wondered that you'd take them with.

John Why?

Del Out in the woods?

John No, but to wear in the Cabin.

Del ... that's right.

John Don't you think?

Del I do.

John I know I couldn't wear them in the woods.

Del No. No. That's right. Where were we?

John Issues of sleep.

Del ... iss...?

John Issues of sleep.

Del No. I'm sorry. You were quite correct. To take your slippers. I spoke too quickly.

John That's alright.

Del Thank you. *(Pause.)* Where were we? Issues of Sleep.

John And last night either.

Del Mm...?

John ... I couldn't sleep.

Del So I'm told. *(Pause.)*

John Last night, either.

Del Fine. What does it mean 'I could not sleep'?

John ... what does it mean?

Del Yes. It means nothing other than the meaning you choose to assign it.

John I don't get you.

Del I'm going to explain myself.

John Good.

Del A 'Trip', for example, you've been looking forward to.

John A trip. Yes. Oh, yes.

Del ... absolutely right.

John ... that I'm excited.

Del ... who wouldn't be?

John *Anyone* would be.

Del That's right.

John ... to go in the Woods...?

Del Well. You see? You've answered your own question. *(Pause.)*

John Yes. I'm excited.

Del I can't blame you.

John You can't?

Del No. Do you see?

John That it's natural.

Del I think it is.

John Is it?

Del I think it absolutely is. To go with your father...?

John Why isn't he home?

Del We don't know.

John ... because it's something. To go out there.

Del I should say.

John In the Woods...?

Del I hope to tell you.

John Well, you *know* it is.

Del That I do. And I will tell you: older people, too. Grown people. You know what they do? The night before a trip?

John What do they do?

Del Well, many times *they* cannot sleep. *They* will stay up that night.

John They will?

Del Oh yes.

John Why?

Del They can't sleep. No. Why? Because their minds, you see, are full of thoughts.

John What are their thoughts of?

Del Their thoughts are of two things.

John Yes?

Del Of what they're leaving.

John ... yes?

Del And what they're going *toward*. (*Pause.*) Just like you.

John ... of what they're *leaving*...

Del ... mmm... (*Pause.*)

John How do you know that...

A crash is heard offstage.

Donny (*offstage*) ... I'm alright...

Del ... what?

Donny (*offstage*) I'm alright...

Del ... did...

Donny (*offstage*) What? Did I what?

Del Are you...

Donny (*offstage*) What? I've spilt the tea.

Del What?

Donny (*offstage*) I spilled the tea.

Del Do you want help?

Donny (*offstage*) What?

John 'Do you want help' he said.

Donny (*offstage*) No.

Del You don't? (*To John.*) Go help your mother...

Donny (*offstage*) ... I'm alright. (*To self.*) Oh, hell...

Del What did you...

Donny (*offstage*) What?

Del ... what did...

Donny I broke the tea, I broke the teapot. I'm alright. I broke the teapot. (*Pause.*)

Del (*to John*) Well there you go.
... a human *being*...

John ... yes?

Del ... cannot conceal himself.

John That's an example?

Del Well, hell, look at it: anything. When it is *disordered*, any um, 'change' do you see...?

John She ain't going.

Del No of course she's not. But *you* are. And your father is. It's an upheaval.

John It's a minor one.

Del Who is to say?

John But did *you* feel that?

Del Did I...?

John Yes.

Del Feel what?

John Last week.

Del Feel. Last week.

John Thoughts on a trip. When you took *your* trip.

Donny (*offstage*) It's going to be a minute...

John ... when you...

Donny (*offstage*) ... hello...?

Del We're alright.

Donny (*offstage*) The tea is going to be a minute.

John We're alright in here.

Donny (*entering*) I've put the... why aren't you asleep.

Del ... did I feel 'pressure'?

Donny ... John?...

John Yes.

Donny Why aren't you asleep?

Del Before my trip. No.

John No. Why?

Del Because, and this is important. Because people differ.

Donny What are you doing down here?

Del We're talking.



Practical Exercise

You may wish to work individually on completing these questions.

1. Rereading the extract what do you notice about the play's language and the way it is formatted on the page? Note the use of ellipsis (...) and occasional capital letters within the text. What is the writer's intention here? Can you find other examples within the rest of the play?
2. When you go to see the Donmar's production of THE CRYPTOGRAM consider the following:
 - What transformations take place within the characters through the journey of the play? How do the actors embody these changes?
 - How does the design establish the world of the play – time, place, feel? Note the changes in the set from the first to the last act. How might these relate to the characters' journeys?

An interview with Josie Rourke, director of THE CRYPTOGRAM

Q THE CRYPTOGRAM was first staged a little over ten years ago, why a revival now?

A As Mamet's one of our leading practitioners, and certainly one of America's major playwrights, Michael Grandage (Artistic Director of the Donmar) and I felt the play deserved a firmer place in the canon of his great work and twelve years seemed like a reasonable interval. I'm just thirty now so there's no way I could have seen it when it was last on because I was doing my A Levels in Salford at the time. It's such a fascinating play in terms of where it sits in our perception of Mamet's work. It bears many of the hallmarks of his writing but it's very unusual, not least because it's clearly in some way autobiographical. Although he's very cagey about that.

Q Have you had much contact with him during rehearsals?

A Just through his agent. I met him in 2001 when I was Assistant Director on *Boston Marriage* at the Donmar. He came in for a rehearsal. It was a bit nerve wracking because we'd been working on it for five weeks and hoped he'd think it was alright. He gave some very useful notes and was very warm about it.

Q Mamet's such a rounded practitioner, not only in terms of his work as both a writer and director, but also as an essayist on the subject of acting. Does that present an added challenge to a director of his plays?

A I think it's a really useful set of guidelines as to how to approach the work. What it does is to emphasise the need for the actor simply to try and do what the playwright wants. The thing to remember about his polemical writing is that he comes from a tradition of Method acting that doesn't exist in this country. In England we're principally a playwright culture, always have been, they're at the top of our tree. Mamet's writing within a specific culture and I think some of the stuff he wants us to do we do already as part of our system. But a sense of being faithful to the playwright - trusting in them, obeying them - is really useful. It's prompted us to explore the fine detail of every pause, every ellipsis and keep asking, 'Why's that a full stop? Why is that a capital letter?' It really does yield fascinating results.

Q On first reading THE CRYPTOGRAM it's rather an abstruse play. What for you are the underlying themes?

A If you'd asked me four weeks ago, before we started rehearsing, I'd have said, 'Yes, it's deeply elliptical and really rather strange'. But after investigating it so hard over the past three weeks it doesn't seem abstruse at all. In fact it seems very concrete and rather particular and definite. Certainly the symbols within it can seem strange - the knife, the stadium blanket, the book. But of course as you discuss those things they take on a life of their own. And this, for me, has become what the play is about. It's less about us understanding what the objects are and more about understanding how the playwright and the characters within the play use them to decode certain parts of their life, sometimes very falsely. One of the central revelations of the last act is that a knife Del believed to have great value and significance, gifted to him by Robert, wasn't in fact a war memento but something he bought off the street. Or was it? Donny does that as an act

of cruelty to punish him for his deception. And it seems to me that to call the play 'The Cryptogram' and then to load it with these objects that seem to have significance is less a desire to present us with a puzzle and more a desire to make us think about how we sometimes falsely attempt to decode our own lives.

Q How have you gone about working with the actors on the characters' interwoven dialogue?

A It's one of those things where if you worry away at it enough and ask them why exactly a character stops a sentence mid-flow, or why a capital letter might be there, you find the answers. Ultimately you're asking them what these people are trying to do to each other. That's Mamet's great dictum: What effect is one character trying to have on another? That actually those things which seem weird or absurd on a first read take on meaning and can become tools.

Q In the early rehearsals were you literally going through the text marking all the pauses, etc.?

A What we did first was to go through the play and read it in quite big sections to try and figure out what was going on and attempt to make more sense of it. We were trying to infer things about the characters' relationships from what's there – what's happening and what they're trying to get from each other. Mamet cautions against this, however, so we've not done too much. We just tried to get a good reader's grip on the play, to demystify it a little bit. That took about a week or so and that led into even more detailed work, by which stage the actors had done quite a lot of line learning. It's very hard to get off book with a Mamet play because you're required to learn it with such precision.

Q Are there certain exercises or techniques you use in rehearsals?

A I don't have a set way of working, I tend to use a different process for each play. The play I did before this couldn't have been more different. It was *King John* with twenty-nine actors for the RSC, a big epic undertaking. What I tend to do for my preparation is read the text a lot and break it down in my own way. I'll do read throughs where I'll just think about one thing, looking out for stuff, and try and get a sense of the overall shape of the play. I had a mini David Mamet festival, read all the plays and watched loads of his films and tried to absorb all that. We've done some exercises in the rehearsal room but not a lot. It's been more about trying to get a sense of the discipline that's required by the text and to get that discipline to come from the actors rather than me. So if there's been one main thrust over the past few weeks it's been to find a self-generated discipline, not only from the senior actors but also from the children, whose part is as big. Really helping them to understand what the undertaking is. It's felt like a big task for a relatively short play.

Q How long have you had to rehearse?

A We'll have five weeks in total, which is great. The average is about four but for me five is perfect. With four you always feel like there's a week where everyone gets to know each other, two weeks to desperately do the play and a week of running.

Q Mamet took quite a risk in making one of the main characters a ten-year-old boy. You've had to cast three child actors to play the part at different performances, has this presented a particular challenge in rehearsal?

A It is a massive risk. I think what we've forgotten a little, through familiarity with them, is the frisson of seeing a child on stage and realising within the first five minutes that they've got this massive part and they're going to have to carry it. That's the other cryptogram of the play: Who is the protagonist? Who is going to be the tragic character? I think at the end of the first act you think it's Donny, at the end of the second you think it's Del and at the end of the third you realise that actually, in the same way that Donny and Del have been doing, you've been ignoring the pleas of the child. And it's his tragedy that he's going to go upstairs and do something awful with the knife. But, yes, children do sometimes forget lines, more than adults and in a different way. So I feel a duty to get everyone to the same state of preparedness so that if that happens, which it might, everyone can go, 'We're OK, we know it well enough.'

Q So how do rehearsals with the children work?

A We normally call them in pairs. One performs while the other observes, which sets them up for coming in and doing it the next day. Their qualities are so different. One of them is bang on the centre of that sort of troubled boy, he just has something that's absolutely sympathetic to what the character is. The thirteen-year-old is very mature and understands that he needs to come down a little bit in order to play it but actually has a really extraordinary quality. And the other has this wonderful hauntedness and energy wise is a bit like two thousand brightly coloured balls bouncing down a hill!

Q How does it effect the adult actors playing with a different child each time?

A I have to say they're being more grown up and patient about it than I think anyone has been grown up and patient about anything in the history of the world. I think they're wonderful. I'm amazed at their ability to keep really centred and calm and be so fantastic and encouraging with them. And to celebrate them as well. And they are to be celebrated, they're accomplishing an amazing thing.

Q What advice would you give anyone coming to see a Mamet play for the first time? What should they look out for?

A I think the thing that consistently astonishes me about his writing is his ability to do that thing Pinter does, and I know they're very simpatico, in that they both understand the buried violence that exists in language - how people damage each other, how pain works. I think it's astonishing and that's in the hard wiring of Mamet's writing in the most incredible way. The different ways in which a howl of anger can be suppressed and transmuted into something else, into a different exchange, into dialogue. On the page it can look formal and strange but actually what he is doing is expressing naturalistic speech. That actually this is how people sometimes talk. In the tradition of all truly great playwrights he's about language, how we're trapped by expression. There's this wonderful exchange between Donny and Del in the third act where they're both for different reasons bitter with each other and he says to her, I'm paraphrasing here, Oh, if we could speak the truth just for one moment then we would be free.' You think, yes, but then what is the truth? There's a lot of repetition within the dialogue and sometimes you

wonder if by repeating something instead of it becoming more true it becomes less so. Can you actually ever completely decode something? Language, your own behaviour, symbols, mutual decisions, lies. Once you've pulled it all back is there anything left underneath?



Discussion Point

THE CRYPTOGRAM features several objects - the knife, the blanket, the photograph - which are heavily symbolic, Mamet referring to them as 'archaeological artifacts'. In the interview above, director Josie Rourke comments that the purpose of these is 'less about us understanding what the objects are and more about understanding how the playwright and the characters within the play use them to decode certain parts of their life.' What do you think she means? You may find it useful to refer to Section 3, 'The play in context', when discussing your answer.



Ideas for further study

Reading and research

To gain a fuller understanding of the style of David Mamet's work you may want to read some of his other plays:

David Mamet Plays: 1 (Duck Variations, Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Squirrels, American Buffalo, The Water Engine, Mr Happiness) (Methuen 1994)

David Mamet Plays: 2 (Reunion, Dark Pony, A Life in the Theatre, The Woods, Lakeboat, Edmond) (Methuen 1996)

David Mamet Plays: 3 (Glengarry Glen Ross, Prairie du Chien, The Shawl, Speed-the-Plow) (Methuen 1996)

He has also written and directed the following films, several based upon his own plays:

Spartan (2004)

Heist (2001)

State and Main (2000)

The Winslow Boy (1999)

The Spanish Prisoner (1997)

Oleanna (1994)

His views on writing, directing, acting, the theatre and society in general can be found in:

Writing in Restaurants (Faber & Faber 1988)

Make-Believe Town (Faber & Faber 1996)

True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor (Faber & Faber 1997)

The following books provide useful background information and criticism on Mamet:

The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press 2004)

How Good is David Mamet Anyway? by John Heilpern (Routledge 1999)

(See also the books and essays cited in the endnotes.)

Bibliography

Books

Writing in Restaurants (Faber & Faber 1988)

True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor (Faber & Faber 1997)

The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press 2004)

Websites

The David Mamet Society, <http://mamet.eserver.org>

New York Times Theatre Reviews, <http://theater2.nytimes.com>

Biographical background, <http://en.wikipedia.org>

Endnotes

- 1 *Writing in Restaurants* by David Mamet (Faber & Faber 1988), p. 27
- 2 *David Mamet in Conversation*, ed. by Leslie Kane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2001), p. 13
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 63
- 4 David Mamet from *David Mamet in Conversation*, p. 13, quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press 2004), pp. 1-2
- 5 Unidentified clipping in the Mamet file, Harvard Theatre Collection (Dated 1990)
- 6 *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press 2004), p. 16
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 4 and 17
- 8 *David Mamet in Conversation*, ed. by Leslie Kane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2001), p. 168
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 151
- 10 *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press 2004), p. 28
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *The Cabin* by David Mamet (Viking Penguin 1993), p. 11
- 13 *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press 2004), p. 110
- 14 *Jafsie and John Henry* by David Mamet (Faber & Faber 1999), p. 133
- 15 *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press 2004), p. 24
- 16 *The Cryptogram: More Mametspeak, More Provocation*, John Heilpern, *Observer* (24 April 1995)
- 17 *David Mamet in Conversation*, ed. by Leslie Kane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2001), p. 125
- 18 *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press 2004), p. 32
- 19 *The Paris Review: Playwrights at Work*, ed. by George Plimpton (Modern Library 2000), p. 374
- 20 *David Mamet in Conversation*, ed. by Leslie Kane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2001), pp. 151-152

- 21 *Make-Believe Town* by David Mamet (Faber & Faber 1996), p. 32
- 22 David Mamet in conversation with Charlie Rose on WNET-TV (11 November 1997)
- 23 *David Mamet* by Dennis Carroll (Macmillan 1987), p. 6
- 24 *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press 2004), p. 140
- 25 *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* by Melissa Bruder, et. al. (Vintage Books 1986), p. 87
- 26 *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* by David Mamet (Faber & Faber 1997), p. 13
- 27 David Mamet interviewed by Melvyn Bragg on The South Bank Show (16 October 1994)
- 28 *True and False* by David Mamet (Faber & Faber 1997), p. 57
- 29 Ibid., p. 98
- 30 Ibid., p. 22
- 31 *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press 2004), p. 155
- 32 *David Mamet: A Casebook*, ed. by Leslie Kane (Garland 1992), p. 240
- 33 *The Director's Voice: Twenty-One Interviews* by Arthur Bartow (Theatre Communications Group 1988), pp. 233 and 235
- 34 *True and False* by David Mamet (Faber & Faber 1997), p. 12
- 35 *The Director's Voice: Twenty-One Interviews* by Arthur Bartow (Theatre Communications Group 1988), p. 233
- 36 'Bill Bryden on Summerfolk', Guardian (11 October 1995)

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The Donmar Warehouse is an intimate (not for profit) 251 seat theatre located in the heart of London's West End. The theatre attracts almost 100,000 people to its productions a year. Since 1992, under the Artistic Direction of Michael Grandage and his predecessor, Sam Mendes, the theatre has presented some of London's most memorable theatrical experiences as well as garnered critical acclaim at home and abroad. With a diverse artistic policy that includes new writing, contemporary reappraising of European classics, British and American drama and music theatre, the Donmar has created a reputation for artistic excellence over the last 12 years and has won 25 Olivier Awards, 12 Critics' Circle Awards, 10 Evening Standard Awards and 10 Tony Awards for Broadway transfers.

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