

57 QUOTATIONS



David Mamet

(1947-)

David Mamet is the major living American dramatist, known in particular for *American Buffalo* (1975), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), and *Oleanna* (1991). The uniquely versatile and prolific Mamet also wrote the screenplays for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), *The Verdict* (1982), and *Wag the Dog* (1997). In addition he is a religious scholar who has written, produced and directed TV shows and commercials, as well as writing an historical novel about a lynching and children's stories. *Oleanna* disturbed liberals by dramatizing the fascism of academic Feminists. More recently Mamet shocked them again by announcing "Why I Am No Longer a 'Brain-Dead Liberal'" in the *Village Voice* (2008).

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, 1960s counterculture, the avant-garde, equality, rejects liberalism, big government, reason vs utopianism, abortion, affirmative action, fairness, free enterprise, no longer "brain-dead," conservatism, America, academics, Postmodernism, Political Correctness, Hollywood, critic, drama, writing dramas, audience, human nature, women, advice, death:

YOUTH

I grew up in a tough neighborhood and we used to say you can get further with a kind word and a gun than just a kind word.

I hate vacations. There's nothing to do.

1960s COUNTERCULTURE

As a child of the '60s, I accepted as an article of faith that government is corrupt, that business is exploitive, and that people are generally good at heart.... I took the liberal view for many decades, but I believe I have changed my mind.

THE AVANT-GARDE

The avant-garde is to the left what jingoism is to the right. Both are a refuge in nonsense.

EQUALITY

No one enjoys being equal.

REJECTS LIBERALISM

I began to question what I actually thought and found that I do not think that people are basically good at heart; indeed, that view of human nature has both prompted and informed my writing for the last 40 years. I think that people, in circumstances of stress, can behave like swine, and that this, indeed, is not only a fit subject, but the only subject, of drama.

I examined my Liberalism and found it like an addiction to roulette. Here, though the odds are plain, and the certainty of loss apparent to anyone with a knowledge of arithmetic, the addict, failing time and again, is convinced he yet is graced with the power to contravene natural laws. The roulette addict, when he invariably comes to grief, does not examine either the nature of roulette, or of his delusion, but retires to develop a new system, and to scheme for more funds.

BIG GOVERNMENT

I am hard-pressed to see an instance where the intervention of the government led to much beyond sorrow.

What is Big Government but the Executive's cocaine dream, an activity devoted solely to jockeying for position, in which he may find license for malversation, and may take the company treasury and direct it toward those people who will support his continued incumbency.

REASON vs UTOPIANISM

The play...is...a disputation between reason and faith, or perhaps between the conservative (or tragic) view and the liberal (or perfectionist) view. The conservative president in the piece holds that people are each out to make a living, and the best way for government to facilitate that is to stay out of the way, as the inevitable abuses and failures of this system (free-market economics) are less than those of government intervention.

ABORTION

It is to a dramatist, which is to say, to an unfrocked psychoanalyst, stunning that that which has sustained the Left in my generation, its avatar, its prime issue, has been abortion. For, whether or not it is regarded as a woman's right, an unfortunate necessity, or murder, which is to say, irrespective of differing and legitimate political views, to enshrine it as the most important test of the Liberal, is, mythologically, an assertion to the ultimate right of a postreligious Paganism.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Not only can we not undo actions taken in haste and in fear (the Japanese internment), but those taken from the best reasons, but that have proved destructive (affirmative action); the essential mechanism of societal preservation is not inspiration, but restraint.

FAIRNESS

"Fairness" is not only a nonlegal but an antilegal process, for it deals not with universally applicable principles and structures, but with specific cases, responding to the perceived or proclaimed needs of individual claimants, and their desire for extralegal preference. And it could be said to substitute *fairness* (a determination which must always be subjective) for *justice* (the application of the legislated will of the electorate), is to enshrine greed, in this case, not for wealth, but for preference.

FREE ENTERPRISE

I began reading not only the economics of Thomas Sowell (our greatest contemporary philosopher) but Milton Friedman, Paul Johnson, and Shelby Steele, and a host of conservative writers, and found that I

agreed with them: a free-market understanding of the world meshes more perfectly with my experience than that idealistic vision I called liberalism.

NO LONGER “BRAIN-DEAD”

I found I had been—rather charmingly, I thought—referring to myself for years as “a brain-dead liberal,” and to NPR as “National Palestinian Radio.”

This is, to me, the synthesis of this worldview with which I now found myself disenchanted: that everything is always wrong.

John Maynard Keynes was twitted with changing his mind. He replied, “When the facts change, I change my opinion. What do you do, sir?”

CONSERVATISM

Don’t assume I’m dumb because I wear a suit and tie.

Do I speak as a member of the “privileged class”? If you will—but classes in the United States are mobile, not static, which is the Marxist view. That is: Immigrants came and continue to come here penniless and can (and do) become rich; the nerd makes a trillion dollars...and the individual may and probably will change status more than once within his lifetime.

AMERICA

I’d observed that lust, greed, envy, sloth, and their pals are giving the world a good run for its money, but that nonetheless, people in general seem to get from day to day; and that we in the United States get from day to day under rather wonderful and privileged circumstances—that we are not and never have been the villains that some of the world and some of our citizens make us out to be, but that we are a confection of normal (greedy, lustful, duplicitous, corrupt, inspired—in short, human) individuals living under a spectacularly effective compact called the Constitution, and lucky to get it.

For the Constitution, rather than suggesting that all behave in a godlike manner, recognizes that, to the contrary, people are swine and will take any opportunity to subvert any government in order to pursue what they consider to be their proper interests.

ACADEMICS

The greater the intellect, the more ease in its misdirection.

The poker player learns that sometimes both science and common sense are wrong, that...perhaps, one should never trust an expert, that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of by those with an academic bent.

One can read all one wants, and spend eternities in front of a blackboard with a tutor, but one is not going to learn to swim until one gets in the water.

The mind is a mill which can incessant turn, ‘til its mere operation focus the stress inward and the stones grind themselves to dust.

POSTMODERNISM

Every reiteration of the idea that nothing matters debases the human spirit.

In denying what we know, we are as a nation which cannot remember its dreams—like an unhappy person who cannot remember his dreams and so denies that he does dream, and denies that there are such things as dreams.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

We live in oppressive times. We have, as a nation, become our own thought police.

So you ask a guy what do you do for a living, it's the same thing as asking a guy, let me know what your politics are before I listen to you so I know whether or not you're part of my herd, in which case I can nod knowingly, or part of the other herd, in which case I can wish you dead.

We recipients of the boon of liberty have always been ready, when faced with discomfort, to discard any and all first principles of liberty, and, further, to indict those who do not freely join with us in happily arrogating those principles.

A dramatic experience concerned with the mundane may inform but it cannot release, and one concerned essentially with the aesthetic politics of its creators may divert or anger, but it cannot enlighten.

HOLLYWOOD

Show business has always been a depraved carnival.

Films have degenerated to their original operation as carnival amusement—they offer not drama but thrills.

Life in the movie business is like the beginning of a new love affair: it's full of surprises, and you're constantly getting fucked.

I always thought the real violence in Hollywood isn't what's on the screen. It's what you have to do to raise the money.

We Americans have always considered Hollywood, at best, a sinkhole of depraved venality. And, of course, it is. It is not a Protective Monastery of Aesthetic Truth. It is a place where everything is incredibly expensive.

The job of mass entertainment is to cajole, seduce and flatter consumers to let them know that what they thought was right is right, and that their tastes and their immediate gratification are of the utmost concern of the purveyor. The job of the artist, on the other hand, is to say, wait a second, to the contrary, everything that we have thought is wrong. Let's reexamine it.

CRITIC

My prize, in a stunning example of irony, was a year's subscription to *New York*, which rag...I considered an open running sore on the body of world literacy—this due to the presence in its pages of John Simon, whose stunning amalgam of superciliousness and savagery, over the years, was appreciated by that readership searching for an endorsement of proactive mediocrity.

DRAMA

It's only words...unless they're true.

We respond to a drama to that extent to which it corresponds to our dreamlife.

The subject of drama is The Lie. At the end of the drama THE TRUTH—which has been overlooked, disregarded, scorned, and denied—prevails. And that is how we know the Drama is done.

All drama is about lies. All drama is about something that's hidden. A drama starts because a situation becomes unbalanced by a lie. The lie may be something we tell each other or something we think about ourselves, but the lie imbalances a situation. If you're cheating on your wife the repression of that puts things out of balance; or if you're someone you think you're not, and you think you should be further ahead

in your job, that neurotic vision takes over your life and you're plagued by it until you're cleansed. At the end of the play the lie is revealed. The better the play the more surprising and inevitable the lie is. Aristotle told us this.

The basis of drama is...the struggle of the hero towards a specific goal at the end of which he realizes that what kept him from it was, in the lesser drama, civilization and, in the great drama, the discovery of something that he did not set out to discover but which can be seen retrospectively as inevitable. The example Aristotle uses, of course, is Oedipus.

WRITING DRAMAS

Get into the scene late, get out of the scene early.

A good film script should be able to do completely without dialogue.

Anyone can write five people trapped in a snowstorm. The question is how you get them into the snowstorm. It's hard to write a good play because it's hard to structure a plot. If you can think of it off the top of your head, so can the audience. To think of a plot that is, as Aristotle says, surprising and yet inevitable, is a lot, lot, lot of work.

Every scene should be able to answer three questions: Who wants what from whom? What happens if they don't get it? Why now?

In playwriting, you've got to be able to write dialogue. And if you write enough of it and let it flow enough, you'll probably come across something that will give you a key as to structure. I think the process of writing a play is working back and forth between the moment and the whole. The moment and the whole, the fluidity of the dialogue and the necessity of a strict construction. Letting one predominate for awhile and coming back are fixing it so that eventually what you do, like a pastry chef, is frost your mistakes, if you can.

Art is an expression of joy and awe. It is not an attempt to share one's virtues and accomplishments with the audience, but an act of selfless spirit.

AUDIENCE

When you come into the theater, you have to be willing to say, "We're all here to undergo a communion, to find out what the hell is going on in this world." If you're not willing to say that, what you get is entertainment instead of art, and poor entertainment at that.

HUMAN NATURE

We *all* hope. It's what keeps us alive.

When the gods would make us mad, they answer our prayers.

In a world we find terrifying, we ratify that which doesn't threaten us.

People may or may not say what they mean...but they always say something designed to get what they want.

WOMEN

In the meantime: (1) be direct; (2) remember that, being smarter than men, women respond to courtesy and kindness; (3) if you want to know what kind of a wife someone will make, observe her around her father and mother; (4) as to who gets out of the elevator first, I just can't help you.

ADVICE

Always tell the truth—it's the easiest thing to remember.

DEATH

All fears are one fear. Just the fear of death. And we accept it, then we are at peace.

