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Power by Deception:

Mamet's Matters of Confidence

Christophe Collard

Pivot is published through Open Journal Systems (OJS) at York
University

On the photo of the playwright, filmmaker, and sometime acting theorist David Mamet that hangs among the pictures of other famous former students in the lobby of the Neighborhood Playhouse Theatre School in New York City is written: "Take heart, they didn't ask me back either" (qtd. in Nadel 44). In spite of his poor aptitude for it, Mamet's understanding of acting has helped him as a dramatist and director to consider the role of the audience in his compositions. Since the generative quality of art depends on a so-called double vision of problem and artifice,

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the artist, he argues, must establish a communicative relation with the spectator for the latter to avoid what Mamet calls "the liberal fallacy of assuming that because we can perceive a problem we are, de facto, not part of the problem" (Mamet, House 114). To achieve this, the audience must be ushered into the diegesis by means of a pragmatic balancing act where the artist meets the audience halfway. Critic Thomas L. King pointed out that the words pragmatic and practical are both cognates of the Greek word *πραξις*, or "upright action" (540). Artistic effectiveness, therefore, would depend to a significant degree on the spectator's willingness to suspend his disbelief and the artist's capacity to hide his hand. Either perspective requires enthusiasm. After all, compromises like these can be seen as constructive investments towards an abstract, overarching objective. Mamet once expressed his relief that Ernest Hemingway and Edith Wharton, two of his literary heroes, could sometimes "write such trash;" that the qualitative gap between their best and worst work proved that "making art isn't magic but fucking hard work" (Mamet, qtd. in Wetzsteon 114). The actor Colin Stinton, Mamet *habitué* of many years, similarly evoked Mamet's pragmatism when discussing the playwright's readiness during rehearsals

to cut away all lines that sound untrue or digress from the through-action (qtd. in Dean 39). What matters, then, is not the fetish of the creation as product, but its evocative potential in presentation to an audience.

In *South of the Northeast Kingdom*, his paean to the state of Vermont written for *National Geographic*, Mamet states that traditions are artificial and so can be “continued only through force of will” (5). Further into the book, he quotes from Sherwood Anderson’s novel *Poor White* (1920) the conviction that “[a] man who has a trade is a man, and he can tell the rest of the world to go to hell” (129). The stoicism here evoked shies away from self-congratulation in the awareness that any act performed without focused introspection is a threat to one’s integrity. Epictetus, a stoic philosopher to whom Mamet regularly refers, claims that “it is disgraceful for man to begin and end where animals do” (Epictetus 13-4). From the artist’s perspective, the stoic attitude reflects a sensitivity towards processes instead of a primitive susceptibility to “the value of externals” (6)—i.e. an attachment to form over substance. Such a disposition enables the artist to remain connected to his objectives and values despite distractions. To Mamet, there is no such thing as pre-existing character but only words on a page. As he argues in *Three Uses of the Knife*, his treatise on the nature and purpose of drama, meaning results from the dramatization of impressions into what is ideally a three-act-structure (3, 8, 64). Echoing anthropologist Victor Turner’s views on social interaction and man’s primeval survival mechanism (32), Mamet believes a “hero journey” (14) stimulates the individual to learn from adversity and to grow by confronting problems and formulating solutions. The purpose of drama, hence, would be to remind audiences that although “in an extraordinarily debauched, interesting, savage world” (18) the hero journey can never be completed,

growth through functional frameworks nonetheless remains possible:

Just as commercial pabulum reduces all of us (the creator, the 'producer,' the viewer) to the status of consumer slaves, so dramatic art raises the creators and viewers to the status of communicants. We who made it, formed it, saw it, went through something together, now we are veterans. Now we are friends. (53)

In similar fashion, Mamet has argued that "[t]he joke, the tragedy, and the comedy" are designed to lead the mind of the audience "to its own confusion" (Mamet "Confession"). By analogy, moreover, the characters in his dramas appear overwhelmed by the society in which they find themselves. Pioneering Mamet-critic Dennis Carroll, for one, has noted that "[i]n Mamet, the greatest masters of effective 'blah'" are these characters, "those who are most lost, deluded, and compromised" (22). Due to Mamet's perceptibly ambivalent attitude towards deception, his characters are trapped in the inner logic of their self-styled language while simultaneously putting it to constructive ends. These figures are masters of self-reliance, yet only within the limited framework of their limited objectives. After all, this presumably marginal status of Mamet's characters appears to follow solely from their incapacity to transcend their situation.

Paraphrasing William Hazlitt, Mamet contends that "it is easy to get the mob to agree with you—all you have to do is agree with the mob" (Mamet, *Truth* 111). Even so, the mob's opinion continually changes, which makes the impostor's influence temporary at best. The matter is different, though, when the very means of expression and reference are controlled, or, as Michel Foucault reminds us, "Power is exercised only over free subjects" (Foucault 428). Mamet, for one, considers language as intrinsically exhortative due to its capacity to connect and confuse (Isaacs 219). Interaction,

after all, implies a set of values. Any action that constitutes said interaction, therefore, must be meaningful in order to be effective. Charismatically efficient discourses, i.e. discourses with a significant capacity to connect and confuse, then, are products of negotiations rooted in language, which in itself is both a disciplined negotiation and a generative matrix. Acknowledging the transfer of meaning that encapsulates a purposeful linguistic utterance, then, establishes the latter as an act socially *performed*. In other words, considering language as performed through speech acts “shifts attention from what language *is* to what it *does* and sees a *social process* where other linguistic philosophies see a *formal structure*” (Petrey 3, italics in the original). And with absolute Truth, accuracy, and adequacy melting under scrutiny, what becomes important is the efficiency with which something is communicated. The awareness that language is not just a nomenclature but rather a form of action thus allows the individual to escape the so-called ‘prison house of language’ and direct his attention to the potential underneath. Moreover, while interpretation and expression occur together within a given situation and contextual influence consequently cannot be avoided, acknowledgment of this mechanism should limit the vulnerability to charismatic effects that self-righteousness ironically implies.

In *The Shawl* (1985), David Mamet’s first play to premiere after the Pulitzer Prize winning *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), a woman, Miss A, seeks out a clairvoyant, John, to assist her in answering an emotionally troubling question related to a recent inheritance. Despite the common scepticism about claims to psychic abilities, Mamet initially presents the medium as more affirmative and commonsensical than vacuous or manipulative. John impresses Miss A with his seeming ability to anticipate questions, concerns, and intimate details. Before Miss A can divulge the cause for her visit, John’s—indeed—charismatic exposition of the “psychic

ability" (Mamet, *Shawl* 90) to rationally confront "a hidden order in the world" (91) has succeeded in lowering her defences. Reassured that her most private feelings are no delusions, she is ready to submit herself to the seer's authority. And just when John's assertions become bold to the point of rekindling Miss A's suspicions, an impossible "Truth" (92) forces her and the audience alike to trust his judgement: at the closing of the first act the medium has effectively divined she has a scar on her left knee, a remnant from "a time of physical danger" (92) Miss A was adamant to know—or at least remember—nothing about and has thus proven the legitimacy of his claims to psychic ability.

While Mamet's depiction of an honest and potentially legitimate psychic medium is surprising, equally surprising is his decision to finally expose the mystery by letting John show Charles—his younger lover—"the trick 'from the back'" (102), after having until then always refused to offer any kind of explanation in this direction. In fact, the entire second act is an extensive exegesis of how John wins Miss A's confidence through deceptive means. That is his trade. He is a confidence man. He feeds on his clients' anxieties by relying on "common sense" (97) and "educated guess[es]" presented as "magic" (100). It is significant, then, that Mamet chooses to dramatize this particular play on a stage, rather than writing it as a text only to be read. Live theatre more than any other artistic medium draws attention to the contingent and polysemic nature of cultural communication. John's revelation of his deception to Christopher reveals to the audience the limits of their knowledge, which is limited both by what Mamet allows them to see, and because theatre audiences can only perceive fragments of densely-textured verbal constellations in a continuous flow. We, as a rule, are simply not capable of comprehending every nuance of the language coming at us from the stage. Consequently, attending a theatrical performance becomes an act of

resistance to institutionalized values by consciously confronting overdetermined stage signifiers. In a cultural context where critical distinctions have generally become unstable, live theatrical performance remains unique in its explicit resistance to charismatic transparency-effects, i.e. to persuasive illusions of clarity. By incorporating a virtually limitless number of perspectives, signifiers, and signifying systems in a temporally and spatially ritualized event with “the performer and the spectator ... physically present at the same time in the same place” (Kattenbelt 33), the theatre iconizes an elusive content. For, as “semiology in action” (Pavis 19), the theatrical *mise en scène* constitutes an “engine for spectatorship” that drives heterogeneous stimuli towards “the production of a (meaningful) texture to the event” (Lavender 63), with the concrete, the metonymic, and the virtual constantly in flux.

Fittingly, while bearing in mind that Mamet’s swindlers are complex figures, the simplicity of the ruse described in this particular scene is disappointing to Charles, even though he was taken by the performance. John’s profession, just like that of the dramatist, is frustrating at heart because here craftsmanship is measured by its ‘transparency’:

JOHN. One of the, you will see, the most painful sides of the profession is this: you do your work well, and who will see it? No one, really... (*Pause.*) If you do it well. (*Pause.*) But... (*Pause.*) To say, to learn to say, I suppose you must, to say what separates us, finally, from them is this: that we look *clearly*. So be it. Not that we’re ‘special’.... (102)

This passage, with its insistence on the “‘magical’ skills inherent and hidden in persuasive performance” (19), Brewer points out, could have been lifted from Mamet’s 1977 meta-dramatic rehearsal play *A Life in the Theatre*. Nonetheless, Charles has different ambitions. He is out to exploit John’s

expertise with the human psyche for immediate financial gain. Arguably, the opportunistic playwright could do the same, should that be his objective. In all his eagerness, however, Charles has overlooked his lover's warning that "[their] job is not to guess, but to *aid*... to... to create an atmosphere" (Mamet, *Shawl* 100, italics in the original). There are no straightforward formulas, only guiding principles to react constructively to a situation. But creating the right atmosphere is the crucial first step towards manipulation, for it is the framework that decides on the content and steers the interpretation.

Given the plausibility of John's teachings in the second act, it is all the more ironic that the act ends with Charles threatening to leave his lover should he fail to comply with his own crude, exhortative scheme to con Miss A out of her presumed fortune. Shortly after the third act begins, the audience's wavering between various perspectives is resolved by the realization that the men's second meeting with their victim is driven by fraudulent techniques. Indeed, Charles' pushy interventions in the *séance* (110), the concretization of some preconceived ruses (106), and the incantation "As, Alif Casyl, Zaza, Hit Mel Melat" (110) confirm as much. On the other hand, the atmosphere of the *séance* was said to require mutual confidence in order to establish an effective transaction. To Deborah Geis,

The Shawl's preoccupation with trances and clairvoyance—counterpointed with the assertions that the psychic phenomena are merely akin to a magician's tricks of the trade—leaves the spectators feeling as if they have witnessed a curious type of doubled event that is at once mystifying and a demystification (a typically postmodern refusal of clarity and closure). (110)

At the very moment Miss A exposes the scam in a final act of scepticism by presenting a fake picture of her mother, Mamet

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plays his trump card. When all seems lost John, once more out of nowhere, 'interpellates' his client—and through her the theatrical audience—with an impossible Truth:

MISS A. May you rot in hell, in *prison*, in... you *charlatan*, you *thief*...

CHARLES. We've...

JOHN. *No.* Oh God forgive me...

MISS A. If there's any power in the world... (*Rising.*)

JOHN. *No!*

MISS A. ... I'm going to...

JOHN. Oh, God help me, I'm sorry...

MISS A. GET OUT OF MY WAY!

JOHN. Oh, God Help Me. I see Your Sainted Mother. Wrapped you in a Shawl. A Red Shawl...Which she brought back, which she wore, she whispered, 'I Am Coming Home...' When she went out. Your father took her. For the evening. And. When she came home. Into your room, she draped it on the lamp. It cast a red...

MISS A. ... *No.*

JOHN. Yes. And she would sing to you, 'Are you asleep? My lamb...?' And she would sing, you hear her.

MISS A. *No.*

JOHN. And she would cradle you. The shawl smelt of perfume. You lost it *when?* Five... Five...

MISS A. Yes.

JOHN. What?

MISS A. Five Years ago.

JOHN. And told no one, and grieved, a yellow flower, a rose, in the middle, and a golden fringe, she sang, 'Are you asleep my lamb?' And she thinks of you still. And calls to you. And she calls to you now. And I saw her by your bed. She Wore The Shawl. (112-3, italics in the original)

Whether a long con, a brilliant improvisation, or an act of genuine divination, this mysterious reversal at once undermines premature conclusions. John's speech still carries traces of his technical revelations to Charles but confuses everybody with unexpected, inexplicable elements. By the time we enter the play's final scene, not even the 'transparency' of the medium's craftsmanship is certain any longer.

We are in Mamet-territory here, where interpretation is invited yet suspended. He directs our thoughts in the same way that John is in control. Disappointed in Charles's misconduct during Miss A's last visit, he breaks with the younger man despite a final burst of humility on the latter's behalf. To get him out of the way John then insists on rationalizing his own performance, presenting it as a token of self-reliance and creative thinking under pressure. That, he claims, is all the equipment he has "to live in a world without mystery" (115). What Charles does not seem to understand is the difference between immediate gratification of primary impulses and the pragmatic investment towards a higher objective. John's trade revolves around giving his clients "a *mechanism*" that satisfies their anxiousness "to trust" (99, italics in the original) and so relieve themselves of the burden of critical judgment. But when in the play's finale Miss A assumes Charles's role, John immediately reverts to a formulaic register subtly mixing deliberate rhythms, puns, and constructive advice:

MISS A. ... you seem...?

JOHN. I was with a client, and you are absolutely right. Now: let me clear my mind, and... (*Pause.*) Yes. Now. You seem...you've *decided* something, for you seem in better *spirits* today. Something has been... And a *burden* has been lifted from your mind. Good. I see *clarity*. Good. For there's so much sorrow in this life. A question answered. For, finally, we must solve them all in our own mind. And we know that it is true. (*Pause.*) Good. (*Pause.*) Yes. Yes. What? What is it? (*Pause.*)

MISS A. I have to ask you something.

JOHN. ... but still sceptical. Good. We can't overcome our nature. For it protects us. You ask what you wish to ask. (Mamet, *Shawl* 116, italics in the original)

The product of John's trust in his technical mastery and the first principles granting the courage to confront the unexpected, this mix ultimately accounts for the (con)artist's double vision. Questioned on the modalities of payment, he answers Miss A with a formula first introduced in the expositional second act and leaves the decision "completely up to [the client]" (117, see 98). No longer sceptical but eager to know more about her deceased mother, Miss A keeps pressing John for further revelations, which he plausibly provides in another display of professional skill. Like an expert dramatist, though, these last surprising elements are cut short by an admission of powerlessness: "I do not know. That is all I saw" (118). A tradesman of the elusive, his job is to stimulate, not to explicate. John may need his audience for financial gain, to perfect his craft, even to satisfy his existential need for recognition and—as suggested by Dennis Carroll—for communion (116-7). Yet none of these needs can be fulfilled without restraint.

Brewer is certainly right in claiming that "legitimacy and charlatanism can only be separated by their relative spiritual efficacy for the listener" (22). Yet the distinction between a

sense of fulfilment and frustration is not just a semantic matter, but one of method and perspective, too. John in *The Shawl* could easily qualify as a psychological or social worker, as well as a charlatan, and most likely as both. Only the last view, however, justifies the generative potential suggested by the con man's pragmatic play with contingencies. The subtlety Mamet applies in crafting this character hints at an acknowledged fascination (Nuwer 55) for the hybrid of hustler and hero. As Johan Callens notes, these con artists betray Mamet's "admiration for [their] stamina, resourcefulness, and energy ... tinged with hope because of their relative self-awareness" (Callens 8). Henry Schvey considers the play to be "about a man's growth and capacity for self-knowledge in the midst of corruption" (89). Indeed, this double vision shields the con artist from lapsing into venality and allows him to be successful within the framework he carves out for himself. In other words, Mamet's swindler here acts constructively upon his acknowledgment of moral impurity. For as Gregory Mosher, the original director of *The Shawl*, points out, to be clairvoyant is not about reading the future, but "about ... seeing clearly, unimpeded by this barrage of opinion that comes at you every day" (qtd. in Kane 237).

David W. Maurer, author of *The Big Con* (1940), remarks that it is typical for this criminal specialty to "derive a pleasure which is genuinely creative from toying with language" (qtd. in Farb 123). Con men's charismatic hold over their victims primarily relates to the faculty of creating an alluring blend of the commonplace, the forbidden, and the exotic, often complemented by an ambiguous social position in the shadowy zone between legitimate and illegitimate subcultures. The con man, like the dramatist, propagandist, or marketeer, capitalizes on the exhortative potential of language's aporetic play with denotation and connotation. Or better: its power to confuse and connect. The dramatization of estrangement, or *ostraneniye* as Russian theorist Viktor

Schklovsky calls it, in turn repurposes the con man's deception by staging it as an aesthetic engine of reflection (Holthusen 145-6). This helps to explain why Mamet decided to design a number of his plays and films as a con game—doubling it for the inset and frame as if to insist on deception as reality and metaphor.

The con's importance in Mamet's work can hardly be underestimated. Most significantly, his first film as writer-director turned out to be "a subversive under-the-rock look at the interlocking scams that define much of today's moral universe" (Kroll 85). Released just two years after *The Shawl*, *House of Games* (1987) feels like an attempt to try out this relatively obscure play's conundrums on a broader audience. Produced on a small budget and "Based on a Story by David Mamet and Jonathan Katz," this independent picture allowed Mamet to develop his vision in a new medium with but minimal aesthetic compromises. In its first stage, Mamet's directorial debut carried the working title *The Tell* (Carroll 17). Presumably, this title was dropped because it overemphasized the element of manipulation. The title *House of Games*, on the contrary, operates on various levels of signification without overplaying its hand. As a result, it opens up the work's metaphorical range.

The film is ostensibly narrated from the perspective of the female lead, Margaret Ford, renowned psychiatrist and author of the bestselling *Driven: Compulsion and Obsession in Everyday Life*. Familiar as Fords may be, though, they must still be driven attentively. The book's title is a first tell that its author is not as careful as she should be, since it evokes a propensity to generalize, which is further emphasized by the cover's conspicuous red lettering more attuned to tabloid titles. Moments after we see her autographing a fan's copy, Ford's hubris is denounced by a patient who asks her if she thinks she is exempt from bare human experience (Mamet,

House Screenplay 6-7). This is an issue Mamet would later return to in his essay collection *Some Freaks*, where he argues that

analytic technique, philosophy, and method are, of course, essential; but without the act of self-renunciation by which the analyst ratifies the patient's position, they will not get a chance to come into play. (Mamet, *Some* 286)

The scene then dissolves to a restaurant where Ford is having lunch with her mentor, Dr. Maria Littauer, to whom she relates her disturbingly simplistic conclusions about this patient's case:

FORD. Listen to this: in her dream: she saw a foreign animal. What is the animal? She cannot think of the name. It's saying, the animal is saying "I'm only trying to do good." I say, "What names comes up when you think of this animal?" She says it's a "lurg," it is called a "lurg." So if we invert "Lurg," a "lurg" is a "girl," and *she* is the animal, and *she* is saying "I am only trying to do good." (*House Screenplay* 7-8, italics in the original)

The film's entire first act is devoted to acquainting the viewer with Ford's professional conduct. Matters speed up, though, once she finds her professional pride piqued by Billy Hahn, another one of her patients, who claims no one can cure him of his gambling compulsion, displaying a handgun to prove his point. Wary of Ford's formulaic suggestions, he calls psychology a "con game" (10) and threatens to kill himself if he does not find a way to settle his debt with "Mike, the Unbeatable Gambler" (11).

At nightfall, Ford goes looking for her nemesis at The House of Games, an obscure gambling den in a rundown commercial building. Her first interchange with the bartender boosts her confidence, as does a compliment from Mike himself for

“siz[ing him] up so quick” (14). Yet Ford is not driving up a one-way street here. Our unbeatable gambler is looking for tells by dropping a number of puns about her “fronting off,” which indicates he has in turn sized up both her and her “books” (13); quoting a figure of \$800 instead of \$25,000 as Billy Hahn’s standing debt (14), all of his disingenuous probes go unnoticed, including the pun on “front.” When he asks the renowned psychiatrist whether she knows what a ‘tell’ is, and she fails to take the hint, he knows his display of disingenuousness will pay dividends. Ford’s presence in the House of Games is an act of vanity, and as Charles in *The Shawl* found out, irrational drives and critical judgment make for strange bedfellows. Blind to the inconsistency between her air of complacency and the actual extent of her ignorance, Ford is now easy prey for Mike, who mesmerizes her with a simple trick he cynically presents as an initiation into the secrets of his exotic trade. Fascinated and charmed by Mike’s subsequent call for her assistance in beating a star poker player from Las Vegas in the adjoining room, she forgets she is now helping the unbeatable gambler she set out to beat herself. Small wonder Ford falls victim to a scam that would have cost her \$6,000 if one of Mike’s cronies had not threatened her with a loaded squirtgun, thereby ruining the frame-up.

The film makes excellent use of the medium’s potential for transparency in the sense that the audience simply follows Ford in her good-natured reaction to Mike’s apology for abusing her trust. As she is present in every one of the film’s scenes, we are inclined to take her point of view. Unlike *The Shawl*’s simultaneous reference to the artifice and the persuasive performance on the diegetic and scenographic levels, the spectator here has only a few visual clues to go by and very slight ones at that. Moreover, most are overlooked in the attempts to keep track of the narrative progression. Cinema itself, in a similar fashion, is characterized by a

tension between a picture's 'content' and the set of stylistic devices bringing it about. Being neither 'pure' art nor science, in the words of philosopher Gilles Deleuze, film constitutes an "artistic-industrial hybrid" that, like classifications of genre, resists essentialist readings (Deleuze 17). To film theorist Robert Stam, cinema

is both a synesthetic and a synthetic art, synesthetic in its capacity to engage various senses (sight and hearing) and synthetic in its anthropophagic capacity to absorb and synthesize antecedent arts. (61)

Film generates meaning through a technologically mediated juxtaposition of moving images, which, in turn, are compositions of various semiotic channels. Interpretation of a filmic narrative, too, occurs by means of *analogous* thought. Cinema, moreover, resembles theatre in the physical constraints it imposes upon its audiences. Bound in place and time to a darkened performance space, the spectator's attention is almost entirely shielded off from external influences to create "the optimal conditions for an immersive experience" (Ryan 60). But whereas theatre communicates through sensorial immediacy, film engages visceral responses primarily by means of charismatic effects. So, very much like Ford herself, we are driven into a strange, forbidden world, interpellated by an argot that is partly comprehensible and partly mystifying. The poker chip Mike gives Ford as "a souvenir of [her] close escape from con men" (Mamet, *House Screenplay* 25) echoes this mechanism by establishing a bridge between her and them while offering the audience the prospect of a return to this compelling world. As Mike hands the chip to her, he repeats his invitation to "come back again" for some more "Jolly Pranks" (27).

Mamet's literary, as well as his visual, artistry permeates all of the film's dialogues. Every exchange plays out language's poetic supplementarity, so that gradually the spectator starts

recognizing patterns of meaning outside the linear plot development. Back in the hospital, Ford's patient unwittingly articulates a subconscious impression created by the previous scene:

PATIENT. He said, "I can make any woman a whore in fifteen minutes."

FORD. (*off camera*): ... and what did you say to that?

PATIENT. I said he couldn't make anybody a whore that was not a whore to start out with. (29)

As seems customary, this session, in which Ford assumes the position of therapist again, is followed by a meeting with her own officious therapist. With hindsight, her experience at the House of Games affects her professional outlook more than she anticipated. Echoing Billy Hahn in calling her trade a con game, she realizes her patient's problem is too complex for her limited professional expertise. Such is her confusion that she makes a Freudian slip, which triggers Dr. Littauer's advice that Ford take her "own prescription" and do "something else," (30) something "that brings [her] joy" (31). The film's montage completes Ford's characterization with a shot of the cheque made out for the con men, followed by the protagonist's return to the House of Games. It is thus suggested that Ford enjoys the company of hustlers and believes her previous experience served as a rite of passage, an impression supported by the con men's sympathetic treatment of her after she discovered the scam, as well as by Mike's repeated invitations. She is flattered and impressed, and now considers herself protected from further deception. With her proposition to write "a study of the confidence game" (33) Ford seeks to obtain the best of both worlds. Yet her plan is flawed as it ignores the observer's paradox of impossible disinterestedness. Mamet, then, counterpoints Ford's plan with another series of clues she fails to notice. Given that Ford wants to learn "how," in Mike's words, "a *true*

bad man plies his trade" (33, emphasis added), she does not realize the actual absurdity of her position. By considering herself immune, she also overlooks the implications of the confidence game's basic tenet for her personally:

MIKE. The basic idea is this: it's called a 'confidence' game. Why? Because you give me your confidence? No. Because I give you mine. So what we have here, in addition to 'Adventures in Human Misery,' is a short course in psychology. (34)

The irony is blatant but goes by uncommented. As it stands, Ford is subjected to an introduction into the discipline from which she essentially derives her sense of professional selfhood. She allows herself to be driven into Mike's world, and now he redefines her own. Soon, then, the unbeatable player drives home the message unequivocally:

MIKE. Be *real*, Babe. Let's up the ante here. (*He stops*)
Do you want to make love to me?

FORD. *Excuse me...?*

MIKE. Because you're blushing. That's a tell. The things we want, we can do them or not do them, but we can't hide them.

FORD. And *what* is it you think I want?

MIKE. I'll tell you: someone to come along, to take you into a new thing. Do you want that? Would you like that?

(*Beat.*)

FORD. (*softly*): Yes.

MIKE. What is it...?

FORD. Yes.

MIKE. That's good. (38, italics in the original)

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Power is indeed only exercised over free subjects, yet presenting manipulation as free choice speeds matters up. Ford's patient's claim that one cannot turn somebody into a whore who "was not a whore to start out with" (29) was beside the point. In the con man's world where 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' the rule of the game is "Don't Trust Nobody" (37).

Midway through *House of Games* Ford has mentally and physically submitted to Mike's authority. He has no qualms about being "a con man, a criminal" (41) while she leaves the definition of her own identity entirely up to him, her "object of transference love" (Borden 239). With no longer a clear set of values at hand, Ford is entangled in a web of intrigues so complex she—and with her the audience—loses track of the difference between what is real and what is set up. The only certainty is her eagerness to please Mike at whatever cost. As he skilfully guides her through a dramatic chain of events, he becomes her sole point of reference. At the end of the ride, Ford has given Mike \$80,000 of her own money and in return is abandoned on the hard shoulder of a freeway with "a strong urge to confess" (Mamet, *House Screenplay* 54). Next, we see her standing in the hallway outside Dr. Littauer's lecture room, a liminal zone between Ford's private and professional selves. The door opens and a fragment of her friend's exposition is heard:

DR. LITTAUER. Compression, inversion, elaboration, are devices of transforming the latent into the manifest. In the dream, and also, in the... In the *Joke!* (55)

The reminder of this transformative principle acts as a catalyst, adding an insult to Ford's earlier confusion about Mike's 'Jolly Pranks.' The confrontation with such a basic tenet of her discipline is revelatory. In her descent into the depths of existential nausea, she cancels her appointments, throws away her book, and tears her degree from her office

wall, ready to make *tabula rasa* of her past. Right on cue, Billy Hahn knocks on her office door. After having sent him away, she takes out her trash and spots Billy driving the same vulgar red Cadillac she and Mike used during his latest operation. Despite the psychologically damaging implications of this discovery, its structural positioning in the narrative marks the effective beginning of Ford's reintegration. In his book-length essay *Three Uses of the Knife* (1998), Mamet posited that "[o]ut of this [second act] despair must come the resolution to complete the journey.... Part of the hero journey is that the hero must revamp her thinking about the world" (Mamet *Three* 33). Yet Mamet the trickster uses the following scene to keep the audience focused on action rather than on his conceptual framework. Ford follows her former patient to the tavern where she met Mike for the second time and eavesdrops on his smug-triumphant account of how he outsmarted her, despite her status as the intellectual authority on compulsive behaviour. Lines like "the broad's an addict" (Mamet, *House Screenplay* 61) and "Well, it's what you pay for, it's realism" (61) where he brags of the "small price" (62) of his physical investment to create the illusion of sexual attraction, damningly expose the extent of Ford's victimization. Though Ford had already resolved to put the entire episode behind her, this unforeseen confrontation brings the philosophical dimension of Mamet's work to the fore via a context-related twist.

Mike's double vision has battered Ford's hubris into humility with an "Old style ... frame" by "Some *Dinosaur* con men" (62, italics in the original), yet his spectacular efficiency also proves his undoing. Indeed, dispatching Billy Hahn to Ford's office after the fact was just as much an unnecessary act of hubris, which only fans her wrath. Unaware of being overheard, Mike drops a number of clues regarding his plans for the immediate future. As such, Ford is able to meet him at the airport and lure him into her own vindictive scheme. In a

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demonstration of Mamet's point that hustlers, too, are driven (Nuwer 57), she beats the Unbeatable Gambler at his own game by calling upon his help to flee the city and taking a quarter of a million dollars with her. True to his wonted method, he jumps on the occasion and tries to soothe her apparent anxiety with one of his most cynically charismatic formulas:

FORD. It was fate I found you.

MIKE. Yes. It was.

FORD. Because, *together...*

MIKE. ...Yes. We *can*. (65, italics in the original)

Proving to be an inspired student, Ford plays on Mike's sole weakness. He is driven by greed and strikes whenever he feels in control, used as he is to dictating the rules of the game. Since he lost out on his first scam, he has had to invest in Ford's sympathy to win her back. But now Ford has shown up out of the blue sporting Billy Hahn's handgun, and Mike is forced to rely on his first principles. And whereas these made him invincible within a framework he himself conceived, the truly unforeseen situation in the airport scene makes him look rather ordinary. Mike the unbeatable gambler is killed in an abandoned baggage area under a sign that reads "Secure Area" by a "crooked bitch" who is "out of control" (69). When shot, Mike turns to coarse language while still refusing to do Ford's bidding and beg for his life. What is worse, he refuses to acknowledge her as an integrated personality by negating even her gender as, when hit by a second bullet, he sarcastically retorts: "Thank you, sir, may I have another?" (69). His dismissal of her power over him is heroic, but utterly ineffective. Because he stubbornly keeps refusing to recognize anything but his own authority and genius, Ford fires three more rounds into him and leaves

without her fake bag of money. So the brilliant schemer dies because his double vision proved myopic.

In what many critics consider a disturbing ending, a suntanned Ford in a slightly eccentric flowery dress is autographing a book. Unlike at the film's opening, the dedication Ford inscribes now reads "forgive yourself" (70), echoing the advice she received from Dr. Littauer when she had reached the apex of her emotional crisis. Ford has done the unforgivable by murdering Mike, and relapses (albeit on a small scale) by stealing a gold lighter in the film's final frames, yet speciously excuses herself. To Price, the film proves that "the kinds of linear narrative in which Mamet works are far from monolithic or monologic" (56). A play-within-the-screenplay, in which Mike shows Ford the four basic steps of manipulation, confirms this. Through charisma, interpellation, investment, and finally exploitation, Mike demonstrates how he could have conned a Marine sergeant out of his money at a Western Union office on the principle that "everybody gets something out of every transaction" (37). Mike would have taken the money, while the soldier would have felt like a good man for helping a person in trouble. Significantly, Mike breaks off the con at the moment he strikes it home, as does Mamet in his *House of Games*, an idiosyncratic, almost didactic interpretation of the con game-principle. Whereas this genre traditionally relies on a clear, agonistic division between winner and loser (LaPalma 57), matters are here less straightforward. Mike steals Ford's money, but dies. Ford kills Mike through a well-orchestrated scam and later *smilingly* steals the lighter by feigning a question. The psychiatrist may well be an addict, then, or even a whore, but her traumatic experience with con men forces her to introspect. Being intelligent enough to realize that irrational extremes caused her misery, she learns to acknowledge her imperfections and act constructively upon them. In the words of Bobby Gould from Mamet's *Speed-the-*

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Plow (1988), which was his first play to premiere after the release of *House of Games*, Ford is now “a whore ... but a *secure* whore” (141, italics in the original). The dramatist’s provocation at the end of *House of Games* thus confronts the audience with the (re-)generative potential of drama as it stages deception, self-reflexivity, and heroism at the same time. Ford’s pragmatism is immoral, but the existential journey she has travelled celebrates her—and with her, once again, the audience’s—capacity for critical judgment.

In both *The Shawl* and *House of Games* an air of mystery resists narrative transparency. The pattern surrounding the self-reliant protagonist imposes humility upon the spectator while offering strategies “to outwit victimization” (Nadel 6). Mamet here reveals the charismatic mechanisms of deception, but in doing so again deceives his audience. Unlike the con men he dramatizes, we thus have the possibility of seeing the manipulation performed on the thematic, structural, and scenographic levels. Inspired by the basic tenets of theatrical performance, Mamet here accordingly repurposes a negatively connoted practice into a constructive metaphor that allows one to think trans-contextually. It is a call for a frame of assent which would integrate diversity, process morality, and stimulate reflexivity. ●

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Christophe Collard teaches in the Department of Theatre, Film, and Literary Theory at the University of Antwerp, where he also coordinates the Institute of Jewish Studies. He holds a PhD from the University of Brussels and is the author of the forthcoming monograph study *Artist on the Make: David Mamet's work Across Media and Genres*.