



Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama

By David Mamet

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Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama By David Mamet

The purpose of theater, like magic, like religion . . . is to inspire cleansing awe. What makes good drama? And why does drama matter in an age that is awash in information and entertainment? David Mamet, one of our greatest living playwrights, tackles these questions with bracing directness and aphoristic authority. He believes that the tendency to dramatize is essential to human nature, that we create drama out of everything from today's weather to next year's elections. But the highest expression of this drive remains the theater.

With a cultural range that encompasses Shakespeare, Brecht, and Ibsen, *Death of a Salesman* and *Bad Day at Black Rock*, Mamet shows us how to distinguish true drama from its false variants. He considers the impossibly difficult progression between one act and the next and the mysterious function of the soliloquy. The result, in *Three Uses of the Knife*, is an electrifying treatise on the playwright's art that is also a strikingly original work of moral and aesthetic philosophy.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Playwright David Mamet's three lectures at Columbia University are ostensibly about issues of dramatic structure, but as they unfold, and Mamet continually explores the relationship between dramatic structure and the lives we live, much broader concerns are revealed. Here, for example, is Mamet on political propaganda:

It is ... essential to the healthy political campaign that the issues be largely or perhaps totally symbolic--i.e., non-quantifiable. Peace With Honor, Communists in the State Department, Supply Side Economics, Recapture the Dream, Bring Back the Pride--these are the stuff of pageant. They are not social goals; they are, as Alfred Hitchcock told us, *the MacGuffin*.... The less specific the qualities of the MacGuffin are, the more interested the audience will be.... A loose abstraction allows audience members to project their own desires onto an essentially featureless goal.

Although occasionally academic, the overall tone of the lectures is consistent with Mamet's no-nonsense manner of speech. He has no time for obfuscation and little time for repetition, save when he must absolutely employ it for emphasis. He is passionate about good theater, and passionate about the truth. *3 Uses of the Knife* makes an excellent companion piece to his *True and False*, which addressed similar philosophical matters in the form of advice on the actor's craft.

From Library Journal

One of America's leading living playwrights has crafted three short essays beginning with the premise that it is "our nature to dramatize." The belief in the centrality of drama to our daily lives and the centrality of our daily lives to good drama is the recurrent theme of his ruminations here. While he disdains the current vogue for "problem plays," he avoids attacking any of his contemporaries or their works. And without offering a how-to guide for aspiring playwrights, he provides some interesting thoughts on the inevitable difficulty in creating a convincing second act. Known and respected for his ability to create hyperrealistic dialog, Mamet ultimately reveals the theoretical justification for the sort of drama he writes so well. The text reads a bit like a lecture and never quite convinces the reader that this is a fundamental redefinition of drama. Still, it will be compelling to students of theater and serves as a good companion to Mamet's advice to actors, *True and False* (LJ 10/1/97). Recommended for academic and large public libraries. ?Douglas McClemon, New York Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From [Booklist](#)

Mamet has written about drama's sociological and psychological implications before (*Writing in Restaurants* [1986], *Some Freaks* [1989]), but never as well as in these eight terse, elegant essays. He writes with thrilling simplicity and authority, discussing problems all working playwrights confront (What am I trying to achieve with this play? How come things always get balled up in the second act? Why are most problem plays ultimately unsatisfying?) and connecting his craft to large social issues (violence, censorship, the abuse of public office). Previous Mamet readers and those who know his work on stage and screen will recognize such themes and personal obsessions as the search for authenticity, the yearning for a moral center, and the search--some would say romanticized--for a very masculine kind of stoicism. This time, Mamet's beliefs seem less the wisecracks of a witty, sometimes hot-headed drinking buddy and more the calm, cool, carefully

measured meditations of a man passionate about the truth and determined to share his ideas as clearly and powerfully as possible. *Jack Helbig*

Users Review

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