

**Mamet: A Brief Biography**  
by Anastasia Cannon

*"Writing is a legitimate day-to-day skill, like brick-laying...  
You need a script, Hell, figure out how to write one."*

– David Mamet

The plays of David Mamet are highly taut dialogues – dialogues that on the surface often seem banal, but beneath which invariably lie situations and subtexts of tremendous power and urgency. The unique rhythm, cadence, and syntax of his dialogue reshape language in a way that is both poetic and of-the-street. Accordingly, the works present not so much verisimilar reality as a stylized kind of hyper-reality – a self-contained world inhabited by fast-talking hustlers and con men, be they junk shop proprietors, real estate salesmen or film executives.

Famous in the early part of his career as much for the profanity as the content of his plays, Mamet's early plays are now regarded as among the definitive works of the era. His later works cover an astonishingly wide (and seldom-credited) range – from Victorian-period dramas, to mysteries, to political satires. But consistent throughout his career, Mamet's plays are a study in economy and precision – he is, without doubt, a master of minimalism – and he has fully earned his status alongside the few undisputed greats of the contemporary theater.

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David Mamet was born on November 30, 1947 in Chicago, the son of Lenore June (nee Silver), a school teacher, and Bernard Morris Mamet, an attorney. His mother and father divorced in 1958, and when his mother remarried, they moved to a Chicago suburb. In high school he hung around the Second City, Chicago's renowned improvisation troupe, working as a bus boy.

Mamet's life in the theatre began in earnest in 1967 when he studied at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Sanford Meisner in New York. In 1969 he graduated from Goddard, an experimental college in Vermont, then two years later returned to the college as artist-in-residence. While there he formed the St. Nicholas Theatre Company with students William H. Macy and Steven Schachter. Soon after, the company performed the first versions of Mamet's *The Duck Variations* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, the latter of which won Chicago's Joe Jefferson Award for Excellence in Theatre in 1974 before opening off-off Broadway at the St. Clements Theatre in 1975, where it won an Obie for best new play.

In February 1977, *American Buffalo*, starring Robert Duvall, opened on Broadway, winning a NY Drama Critics' Circle Award and establishing Mamet's national reputation. The play was revived on Broadway in 1983, with Al Pacino succeeding Duvall in the role of Teach. Mamet turned to film for the first time in 1981, writing the screenplay for the remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* starring Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange. In 1982, he wrote the Academy Award-nominated script for *The Verdict*, starring Paul Newman.

Soon after, Mamet began work on his most famous and perhaps greatest work, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, a blistering tale of American business at its most dog-eat-dog. Initially unhappy with the play, he sent it to British playwright and director Harold Pinter asking for advice. Pinter said simply – 'stage it'. In 1984, under the direction of Gregory Mosher, he did, and the play received the Pulitzer Prize, the Drama Critics Award for Best Play and four Tony Nominations.

In 1987, Mamet wrote and directed *House of Games*, the first of his 10 feature films. In 1988, his new play *Speed-the-Plow* premiered on Broadway.

In 1991, Mamet married British singer/actress Rebecca Pidgeon, and in 1992 directed her and W. H. Macy in the premiere of *Oleanna* at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, before moving to the Orpheum Theater in New York. The play met with instant controversy as audiences grappled with Mamet's refusal to deal with the play's subjects of power and sexual harassment in black and white terms. In 1993, Harold Pinter directed *Oleanna* at the Royal Court production in London. Through a mix-up, Pinter followed an earlier draft of the play, which had been used at the Cambridge premiere but was discarded for the New York production. Featuring a very different ending, Mamet eventually acquiesced to Pinter's preference for the earlier draft, allowing it to be used for the London production only. In 1994, Mamet wrote and directed the film version of the play with Macy and Debra Eisenstadt replacing Pidgeon, who was pregnant with the couple's first child, Clara.

Since *Oleanna's* premiere, Mamet has written numerous works for the stage including *Cryptogram*, *Boston Marriage*, *Romance* and *November*; written screenplays for *Wag the Dog* and *Ronin*; and written and directed the films *The Spanish Prisoner*, *The Winslow Boy*, *State and Main*, *Spartan* and *Redbelt*. He is currently working on *The Diary of Anne Frank*, to be released in 2010.