"The Problematic Business of Living Itself" : David Mamet's Devolving Theater

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"The Problematic Business of Living Itself":
David Mamet’s Devolving Theater

by

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Abstract

David Mamet's style is remarkably minimal; there is little in the way of stage direction and his dialogue is often a staccato vernacular. At the same time, within the apparently loose frameworks of his plays lie the seeds of their own destruction: Mamet makes up for the lack of obvious, literal stage direction with the subtle downward spiral of the plot; the coarse frankness of the language depicts worlds nearly devoid of— or at least rapidly losing— their sense of morality or whatever implicit ideas and ideals are central to maintaining the appearance of the status quo. Whether the characters are academics, businessmen, or thieves, Mamet possesses them communicate his fundamental lack of faith in all of humanity, a fate inextricably linked with what he sees as poor choices and values, a fate from which we may never recover. The overall effect of this world view is Mamet's signature brand of what I have termed "Devolving Theater," in which the unraveling of the circumstances within the plays themselves lead the characters perpetually downward, away from any sense of resolution or absolution. To this end, the purpose of this thesis is to explore in-depth the devolution in the plays of David Mamet, focusing specifically on three of his plays: A Life in the Theatre
(1977), Oleanna (1992), and Romance (2005). I will be focusing on character relationships and the use of language, as these are the areas in which the devolution is manifested.
"THE PROBLEMATIC BUSINESS OF LIVING ITSELF": DAVID MAMET'S DEVOLVING THEATER

by
KRISTOPHER AARON SPRING

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# Table of Contents

1. A View from the Top .............................................. 1
3. The Dialogue of Violence: *Oleanna* ...................... 26
4. PsychotoMametics: *Romance* ............................... 45
5. The Knife Thrice Used .......................................... 58

Works Cited .......................................................... 69
All plays are about decay. They are about the ends of a situation which has resolved itself fully, and the inevitable disorder which ensues until equilibrium is again established.

- David Mamet

*Writing in Restaurants, 1986, p. 111*
1. A View from the Top

When I first read David Mamet's Oleanna, I felt myself reacting similarly to many who have seen it performed - with anger, resentment, and frustration toward Carol. I could sympathize with John and thought him excusable in his physicality toward her due to the accusations of sexual harassment (amid other personal attacks) she brings against him. At the same time, as a student, I could understand Carol's frustration at being unable to comprehend and negotiate the world of academia. But it seemed to me as if something else were at work behind John's pomposity and Carol's helplessness, and that something was the real cause of my frustration. Upon closer examination, it occurred to me that, though John and Carol spend three scenes trying to communicate with each other, communication never takes place. It is as if there is no connection between them until the moments of violence at the very end. What begins as a routine conference between a teacher and a student erodes over the course of the play into a brutal demonstration of animalistic behavior, incongruent with the "normal" concept of academia.

In many of Mamet's plays, I observed that, much of the time, his characters are involved in situations that tend to unravel, whether through their direct actions or not.
In other words, many of his plays devolve from ostensible order into chaos as they progress toward their conclusions. Language and relationships tend toward entropy and visibly break down time and again. A pattern emerges - a devolving theater - that is the theatrical manifestation of Mamet’s own bleak prognosis for human institutions (such as academia), and, as it becomes apparent from deeper investigation, for American culture at large.

The vast majority of Mamet’s work, meant for the stage, screen, or otherwise, was written in the latter half of the twentieth century and reflects an almost implicit stark social criticism and cynicism toward American institutions and culture: “Our civilization is convulsed and dying,” he opines in Writing in Restaurants (1988), “and it has not yet gotten the message. It is sinking, but it has not sunk into complete barbarity, and I often think that nuclear war exists for no other reason than to spare us that indignity” (116). Although somewhat alarmist and dated - markers of a mentality weaned in the Cold War - these words nonetheless summarize Mamet’s foreshadowing of our direction as a society quite well. The language he chooses to use is noteworthy: the phrase “gotten the message” and his allusions to nuclear apocalypse seem to indicate his belief in an imminent end to our way of life.
However, he still places the blame for our cultural and societal devolution squarely on us - we have no one to blame but ourselves for the corrosion of our once-sacred institutions: academia, jurisprudence, and even the theater itself.

It may be that the force behind this devolution is a sort of general malaise or resistance that keeps us from recognizing (or wanting to recognize) that we are indeed a society on the decline. Mamet observes earlier in the same book:

We are an illiterate country...We are destroying ourselves by accepting our unhappiness. We are destroying ourselves by endorsing an acceptance of oblivion in television, motion pictures, and the stage. (21)

While he is surely lamenting the dwindling of interest in the written word, he is more intent on letting us know that we cannot or choose not to read the signs that portend that something is wrong. Instead, we try to cover up or ignore outright that which is unjust in favor of that which is easy or profitable, no less in everyday life than in our choices of what is entertaining, what is knowledge, and what is justice.

Perhaps his own prolific contribution to the world of
the theater seeks to assuage the "acceptance of oblivion" that he claims holds sway over the country at large, a means to turn the audience of America back onto itself and expose it as the crumbling, amoral monster that he sees it to be: "...A theatre which too often has had to settle for the ersatz, and a culture whose pieties he has set himself to assault" (Bigsby 15). By attempting to expose via his drama the underlying causes of decay and rot assailing the theater itself, for example, Mamet exposes those same veins of decay and rot assailing American culture.

Though his dramatic structure does have precedent in the theatrical world, his style is noted as being unique and relatively unlike that of his predecessors on the American stage. Stage direction and settings are usually sparse but they are more than compensated for by the intriguing and dynamic dialogue of his characters, who "express their muddled ideas in uncompleted sentences and sputtered obscenities" (Harriot 75). In fact, often the first (and most notable) indication of his devolving plots is a breakdown in language: one thinks of Teach from American Buffalo (1976) and his near incoherence leading up to the violent rage that trashes Donnie’s shop. Mamet’s characters, though, can become trapped within the very informality of language that should otherwise allow them to
communicate clearly:

At his best, Mamet sets up, via this voice, a crammed-full linguistic world, sealed off from everything but the jagged rhythms of its own fricative riffs. Within this world, Mamet’s characters appear neither as puppets nor quite like individuals, but more as creatures feeding at the same language pool. (London 18)

The base nature of the language doesn’t allow a very wide (or necessarily very effective) array of communication. With so many of his characters “feeding at the same language pool” of epithets, expletives, and colloquialisms, the pool becomes even more hazy and muddied since they are often unwilling or unable to communicate in any other way. However, even when the language is not base, as it isn’t between John and Carol for the large part of Oleanna, communication and connection can still fall apart. The stress of these two characters not being able to understand one another, though speaking two forms of the same language, proves too much to bear for the characters (and often the audience).

In addition to his use of vulgar, staccato language - and often in the wake of impressive verbal tirades - the stage itself is used as a canvas for illustrating the
oncoming or recently manifested chaos; again, we think of Teach in the junk shop. The stage, or rather the events occurring on it, often reflects or refracts the mental states of the involved characters: Teach stands amid the piles of junk he created, thinking cluttered junk, speaking cluttered junk. What little control he ever had over his world is gone, and the set has gone with it.

It is easy to see a character like Teach, for example, as a "bad guy," but Mamet's characters don't fit into easily identifiable categories of good and bad. Because they are drawn from an already hazy linguistic and moral background, they defy the typical protagonist-antagonist relationship:

Mamet's world...shows a grimly deterministic theater in which his heroes are victims. Their victimization stems from outer forces - a ruthless business associate, an opportunistic executive, a petty thief - as well as from inner forces: the failure of self-reliance, the exaggerated claim that proves false, and characters' obsession with money that they will never see and with relationships that will never be fulfilling...There are no villains in his theater - only individuals whose world of diminished possibilities and banalities defines and confines
Mamet seems to be telling us that his characters (and by extension, we) have little actual autonomy; we are often at the whim of others, who usually don't have our best interests in mind, and personal drives which are inherently (or inevitably) flawed. But to externalize this onto a single character - a man in a black hat, for example - wouldn't work, as he observes in *3 Uses of the Knife* (1998):

> [It] is a compulsive expression of the need to repress - to identify a villain and destroy it. The compulsion must be repeated because it fails. It fails because the villain does not exist in the external material world. The villain, the enemy, is our own thoughts. (52)

Unless we put the black hat on our own heads, we are essentially fooling ourselves, and this self-deception is at the heart of his devolving theater. For example, in *A Life in the Theatre*, Robert clings steadfastly to his somewhat deluded notions of what makes a "great actor", so much so that he ignores the signs of his own impending obsolescence. Likewise, by not admitting and/or accepting ourselves as key players in the downfall of our own way of life, we only serve to continue and speed up the process.
At the same time, it may be easier to empathize and sympathize with his characters' weaknesses because their vernacular is often so like ours - they speak our language. Due to this shared language, their relationships are more powerful and intimate. Moreover, we see only one or two relationships at a time. By not being bombarded with characters, we can focus more clearly on the dynamics between characters: what they say, how they act, and the tensions between them. *Oleanna* and *A Life in the Theatre* (1977) spotlight only two people, *American Buffalo* and *Speed-The-Plow* (1985) only three, and even though *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1982) sports a cast of seven they are (with the exception of the last scene) all presented in small groups and are basically birds of a similar feather. Since we are able to follow the relationships more closely, we are then more able to trace the devolving path they take to reach their respective messy ends.

Each of the abovementioned plays has, at its heart, manifestations of the very notion of societal devolution that Mamet espouses: "...the myths that have deformed American possibility" (Bigsby 15). As mentioned previously, Donnie Dubrow's junk shop, by nature chaotic and cluttered, is further junked by the small-time criminality of Teach when his own petty aspirations are
thwarted; Williamson's "Big Board" starts Glengarry as the epitome of ordered rank and status but ends up as shattered as the real estate office's front window; Karen and Bobby Gould's new-found hope for the radiation script is crushed under the weight of Charlie Fox's vicious verbal salvos, eradicating Karen altogether and drawing Gould back into the fold of profit-driven producers.

As Carl Rollyson asserts: "Mamet's plays are all concerned with charting the moral relationship between the public issues of the nation and the private anxieties of its citizens" (2199). In doing so, Mamet is able to demonstrate how flaws in the institutions we value affect the individuals who populate them, and vice versa. In addition, for Mamet the world of the theater and the real world are inextricably linked, thus his pessimistic worldview is going to be visible in the process and progress of his plays, becoming a singular force on the dramatic stage.

For further investigation into Mamet's devolving theater, this thesis will examine three more of his plays in depth to reveal, examine, and chart the downward direction of each, exposing a clear pattern to his dramaturgical style. Three plays were chosen based on the dates of their original productions: A Life in the Theatre
(1977), Oleanna (1992), and Romance (2005). By examining plays from the early, middle, and later parts of Mamet's writing career, we may be able to detect if (and how) his style has grown or changed over time. Also, all three plays are set in environments where language - Mamet's most notable indicator of devolution in his drama - plays an essential role.
2. Nuclear (Re)Actors: A Life in the Theatre

A life in the theater is an oxymoron of sorts. The theater is artifice, an act, a Protean dilemma. What we see is not life but an imitation of life and snippets of events in it, as created by the playwright. We see what the playwright wants us to see as the actors portray it. It isn’t really life at all.

But what Mamet gives us in A Life in the Theatre (1977) is certainly an approximation, a reasonable facsimile of the life behind the curtain, the greasepaint, and the false pretenses of the play proper. To do so in play form is an incidental irony, but what better medium to choose? The stage is perhaps the most adequate medium to display hidden entropic forces, especially those that lurk in the institutions we often assume to be the most structured and the most innocuous. The theater, by virtue of its ability to portray “life” is perhaps best suited to enact its own devolution - its “death.”

Mamet is not the kind of social critic who laments others’ issues while neglecting his own arena; his eye is focused rather strongly on the devolution going on in his own dramatic playground. He is aware of the posturing nature of drama and the fact that its existence at all is simply a matter of choosing words and putting them in some
order. One can see this in his conspicuous choice of spelling in the title of the play itself: he opts for the British "theatre" rather than the more common American "theater." This is an interesting choice for a number of reasons, one of which raises the issues of power that will play out in the upcoming twenty-six scenes. Above the considerations of the rocky relationship of Robert and John - which is where the devolution in this play occurs most visibly - there is the state of the theater itself. Does it remain an art form of the upper class, a patriarchal structure reminiscent of a British sensibility of high drama, as Robert seems to embody with his florid language? Or is it becoming "Americanized," cheapened and accessible, and therefore losing its prestige as form of creative expression? While Mamet’s two characters certainly experience a shift in power and identity during the course of the play, he is also directing our attention to the direction of drama as we proceed into the future.

In Writing in Restaurants, Mamet observes that "theater is dying. And it’s true, and, rather than being decried, it should be understood" (19). This statement parallels his lament regarding America's "acceptance of oblivion...on the stage" as one of the markers of our increasingly illiterate society, but it also criticizes
such acceptance and promotes reflection. We are reminded of Mamet’s role as active exposér of social decay rather than its disinterested reporter: he urges us to look at and think critically about the words and actions of Robert and John. Perhaps, by relating to them, we can see ourselves as actors as well, as proactive forces in the deadening of the “American Dream.” For John, the dream is to become a star; for Robert, it is to remain one.

The initial stage directions, sparse as ever as per Mamet’s style, indicate merely that Robert is “an older actor” and John “a younger actor,” but this is obviously far too simple a characterization. Readers with any experience of Mamet might predict a more varied, intricate, and probably awkward relationship between the two, one that is (or is going to be) fraught with a fragility of some kind. As William Herman notes:

Mamet’s obsessive themes are broken friendships, the failure to form relations, the impossibility of forming relations, and yet the endless pursuit of these relations. It is as if his characters were possessed with an ontological weakness that can only be strengthened by the relations toward which they endlessly strive. One relationship his characters
find themselves in - formed without the striving - is that of master and disciple... (130-31)

Herman’s observation describes the relationship between the two actors quite well. Their relationship forms the lens through which we view the theater, both onstage and behind the scenes. As such, it becomes representative of the theater for us in its humanity and its fragility. As Robert’s self-important language destroys his relationship with John, so too is the theater itself in danger of being destroyed as well.

Robert, by virtue of being “an older actor,” is deferred to by John during roughly the first half of the play. John’s dialogue is sparse and usually only in reaction to Robert’s comments or musings, which serve to do little else besides reinforce Robert’s own ego and identity, and dubiously convince himself of his own eminence.

Robert’s experience, which one can infer to be somewhat broader than John’s since he is the older of the two actors, is obliquely manifested by his language. From the very beginning we are aware that Robert chooses his language very carefully, cleverly manipulating the conversation - if it can be called that - with John.
Consider this early scene where he has just praised John's performance:

ROBERT. I wouldn't tell you if it wasn't so.

(Pause.)

JOHN. Thank you.

ROBERT. Not at all. I wouldn't say it if it weren't so. (1)

Robert's self-correcting conscious shift to the subjunctive case (along with the necessary repetition of the light praise) indicates his need to maintain a position of power in the relationship - the high ground of language (this example is congruent to the theatre/theater distinction). From this semantically raised platform, he can look back over his life in the theater as well as maintain a steady view going forward:

Robert relies on ephemera and nostalgia to capture important memories, recall past glories, and reflect upon his career. In spite of his assertions that he is "modern" in outlook, Robert's speech is florid, hyperbolic - sometimes positively Victorian in nature. (Dean 121)

His speech is his life, and it is almost immediately apparent that Robert likes to hear himself speak, even to say things that were already said:
"Attentive" is a perfectly acceptable word to use to describe the audience for that night's show, which is the subject of John's observation. But Robert, perhaps angry for not making the observation himself, must expound and expand on it with fifty-cent words whose role is to add dimension to the conversation merely for his own edification. It also gains him the power of the "last word."

However, Robert is not immune to descents into vulgarity, no matter how linguistically superior he thinks himself to be. He seems to undermine his own language on more than one occasion; for example, regarding a female performer who has made his scene more difficult, he tells John "I want to kill the cunt" (7). As much as Robert is in character, both on the stage and off, this choice of language seems remarkably out of character. Furthermore:

JOHN. It is a marvel that you can work with her.

ROBERT. It's not a marvel, John, you learn. You learn control. (Pause). Character. A sense of right from wrong. (7)
Notions of right and wrong (Robert’s ostensible definition of character) seem to have fled Robert momentarily when he utters the above line to John. Such a contradiction, within the span of a few written pages (or moments on the stage) demonstrates a weakness in Robert, a crack in his outer shell (or, his character) that foreshadows, to a certain extent, his downfall. Ironically, the concept of control that he alludes to is both precisely what Robert wants to maintain and precisely what he loses hold of “as he battles to fend off fears of impending obsolescence - in and out of the theatre” (Dean 121).

The status of Robert and John’s relationship, while constantly being reinforced by Robert’s language and diction, is also demonstrated by movement and posture. In scene five, Robert consistently criticizes John about his back not being straight as he talks on and on about himself, his likes and dislikes, and his “theory.” It is as if Robert doesn’t actually want John to stand up straight, since supplicants or underlings rarely do. He asks of John, “Do you follow me? (24), a reminder of the master-disciple relationship Mamet’s characters often find themselves in. Come Hell or high water, Robert needs to be relied on, emulated, and well-liked.

Still, we know that Robert’s facade has a visible
crack in it, and that he is acting as much off stage as on (with equally forgettable scripts). It is an act that cannot hold much longer, though. Mamet sets the stage for Robert's descent in scene eight, when Robert asks John for a "favor":

ROBERT. In our scene tonight...

JOHN. Yes?

ROBERT. Mmmm...

JOHN. What?

ROBERT. Could you...perhaps...do less? (31)

It is a point that severely tests the already brittle bond between them. John's reaction is subdued but we are able to recognize his resentment, made all the more justifiable when Robert messes up one of his own lines in scene nine (a mistake Robert is bound to repeat). By this point, John is less the theatrical tyro and Robert is more the theatrical tyrant. As if he feels the stability of his position beginning to waver, Robert tries to impress John with his analysis of the lifeboat scene in scene thirteen. John, however, is clearly uninterested in his long-winded observations, since they have to start rehearsing from the top of the scene after Robert's tangents, and this is presumably a small part of a much larger work. John's sigh at the end of the scene is the cue to the audience that a
shift is on, a death knell of sorts for Robert as we witness John’s ascendancy and movement more or less out of Robert’s control.

The dialogue in the following scenes shows John becoming more dismissive as Robert becomes more pathetic, his words and actions seeming superfluous now as he begins to lose his grip on power and his reality in the theater:

The tension between the actors...is all competitive now. The older man’s brushes with self-destruction and madness are rooted in his loss of ease during the only part of the day that matters to him, the moments when the lights come on. (Henry 98)

In scene seventeen, for example, John snaps at Robert’s pontificating over cold cream and greasepaint, again made justifiable by Robert’s self-contradictory line: “You can learn a lot from keeping your mouth shut” (56). If he were only able to heed his own advice, he might have been able to save his relationship with John, but the best that Robert can hope for now is a working apathy. In scene twenty, when Robert enters muttering “Oh God, Oh God...” (65), we never find out what the problem is because John never asks. Robert’s problems are all his own now as the spotlight moves to shine on the up and coming youth and grows dim on the old hack. The actors’ relationship has
devolved due to Robert's consistent misuse of his presumptuous language, and he doesn't know how to use those same words to fix it. As Bigsby asserts: "Robert is constantly elaborating metaphors which imply coherence but which become more self-evidently nonsensical as the play proceeds" (97). The language he once clung to is rapidly failing him, or more appropriately, he is failing it. Robert's "theatre" has gotten quite cold, stiff, and rigid - it is indeed dying.

Feeling the pressure of obsolescence and his own looming "death," Robert seems to fade back into a metaphorical corner, and like any animal trapped in a corner, his reaction is to lash out at his provoker. Perhaps unwittingly, John is the provoker in scene twenty-two, when he mocks - ever so slightly - Robert's linguistic style:

ROBERT. Oh, the Young, the Young, the Young, the Young.

JOHN. The Farmer in the Dell.

ROBERT. Oh, I see.

JOHN. Would you hand me my scarf, please?

(Pause)

ROBERT. You fucking TWIT. (70)
By comparing Robert’s usual florid (yet vacuous) style to a nursery rhyme, (in other words, likening Robert’s manner of speaking to that of a child), John is belittling Robert’s only real source of power and identity - his expressive language. With his sole means of identity all but gone, Robert chooses exile to the darkness of offstage where he watches John rehearse. He weeps not for the beauty of John’s performance, but in denial and self-pity of his own theatrical descent. His last gambit, after the confusion of the operating room scene leaves him almost helpless, is the apparent suicide attempt (or at least the gesture of suicide) of scene twenty-five. Robert, who sounds almost schizophrenic with the diversity of topics he speaks about, causes John to utter, “God, what’s wrong with you?” (80). If John isn’t aware of the nature of the problem - and his active role in it - then the audience surely is. But we are also aware that Robert’s is just another act, another feint, another ruse of the stage meant to influence our emotions - to influence the masterful theatrics of Robert back into the spotlight.

Though Robert’s resurgence into primacy is not slated to happen, the final scene and the opening scene of the play share a remarkable similarity. They begin almost identically: a performance has just ended and the two
actors swap light compliments with each other. However, the pleasantries are short-lived, and may indicate an acceptance on the part of Robert of his own demise: "(to himself) It's getting cold" (81). John is anxious to get away from the backstage area, eager to engage in "A Life Outside the Theatre" that Robert may never have had.

Robert, however, is not through musing:

ROBERT. A life spent in the theatre.

JOHN. Mmm.

ROBERT. Backstage.

JOHN. Yes.

ROBERT. The bars, the house, the drafty halls. The penciled scripts...

JOHN. Yes.

ROBERT. It all goes so fast. It goes so quickly. (83)

When Robert utters the phrase "a life spent in the theatre" it is particularly telling, since it can refer nostalgically to the long span of time he has been a part of the theatrical world. But, it can also be an admission that his life is indeed spent - it is over - in the theater, and therefore in reality. He has to go, he has to leave now or he'll be locked in the "theatre" forever, which may inevitably be what Robert wants. However, there
is no more room for him since John has ascended. Robert's last house is an empty one.

The structure of the play, divided into twenty-six short scenes alternating between performances and behind-the-scene vignettes, seems to illustrate a chaotic theater in a manner that is certainly unorthodox, even for Mamet. Still, it works rather well for Mamet's devolving theater.¹ Instead of a standard plot line with more developed scenes, we jump back and forth somewhat between sets and scenarios chaotically. The only thing linking one short scene to the next is the relationship of Robert and John, which is progressively deteriorating.

Mamet is offering up Robert as an example of our own artistic snobbery and ego, exactly the kind of person who "accepts oblivion" in theater. He is the type of actor (both real and fake) who is complicit in the destruction of the art form. In scene seventeen:

ROBERT. [...] One must speak of these things, John, or we will go the way of all society.

JOHN. Which is what?

ROBERT. Take too much for granted, fall away and die.

¹This type of structure wasn't necessarily lauded by everyone. Colin Ludlow writes: "There is no storyline to join the different incidents and conversations together, but what the play lacks in plot it partially makes up for in atmosphere" (25). If anything, such an opinion shows Mamet's desired effect - to undermine the notions of what theater is (or is not) by rapidly altering time and setting.
(Pause.) On the boards, or in society at large.

There must be law, there must be reason, there must be tradition. (57)

Mamet, in warning us about the dangers of taking things for granted, might as well be speaking directly to us. However, he asserts in *Writing in Restaurants* that "we live in a world ruined by Reason" (80), so the latter part of Robert's speech seems to reflect Mamet's antithesis, the archenemy of great theater. It is scarcely surprising, then, that Robert is written to forget lines, misspeak lines, and emote extensively along the path to his final curtain.

Robert clings to his self-important language, and that is the instrument of his demise. By blurring the line between on stage and off stage, Robert succeeds only in alienating the only thing that can keep him going - his relationship with John, who can stop acting when the curtain is down. Robert's stubborn insistence on the virtues of the "theatre" prevents him from recognizing that John is beyond his grasp, and though Robert notes the power of John's performance he may not really believe it. Robert cannot or will not adapt, which in any environment is a sure path to extinction, as is evident in the final scene. John rehearses a script, since he is bound to perform
again. Robert, on the other hand, speaks only for himself in the last line: "The lights dim. Each to his own home. Goodnight. Goodnight. Goodnight" (84).
3. The Dialogue of Violence: Oleanna

There is no better way to experience the downhill slope than to begin at the top of the hill. This is a literal truth but also a metaphorical one; to truly understand and appreciate decline one must have a sense of where the decline is coming from. In spiritual terms, we can recognize sin and imperfection because we recognize a space of perfection without sin: Eden, Elysium, Arcadia. Presumably, the historical Oleanna, from which Mamet takes the name of his play, was an attempt to approximate paradise in its own right. Paralleling the biblical story of Adam and Eve, this fails. Sin and death are released into God’s perfect creation, forever marring it and leaving it fraught with the danger of sinful, decadent collapse. In Genesis, it was the desire to eat of the Tree of Knowledge the cursed our biblical predecessors. In Oleanna, a similar quest for knowledge – and the power that comes with it – curses Carol and John, a curse that repeats in the midst of other curses throughout this play.

Perhaps John and Carol are Adam and Eve’s contemporary representations, their respective stories sharing an almost frightening congruence. Both plots are marked by signifiers of perfection gone wrong, of paradise lost due to the actions of its inhabitants, and both depict the
struggle and downfall of communication between the opposite sexes and the perils of talking/hearing versus speaking/listening. Though these considerations are more latent against the overt themes of sexual harassment and issues of less-than-adequate university level education, they are nonetheless more central to the play than the latter two:

The message of *Oleanna* appears to have much less to do with political correctness and sexual harassment and more to do with the difficulties of acquiring and controlling language, especially in the specialized environment of the academy. (Badenhausen 2)

The ire and indignation that we feel during the course of the play most likely stems not from our frustration with Carol’s attitude or John’s pomposity, but from our realization that neither character can merely say what needs to be said.

Due to this failure of communication, *Oleanna* is not much different than *A Life in the Theatre*. Both plays utilize a cast of only two, the characters arranged from the beginning of the plays in a master-disciple relationship. *Oleanna*, however, follows a more typical plot structure, with more drawn out and developed scenes, though the development is at times hard to access behind
dialogue that is choppy and convoluted, even for Mamet. It is in this dialogue that the real battle between John and Carol, as with previous characters in previous plays, is waged: "The flailings of language are still the same, only the diction has evolved - from working-class vernacular to educated, middle-class groping" (London 19). The devolution in Oleanna is a direct result of John and Carol's inability to communicate. They talk and talk but never seem to grasp what the other is saying, and the characters' frustration is felt by us as well. Though devolution caused by the misuse of language is not new to Mamet, the eventual descent into physical violence - whether real, imagined, or implied - is what separates Oleanna most strongly from Life.

But much like edenic myths, the play opens innocently enough, albeit with Mamet's signature staccato dialogue. He places us in a metaphor by titling his play as he does. By setting it in academia he presupposes order by likening order to mastery of the world through knowledge (i.e., at the top of the hill). The setting, though appearing ordered and "safe" as such, still has its hidden dangers, as Leslie Kane observes:

With its potential for entrapment and vulnerability to both realistic and ephemeral intrusions, John's office
is simultaneously familiar and defamiliarized, the site of a philosophical-tutorial and the "alleged" scene of the crime where sexual harassment does or does not occur. (148)

John's office is not the classroom, and as such the "rules" of the classroom need not apply; it is an inherently more intimate space and at the same time it reminds us tacitly of his position of relative power. The institutional heart of academia lies most likely not in the classroom, where instruction (or "hazing") occurs, but in those inner sanctums where the power holders deal with their own lives. At the onset of the play, John is doing precisely that, and only secondarily is he addressing the needs of his student(s).

Nevertheless, John is created for us quite clearly; his position is announced by his present situation as a professor up for tenure who is also in the middle of purchasing a home (interestingly, this "creation" of his character comes from without, literally as a voice from beyond - the telephone). This telephone conversation is inherently one-sided, hence we must divine the essence of conversation merely from the fragments of speech and pauses John makes. However, when the telephone conversation ends, we are left with two flesh-and-blood individuals whose sole
purpose in getting together was to find understanding. Their actual conversation plays out as being just as one-sided, or maybe even more one-sided, than the telephone conversation was. To reflect this, there are almost no written lines without ellipses in the entire first scene. These ellipses - the spaces between the words that are often able to speak volumes - help to confirm London’s assertion that “the first section...makes language as the inadequate conveyor of meaning” (19). Words and spaces combine to create an obfuscated semantic atmosphere, hence communication and understanding between Carol and John is difficult.

But this is perhaps not unexpected, since Mamet presents a very power-charged dynamic that takes the master-disciple relationship to an extreme - that of teacher-student:

Both professor and student - the defining Mamet relationship, endlessly inverted - whether or not they are willfully deceptive, portray incompatible views of “truth” and in doing so reveal their own manipulative agendas. (Brewer 165)

On the one hand, John’s agenda is relatively clear, if not self-serving: to maintain his present level of performance in order to secure the tenured position, thus guaranteeing
for himself and his family security and prestige, signified, at least in part, by the purchase of a home. On the other hand, Carol's agenda is much more ambiguous. On its surface, she seeks at once the ability to understand what John says and the validation of being worthy to understand. Her confusion is obvious, as is her meekness due to her perception of John as a champion of the knowledge she so desperately craves. This "knowledge" is embodied in John's language, which consistently eludes Carol's comprehension - or which John consistently dangles as a carrot in front of her nose. In a very real sense, it is as if they are each speaking a different language: "Carol prefers clarity to language that obscures meaning. John, on the other hand, repeatedly employs an artificially-heightened vocabulary that draws attention to his academic status" (Badenhausen 8). Carol has to ask for clarification of words and phrases that John uses, such as "term of art" and "predilection," and her frustration is not at their obscurity but at John using them:

CAROL. No, no, no. I'm doing what I'm told. It's difficult for me. It's difficult...

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2Ironically, reviewers are no less likely to utilize similar words to describe the play itself: "Mamet continually upstages his own characters, gesturing over their heads to an audience he is certain will condemn, according to their individual predilections, one or the other of them" (Favorini 40, emphasis added).
JOHN. ...but...

CAROL. I don’t...lots of the language...

JOHN. ...please...

CAROL. The language, the “things” that you say...

JOHN. I’m sorry. No. I don’t think that that’s true.

CAROL. It is true. I...

JOHN. I think...

CAROL. It is true. (10)

Her situation, as she sees it, is untenable because she cannot master the language of the academy, precisely what John has done and precisely what he “holds over her,” so to speak. Indeed, John’s initial reaction to her apparent inability to grasp the course material is to suggest that she drop the course, effectively barring her from the opportunity to attain the same (or similar) power-through-knowledge that he already has.

The first act is basically a microcosm of what we can assume his actual classroom is like, in which John teaches and Carol listens and tries to understand. In an effort to facilitate Carol’s understanding, John defies common practice by proposing a most unorthodox tutoring, one that Carol has a hard time accepting since, for all her complaints about the degree of difficulty of the subject matter, she still wants to be able to master the material
as is. It is in this tutorial that the dialogue begins to enter the realm of the personal and approaches the intimate, but not in the sense of anything overtly affectionate, much less sexual. Rather, John attempts to relate to Carol by recounting his own struggles as a student. As John confides in Carol about the difficulties he himself faced in his quest to attain power-through-knowledge, he nevertheless continues to fulfill his role as educator by confessing that his job is "to provoke you...to force you to...listen" (22).

But Carol is still confused. The provocation John speaks of may be a foregone conclusion, Carol's temper getting the better of her as the concepts keep getting muddier:

CAROL. NO, NO - I DON'T UNDERSTAND. DO YOU SEE?? I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

JOHN. What?

CAROL. Any of it. Any of it. (24)

This is Carol's zero hour, her great confession, and although she moves to reveal that there is another, deeper secret (which is never given voice), this is ostensibly her prime mover. Her confusion is what brought her to the unscheduled office hour, and in her indignation she finds a moment of clarity. Her anger is also what brings her back
to his office, but this time with a surprise of her own, rather than the surprise party John thinks is coming to him at the end of act one.

The opening of act two could very well have been a continuation of the "tutoring" sessions from act one, if not for the slightly bitter undertone of John's speech and an aura that all is not well:

For we have sensed that the numerous double entendres, the unconventional grading arrangement, the tasteless joke, the drawn-out stories about John's experiences as a student, all will have led these two characters into some kind of trouble. (Badenhausen 2)

The power structure from the first act has been altered. John's impressive arsenal of erudition is being tested as he tries to get some sense of where Carol's accusations are coming from. Of note is the fact that the shift in power is heralded to a greater degree by a profound shift in Carol's character.\(^3\) In other words, she is using other words, some of which mimic John's academically-trained vocabulary, but which certainly are delivered with a newfound confidence and the indignation of a woman scorned.

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\(^3\)As Carla McDonough observes, "Carol's leap from idiot to intellectual between scenes 1 and 2 is completely unanticipated" (97). This alludes to the presence of the "group" to which Carol claims membership, and although we are never told what it is we can recognize it as being somewhat similar to academia in its use of knowledge-as-power.
The confusion she lamented in the previous act is transferred to John, who searches frantically for some solid ground:

JOHN. [...] What have I done to you? (Pause.) And, and, I suppose, how I can make amends. Can we not settle this now? It’s pointless, really, and I want to know.

CAROL. What you can do to force me to retract?

JOHN. That is not what I meant at all.

CAROL. To bribe me, to convince me...

JOHN. ...No.

CAROL. To retract...

JOHN. That is not what I meant at all. I think that you know it is not. (30)

No matter what John’s intentions actually are, this excerpt reflects an issue that has been growing in the play from the first few lines – that language is not working here: “Under such conditions, the diseased language usually leads to...moral deterioration in Mamet’s milieu, rendering any sensitive, positive interaction between these two characters inconceivable” (Badenhausen 8). It isn’t so much that Carol is using John’s words against him, but rather that she is attempting to use John’s use of language as he does in order to undermine a real or inferred
trespass against her (and by proxy her "group"). It is difficult to believe that the Carol of act one would use the phrase "...to overlook it is to countenance continuation of that method of thought" (32), especially since she criticizes John for using the word "paradigm" only a few lines earlier. It is a marked shift in character, language, and power that manifests the devolution at work: calmer conversation (however muddled it may have been) has given way to more frequent raised tones and antagonism.

If we had any remaining presuppositions about the paradiacal nature of this play they would be gone by now. John himself seems to admit that quite plainly: "...we’re just human. (Pause.) That means that sometimes we’re imperfect" (34). The apple has been bitten, and now we can see that knowledge-as-power has crept into Carol’s bones, and she is passing what she has eaten on to her male counterpart:

Thus begins Carol’s real "education," whose subject matter is the art of deception, dishonesty, and skepticism. And Carol becomes quite a good student who learns her lessons well...for she has come to master many of her teacher’s own tricks, including a penchant for intellectual bullying; an ability to use language ambiguously so as to get her way; and an outlook on
the world informed by a deep-seated cynicism about human relations. (Badenhausen 11)

Thus the relatively one-dimensional nature of John’s academic language (in the sense that it only seems to work for him in a pedantic way) has become the one-dimensional nature of Carol’s, and discussion of the issues between them is rapidly becoming moot. What happens during conflict, then, when words fail? The rational, if it can be called such, gives way to the instinctual - the animalistic - and power transfers from the tongue to the sinew. Carol is on her way out of the office - it seems as if she, at least, begins to realize that words are no more use - but is impeded by John, who forcibly restrains her:

Deprived of his superior advantage, dialogue, and presented with a challenge to his knowledge, [John] ultimately fails in a crucial attempt to win the play. Thus, when Carol refuses him the courtesy of continuing their discussion, her oversteps the bounds of civility, in her view, by restraining her physically against her will. (Kane 172)

The situation has degraded into the physical, and while it is not yet outright violence it is certainly devolving away from conscious control.
Act one begins at a level place and slowly digresses from it, and act two lets us drop in a semi-freefall with both characters grappling, literally and figuratively, on the way down. Does anything but chaos await us in act three? By this point, John is thoroughly degraded, the full weight of Carol’s accusations (“facts,” to her) bearing down on his life and costing him his tenure (i.e., his life), his house, and presumably his marriage. Like Robert from *A Life in the Theatre*, he has become the cornered animal, a dangerous creature to deal with now that he is approaching a place where there is nothing-else-to-lose. Still, John patronizingly attempts civility and instead receives Carol’s antagonism.

However, even though she is ostensibly in the position of power — having taken away everything from John and thereby “evening the score” for his alleged improprieties — she falters a bit at this meeting, curiously stumbling by asking for an explanation of “indictment.” In the context of the legal issues that she has brought forth (either by herself or on behalf of her “group”) it seems very unlikely that “indictment” would not have been already known to her or at least explained. Still, her reaction to his use of the word — “You will have to explain that word to me” (39) — is not a question, as she would have worded it in act
one, but a demand, as she has learned to word it in acts two and three. Whether or not it was a purposeful demand (bringing to his attention his choice of another "obscure" academic term), it shows her awareness of her own appropriated power: she can demand an explanation for his actions, rather than ask. Regardless, it is a minor hiccup in an otherwise nearly complete power shift: "These characters have done nothing more than switch places...indeed, we might imagine Carol enrolling in graduate school soon enough, leading students down the same path" (Badehausen 13). Her rather long sections of dialogue here, which never would have occurred in either of the previous two acts, betray her preparedness (and we might assume her willingness) to assume John's role.

What began as an exercise in pedagogy, however brittle or posturing it may have been, has devolved into the bitingly personal. The thirst for understanding has been replaced with the hunger for spite, and although Mamet gives us a tease of a possible reconciliation, we know it cannot come; the animal in John and Carol (and by extension, us) will not be denied after such consistent provocation. Indeed, it is recognized:

JOHN. Don't you have feelings?

CAROL. That's my point. You see? Don't you have
feelings? Your final argument. What is it that has no feelings? *Animals.* (40)

Carol has an ironic bit of prescience here. She is acknowledging that the situation has deteriorated to a level that is no longer human, and can therefore no longer be rectified by that which greatly separates humans from animals - language. However, she is only half-correct in her proposition that animals have no feelings. While emotion may be most often associated with humanity, instinct (or "natural reaction" as it were), in the animal world, is quite congruent to expressions of emotion - for example, an expression of rage or frustration.

Still, the dialogue continues, threading in and out of accusation and reprimand, to a point where John all but gives up the ghost: "What's the use. It's over" (43). John's world, both in and out of academia, has fallen away from him, the veil of knowledge-as-power has given way. Carol, seeing his reticence, begins to walk away - but doesn't. As if not understanding the rules of engagement, she presses the last bit of her agenda, in effect continuing to prod the cornered beast who, at this point, has almost nothing else left to lose. All that remains for him is his legacy, in the form of his book, and whatever shred of paternalism he associates with it. These, too,
are destined for maligning at Carol's hand. Then the animal strikes.

To think, however, that the animal cannot use language is not entirely true. Rather, he/it uses the language of anger and bitterness - the vulgar - which is the kind of language that permeates the larger section of Mamet's drama. The main methods of communication for the animal, however, are still physical, as Leslie Kane observes:

Recalling American Buffalo in pace and structure, Oleanna intensifies toward an explosive moment, effecting some kind of reconciliation or rapprochement at the conclusion. Beautifully prepared by the breakdown of language and reason, John's outcry, "You vicious little bitch...you little cunt" (47), and violent attack on Carol...nonetheless shocks us - and him - by its ferocity and inhumanity. (182)

The brutal nature of John's attack is shocking, but can it be unexpected by play's end? Throughout the course of the play, Carols unwinds as John winds up, and by the conclusion, all of the negative energy that has been building up must find release in some form. Though John's visceral reaction has been criticized as misogynistic - due most likely to Carol's gender and the epithets John uses - his violence may display a more generalized reaction to
stimuli, especially those that assail the heart of one's self-assumed identity. Carol's relentless accusations, as well as John's insistence on continued (though useless) dialogue, work together to undermine both of their worlds: "Mamet allows the audience...to see the characters as active participants in the collapse of those values to which they appeal" (Silverstein 117). The events don't happen to John and Carol, they both make them happen. Both claim to value "understanding," but in the effort to communicate this shared value to each other, their speech un-communicates it.

The pristine setting of academia appears to make the discourse (and discord) of the play seem all the more disturbing, especially so at its degraded, devolved finale:

Though the bulk of the drama unfolds within the glow of the professor's oak-paneled office, it might as well transpire - given the gravity of Mamet's message and his didactic, horrific tone - at the precipice of a cliff, a crevice in the earth opening up to the depths of hell, with its two symbols of a lost and future order teetering on its edge, meeting for the last round of head-butting. For all its minimalism, Mamet's play suggests apocalypse, fire, blood, guts, and destruction. (Feaster 53)
Feaster's description, though very colorful, is valid. The lower-key yet patronizing dialogue-that-goes-nowhere of the first act has a far more sinister overtone than one might first think, and the accusatory dialogue of acts two and three serves to make manifest the dark, animal side that act one left latent. Our Adam and Eve have come full circle - a chance they weren't allowed in the original telling of their story - but their quest for understanding was lost as their language became less and less effective, causing the situation to devolve into shocking violence.

Almost orgasmic in its sweep, Oleanna displays the fundamental baseness of the individuals at the heart of every seemingly innocuous human institution. This instinctual need for power - whether violent power or knowledge-as-power - corrodes that very same institution from the inside out, or at the very least allows a vicious cycle which allows corrosion to continue. John, like Robert from Life, hangs on to language until the very end. Unlike Robert, his (and Carol's) anger and frustration break the boundaries of civility as he finds a better way to communicate how he feels - through his fists. In the final, adrenalin filled moments, both characters have complete understanding.
David Larner adequately sums up the play: "We see it coming. It comes on relentlessly. It arrives and crashes down. It destroys. It is over" (113).
4. PsychotoMametics: Romance

During the O.J. Simpson case I was at a party with a couple of rather famous jurists. I said it occurred to me that a legal battle consisted not in a search for the truth but in jockeying for the right to pick a central issue. They chuckled and pinched me on the cheeks. "You just skipped the first two years of law school," one of them said. (30)

The above observation, taken from Mamet’s 3 Uses of the Knife (1998), was written almost eight years prior to the release of Romance (2005), but nonetheless adequately summarizes the gist of this bizarre, post-millennial commentary on the daily business of litigation and the pageantry of the courtroom. In Mamet’s courtroom, it is a relief that Justice is blind, but if she weren’t she would most likely be even more confused by what is going on in her midst and with the invocation of her name.

With Romance, Mamet appears to be undermining his own unique and provocative style, perhaps as a thumbing-of-the-nose to actual and potential critics of his body of work, as Ben Brantley suggests: "Romance fits into that unloved category that might be called the Work of Contempt, created when an artist becomes weary of hearing about his limitations and perhaps equally weary of working with them"
(www.nytimes.com). As opposed to the relative focus of the topics presented in *A Life in the Theatre* and *Oleanna*, which tended to vivisect one major issue with incidental minor ones, *Romance* opens up a Pandora’s Box of diverging and tangential issues, ranging from the Mid-East peace process to homosexuality to prescription drug use and abuse. It is a confluence of contemporary headlines, a mishmash of that which is problematic or sensitive. The romance may derive from the neurotic/erotic dance the characters perform as the issues sweep in and out of prominence. Nonetheless, as much as it may appear to differ in topic and overt tone from either of the two previous plays, *Romance* bears Mamet’s trademark proliferation of expletives and a wit honed with a sardonic undertone that reins in each tangent as it threatens to take prominence. If the devolution of order into chaos is his dramatic game, then this play may be his trump card.

Like the theater and the university, the courtroom is a prestigious institutional setting where formal language is exalted. But perhaps more so than in the others, the courtroom embodies something of the sacred; it is a place where truth and justice are determined, and thereby

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*Certain allusions in the play - mysterious rabbits and hypodermic needles, for instance - transform the play into a bastard child of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Naked Lunch* (1959).*
provides a basis for our societal ideas of morality and order. As hallowed as its halls might be, however, it is home to the same kinds of rehearsal and performance we see in the theater and to the manipulation and permutation of language that occurs in the university classroom/office. As such, with its formalities and procedures, it should be one of the few institutions remaining where structure is typically held in high regard. Moreover, one might think its stated purpose - the divination of truth - should be championed above all else.

But, as Mark Steyn succinctly observes, “David Mamet’s Romance is a farce” (37), hence we are not going to see the plots enacted toward a climax and denouement in a realistic way here, but rather as a “departure from the staccato realism for which he became famous...a legal farce in the tradition of the Marx Brothers” (Brustein 28). While it is true that Groucho’s subversive sensibility would probably warm to the plays of language depicted in this kangaroo court, his characters differ in one interesting aspect from Mamet’s: his characters had names, names that were crafty and laughably absurd. Though Mamet has never gone that route, opting more often instead for generic names that carried no meanings of their own (Teach from American Buffalo is a notable exception), here he decides to, for
the most part, forego proper names altogether. Instead, he labels his characters by their occupations, not by who they are but by how they relate to one another in their courtroom roles: Judge, Prosecutor, Defense Attorney, Bailiff. These titles tend to remind us where we are, and reinforce the formalism and structure that the court embodies. Even the Defendant is named so, and even though this is not an occupation per se it is nonetheless a label that places him into a distinct position in the courtroom setting. By not giving them names Mamet denies these characters an essence of humanity that his previous characters (and the audience) share. There is the added effect of leaving us to concentrate not on who they are, which appears inconsequential, but rather on what they do (or do not do, as it may be). They are not people but cogs in the machine of jurisprudence - or in the image of jurisprudence - into which Mamet presently hurl his wooden shoe.

It is misleading, though, to think of the play as dissonant and chaotic from the beginning. Actions in the legal system, especially in the courtroom, can, for all its procedure and structure, seem rather arbitrary and stilted due to the process. Though rule-bound, the cross-examination is basically an argument, a battle of
intellectual and linguistic wills, with the sole aim of having one person prove the other person wrong. The questioning attorney, whether prosecution or defense, may alter tone, diction, the line of questioning, etc. to throw off the questioned, hence creating a form of chaos that is part of some larger order (read: agenda) at hand. It is within this very situation, a cross examination, that this play begins.

It isn't too long into the play that distractions begin to emerge (as early as page four), and by page nine elements preventing "proper" procedure produce a cross-talk that will pervade the courtroom segments of the play:

PROSECUTOR. Let me begin again. Did you physically contact a person in the Room...

JUDGE. ...and could someone get my pill, please...?

BAILIFF. Your Honor, you've taken your pill.

JUDGE. I took my pill?

BAILIFF. Your Honor, yes.

PROSECUTOR. Do you require me to repeat the definition of "contact?" (9)

Though it appears as if the Prosecutor is able to negotiate through this interruption, much like the Judge's sneezing it is a small symptom of a much larger illness infecting the courtroom. In between the Judge's pontificating
regarding the Peace Conference and his non-sequiturs about the parade, the Prosecutor is forced to repeat himself; words like "again" and "repeat" themselves repeat throughout scene one. The Judge is too busy bemoaning his allergies to focus on the case at hand, a case that, due to his susceptibility to gadfly distraction and his own wandering attention span, loses its form rather quickly.

This opening scene bears a strong parallel, in this sense, to the opening scene of Oleanna in that characters are talking but very little is being communicated, and no understanding is derived from the use of language. In Oleanna, though, we could follow the dialogue as a discussion between John and Carol (as convoluted as it was). Here we have little to hang on to except a presumption of the structure of the legal system to figure out what is happening, but since there are more than two voices talking over and at cross purposes to one another things quickly become confusing. The characters themselves are confused yet try to maintain a sense of purpose, such as when the Prosecutor announces his intention to produce a "cavalcade of Expert Witnesses...who Cannot Draw a Rabbit" (30). As absurd as that sounds, the Prosecutor is, at the very least, trying to maintain the procedure and order of the court.
The attempt at Mideast peace going on in the background of the play (and being called for by the Judge in moments of lucidity) contrasts the absurdity and descent into madness that is occurring on stage. While the Israelis and Arabs are ostensibly negotiating a settlement to their centuries-old animosities at an undisclosed location, other factional violence is being waged one-on-one in scene two between Christian and Jew:

DEFENDANT. Fuck you.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. Fuck me? Fuck you, you Rug Merchant, Greasy, Hooknosed, no-dick, Christkilling, son-of-a-bitch sacrilegious...

[...]

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. [...] ...when I’ve missed taking Little Tommy to Church Youth Hockey, because I’m stuck in here listening to your sniveling, sick...

DEFENDANT. Oh, Oh, Little Tommy, again? Limping, when he comes home from communion, does he...? (Pause)

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. I hope, I hope that the Arabs. Rise in their droves, and drive your people into the sea. Killing the children. Raping their wives and burning down all traces of your two-thousand-year-long sacrilege.

DEFENDANT. Fuck you. (41-42)
Despite the fact that they are not given names, we begin to understand the characters by their opinions and prejudices. This scene in particular is ripe with Mamet's trademark vernacular, made all the more potent by the constant ethnic epithets and slurs. The zealous representation that is part of the Defense Attorney's duty mutates him into a zealot of another kind, in opposition to his client, who should be the subject of his ministrations but now is the subject of his verbal tirades. Even with the Bailiff's well-intentioned interludes announcing lunch, both characters continue their assaults. In an effort to leave no insulting stone unturned, they even turn their bile on the Bailiff, the representative of physical Law Enforcement, thus promoting chaos in the face of law and order.

It may be unfair, however, to view this bitter argument as just a derogatory duel, since its cathartic aspects must be noted. Consider the outcome of the scene: after much swearing and screaming the Defendant has an epiphany - a method of solving the Mid-East crisis through chiropractics. Regardless of how bizarre or inane that may sound, the oral release of such built up, generations-old prejudice and hatred has spawned a possible "solution," something that myriad attempts during actual Peace
Conferences, with concomitant diplomacy, tact, and "niceness," have been unable to do. Those basest elements of language - the epithets, obscenities, and other assorted vulgarities (the essentials of Mamet's theater) - have purged the slate for potentially (re)constructive progress, powerful enough to realign both the spines of Arab and Jew and the agendas of Defense Attorney and Defendant.

Scene three functions in a similar fashion to scene two, and provides us with a glimpse of the Prosecutor's home life. It reveals him as a homosexual, and introduces Bernard, the only character known by his name (though he also turns out to be the elusive Bunny\(^5\)). It is a glance at another scrutinized (though perhaps not devolving) American institution - the family - and Mamet highlights for us that the bonds that create the family, whether it is mother/father/2.5 children or man/man, are maintained through communication. The Prosecutor's opening speech in this scene is reminiscent of Robert's solo emoting from A Life in the Theatre: it is more a string of words together than it is a practiced closing statement (or whatever it is supposed to be). Bernard, desiring to be honest to his lover, is met with only hostile retorts, and the inevitable

\(^5\)It is true that we learn both the Judge's and the Bailiff's name in the course of the play, but they are written as "Judge" and "Bailiff" throughout.
shouting match begins in which the things that weren't said are now being said. The heat between the characters is enough to burn the roast, which is already burning in the oven. Ironically, the roast may be the barometer of the course of the play: it is something that is meant to be fulfilling (such as the pursuit of truth), but it is neglected over trifles and ends up unpalatable.

That very concept bring us to scene four, when these few narrative threads meet - the chiropractic solution of the Defense, the relationship ills of the Prosecution, and the worsening allergies of the Judge - and create a Gordian Knot that Justice's sword has a difficult time cutting through. While the Defense attempts to voice its newfound remedy to the ills of the Middle East and the Prosecutor tries to voice his objection to the nonsense of it, the Judge allows himself an additional helping of medication and overmedicates himself into some sort of haze, leaving the courtroom open to a cacophony of voices:

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. Your Honor, we have an infallible plan to bring Peace in the Middle East.

PROSECUTOR. There are fine, fine color films.

BAILIFF. Drums Along the Mohawk...

JUDGE. I saw that film. It has a lot of Indians.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. Indeed it does, Your Honor.
JUDGE. And that illustrates my point. That people...what was I saying...?

PROSECUTOR. Your Honor, I can see the Court is tired, and if I may suggest it...

JUDGE. Shakespeare was a Jew?

BAILIFF. And a Fag... (77)

Ironically, the Judge, whose responsibility (among many) is to maintain “order in the court” (signified by the gavel that he cannot find: “Where’s my fucking gavel...” [111] he asks later), is precisely the person who most promotes chaos. Due to his marked inability to keep order, the subplots of sexual and religious orientation revive and turn to historical figures (e.g., Shakespeare) as if such labels would “discredit” history and make the characters realize they all had been living lies. Add to the distractions a cell phone that incessantly rings and which heralds the appearance of a leopard-skin clad Bernard/Bunny, and almost all hope of legal due process is lost. At this point, the fact that the Defense’s ludicrous solution is chiropractics is no longer even worth noting. Rather, what is noteworthy is the fact that no solution is able to be voiced over the trifling clamor of these contemporary “issues” that cloud Western society. The very individuals who control the Law, and therefore the course
and interpretation of morality (hence, societal views of the "issues"), cannot seem to control themselves; argumentation, not truth, has won the day, but rather than a single cross-examination we have many going on at once.

Slowly and after much "discussion," the circus atmosphere that pervades the majority of scene four begins to wind down, and through the many interruptions, stilted speeches, and fighting doctors, the Defense's plan for peace is discerned. Its value as a plan is recognized, perhaps as the drug that the Doctor administers to the Judge takes its effect and begins to clear his mind. However, as the group prepares to depart to the Conference to announce its terrific solution - thanks to the gavel that miraculously reappears - the attendees of the Peace Conference themselves are on the move, giving up on Peace yet again, and leaving the characters to despair and return to their old, miserable ways:

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. The leaders have quitted the Peace Conference. They have departed in wrath.

DEFENDANT. Too late, too late...why, Lord, oh why are we doomed to endless strife?

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. Well, everything was going fine until you killed Christ.

(General approval. DEFENDANT gets incensed and
attacks the DEFENSE ATTORNEY.)

JUDGE. Hey, in all fairness, he's right. But that's a question for another day. (118)
The chiropractic solution will never be tested for its efficacy, and peace will remain a psychotomimetic dream indefinitely.

*Romance* is an exercise in language run wild, set loose like a bull in a china shop where the bull is part bullshit with equal helpings of prejudicial honesty and blatant expletive-studded ignorance. As Mark Steyn notes:

That's Mamet's running joke: the heavier the subject, the broader the gag - low comedy about weighty matters. The true romance of this play is its love of language - or, at any rate, love of Mametian language, in particular the pure, rhythmic pleasures of the f-word, extravagantly deployed. (37)
The china shop is that delicate view of truth and justice, and for want of a better cliché, the "American Way" that Mamet so bemoans. Our love of language, or perhaps our love of hearing ourselves speak, has far outweighed the reason for being in court at all: to determine what (or who) is right and wrong.
5. The Knife Thrice Used

The year 1988 sits in the middle of the span of time David Mamet has been a playwright and devout social critic, among other things. *A Life in the Theatre* has been written, performed, and reviewed. Also, such notable creations as *American Buffalo* (1975), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), and *Edmond* (1985) have also been written, the latter three focusing - in contrast to the former - on the more overt underhandedness (a seemingly paradoxical concept) of American culture. One might think, after writing these plays, that Mamet would come out of the creative process more embittered at the state he sees society in - and even more ready to expose it as such. Interviewed the same year, Mamet's sentiment is rather clear: "There are ebbs and flows in any civilization. Nothing lasts forever. We had a good time...Now you've got to pay the piper" (Savran 144). In Mamet's eyes, we are no longer grinding inexorably down that deteriorating path, taking everyone and everything with us, but we are already there, at the end of things - and it is time to settle accounts with whomever or whatever his "piper" is. Still, *Romance* is seventeen years away, which affords us plenty of time to continue our devolution - and which affords Mamet plenty of time to write strikingly and critically about it.
But for a playwright who consistently writes about the devolution of human institutions and relationships, his own motivation is surprisingly mysterious:

Well, one is drawn to certain things, you know...His predilections are not subject to his own intellectual recall or understanding. There's something much deeper. And it's the same thing in playwrighting. The things which one is drawn to write about don't stem from intellectual prejudice or even affection, but rather from something much deeper. (Harriot 78)

This "something much deeper" (which is never fully explained) allows such thugs as Teach and shysters as Roma to tread the same boards as Robert and John, Carol and John (and the ironic return of 'predilections'), and the myriad faces of Romance. Mamet's sense of societal decay, born from the actions of those involved in American culture - from crooks to businessmen to actors to officials - informs an indignation that has spawned thirty years of theater. It is a theater that, at its heart, draws out, dissects, and displays the selfishness and desire for power that continually plague American culture.

As mentioned earlier, the three plays I've focused on were chosen for their similarity of setting; they are set in institutions based on an assumption of some sort of
agreed-upon order, which is, in turn, based on some sort of "instinct for rightness": the rightness of art, the rightness of knowledge, the rightness of truth and law. Of course, this is not to say that these plays share no similarities with his other plays, for one common denominator among them all is a shared belief in the rightness of power, an undeniable force in American culture that determines all other rightness. However, the desire for power in the more prestigious institutions is inherently more subtle and seemingly innocuous, and therefore more dangerous - threatening the "incorruptible" and shaking the heretofore thought unshakable foundations of culture and morality.

Robert and John are Mamet's own sacrifices to his indignant cause, amalgams of actors that one might assume he knew from his experience in the theater. The ebb of Robert, the old hack who was once presumably the paragon of drama, is the flow of John, the rising star who heralds Robert's obsolescence. But what appears to be a simple power shift is something more. By John stepping into the roles that Robert is vacating, John is not refreshing the roles but perpetuating them. Hence, the actor is merely the vehicle, the unwitting servant of the true cause of decay in the theater - the roles themselves, and by
extension, the drama that unfurls in the creation and maintenance of those roles. Mamet is not only bemoaning the petty aspirations of the dramatic actor, but he is also berating the theater itself that allows "oblivion in theater" to go on. By continuing to perform the melodrama of the lifeboat scene or any of the other snippets we see within the play, the actors reinforce that oblivion, which for Mamet is synonymous with bad art. As a consequence, the constant performance of bad roles allows decay in the broader societal appreciation of art itself that leads, not ironically, to the cultural sensibility demonstrated in Speed-the-Plow, where "cheap and profitable" wins out over "personally meaningful." Robert, as representative of those roles, is dying with his theater, as we might expect John to do as well if he continues performing those same roles as well.

The sadness that arises from Robert's theatrical demise is taken to the next (albeit lower) level in Oleanna. In A Life in the Theatre, Robert fades into the shadows in a relatively silent fashion, whereas in Oleanna, John falls but reasserts himself in dramatic fashion at play's end. Again, Oleanna is more than just a power shift, and certainly about more than sexual harassment or the "current events" of 1992: it deals with the structure
of the university and the language of knowledge and power, and how the use of language affects transference of knowledge and power (if it happens at all). Carol’s frustration derives solely from John’s language, which excludes (separates the student from the teacher as unequals) rather than includes (unites student and teacher together in a mutual learning environment as equals). The gender factor here, however, adds an exponent to the issue that serves to heighten the communicative tension at the same time it distracts many viewers and readers from the power issue. Nevertheless, Carol’s ability to "play the sex card," so to speak, provides an almost adamantine lever to pry the knowledge-as-power/language issue right up from its oak-paneled studs. It also makes the inevitable violence at the play’s conclusion seem more heinous, though audience reaction – from clapping for John to angry shouting at Carol – somewhat belies its heinous nature on occasion.

John’s violence is not usually the typical outcome of teacher-student interactions, but it can certainly be a result of miscommunication. When differences arise and words fail, how far behind are the muscles and sinew? Rape, though only alleged in this play, has been described not as a crime of sex but of power, and here we have a
power-charged situation. But the crime of power, in this instance, can go either way. Carol uses her new-found power to exercise control over John and his myriad personal ambitions (tenure, child, new home, book) as manipulatively as John uses his "earned" power to exercise a more subtle form of control over Carol: first with his words, and then (as the words are less and less efficacious) with his inappropriately placed hands. John's crime is the misuse of his intellectual language to confuse, while Carol's crime is the misappropriation of his intellectual language to "get even." Ironically, she does this too well.

In Oleanna, is language an ineffective conveyor of meaning? Perhaps, when it results in an inability to promote and share discourse, which is presumably the mission of any academic establishment. Still, like any institution that holds power in some sort of thrall, academia has its own ways of keeping its language valuable, and this is what John represents. The trouble arises not only when the language used in the classroom (or office) is incongruent with everyday language, but also when situations occur for which language fails. In the dialogue of John and Carol, this incongruency courts danger:

Even the violence in his plays, particularly troubling when between men and women, erupts out of frustration
with this struggle to describe the things of this world that can't be described. (London 20)

What is indescribable is the ineffable nature of emotion, the animalism that emerges when one is under attack from an outside enemy, the fight-or-flight that overrides the "rational" centers of language and logic. Although it is doubtful that Mamet sees such violence in the future of higher education, the underlying idolization of academic language and knowledge-as-power that these institutions uphold is a lightning rod for the frustrations of the people who work hard to attain that language and power. Academia's ivory tower may be under attack from without by accusation, but the linguistic bricks from which it has molded its foundation are subject to cracking and splitting from within as their arbitrariness becomes all the more apparent and baseless. The tower itself becomes, then, not a place to harbor preachers of knowledge-as-power and their craft, but a holding environment for them and their potential violent tendencies. Stemming from this, academia's privileging of one kind of language over another to share discourse is perhaps its most ardent enemy: confusions arising from language are more likely to happen, thus increasing the potential for language to fail and other forms of communication to take over.
A Life in the Theatre and Oleanna may devolve into a terminal relationship and a brutal confrontation, but they are still situations that fall neatly into the spectrum of plausibility. In other words, both of those plays are somewhat realistic in their portrayals of the theater and university. This verisimilitude lends a credibility that not only drives home the impact of their respective messages, but also focuses the collective eye of the audience on characters so like themselves that it is difficult not to relate to them. With Romance, such verisimilitude takes back seat to a glut of hijinks under the blind eyes of Justice, barely tempered by her sword.

The language of Romance, as has been observed, certainly rings true to Mamet's style, but is the play so unlike his other works? The extent of the vulgarity expands upon that of Glengarry Glen Ross and Speed-the-Plow, but even those plays follow certain detectable plot lines that focus on a solid issue. Mamet's court is the opposite, or at least the dark cousin, of his own "typical" style. Perhaps he wrote about devolution in his drama so extensively that his own writing style devolved a little bit as well.

Or perhaps not, because Mamet is merely doing what Mamet does best - social criticism that shows not what he
thinks but who we are. Our cruel appetites for a myriad of “-isms” have allowed the basic humanity to drain out of our most beloved institutions, leaving the players as nameless roles. Mamet’s choice to place them in a courtroom is not accidental; when the world comes crashing down, our first reaction is to unite under a shared “rightness of power” which is often the “rightness of truth and law,” as mentioned previously. Ironic in its literalism as it may be, law and order is the counterweight to anarchy and chaos, the latter of which appears to be the unnamed prime mover in Mamet’s plays.

By bringing sensationalistic headlines into the courtroom (the venue of the search for truth), Mamet is distracting us from the collapse of justice that occurs in the play. The arguments over homosexuality and religious denomination are an exercise in straw-clutching performed by characters who are no more than straw men, whose zeal has sparked them to burn for all the wrong reasons. We are left with charred remains, then, of the very individuals that we once relied upon to determine (to a greater or lesser extent, for us) what is “right” and “good” and “valuable.” The pursuit of truth becomes a muddied endeavor at best.
The determinism of Mamet's devolving theater, cynical at best and grim at worst, is difficult to deny, nor is the underlying truth he seeks to expose in *3 Uses of the Knife:*

We live in an extraordinarily debauched, interesting, savage world, where things don't really come out even. The purpose of true drama is to help remind us of that. Perhaps this does have an accidental, a cumulative social effect - to remind us to be a little more humble or a little more grateful or a little more ruminative. (20-21)

Mamet's plays often devolve into debauched, interesting, and sometimes savage situations; the three plays written about here certainly reflect that. The vulgar language he is known for is the *lingua pura* of his devolving theater, even in settings where we might least expect to hear it: the theatre, the classroom, and the courtroom. These settings are not impervious to devolution, as we may have thought, since they are institutions created and populated by individuals who have the same shortcomings, idiosyncrasies, and agendas as Teach, Bobby Gould, and Roma. The high ground of formal language that the formal institutions champion isn't enough to protect them.

Mamet's devolving theater is testament to those failures of language that divide and conquer, the same
language from which we derive an unstable sense of self. From the ashes of our own self-defeat along the course of Western civilization – where we presupposed our own greatness in everything from art to knowledge to the truth itself – Mamet draws a line that reads “I told you so.” Or maybe he has already written it on the page:

At that point, then, in the well-wrought play (and perhaps in the honestly examined life), we will understand that what seemed accidental was essential, we will perceive the pattern wrought by our character, we will be free to sigh or mourn. And then we can go home. (80)
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