

Univerzita Karlova v Praze – Filozofická fakulta

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**Myth, Ritual and Identity of the Postmodern Man in Selected Plays by  
Sam Shepard and David Mamet**

**Mytus, rituál a identita postmoderního člověka ve vybraných hrách  
Sama Sheparda a Davida Mameta**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Za podporu a podnětné připomínky při vypracovávání této práce bych chtěl poděkovat vedoucí práce Clare Wallace, dále pak profesoru Larsovi Sætre z Univerzity v Bergenu, který mi pomohl během mého pobytu v Bergenu jak s literaturou, tak s náhledem na problematiku, které se v práci věnuji a Fredovi Sætveitovi za jeho všestrannou podporu během mých návratů do Bergenu. Mimo to bych chtěl poděkovat přítelkyni Martině za to, že tuto práci po mě přečetla, za její pomoc i dobré rady, kamarádům, že trpělivě poslouchali, když jsem jim vykládal o jednotlivých problémech a v neposlední řadě rodičům za to, že mi drželi palce a věřili mi.

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## **Anotace**

Ve své práci jsem se zaměřil na otázku vztahu člověka v Americe v desetiletích po druhé světové válce nejen k vlastní identitě, k mýtům Divokého západu, ale i ke konzumní společnosti. Tyto aspekty jsem porovnal v dílech dvou amerických dramatiků Sama Sheparda a Davida Mameta, kteří se podobnými otázkami v 60. a 70. letech 20. století zabývali ve své tvorbě. V teoretické části jsem se zabýval rozvojem amerického divadla mimo Broadway. Psal jsem o třech významných divadelních souborech tohoto období, jakož i o rozdílech v jejich přístupu. Komparaci děl autorů jsem založil na teorii performance, jejímž hlavním představitelem je Richard Schechner a na teorii J. L. Austina, tzv. „performatives,“ to jest slov, která vyjadřují konání. V této kapitole jsem se též zabýval otázkami rituálů a mýtů v postmoderní společnosti, kde jsem vycházel především z díla Victora Turnera a Marie Maclean. Dvě hlavní kapitoly mé práce se věnují porovnání dvou her od každého z autorů právě s ohledem na to, jak Shepard a Mamet staví otázku rituálů a mýtů. Ty jsou v moderní době stále více považovány za nepostačující, zevšednělé až přímo zavádějící. Postavy v jejich hrách se tak z různých důvodů nedokáží vyrovnat se společností, jsou na jejím okraji a nemohou najít cestu zpět. Na základě porovnání děl jsem dospěl k závěru, že i když se po formální stránce hry obou autorů liší, jejich pozornost se soustředí na člověka (u těchto dvou autorů často na muže), který po období nadšení z konce války a napětí 60. let nedokáže sám před sebou určit, kým je. Hlavní rozdíl mezi autory z tohoto pohledu je v tom, že zatím co Shepardovy postavy jsou snílci neschopní fungovat, Mametovy postavy jsou kruté, ale vnitřně rozervané, a jejich tragédie spočívá v neochotě připustit si vlastní slabost a tedy v nemožnosti nápravy.

Klíčová slova: identita, rituál, moderní mýtus, Shepard, Mamet, Off-Off-Broadway

## **Summary**

In my thesis I focused on the matter of the relationship of Americans during the decades after World War II to their own identity, as well as to the myths of the West or consumer society. I wanted to compare these aspects on plays by Sam Shepard and David Mamet, two playwrights concerned with similar issues in 1960s and 1970s. In the theoretical part of the thesis I concentrated on the development of the American theater off Broadway. I described three significant theater groups of the era and the differences in their approach. I based the comparison of the plays on Richard Schechner's performance theory and J. L. Austin's theory of the so-called "performatives." Later I discussed the matters of rituals and myths in the postmodern society where I based my theory especially on Victor Turner's and Marie Maclean's work. The two main chapters are dealing with comparing two plays by each author with regard to the way Shepard and Mamet work with rituals and modern myths. Those are considered commonplace, insufficient, almost misleading in a modern society, and the plays' characters thus cannot cope with the society. They end up being on its outer edge and do not seem to be able to find the way back. As a result of the comparison of the plays based on the theoretical part I concluded that even though from the point of view of form the plays of the two authors differ, their interest lies in the individuals (in case of the two authors discussed here, men) who, after a time of enthusiasm after the War and tension of the 1960s cannot determine for themselves who they are. The main difference between the authors from this perspective is that while Shepard's characters are dreamers unable to function properly, Mamet's characters are cruel, but torn inside, and their tragedy is in their inability to admit their weakness and, conversely, in the impossibility of any remedy.

**Keywords:** identity, ritual, myth, Shepard, Mamet, Off-Off-Broadway

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# 1. New American Theatre Emerging

The cultural and political situation in the United States in the decades after World War II was full of paradoxes. America was waging war on several battlefronts – be it wars in Southeast Asia or the arms race in a world divided into East vs. West, or even on the home soil. If as a result of the war one dangerous totalitarian ideology was defeated, Communism remained a viable threat both to the country's political ambition and inner integrity. While the war united the whole nation, first the 1950s and then also 1960s brought about vigor to make changes in the society. The 1950s are often depicted as an era of prosperity in the U.S. when an intoxicating feeling from the victory of the democratic ideals was prevalent among the people. However, an escalating tension between the West and the East in the matters of foreign policy, ideology, as well as domestic issues caused anti-Communist hysteria in the U.S. which gradually infiltrated all spheres of the society. As Stephen J. Whitfield notes in *The Culture of the Cold War*,

[with] the source of the evil so elusive and so immune to risk-free retaliation, American culture was politicized. The values and perceptions, the forms of expressions, the symbolic patterns, the beliefs and myths that enabled Americans to make sense of reality - these constituents of culture were contaminated by an unseemly political interest in their roots and consequences. The struggle against domestic Communism encouraged an interpretation of the two enterprises of politics and culture, resulting in a philistine inspection of artistic works not for their content but for the *politique des auteurs*.<sup>1</sup>

As Whitfield notes further, paradoxically, in an effort to discover totalitarian ideas, the American government began to violate civil liberties and human rights, whether it involved

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996) 10.

employment or a theater play, Arthur Miller vs. HUAC<sup>2</sup> being one example. However, such attempts were more shattering than uniting and a society based on free thinking denied them.<sup>3</sup> It was a clumsy attempt to achieve a united nation that would be able to face new post-war ideological threats better and at the same time it was an effort to introduce a national identity that people had been drifting away from after a period with one of the most dramatic immigration waves in the history of the country. However, it was clear by 1960 that there is no single major, overwhelming culture that could apply to a country as complex as the U.S. and that there would probably never be one. As Matthew Roudané noted in his book *Drama after 1960*, one could say a lot of things about the USA of that time, but above all it was true that rather than United, one could speak of the DisUnited States of America.<sup>4</sup> Diversity became the idiosyncratic element of the American cultural background. It was reflected in all social spheres, including art and literature, and the theatrical practice was no exception.

For a long time before World War II, Broadway had been the gateway to theatre in America and many plays had to pass the acid test of the New York stage before they were introduced in theatres in other cities across the country. In the inter-war period, and partially in the 1950s as well, great playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee were still produced on Broadway and many of their plays premiered there. Those who failed there had little chance of getting staged in other theatres in the inland U.S. or on the West Coast. On the other hand, those that had been successful on Broadway, such as some plays by Beckett, had almost guaranteed success in theatres outside Broadway. However, since the society was polarized due to the Cold War and the Red Scare, it was more and more difficult to predict stage success, and in combination with increasing running costs, the pressure on the theatre producers increased as well. Therefore, as soon as in the 1950s,

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<sup>2</sup> House Committee on Un-American Activities, a bureau established to investigate suspicious, “un-American” behavior among the citizens. See for example Whitfield, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Whitfield, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew C. Roudané, *Drama Since 1960* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996) 3.



and especially in the groundbreaking 1960s, can we talk about the decline of Broadway as the gateway for plays to the U.S. It gradually became a stage lacking any efforts of innovativeness and experiments, pursuing solely box-office hits. Thus, Broadway left space for others to produce plays that are innovative, challenging and risky.

It was impossible to either predict or enforce a certain taste on the American public, since there was basically no unity of political and social opinions in the society. Both World War II and America's involvement in conflicts in Korea and Vietnam resulted in the disillusionment of the society, which started to question their own identity. Such identity crisis brought about a shift from society-wide problems depicted and criticized by the playwrights of the previous era, to the individual. Those who reacted in time to this development were especially new theatres and theatre companies in New York, taking advantage of the void left by Broadway's disinterest in new drama for fear of financial failure. These alternatives to Broadway, later known as Off- and Off-Off-Broadway respectively, offered contemporary dramatists a priceless opportunity to stage their original dramas without the financial risks and potentially career-crippling reviews of Broadway.

Sam Shepard and David Mamet, the two playwrights the following thesis is focused on, were amongst the most prominent playwrights who arose from the Off- and Off-Off-Broadway milieu. They both carried on with their theatrical experiments there and gradually they reached some of the most famous stages in America and Europe. Even though at first sight their early plays are rather different, focusing on various aspects of the modern American individual and society, I would like to show that, ultimately, their goal was quite similar: to discredit the feeling of a unified American identity that had emerged after World War II, to challenge the lethargy of the American people and to show the flaws of the mythic American dream and the false preconceptions people consider in their "pursuit of happiness." Although Shepard emphasizes the psychological struggle to grasp the changing character of the society after the 1960s and Mamet's focus lies with ruthlessness of the business America

and the changing social patterns coming after the 1970s, ultimately, their interest lies with the way (American) individual is coping with the new condition and the fact that the myths and rituals that used to help people tackle difficult situations have lost their power.

In their own ways, both Shepard and Mamet problematize personal identity and social position in relation to various phenomena that I intend to discuss in detail in the next chapter. These phenomena cover a large scale of influences both authors have considered in their careers. Among the most important is the relationship of the individual and society to the ritual and (cultural) performance as described by the anthropologists Victor Turner and Milton Singer, performance, theater performativity and interaction between characters, notions very important to both playwrights and originating from works of J. L. Austin, Marie Maclean and Richard Schechner. Additionally, there are other aspects of human society that need to be addressed: sexuality, the role of family, the past or myths being among those most prominent.

Since Sam Shepard was more involved in the Off-Off-Broadway movement in the 1960s and was an integral part of several theater companies and groups discussed in the following chapter, I would like to start the discussion with his work and the level of influence the new theater scene had on his writing in 1960s and 1970s. In the chapter dedicated to his idiosyncratic style of writing I will discuss two of his plays that represent his specific style of playwriting and working with theatrical images and space, *La Turista* and *Tooth of the Crime*. In that way I would like to show his perspective on the modern American's position in relation to the matter of identity and the tools he used to depict it. After that, I would like to compare his work with that of David Mamet in order to show how he sees the individual and his position in the modern society. Again, I will discuss plays that make use of the tension between the society and the individual and his disillusionment with the modern-day America, these being in my view primarily *Edmond* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Afterwards, it will be useful to compare the two playwrights and show the differences, and often quite surprisingly

similarities, in their ways to deal with the postmodern condition of fragmented reality and imagination in the historical context outlined here. Although commenting on strictly speaking related issues, either of the playwrights contributed to the modern American theater in a different way, employing what they considered the most articulate tools to depict their characters' struggles: music, language, myths, dreams, past (or rather lack of it) and identity.

## 2. Fragmented Identity, Myths and (Off-)Off-Broadway

### 2.1 The Emergence of an Alternative

As early as 1952 John Cage arranged a happening groundbreaking for the history of the American theatre of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the so-called “untitled event” at Black Mountain College.<sup>1</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte in her essay “Performance Art and Ritual” writes that “historical relevance of the ‘untitled event’ is founded on its discovery of the performative.”<sup>2</sup> A new shift in dynamics between the actors, performers and the spectators was first tried out. Focus changed from issues about characters and their actions or their motivations to the performance of actions proper, as Fischer-Lichte notes, “when the performers spoke, they either recited their own texts or they made it clear that they were reading from texts by other authors.”<sup>3</sup> When Stephen J. Bottoms talks about the ‘untitled event,’ or the ‘Theatre Piece,’ as he calls it, he claims that “the performance was an experiment with structured randomness, juxtaposing disparate elements so as to explore chance interrelationships between them.”<sup>4</sup> The audience did not look for a meaning for the motivation of the characters on stage. They were encouraged to let imagination, free associations and feelings the performance aroused overwhelm them. In the end,

the ‘untitled event’ dissolved the artefact into performance. Texts were recited, music was played, paintings were ‘painted over’ – the artefacts became the actions. Thus, the borders between the different arts shifted. Poetry, music, and the fine arts ceased to

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<sup>1</sup> Cage’s “untitled event” and its influence on later drama is considered in Erika Fischer-Lichte’s essay “Performance Art and Ritual: Bodies in Performance,” *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (London: Routledge, 2003) 228-30.

<sup>2</sup> Fischer-Lichte, 230.

<sup>3</sup> Fischer-Lichte, 233.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004) 32.

function merely as poetry, music, or fine arts – they were simultaneously realized as performance art. They all changed into theatre. [...] [T]he ‘untitled event’ not only blurred the borderlines between theatre and the other arts, but also those between theatre and other kinds of ‘cultural performance’.<sup>5</sup>

Cultural performance is a term coined by the American anthropologist Milton Singer in 1959. Such performances, according to Singer, included not only theatre, but concerts, weddings, religious festivals etc.<sup>6</sup> He proceeded from the general opinion among “Western scholars that culture is produced and manifested in its artefacts (texts and monuments), which [...] have been taken as the proper objects of study in the humanities.”<sup>7</sup> In similar fashion, Fischer-Lichte points out that already Dadaists and Futurists reacted against the rigidity of the cultural artifacts and preferred performance. However, Cage’s main contribution in this context was his turning away from the destructive and his showing that there are “new possibilities opening up not only for the artists but also for the audiences.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the later development of the theatre in America in 1960s and 1970s, with focus on the actor and less on psychology of the character, was more or less a consequence of Singer’s cultural performance and Cage’s “untitled event.” However, the reasons behind the great shift away from the traditional theatre were much more straightforward. Before the revolutionary 1960s, as noted in the previous chapter, Broadway was the main American stage and it determined whether the play would be a success or not, be it plays from America or Europe. C. W. E. Bigsby calls the then-Broadway the originator of drama, a place where playwrights as recent as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller produced premieres of their plays and other theaters served mainly as “try-outs.” Nevertheless, the pressure on plays to be successful on Broadway was rising, just like production costs, what resulted in a lack of will

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<sup>5</sup> Fischer-Lichte, 233.

<sup>6</sup> Marvin A. Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004) 13.

<sup>7</sup> Fischer-Lichte, 230.

<sup>8</sup> Fischer-Lichte, 231.

to risk producing unknown plays from up-and-coming playwrights. This situation gave an opportunity to theater companies outside Broadway and outside New York City proper. Such theaters usually worked as so-called "try-out houses" in order to test profitability of newer plays that would, if they passed the test, eventually move to Broadway. However, these theaters boomed especially in 1960s and early 1970s, after which their influence slowly waned, but by that time they have changed the layout of the American theater so drastically that there remained only a handful of playwrights who continued writing plays for Broadway.<sup>9</sup> New spaces gradually emerged, and writers could present their works there with low costs and almost no pressure from producers. After Actor's Equity approved of the new theater structure outside Broadway and allowed the new companies to produce plays, they came to be known under an umbrella name Off-Broadway for theatres with under 300 seats and a precisely restricted area where they could carry on with their business and, still later on, Off-Off-Broadway for theatre spaces with under 200 seats. Off-Broadway was approved as soon as 1950, while Off-Off-Broadway was not recognized before the end of 1950s.<sup>10</sup>

Off-Broadway offered what Broadway ignored out of desire for financial success and where it stagnated – new topics, a new perspective on the contemporary crisis in the society related to controversies like war in Southeast Asia or the witch hunts of “McCarthyism” in 1950s. New, successful playwrights began writing for Off-Broadway, and productions from local theaters received attention in newspapers and journals. However, as time passed, even Off-Broadway became costly and the number of produced plays plummeted. Quite often four out of five produced plays were revivals. Bottoms, who has written extensively on Sam Shepard, quotes in his history of Off-Off-Broadway called *Playing Underground* Michael Smith, an influential theatre critic and proponent of Off-Off-Broadway. He claims increasing

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<sup>9</sup> Bigsby mentions Inge as one of a few examples of a playwright who has been successful even after Off-Off-Broadway's rise to prominence. C.W.E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 155.

<sup>10</sup> Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 364.

rent costs, unions intervention, ticket prices, high production costs and turning to what he called “hit psychology” were the main reasons why “Off-Broadway’s happy days were over quicker than anyone expected [.]”<sup>11</sup> Stuart W. Little in his account of Off- and Off-Off-Broadway notes that “Off off-Broadway sought the purity of the simple theatrical partnership of author, director, and actor. [It] was like Circle in the Square in the days of its innocence, before it was discovered.”<sup>12</sup> Enthusiasts like Joe Cino and Ellen Stewart, who were open to producing plays of promising playwrights such as Terrence McNally, David Rabe, Lanford Wilson, later for example Tony Kushner, were instrumental in the rise of Off-Off-Broadway. Joe Cino was actually the first who came with the idea of creating a European-style coffee shop with productions for the guests, as Wendell C. Stone claims in his book on the Off-Off-Broadway period of prominence called *Caffe Cino: The Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway*:

Caffe Cino became one of the important cafe-theatres of the period. It was instrumental in launching and popularizing the off-off-Broadway theatre movement, in exploring new production styles, [...] and in promoting the careers of numerous performers, playwrights and directors. [...] It offered a safe space in which taking risk was encouraged, in which failure was acceptable though hardly encouraged, and in which friends supported each other in their challenge of social and theatrical traditions. [They] learned from the success or failure of their own experiments, as well as from watching experiments of other practitioners [...]<sup>13</sup>

Caffe Cino, and later La Mama Experimental Theatre Club and others were able to respond to the changes in the society. In combination with experimenting with the play-actor-audience dynamics and with the way in which the play affected the audience on the personal level, they were able to take the American theater over the crisis. Personal, national and cultural identity

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<sup>11</sup> Bottoms, *Playing Underground*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart W. Little, *Off-Broadway: The Prophetic Theater* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1972) 184.

<sup>13</sup> Wendell C. Stone, *Caffe Cino: The Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005) 1-5.

became more prominent than social critique and appeal to the humanity. Taking into consideration the variety of productions, playwrights and scenes – even if we consider only the difference between Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway – one cannot wonder the plays produced were so diverse, from largely experimental to seemingly traditional realistic plays.

## 2.2 The Three Theater Companies

The emergence of Off-Broadway and later Off-Off-Broadway is related first and foremost to three experimental companies from the period between 1949 and 1967. The first one is the Living Theatre around Judith Malina and Julian Beck. Bigsby notes that the Living Theatre “began by self-consciously celebrating modernism [...] admired for putting language under strain and thus provoking a new perception of the real.”<sup>14</sup> They gradually moved away from the poetic word and put emphasis on the performers who exposed, “often quite literally, a naked self, [stepped] out of role.”<sup>15</sup> However, some of their works, like the highly interactive *Paradise Now* from late 1960s, explored the power of rituals to liberate people from the status quo.<sup>16</sup> Their greatest advantage – emphasis on interaction, language poetry, the performer – contributed to what became of American theater after 1960s, but, at the same time, it was their weakest spot. The Living Theatre became gradually more and more political, especially after their return from Europe in 1968, and moved away from the author, in accordance with Artaud’s call for “ending of theater’s reliance on the playwright to create dramatic fictions.”<sup>17</sup>

Robert Schechner, the theatrical theorist and one of the founders of Performance Studies at New York University, founded The Performance Group in 1967. Similarly to the

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<sup>14</sup> Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 237.

<sup>15</sup> Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 244.

<sup>16</sup> See Bottoms, *Playing Underground*, 238.

<sup>17</sup> Bottoms, *Playing Underground*, 240.



Living Theatre, his interest lay in interaction with the audience and literary texts were of little interest to the Group. The actor was supposed to become accustomed to his character, to find a kind of harmony between his own and character's identity. At the same time they undermined the authority of the text, inserted various passages from other texts that were allowed "to infiltrate the action as theoretical role and personal identity were counterposed, [...] exposing the fictionality of both [...]"<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Schechner introduced a new perspective on the relation between the stage and audience in order to "heighten the awareness of the audience by surrounding it with action, forcing it to look at the stage experience with fresh eyes."<sup>19</sup> Schechner later left the group, which changed name to The Wooster Group managed by Elizabeth LeCompte and turned away from Schechner's original intention to focus on the ritualistic of theater towards deconstructing texts.<sup>20</sup>

The last significant theater group of the period, The Open Theatre, was created around Joseph Chaikin. Chaikin was regarded "as one of a select band of international 'guru' directors - along with the likes of Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski [...]"<sup>21</sup> He was first of all interested in the actor's position, and in theater becoming "more completely live than was possible in an art which turned on the reiteration of prescribed actions and words in the service of sociology or psychology of the individual."<sup>22</sup> As Roudané notices in *Drama Since 1960*, Chaikin's focus was on 'transformation,' which encouraged the performer to switch roles, sex, and context, sometimes in midsentence."<sup>23</sup> These exercises are then reflected in works of Shepard, for example in the Boy's role in *La Turista*, as I will show in the next chapter, but also in Mamet's *Edmond*.

Each of the newly created theater companies shared the diversion from Broadway and thus, effectively, from the American theater. With efforts to revolutionize the theater

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<sup>18</sup> Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 247-8.

<sup>19</sup> Little, 193.

<sup>20</sup> Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 249.

<sup>21</sup> Bottoms, *Playing Underground*, 169.

<sup>22</sup> Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 244.

<sup>23</sup> Roudané, 117.

dynamic, they managed to push theater forward and, at the same time, they were able to face successfully new media, such as the television. Right from their beginnings, they were a source of inspiration for American playwrights, who cooperated with them directly and wrote plays for them, or who worked with their ideas how to adjust the theater to new theories.

### **2.3 Off-(Off-)Broadway Experiments, Audience and the Performative**

In the next part, I intend to focus on the main schools of thought from the theater theory and anthropology that have fundamentally influenced playwrights after 1960s, because both Shepard and Mamet drew on experiments based on these theories. Shepard cooperated with Chaikin as well as with La Mama ETC and his Off-Off-Broadway experience played a significant role in his works. The matters of identity were important to him, as well as family, religious and social rituals, popular culture, the past, myths and ideas close to Chaikin's Open Theatre and Schechner's Group. He has implemented various popular culture images in his plays to disturb the expectations of the audience and challenge the sequence of associations such images can inspire.

Mamet wrote his first play during his studies at Goddard College and his success in local Chicago theatres "convinced him that he was a dramatist, rather than simply an actor who simply wrote on the side."<sup>24</sup> Within a couple of years he moved his plays to Off-Broadway and later, towards the end of 1970s, to Broadway, where *American Buffalo* was produced and "voted the best play of the year by the New York Drama Critics."<sup>25</sup> Mamet was inspired by the film environment where human identity is often just wordplay and, like with Shepard, ritual as an element of identity appears in numerous of his plays. Compared to Shepard, Mamet's plays are much more subtle in challenging the audience's imagination and

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<sup>24</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, *David Mamet* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985) 21.

<sup>25</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 21.

in playing with the American myths. Both authors have managed to take advantage of the new media of the 20th century and thus enhanced their own profile among the public, but their respective experience in New York also helped forming their theatrical expression, language and imagination.

All experiments on Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway were more or less tied to contemporary theatre theory focused on the role of the audience, on the actor's/character's identity as well as on the play's impact on onlookers' identity. Moreover, Victor Turner in his anthropological research proposed the theory of so-called "cultural performances," a form of secular rituals that are mirrored in plays and influence our senses. These theories have had a fundamental influence on both authors and, therefore, I want to discuss them in some detail here.

The British director Peter Brook in his series of lectures on drama introduced his notion of Holy Theatre, or The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible: "the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts."<sup>26</sup> Brook focused on the audience's perspective, their experiencing of the theatre and on the role of ritual in drama. Brook claims that we "have lost all sense of ritual and ceremony – whether it be connected with Christmas, birthdays or funerals – but the words [of the tradition] remain with us and old impulses stir in the marrow."<sup>27</sup> Theatre has tried to reintroduce rituals in our lives, but failed and left the audience refusing the idea of a holy stage. Brook also thought highly of silence, calling it a climax just like a climax of celebration. He is concerned that "higher" theatre does not mean more intense, cruel in Artaudian sense, but nicer, decent.<sup>28</sup> Brook therefore established a group he called Theatre of Cruelty as homage to Antonin Artaud and used it for trying out several of his theories, working with the actor, silences, and

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 42.

<sup>27</sup> Brook, 45-6.

<sup>28</sup> Brook, 47.

rituals, among others, with the ultimate question being whether “the invisible [can] be made visible through the performer’s presence.”<sup>29</sup>

When Shepard lived in England in early 1970s, he became acquainted with Peter Brook and his view of theater influenced Shepard in the way he approached writing from then on. Ellen Oumano notes in her book on Shepard that Brook’s influence “led him to a greater awareness, self-confidence, and depth of character, both in him and in his plays. Brook had read his plays and told Shepard he needed to think more about character.”<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, in Shepard’s later plays, such as his family trilogy, the characters are much more worked out, but one can see the difference already in *Tooth of the Crime*, where Hoss is a much more complex character than Kent in *La Turista*, who is first of all serving as a representative of the America Shepard criticizes. Mamet worked with Harold Pinter, who was both a great influence and an instrumental advisor for him. There is little surprise, then, that Mamet prefers his characters using a precise language with carefully chosen words and violence is a great part of his plays. What both Shepard and Mamet have in common is a strong drive in their dialogues, which are very often quite literally fights (like, for example, in Shepard’s *Tooth of Crime* and Mamet’s *Oleanna*). Words can hurt, make us reconsider our own identity and position in the society. To put it simply, words can *act* on their own as performatives and bring about more action from others, from those to whom the words are addressed.

The British philosopher and linguist J. L. Austin coined the term performative mainly in the linguistic context in *How To Do Things With Words*. Marie Maclean uses his theory when she talks about performatives in her book *Narrative as Performance*. According to her, performance “is not subjected to the criterion of truth or falsehood, but judged on success or failure.”<sup>31</sup> Maclean talks about the importance of interaction, and she goes even further

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<sup>29</sup> His experiments described in Brook, 49-52.

<sup>30</sup> Ellen Oumano, *Sam Shepard: The Life and Work of an American Dreamer* (London: Virgin, 1987) 99.

<sup>31</sup> Marie Maclean, *Narrative as Performance: The Baudelairean Experiment* (London: Routledge, 1988) xi. The British philosopher and linguist J.L. Austin coined the term performative and noted that they cannot be false or true, only happy or unhappy.

concerning the present interest of study, claiming that relationships within performance are “at once co-operation and a contest, an exercise in harmony and a mutual display of power.”<sup>32</sup> It is precisely because of the teller-hearer basis of performance that it is never the same.

Talking about narrative energy, Maclean is also concerned about the “delicate balance” between too much and too little information the teller tells in order to inspire hearer’s imagination and fantasy. He has to adapt to the hearer’s reactions, be it an audience or another character in the play, as well as to what type of audience one is telling the story to, more so in the drama proper.<sup>33</sup> A single story would most probably have a different meaning and tone in a completely masculine or feminine company, and “each time the telling will vary according to the relationships, the needs, the reactions, and the gender of teller and audience.”<sup>34</sup>

Maclean emphasizes the significance of interaction *in* saying something as opposed to the act *of* saying something.<sup>35</sup> Referring to Shoshana Felman, Maclean brings attention to what she calls “the second order” of speech act that would “operate in fictional discourse and everyday narratives.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, a performative like “I will tell you a story” actually creates the teller-hearer relationship, and in drama it overlaps both orders. The audience realizes they are watching a series of fictional events, while the characters in that play behave as in a natural discourse. Apart from possibilities of dramatic irony and humor this discrepancy can bring on the scene, it works well as a reflection on the society both in the Ibsenian sense of the large social conflicts as well as on the individual, which is a focus for many an American playwright after the 1950s.

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<sup>32</sup> Maclean, xii-xiii.

<sup>33</sup> Maclean, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Maclean, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Maclean, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Maclean, 24.

## 2.4 Ritual, Myth and Identity in Anthropology and Performance Theory

Maclean in her performance research discusses the origin of drama, but since interaction and its influence on the audience or readers is of higher importance to her, she fails to be more specific about “roots of drama in ritual and the relationship of both to myth.”<sup>37</sup> However, the notion of ritual, drama, myth and identity in the two playwrights’ works is of crucial importance to this thesis. Therefore, I will concentrate on this topic via Victor Turner’s and Richard Schechner’s work. Shepard uses primitive myths and rites in his play to depict the characters’ connection with the instinctive side in themselves, as well as popular myths and mythical figures like cowboys, frontiersmen, forefathers or rock stars to undermine people’s concepts of them. They are not ideal, faultless heroes from the movies or comic books, but splintered ideas, with only remnants of what they used to represent in the past. Mamet is interested in the business side of the modern society, and his plays include rituals related to business, money, power play or advantage over another person. The characters are trying to corner each other with their speech. It is not about the performative quality of the language. Very often it is quite the opposite, indeed – about the inability of words to transform into actions. However, the power play between the characters and the tension between success and failure as described by Maclean is one of the most basic elements in Mamet’s theater.

In his efforts to find a correlation between drama and ritual, the anthropologist Victor Turner employs Arnold van Gennep’s term “rite of passage”, which has, Turner notes, become almost exclusively connected to “life-crisis” rituals.<sup>38</sup> Van Gennep divided them into separation, transition and incorporation. Similar to Turner, the scope of interest here lies with the middle phase, the liminal phase, which bears in itself a change of identity and, as Turner

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<sup>37</sup> Maclean, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) 24.

points out, a “passage in space,” be it walking through a door or walking a long and exhausting journey. The liminal phase is very important for the nature of the ritual, because without it, Turner argues, the ritual “becomes indistinguishable from ‘ceremony,’ ‘formality’ or ‘*secular* ritual.’”<sup>39</sup> Wedding, funerals, or manhood initiation rituals have been demystified by modern society and the ritual aspects continue to live first of all in art forms like theater, opera, or dance. One difference between theater and ritual is that in theater one makes distinction between the performers and the audience, whereas rituals have no audience.

## 2.5 Richard Schechner and the Performance Studies

When discussing the relation between audience and performers in ritual and theater, Turner turns, not without reason, to Richard Schechner who, as already mentioned, was the founder of The Performance Group and Performance Studies at NYU. In his “handbook” to Performance Studies, Schechner goes through the main thoughts on which the performance theory is based. He focuses on what is performance, what is the relation between performance, ritual, and human identity, and what it means in both theater and everyday life.

According to Schechner, performance “exists only as actions, interactions, and relationships.”<sup>40</sup> He talks about Gennep’s and Turner’s theory of three stages of the ritual already mentioned earlier in this chapter, but he also elaborates on the position of the individual and the state of his or her identity during the ritual. He talks about the tension between acceptance and rebellion in initiation rituals that are a part of everyone’s lives, such as weddings or graduations.<sup>41</sup> Within the liminal phase itself, Schechner talks about two stages a person goes through. First, “they enter a time-place where they are not-this-not-that,

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<sup>39</sup> Turner, 80, original emphasis. The term secular ritual adopts Turner from Barbara Myerhoff and Sally Moore’s 1977 book *Secular Ritual*.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006) 24.

<sup>41</sup> Schechner, 23.

neither here nor there, in the midst of a journey from one social self to another. For the time being, they are literally *powerless* and often *identityless*.<sup>42</sup> Then they are ascribed their new identities, and after that it is up to them to accept them or fight them, doubtless a source of many a great topic for the theatre.

Apart from the connection between ritual and identity, Schechner highlights the relation between the society and the kinds of plays it likes. When he quotes Brian Sutton-Smith claiming that play and power are tightly connected, we get back to what Marie Maclean said of the teller-hearer cooperation/contest. People desire to display their superiority in a contest and relate thus to their peers through what Sutton-Smith called “common contestive identity.”<sup>43</sup> In *La Turista*, Kent was powerless against the Boy, while Mamet’s characters abuse their power regularly for their own ends.

It is still true that theater has a close connection with ritual, cultural performances and of course performatives, words carrying action. All these phenomena have a lot in common, among other things their mutual interest in human identity, either of the individual or the identity of the society one lives in, and in the manner it is formed, disturbed and developed. The social life is full of everyday rituals, as well as rituals of ceremony when a person is officially promoted to another position in the society and should generally command more respect from the others. However, rituals often lose their meaning, their power wanes and they are becoming merely empty forms, either due to the secularization of the society or due to loss of belief in the authority of rituals. Once our identity starts splitting up we no longer know who we are or what is our goal in life and the fight for survival begins, using any tools, plays for power or role-swapping in order to find ourselves. Shepard’s and Mamet’s characters are often alive only because of this struggle and their efforts to come on the top. In the following chapters, I will discuss how the respective playwrights make use of the various

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<sup>42</sup> Schechner, 58, emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> Schechner, 85.



theories that have raised interest in the second half of the 20th century and what, if any, similarities one could find in their treatment of the postmodern condition of a fragmented reality.

### 3. Identity Roles and Confused Men in *La Turista* and *The Tooth of Crime* by Sam Shepard

#### 3.1 Starting Off-Off-Broadway

When Shepard came to New York City at the beginning of the 1960s, the alternative theater scene was just forming. His participation in this part of the history of American theater allowed him to experiment with the formal features of his plays in a way that would not be acceptable in a regular theater burdened with financial and critical expectations as was the case of the contemporary Broadway scene. He had been developing his ideas idiosyncratically on Off-Off-Broadway – he experimented with jazz and rock to comment on the current situation in America where the man “has lost a stable sense of identity and of history.”<sup>1</sup> The myth of the American West, of the American dream, the family, his notorious fascination with (so overtly American) cowboys has also been a very important element in his work, but he also explored the ritual’s liminal phase, the phase of non-identity, as described by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner.<sup>2</sup> With people around him, be it his childhood friend Charles Mingus, his one-time lover Patti Smith, or his close friend Joseph Chaikin, Shepard tried out many situations that he would eventually use in his plays. In fact, of his early plays and theatrical texts, *Cowboys #2* was influenced by his experience with Mingus, *Cowboy Mouth* was co-written with Smith and *Savage/Love* and *Tongues* with Chaikin.<sup>3</sup> Especially in the second half of the 1960s and in the 1970s, Shepard was interested in role-playing and rituals

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<sup>1</sup> Megan Williams, “Nowhere Man and the Twentieth-Century Cowboy: Images of Identity and American History in Sam Shepard’s True West,” *Modern Drama* 40.1 (Spring 1997) 58.

<sup>2</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, see also Schechner, 58.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Ellen Oumano, *Sam Shepard: The Life and Work of an American Dreamer* (London: Virgin Books, 1987) 31 (Mingus), 89 (Smith) and 125 (Chaikin).

as a part of the search for identity and these tryouts helped him establish these concepts in his later dramatic work.

Although he cooperated with various Off-Off-Broadway theater companies and groups, especially with Chaikin's Open Theater and Ellen Stewart's La Mama ETC, and many of his early plays were premiered there, he did not agree with all of the performance theater features as presented by above all Richard Schechner. He particularly opposed Schechner's concept of environmental experiment with the stage and he expressed his discontent with The Performance Group's staging of *The Tooth of Crime*, stating that

there's a whole myth about environmental theater as it's being practiced now in New York. The myth is that in order for the audience to be actively participating in the event that they're watching, they have to be physically sloshed into something, which isn't true at all. An audience can sit in chairs and be watching something in front of them, and can be actively participating in the thing that's confronting them, you know. And it doesn't necessarily mean that if an audience walks into the building and people are swinging from the rafters and spaghetti's thrown all over them, or whatever the environment might be, that their participation in the play is going to be any closer. In fact it might very well be less so, because of the defenses that are put up as soon as that happens...<sup>4</sup>

Instead, Shepard has preferred to "throw" images at the audience, often very surreal and nonrealistic, multiplying the time or space on the stage. In this way, the audience is forced to deal with the images according to their own experience, just like in Cage's "untitled event."

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<sup>4</sup> Oumano, 97-8.

### 3.2 *La Turista*

This does not mean Shepard did not explore the possibilities of pushing audience-stage boundaries. His 1967 play *La Turista* is one example, where the Boy talks to the audience, lecturing them on primitive ritual practice, and the American couple, Salem and Kent, at one point or the other, go among the audience or walk on a platform, disturbing the traditional theatrical space. Rather than shocking the audience with the play's physicality, they serve to underline characters' perpetual feeling of disconnection from the world and their inability to define themselves in space.<sup>5</sup> *La Turista* was first performed at the Off-Broadway American Place Theater and thus, apart from being Shepard's first full-length play, his first play written outside the United States and at the same time the first one Shepard rewrote,<sup>6</sup> it also signified his success, moving away from Off-Off-Broadway venues based on the success of his earlier plays.

As the title of the play suggests, "the identity of the person – the tourist – and his affliction, that humbling diarrhea – 'la turista' – are signified by a single word."<sup>7</sup> As Bottoms pointed out, *La Turista* is not only developing "masculine identity crisis" that had already been the center of attention in plays such as *Cowboy Mouth* or *Rock Garden*, but it dramatizes "a more direct confrontation with the constricting and disorientating pressures of postmodern society."<sup>8</sup> The main characters face in the two acts two varieties of the same condition. Thus, the play does not continue chronologically, but rather thematically. This duality is reflecting the characters' switching of roles within the play. The plot is rather straightforward and, like

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<sup>5</sup> After all, Schechner wrote about producing *The Tooth of Crime* that one of the greatest fears Shepard had expressed was "that the play [would] become overphysicalized [as a result of Schechner's rehearsal methods] and the language will fall into the background." Bonnie Maranca, ed. *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard* (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981) 167.

<sup>6</sup> Many sources cite these qualities when talking about *La Turista*, see for example Doris Auerbach, *Sam Shepard, Arthur Kopit, and the Off Broadway Theater* (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1982) 16.

<sup>7</sup> Maranca, 67.

<sup>8</sup> Both quotations Stephen J. Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 57-8.

in Shepard's early plays, not much happens in terms of prosaic development. The two main characters, Kent and Salem, are on a vacation in Mexico and at the beginning of the play they have already been suffering from sunburn and dysentery. Their space, represented by a Mexican hotel room, is suddenly invaded by a boy of unspecified age who confronts Kent in his insecurity. In the second act they are in an American hotel room and this time it is only Kent who is ill, suffering from sleeping sickness. In both cases a local doctor with his son comes to treat Kent's condition, but he does not help Kent in either.

Kent is the focus of the identity crisis and in his interaction with the Boy in the first act and Doc in the second we see him gradually lose his self-confidence and with it his sense of self. Like many other Shepard's male characters, Kent admits that he went to Mexico "[to] relax and disappear."<sup>9</sup> Instead, he wound up with diarrhea, incapacitated and unable to enjoy the idealized vacation. He is trying to gain control over the situation by explaining the sunburn he and Salem are suffering from in "pseudoscientific words that de-familiarize the subject."<sup>10</sup> However, even if the explanation is plausible for Salem, it does not help establishing Kent as the alpha male when the Boy appears on the scene and challenges them.

If Kent at first still believes in his power and his right to treat the Boy as a poor third-world-country citizen, he is not able to make him leave or even reproach him for invading their space and mocking Kent's position as the competent male. The Boy enters in the middle of a sentence as Kent describes the three degrees of burns. Shepard thus juxtaposes Kent's dominance over Salem and his inability to dominate his "territory." While the talk about sunburn serves to let them forget about their current situation, a stranger in their room makes them very self-conscious. As someone lacking imagination, it is no surprise that Kent thinks of violence or money as the only way to get the Boy to leave them alone in their stupefied existence. However, the Boy's poverty is the only thing keeping Kent from dealing with the

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<sup>9</sup> Sam Shepard, *La Turista* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981) 259.

<sup>10</sup> Ron Mottram, *Inner Landscapes: The Theater of Sam Shepard* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984) 42.

situation: “If you weren’t poor, I’d kick you out on your ass.”<sup>11</sup> In his prejudiced mind, Kent has already figured the Boy out as a poor Mexican kid cunningly making faces in order to make the Americans feel guilty. In his mind, poverty is a given for these people, they were born poor and they will die poor: “Who’d want a poor kid?” Kent asks. Stability is worse than anything Kent can imagine, and at the beginning of the first act Kent believes he can be whoever he wants to be and that he can influence his fate: “If I was poor I’d kill myself. [...] I couldn’t take it all the time, everywhere I went, every time I got up, knowing I was no better off and no worse than yesterday. *Just the same all the time.* Just poor.”<sup>12</sup> By the time the first act ends, Kent will have tried out different roles, the top dog, the underdog, the cowboy, father, among the most prominent ones, and he realizes that he none of the roles commands respect, and what is worse, he cannot find the role that would define him in his own eyes, as well as in the eyes of the others.

The turning point from this perspective seems to be when the Boy spits in Kent’s face. He challenges Kent’s authority, his identity as the man in the room, his image. It is a fight for power, but here Shepard interchanged words with action to emphasize the gravity of the challenge Kent is up against. He, however, just screams in disgust and disbelief, unable to retaliate, and runs to the shower to cleanse himself. A cleaning ritual should make a person free of something bad that happened, the past, a bad day at work or an intense argument with a close person, but Kent is attacked by “dirty” dysentery before he could clean himself and it is paradoxically the disease that helps him get through. One shock kills another, but it is too much for his mind when he gets back and discovers that the Boy has replaced him in his bed, and he faints, declared “dead” by the Boy and beyond reach for the witch doctor that comes after Salem’s call. The Boy has eliminated all Kent’s possibilities. He is no man if he cannot defend his dignity, and when the Boy takes his bed, he takes his place as the father and

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<sup>11</sup> Shepard, *La Turista*, 261.

<sup>12</sup> Shepard, *La Turista*, 261, emphasis added.

husband as well, robs him of his manhood, so to say, regardless if Salem is his sister or lover, or both<sup>13</sup> – first of all, she is a woman.

### 3.3 Changing scenes

In the second act, Kent suffers from what Doc calls sleeping sickness, “an American disease this time – he doesn’t like to be awake.”<sup>14</sup> He goes in cycles between sleep and consciousness and Salem describes his sleep as absence, void: “You’ll see a person. Like you’re seeing me now, and I’m talking to you, and you’re talking to me, and gradually something happens to me while we’re talking, until I *disappear*.”<sup>15</sup> Like in the first act, Kent’s character is connected with disappearance and Doc tries to get him out of it “through enactment of symbolic rites.”<sup>16</sup> Pumped up with Benzedrine, in a state where he is “in a world unrelated to anything on stage,”<sup>17</sup> he walks in circles until he “starts to acquire a new vitality [...] He is suddenly capable of anything [.]” When in the end he jumps “cartoon-like through the back of the set,”<sup>18</sup> he is not only cured of his illness, but he finally manages to disappear. Only an empty frame is left of him, suggesting we can fill it with whomever or whatever we wish, just like Kent describes in a highly performative text, resembling the Open Theatre or The Performance Group’s rehearsals:<sup>19</sup>

He finds the fluid pounds through his legs and his waist. It catches hold and loosens up. It draws back and snaps out like a snake. He moves across the room in two steps and flattens out against the wall. He disappears and becomes the wall. He reappears on the opposite

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<sup>13</sup> Mottram, 48, assumes they are both lovers and siblings, however, while the latter is implied in Salem's story in the second act, there is no evidence in the text of the former.

<sup>14</sup> Maranca, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Shepard, *La Turista*, 281, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Bottoms, 56.

<sup>17</sup> Shepard, *La Turista*, 284.

<sup>18</sup> Both quotes Bottoms, 56.

<sup>19</sup> The similarity to The Open Theatre’s practice is mentioned by Bottoms, 56.

wall. He clings to the floor and slithers along. Underneath cages of rats and rabbits and monkeys and squirrels. He becomes a mouse and changes into a cobra and then back on the floor. Then onto the roof.<sup>20</sup>

Kent is confused how he should present himself. In the first act and after he has recuperated from the dysentery, Kent talks about the sterile environment in the U.S. where “[e]verything’s so clean and pure and immaculate up there that a man doesn’t even have a chance to build up his own immunity.” This could, according to Kent, lead to “[an] isolated land of purification,”<sup>21</sup> where inbreeding would become the only possibility. Thus, an initial advantage, a germ-free environment, would eventually have apocalyptic consequences. Viewed from a different perspective, Kent is accusing people in his home country that they do not want to get dirty, literally and figuratively, they want to remain sterile. Like Kent, a postmodern American does not feel any connection to the past. He will always want to be on the move, loathing stability as impotence. When we see Kent’s inability to react to the Boy’s spitting at him, or when he comes on stage dressed as a cowboy the Boy talks about at that moment, a boyhood hero, an American macho in full apparel but without pants, we see that the perpetual movement ahead means there is no substance left behind. He is left impotent, incompetent and laughable.

### **3.4 Shifting Roles**

If the Doc in the second act serves mainly as an antagonist to Kent’s desire to get free, especially considering their final word duel, the Boy in the first act is a much more complementary character to what Kent represents. When he first appears on the scene, quite out of the blue, the dynamics of the play shifts, with Kent and Salem opposing the Boy as “the

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<sup>20</sup> Shepard, *La Turista*, 295.

<sup>21</sup> Both quotes Shepard, *La Turista*, 267.



other” that they do not know. During the course of the first act, both Kent and Salem interact individually with the Boy and he is able to adjust his roles in order to challenge their own. The talk in the play is a performance of sorts in Maclean’s understanding, one where there is no truth or lie, only success or failure. In the “mutual display of power” between the characters, Kent had the upper hand over Salem, but the Boy takes the advantage away from him. He is more capable of adjusting to the circumstances, because he comes from an unsanitary environment and has built up his immunity.

Bottoms compares the Boy to the mythic trickster figure who is “immune to the wild germs of Mexico, and is magically able to speak perfect English, to communicate on a disconnected telephone, and to make rude gestures at the audience.”<sup>22</sup> Trickster, according to Bottoms, is a character-type common to mythologies worldwide, representing “the creative exuberance of male childhood.” A trickster may not be a distinct, rounded character, but he is inclined “toward anarchic freedom.”<sup>23</sup> Although here is Bottoms talking about characters in Shepard’s earlier plays, like *Cowboys #2* or *Red Cross*, the Boy in *La Turista* shares their mischievousness and ability to change shapes of his own role. At the same time, Bottoms claims that by submitting to Salem as the mother figure, who in turn wants to sell him, or take him back to the U.S. as a servant, the Boy has become an example that “[t]ricksterism [...] cannot lead to independent identity.”<sup>24</sup>

When Philip Auslander wrote about Shepard’s *Angel City* in his essay “Postmodernism and performance” that “Shepard’s concept of character [...] certainly seems to evoke the idea of the fractured, postmodern self [and] the nature of postmodern subjectivity,”<sup>25</sup> the same applies to the Boy in *La Turista*. He lacks a name, because his identity is less than the sum of its parts. He is a representative of the postmodern man

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<sup>22</sup> Bottoms, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Bottoms, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Bottoms, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Auslander, “Postmodernism and performance,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Steven Connor, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 104.

applying numerous roles in order to cover his inner emptiness, in line with the questions Elinor Fuchs asked in regard to Des McAnuff's *Leave It to Beaver Is Dead*: "What is a person? Can one 'have' an identity, 'own' one [or] does identity consist of continuously changing personae with no inherent self?"<sup>26</sup> It is the old order against the new, similar to the fight between Kent and the Boy, or, as it will be shown later on, similar to the life-and-death fight Hoss and Crow act out in *The Tooth of Crime*. In all three cases, the "old paradigm collapses in unequal contest with a rising [...] power practicing a multiform self and its new ways of improvisation and masquerade"<sup>27</sup> against which the characters representing the established order have no tools to survive. Their identity has been settled in their past and collapses under challenge from the representatives of the fragmented world where the substance to one's self is a burden preventing them from reaching their potential.

When discussing the ending of the first act, Bottoms admits that the Boy is presented with a hope for an alternative: to leave again "to find true freedom and independence."<sup>28</sup> He would apparently, according to his own words, meet his father, who is thus set as a contrast to Kent's failure to become the father figure for the Boy. His "real" father (how much real he is is left unknown, we have to take the Boy's word for it) initiates the trickster Boy into manhood, a definite role as compared to his dodgy personality from the initial encounter with the couple. The Doc from the second act, on the other hand, could be considered as a father figure to Kent, but his effect on the main protagonist is much more adverse. Not only does he not reassure Kent in who he is, or who he could be if only he wanted to; their confrontation drives Kent away running.

The Boy has tried numerous roles in the short time-span after he comes on stage. He started as a strange little boy beggar from the point of view of the two Americans, but in due

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<sup>26</sup> Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 6.

<sup>27</sup> Fuchs, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Bottoms. 55.

course he was a son, a servant, a slave, a tourist guide and an anthropologist, to name the most striking shifts. The Boy's role-play might be successful in swaying Kent out of his comfort zone, and effective in dealing with Salem's mother-figure dominance, however, it is not until his encounter with a true representative of manhood, in his eyes at least, his own father, that the Boy starts to be comfortable with who he is. When he tells Salem that it is "better [to be naked] than weighted down with extra junk you don't need,"<sup>29</sup> he mirrors Shepard's notion of "blank" being better than shattered parts.<sup>30</sup> If there is too much of everything in a person, he or she will never be able to become a stable person, whereas if they start with a clean sheet, they can build up anything they dream of.

When in *La Turista* Kent is first challenged by the Boy talking and presenting reversal of the notion of self-identity, and then treated by a native witch-doctor in the first act and a mysterious American doctor dressed in Civil war clothes, Tucker suggests that "Shepard is appealing to the mythic and subconscious to provide some way out of the morass into which his deracinated, blanched characters have fallen."<sup>31</sup> Kent has to go through the liminal phase of the manhood initiation ritual in order to solve his identity crisis, to become clean, "identityless" as Schechner calls it, and acquire a fresh identity. Although faltering initially and failing in the Mexican act of the play, Kent manages to "talk" his way out vis-a-vis the Doc, he escapes, disappears, leaving a blank cutout behind that can be filled with anything. If blank is better than shattered, useless parts, Kent seems to have taken the hint.

### **3.5 *The Tooth of Crime***

Shepard spent the beginning of the 1970s in self-inflicted exile in England, where he moved in order to fulfill his dream of becoming a rock star. During his stay in England he

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<sup>29</sup> Shepard, *La Turista*, 275.

<sup>30</sup> See also my discussion of *The Tooth of Crime*.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Tucker, *Sam Shepard* (New York: Continuum, 1992) 55.

wrote several plays as well, with *The Tooth of Crime* coming in 1971. As he has been often quoted, “[i]t wasn’t until I came to England [...] that I found out what it means to be American. Nothing really makes sense when you’re there, but the more distant you are from it, the more the implications of what you grew up with start to emerge.”<sup>32</sup> With an ocean creating a gap between him and the U.S., Shepard was able to look at the myth of the American male in more detail and he felt “a heightened sense of the underlying violence of American society [which] in *The Tooth of Crime* [...] took on a particularly virulent form.”<sup>33</sup>

In *Tooth* there is one character struggling to rediscover his lost sense of self. Space is important, creating at the same time distance and a feeling of claustrophobia. The main male character was given an equal antagonist, creating a different play dynamics, setting side by side two men with different attitudes towards the matter of man’s connection to the past, one’s identity and the surroundings one lives in. Shepard combines the myth of the Western frontier with a vague future world ruled by the Keepers of the Game only a handful of the chosen ones participate in. The old myth of a top shot faced off with an up-and-coming new hero fits not only the mythology of the American West, but also the contemporary rock music scene, creating a unique juxtaposition of the two worlds.<sup>34</sup> Thus Hoss, the established top shot, who believes in “the idea of an essential self existing beneath the unstable, pressurized social persona,” has to face a new rival, Crow, a freelance killer representing the “sense that identity is no more than a fragmented composite of surface images.”<sup>35</sup> Mottram adds that Crow “as an archetype [...] is as old as myth itself. He is Cain hating Abel and the aspirant to the office of priest/king who kills his predecessor in the darkness of the primeval forest.”<sup>36</sup>

If in *La Turista* Shepard squares off the civilized America with a conceivably uncivilized Mexico, in *Tooth* the suspense is between the old (Hoss) and the new order

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<sup>32</sup> Mottram, 102.

<sup>33</sup> Mottram, 102.

<sup>34</sup> The connection between the frontier myth of the American West and the contemporary rock scene has been suggested, among others, by Tucker, 89 and Bottoms, 102.

<sup>35</sup> Both quotes Bottoms, 111.

<sup>36</sup> Mottram, 102.

(Crow). Hoss expresses his fears at the beginning, explaining his uneasiness his crew cannot understand: “They’ve got time on their side. Can’t you see that. The youth’s goin’ to ’em. The kids are flocking to Gypsy Kills. It’s a market opening up, Jack. I got a feeling. I know they’re on their way in and we’re going out. We’re getting old, Jack.”<sup>37</sup> Hoss is facing an identity crisis like never before, questioning everything he has achieved as unimportant, because instead of freedom he has become a part of the system. He has become an institution, or industry, a prisoner of his own success, as Mottram<sup>38</sup> has pointed out. Now he has management and charts to tell him when to go for a kill and what to do in contrast to the old times when he was “a mad dog,”<sup>39</sup> roaming free without any rules. He is missing the feeling of power in both his action and words that would render his performance both believable and intimidating. By now he has gotten used to the loss of control over his own life, but suddenly Hoss craves the feeling of deciding on his own how to react and how to fight. He takes it out in a duel his management discourages him from, and it is only because he is misunderstood as an anachronism by both his opponent and the allegedly neutral referee that he loses in the end.

After Hoss learns that Gypsy Killers are rising, he becomes even more restless, realizing that his bad premonition might come true after all. He fears the Keepers will not protect him, that the new, ferocious gypsies would bypass the rules just like his enemy Mojo Root Force did when he took Las Vegas Hoss had marked. Although Hoss was thus tricked out of a mark, he cannot do anything about it, because as far as the Game is concerned, nothing happened. The system he has been defending his whole career turned against him, triggering his spiral of doubting that inevitably leads to confusion about his position in the play’s dreary world. He hopes for a distraction to take his thoughts away: “I’m just getting hungry that’s all. I need a kill. I haven’t had a kill for months now. You know what that’s like. I gotta kill. It’s my whole life. If I don’t kill I get crazy. I start eating at myself. It’s not

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<sup>37</sup> Sam Shepard, *The Tooth of the Crime* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981) 213.

<sup>38</sup> Mottram, 104-5.

<sup>39</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 209.

good. I was born to kill.” He is stopped by the management, stating a lasting success in the game is more important than “an interplanetary flash,”<sup>40</sup> but Hoss’s idea of a star marker, a “cold killer” as his Pa used to call it, is different. A real killer goes “against the code. That’s what they used to do. The big ones. Dylan, Jagger, Townsend. All them cats broke codes. Time can’t change that.”<sup>41</sup> In order to achieve immortality, they all did the unexpected, defying the current rules. Feeling the inevitable downfall, he wants to get that “fuckin’ gold record,”<sup>42</sup> even if it would mean the end of his career.

Although the times changed rapidly from when he was a “complete beast of nature”<sup>43</sup> molded and shaped by his current crew, Hoss believes that he can turn it around and tear away from his dead-end position. He believes because he has to, there is nothing left in the game for him if he wants to be remembered, although he is considered suicidal by his peers. Gradually, even his driver Cheyenne defies going against the game, citing his love for the game, concern about their reputation and desire for gold as strong incentives. Hoss scorns him in what is probably his most poignant critique of his own current position and at the same time a wonderful piece of self-mocking irony by Shepard, considering the status he has gained by this time:

I’m surrounded by assholes! Can’t you see what’s happened to us. We ain’t Markers no more. We ain’t even Rockers. We’re punk chumps cowering under the Keepers and the Refs and the critics and the public eye. We ain’t free no more! Goddamnit! We ain’t flyin’ in the eye of contempt. We’ve become respectable and safe. Soft, mushy chewable ass lickers. What’s happened to our killer heart. What’s happened to our blind fucking courage! [...] We were warriors once.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> both quotes Shepard, *Tooth*, 208.

<sup>41</sup> both quotes Shepard, *Tooth*, 209.

<sup>42</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 208.

<sup>43</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 209.

<sup>44</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 217.

Success breeds more expectations, much more pressure to keep the run going, and that makes it harder to stay true to the original concept. That is what happened to the Off-Broadway scene in the 1960s and Hoss feels he has sold out as well. He started out as a rock star, a gangster killer, even a drug addict, and not the least of as the mythical American cowboy living on the edge. He must admit, though, if in his youth he was “kickin’ shit [...] Hard and fast,” now he is “[i]mpotent. Can’t strike a kill unless the charts are right. Stuck in my image.”<sup>45</sup> He has to keep appearances as the top dog in the game and cannot afford to express himself freely. Gradually he is realizing that there is no good way out of this predicament, because the final fight he is preparing for will either destroy him or confirm him as the king of the game he has begun to loathe and he is “[j]ust tired. Just a little tired.”<sup>46</sup>

### **3.7 Crow, Identity and Role Play**

Crow appears only in the second act, but his presence is felt strongly already before his climactic struggle with Hoss. He is the embodiment of the threatening young unattached rebel whose presence puts Hoss’s identity crisis onto an inevitable crash course. As a Gypsy Killer, Crow has “no allegiance to humanity, no ties to a family.”<sup>47</sup> He is merciless on his quest to reach the top, but his very rootlessness will prevent him from living through Hoss’s destiny. He will never become imprisoned by the game, because he lives outside the rules, just like the rock legends Hoss mentions. Hoss laments lack of self in Becky, lack of “something to fall back on in a moment of doubt, or terror or even surprise,”<sup>48</sup> but Crow does not need his identity to be based on something like history or others’ perception of him. He does not want to root it down, because then he would be “stuck” like Hoss.

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<sup>45</sup> both quotes Shepard, *Tooth*, 226.

<sup>46</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 228.

<sup>47</sup> Tucker, 91.

<sup>48</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 227.

If Hoss is the representative of the old West myth, the ultimate cowboy who is essentially good and who does not hesitate to use whatever means to reach his ends, Crow is definitely the villain in the Western dialectics. But neither of them is a flat character, purely good or bad. Hoss is a drug addict who kills for prestige, for the excitement and his record. Crow is cheeky and over-confident at the beginning, but he gets nervous in the course of the duel as well, when Hoss takes him to uncertain grounds. He is a relentless enemy, but he also tries to understand Hoss's position, even if also for his own ends - to make sure what not to do. Shepard himself made clear of his intentions, when he claimed that Crow is "a totally lethal human with no way or reason for tracing how he got that way ... He spit words that became his weapons ... He speaks in an unheard-of tongue. He needed a victim, so I gave him one. He devoured him just like he was supposed to."<sup>49</sup> Here Shepard sets the whole dynamics of the play in reverse. Hoss is only a sidekick to Crow's rise to power, the old and established is replaced by new and aggressive, giving the play a new dimension, that of a rebel fight against the establishment and purely from the point of view of the performative, Crow is successful.

Hoss and Crow are both "mouthers – rock singers, poet-commentators of their time," and thus choosing a figurative "word-fight" to the death instead of guns or shivs is understandable. The duel is the definite climax of *Tooth* and their respective frames of mind are neatly reflected in the language they use. Hoss is nervous, realizing the make-it-or-break-it nature of the contest, procrastinating in an effort to put Crow off. He admits Crow takes "lotta' energy from a distance,"<sup>50</sup> and when Crow says that they both bow to bigger fields, he recognizes the power of the game. It is represented by the referee Hoss invites to make the calls, and when he shoots him "enraged at the system he has supported,"<sup>51</sup> they both symbolically move outside of the game, to a place where Crow is more adapted and has the

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<sup>49</sup> Mottram, 102.

<sup>50</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 229.

<sup>51</sup> Tucker, 92.



upper hand over Hoss. In his final song-monologue, Crow describes his dilemma about the power the game has over him as well as about his unwillingness to change the way he looks at himself: “If I’m a fool then keep me blind/I’d rather feel my way/If I’m a tool for a bigger game/You better get down – you better get down and pray.”<sup>52</sup> Crow, indeed, is more feeling his way than looking where he is going or where he came from: “I believe in my mask – the man I made is me/and I believe in my dance – And my destiny.”<sup>53</sup> The words come out of him as a machine-gun fire and Hoss is left incapacitated for long periods of the duel, not coping with Crow’s pace and novelty. The past or future are not interesting, his mask is on.

The only time Crow loses control over the duel is when Hoss pulls a history lesson in the origins of rock on him. That is the only time Hoss earns a bit of breathing room, in sports terminology, lecturing Crow on King Oliver, Little Brother Montgomery, Ma Rainey, Blind Lemon Jefferson. When he concludes with “[y]ou a punk chump with a sequin nose and you’ll need more’n a Les Paul Gibson to bring you home,” he is telling Crow he needs more than just an instrument to dominate. An instrument is nothing more than a tool that cannot be used without putting your heart and the legacy of those from the past into it. But Crow disagrees: “I got no guilt to conjure! Fence me with the present.”<sup>54</sup> Crow believes Hoss is still caught up in the past and this might actually be the reason of his failure. In fact, once he overcomes Hoss, he wants to dispose of everything connected to the past, burning everything, letting his driver Cheyenne go and taking over Hoss’s groupie Becky.

Crow does not change his “persona” during the fight, because he has already found the “mask” that works for him. That does not mean he cannot play different roles according to what he needs, as he showed while waiting for Hoss right before the fight:

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<sup>52</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 253.

<sup>53</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 234.

<sup>54</sup> both quotes Shepard, *Tooth*, 241.

Crow seeks to strip away the pretense of uniqueness on which Hoss grounds himself, trying first to absorb and possess his walk, and then, in round one of the language battle, violently appropriating the rhythm and jargon of Hoss's home territory of '50s-style rock and roll, and turning them against him."<sup>55</sup>

Hoss, on the other hand, needs to try out whatever he has in order to counteract Crow's confidence and immunity against the historical past. He has to fight it out, because, as Bottoms points out, the play (and the Game of Hoss's and Crow's world), "in effect, presents a bleak metaphor for the postmodern condition: there is not even a tenuous hope of transcending or escaping the all-pervasive system."<sup>56</sup> If one accepts this comparison, Crow can be considered the more successful because he "has been seen as the embodiment of postmodern America: the mask without a face, the speaker of a language that has no roots and no meaning beyond its pure intensity of style."<sup>57</sup> He shows his detachment from the historical past by making up an embarrassing story about Hoss's childhood, effectively winning Round One, although Hoss complains to the referee that "[h]e was pickin' on past that ain't even there."<sup>58</sup>

As Bottoms says, "Crow's lesson is that [Hoss] must dispense with his personal, centered approach, and effectively murder his own sense of self: 'Start with a clean screen. Are you blank now?'" It works well for Crow, and he counter-attacks Hoss's "ancient delta blues singer"<sup>59</sup> with Rod Stewart and Jerry Lee Lewis, real rockers that changed the face of the game, so to say. This is reflected also in images Shepard so shrewdly sets next to each other. The bell and the way the duel goes on clearly points to a boxing match, but Shepard makes the point of saying that the referee is "dressed just like an N.B.A. ref"<sup>60</sup> The rules are

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<sup>55</sup> Bottoms, 112.

<sup>56</sup> Bottoms, 106.

<sup>57</sup> David J. DeRose, *Sam Shepard* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992) 55.

<sup>58</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 239.

<sup>59</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 240.

<sup>60</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 235.

changing and Hoss has failed to keep up. The whole game has moved on, it has transformed beyond recognition, and thus his greatest success in the fight is rewarded with a mere “draw” because the referee “can’t make heads or tails outa” Hoss’s lesson in personal approach. When Hoss kills the referee, his desperate effort to return the things the way they were ends and he accepts the loss.

### 3.8 The Blank vs. The Shattered

The battle of words between Hoss and Crow is “Shepard’s most explicit expression of [...] speech as power performance” where “words are used as weapons.”<sup>61</sup> Again, getting back to Maclean, the audience can feel the word-battle as a bragging contest, as a play for power. Words here make difference, and not only words, but the way they are said, giving the momentum to the teller. The teller-hearer relationship changes throughout the fight, each of the characters trying to get the attention of the other in order to steer the action. Hoss lost the battle on points and defied the game itself by killing the referee, but before the battle, in the pre-game square-up, Hoss took some good shots and for a while he had Crow swaying. When Hoss switches into “a kind of Cowboy-Western image,”<sup>62</sup> Crow “is getting nervous. He feels he’s losing the match. He tries to force himself into the walk. He chews more desperately and twirls the chain faster.”<sup>63</sup> By the time Hoss gets back to his style, “not realizing his advantage,”<sup>64</sup> Crow “is into Hoss’s walk [...] and does it perfectly.”<sup>65</sup> While Hoss is trying out different identities to gather courage to face Crow in a fight, Crow takes away his walk, a part of Hoss’s image. Apart from Round Two, where Hoss tries to restore his credibility by

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<sup>61</sup> Bottoms, 108-9.

<sup>62</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 232.

<sup>63</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 233.

<sup>64</sup> Mottram, 106.

<sup>65</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 233.

making himself a part of the history, Hoss does not recover from the disruption of his image of himself.

Hoss loses his battle because he does not realize soon enough that “the past is not a set of concrete facts, but a conceptual history which can be rewritten at will by whomever has the power to do so [and] reality itself is a reinventable fiction.”<sup>66</sup> His “machismo” is taken away from him.<sup>67</sup> He also loses because Crow has undermined his claims to originality, leaving him “naked” to face the fact that he is no different from Crow: “Hoss’s derision [that Crow lacks roots] is hollow because he himself has no more authentic roots than Crow: the cowboy and the Delta Blues character are simply poses he has put on [...] Significantly, it is by mercilessly ridiculing Hoss’s claims of originality that Crow finally achieves victory in the language battle.”<sup>68</sup> If Hoss got caught in the past, it was not the real historical past, but the mythical, idealized past where cowboys roamed the open space, “just livin’ their life”<sup>69</sup> and where the Delta Blues singers were carefree musicians not facing the everyday struggle of racial abuse in the America of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After his loss, Hoss tries to learn from Crow how to survive in the Game, but very soon he realizes that he cannot become anyone else, like he could not use anyone else’s identity in the fight. It would just be another copy of someone else. He sees only one answer, and shoots himself in the mouth, hoping for “[t]he mark of the lifetime. A true gesture that won’t never cheat on itself ’cause it’s the last of its kind. It can’t be taught or copied or stolen or sold. It’s mine. An original. It’s my life and my death in one clean shot.”<sup>70</sup> Ironically, as Bottoms pointed out, although Crow hailed Hoss’s suicide as a “genius mark,” it was no more

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<sup>66</sup> Bottoms, 109.

<sup>67</sup> Marranta, 163.

<sup>68</sup> Bottoms, 114.

<sup>69</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 221.

<sup>70</sup> Shepard, *Tooth*, 251.

original than his other personae, and most probably even his walk: “His decision to die violently is as derivative as everything else about his character [.]”<sup>71</sup>

For Hoss, the battle was a ritual to become a better, new self. Had he succeeded, his doubts would disappear and he would become the top marker with nobody challenging his title. However, rituals have been losing power in the gradually secularized world<sup>72</sup> and Hoss’s inability to win with a swift turn to the mythical past of the country seems to confirm this. Although Crow is the representative of the new order, arguably the one even more detached from the mythical, at the same time he is not burdened by any allegiance, he is like a steam roll using the mask he has created and he believes in for his identity. When Crow takes over after Hoss’s suicide, he decides immediately to burn everything that was Hoss’s. In a ritual of fire, he tries to leave Hoss and what he represents, his lack of originality and his failed personae behind and enter the “liminal phase” as Turner calls it, which represents the transition. He wants to become identityless, “not-this-not-that,”<sup>73</sup> detach himself completely from everything in order to become a new self. He was a rootless Gypsy marker, but after the contact with Hoss he needs to purify himself and become the top dog Hoss had ceased to be, if he had ever been one.

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<sup>71</sup> Bottoms, 115.

<sup>72</sup> Turner, 86.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006) 58.

### 3.9 Modern Myths in a More Traditional Theater

Shepard has cooperated with several groups within Off-Off-Broadway that provided him with ideal training grounds for his theater. Among others, his close friend Joseph Chaikin helped Shepard develop his concept of role-play as a part of one's identity, or a way of coping with crisis thereof. He has written plays with this in mind, such as *Cowboy Mouth*, a play "full of unconnected role-playing, reality-inventing games, memory monologues, and so forth."<sup>74</sup> These experiments helped Shepard find a new use for the theatrical space and time on a different level: "[S]pace is emotional rather than physical [and] time is immediate rather than sequential." [original emphasis]<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, he rejected Schechner's concept of theatrical space that he experimented with at the time. Clearly, Shepard's interests lay in the characters' struggle and their language, however physical the plays might have become (for example the overt physicality of *Fool for Love*), challenging audience with their own imagination rather than in Schechner's more direct way.

A few years after writing *Tooth*, Shepard moved back to the United States, creating a partnership with San Francisco's Magic Theatre. In this period he wrote some of his most popular plays, such as his family trilogy (*Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979, and *True West*), and *Fool for Love*. He has continued to explore his characters' identity, concentrating on male characters, with *Fool for Love* one of a few exceptions, depicting a rather complex female character in May. After his plays started to catch the attention of the critics and moved from the peripheries to Broadway, they became more approachable at the expense of less experimentation with language, music and contrasting images thrown at the audience.

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<sup>74</sup> Bottoms, 69.

<sup>75</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, "Introduction," in: *Fool for Love and Other Plays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) 7.

In *La Turista*, Shepard was playing with the dynamics of the drama and the development of the male identity crisis, shifting focus not only between the acts, but also within. In Act One the Boy takes center stage away not only from Kent as a male, but from Kent and Salem as a couple. He challenges Kent as a man, leaving him in an awkward position of impotence. Thus, the play moves from a male-female relationship more towards the father-son dialectics already known from his earlier plays, but this time it is the father who is made incompetent by the son. In Act Two, Doc and Kent form the dialectics of the play, but this time Doc represents Kent's father, putting Kent into the Boy's shoes. The breach of time continuity between the acts helps underscoring the fluidity of the main character's identity and its instability. He is merely switching various roles: before Salem as a brother, lover, or generally a man, knowledgeable and potent, before the Boy as the powerless, angry father. He finally manages to escape the entrapment of his identity, or rather lack thereof, by literally running off the stage after he summed up courage to face Doc, both a father figure and the creator. Additionally, Kent's escape points to "disappearance" of many a character in Shepard's plays, be it Niles in *Suicide in B Flat*, who tried to escape from the perceived loss of attachment to reality because of his fame, or the father/son figures in the family trilogy, *Fool For Love*, or *A Lie of the Mind*.

In *Tooth*, the main character's crisis springs from his inability to find a place in his time, being a kind of anachronism. He is being replaced by a new, young, ferocious rival whose detachment from the surroundings makes him stronger. It is not only old versus new, also a clash of different approaches to one's sense of identity. Hoss, an established part of the play-game, cannot get over his seemingly sudden loss of confidence in himself. He realizes gradually that he has been a prisoner of a game that he no longer recognizes, and neither does he master it any longer. He tries anything in his power to change the outcome of the inevitable change at the top, but Crow, his ultimate replacement, cannot be conquered by a history to which he does not feel connected. In an entertaining combination of music, ritual fight for

survival and language, Shepard points out the modern man's dilemma in a world that has become historyless and ruthless. Again, like in *La Turista*, the dynamics between the acts shifts. In the first act, Hoss is surrounded by his own people who are nevertheless incapable of help and prisoners of the very same system without realizing it. In the second act, consisting first of all of the word-battle, Shepard juxtaposes the two opposing forces to fight it out, all too aware of the inevitable.

When compared especially with Shepard's early one-act plays, the family trilogy and his later plays seem rather traditional in form, if not in the characters' imagination and dreams full of seemingly unrelated concepts that underline their feeling of loss and despair. On the other hand, both *La Turista* and *The Tooth of Crime* maintain the level of surprise in the use of images directly on the stage as products of the characters' imagination or an embodiment of their personal crisis, while, simultaneously, in their time they helped Shepard become a respected figure among contemporary theater practitioners. They combine aptly this imagination with on-stage role-playing and rituals both consciously and unconsciously done by the characters in order to make sense of their situation, leaving the audience to figure it out however they feel it, which makes the plays more challenging and enjoyable at the same time. Judging from the notes and reactions to some of the productions, like that by Shepard himself quoted earlier, it has not been easy to put on a functioning performance of his earlier plays, but when read, the imagination is let loose and one can enjoy the vortex of (often opposite) shreds of images and the reality not as a part of what Shepard wants us to see, but as whatever our own experience of the reality makes up of it.



## 4. Freefalling *Edmond* and Pretending Businessmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross* by David Mamet

### 4.1 From Chicago to Broadway

The year 1975 was an important milestone in David Mamet's theater career. That year, he produced *American Buffalo* in Chicago and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *The Duck Variations* in New York. These plays were produced Off-Off-Broadway in St Clement's Theatre, but Mamet had *American Buffalo* produced on Broadway as soon as 1977.<sup>1</sup> Although the play was not received equally well by all critics, by 1983 it received a revival production on Broadway, this time "hailed as one of the most significant plays of the decade."<sup>2</sup> By that time, Mamet had already won several awards for his plays and had become arguably the most significant American dramatist among those that emerged in 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Like Shepard in 1960s, Mamet was an important playwright of the Off-Off-Broadway movement in 1970s, but while Shepard used La Mama ETC or Open Theater to experiment with his ideas, Mamet established his own theater during his time on Goddard College in Chicago, called St Nicholas Company, later renamed St Nicholas Theatre Company. Although Mamet was less of an experimenter than Shepard, here he was able to try out his techniques and cooperate closely with his actors, even further away from the spotlight than Shepard on Off-Off-Broadway, while protected from the unwelcome fallout of a potential failure.

In his writing, according to Leslie Kane,

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Kane, *David Mamet: A Casebook* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1992) xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Carroll, *David Mamet* (Houndmills: MacMillan, 1987) 2.

<sup>3</sup> Carroll, 2

Mamet unifies the secular with the spiritual, the past with the present, the individual with the community, the teacher with the student, the tale-teller with the listener, the actor and the audience. But, he is aware that despite our need for communication and connection, unions are tenuous, transitory, even exploitive, a point he reiterates in recurring images of disappointing reunions, dissolving marriages, and disintegrating values.<sup>4</sup>

The character dialectics is important to Mamet. In most of his plays, a lot of the drama revolves around relationships based on power: teacher – student, father – daughter/son, younger – older man, the matters of manhood; in other words, like Kane, and ultimately Marie Maclean as well, said, teller and hearer. If one thinks of Shepard's *Fool for Love* as an example of a power struggle in dialogue, Mamet makes it the center of the play in *Oleanna* and plays like *A Life in the Theater* or *American Buffalo* are based on the dynamics of the power play.

However, while Shepard's language is loaded with poetic images and the characters manipulate with each other's emotions, Mamet's language is often incoherent, cut up, ungrammatical, and profane; in other words, in accord with the modern man's idea of dealing with his own position in the society. At the same time, Mamet exploits rhythm and cadence of words to make a point. Some critics go as far as claiming that "Mamet's characters ... *are* their language; they exist insofar as—and to the extent that—their language allows them to exist. Their speech is not a smokescreen but a *modus vivendi*."<sup>5</sup> Mamet is in a very good control of his language, and he has more than once been called a skilled imitator of genuine American vernacular.<sup>6</sup> In the use of language, Harold Pinter is often mentioned as influential on Mamet's style of writing. They are both interested in the unspoken and, as Bigsby has noted, "Mamet's principal notation, indeed, like Pinter's, is the word 'pause', and meaning in

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<sup>4</sup> Kane, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Dean, *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990) 15 and Carroll, 25. Original emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> see for example Dean, 220.

his plays seems to exist as much in the threatening aphasia of his characters as in the language [...]”<sup>7</sup>

Mamet, like Shepard, is interested in the American man’s identity in the postmodern society and uses role-playing, performance and rituals to get to the point, albeit Mamet is more subtle in his treatment of the modern man’s dilemma. When face-to-face with a problem, his characters stutter, try to avoid talking directly and procrastinate. Carla J. McDonough wrote of the difference between Mamet’s and Shepard’s treatment of masculine identity in her book *Staging Masculinity*:

While Shepard’s men looked to the masculine myth of the frontier, to the open spaces of the West, for the touchstone of their identity, David Mamet’s men try to find their masculine frontier in the realm of business. Mamet’s male characters are [...] unwilling to abandon American myths of masculinity, even as those myths shatter around them.<sup>8</sup>

Mamet’s characters are trapped inside, in an office, a junk shop or in a prison cell. He uses stage notes very rarely, usually giving only a basic idea of the place with no emphasis on the clothing or props. They are not important in his theater, but dialogue is, and Mamet uses it masterfully to reveal action underneath the content<sup>9</sup> or “as an integral part of his drama.”<sup>10</sup>

The two plays I want to discuss in this chapter were staged for the first time only over a year apart – *Edmond* was written earlier, having premiered in June 1982, as opposed to *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which was first introduced in September 1983. Although neither of the plays premiered in New York City, they both moved there within months after their first performance and brought several awards and nominations to Mamet, including the Obie Award for *Edmond* and the Pulitzer Prize for *Glengarry Glen Ross*. These two plays are quite

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<sup>7</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby, *David Mamet* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985) 65.

<sup>8</sup> Carla J. McDonough, *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, 1997) 71.

<sup>9</sup> Dean, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Dean, 158.

different in their structure, but they are both related by the method Mamet uses to find a connection between the postmodern man's identity and business and to show the falling of the ideals about the American capitalism.

## **4.2 *Edmond* and the Past**

In *Edmond*, we follow a downfall of a man who one day realizes he cannot continue living the way he has done and leaves his whole life behind. The play is similar to Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, which could also be described as a breakdown of one man against the society he lives in. They both roam the streets for an understanding soul to reach out to, and during the flow of the play they both end up in a prison cell, but while Yank, the "hairy ape" dies tragically in the hands of a gorilla, Edmond's end is more ambiguous – he becomes a victim of a prison "gorilla" in the form of a large cellmate who subdues him but he seems at peace with it. If J. C. Westgate saw Yank as an allegory of "humanity's struggle for identity in a world of crumbling ideologies,"<sup>11</sup> the same could be said of Edmond. He also tries to find a meaning in all the chaos surrounding him and finds nothing but misunderstanding and rage. What sets the two plays apart is the way the world is seen in them. In *The Hairy Ape* everybody, including Yank, has to find their place in a world that has lost its traditional values as a reaction to the World War I. The world in *Edmond* seems to be much more corrupted, inhabited by pimps, whores and junkshop owners, where any discussion turns into a haggle for money. Ironically enough, both plays were often misunderstood by contemporary critics, with Edmond very often considered as a purely realistic play.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> J. Chris Westgate, "Stumbling Amid the Ruins: Yank's Absurd Inheritance in *The Hairy Ape*," in *The Eugene O'Neill Review Volume 25, Nos. 1 & 2*, 2001, June 2008 <http://www.eoneill.com/library/review/25-1.2/25-1.2b.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Dean, 187-8.

Edmond does not have any past he wants to relate to. Shepard's characters can shape their past in order to regain their identity in the modern American society, or to recreate a new past, and thus a new identity. Mamet, on the other hand, does not acknowledge the past as an integral part of his characters. We know very little of Edmond, the most relevant piece of information being that Edmond was married. We know virtually nothing of his life before his leaving his wife, other than his visit to the most future-oriented person in the business, so to say – the fortune teller. Ironically, though, the fortune-teller discusses the past with Edmond, and shows it is futile to look back, because things do not manifest themselves to us and “we see that we could never have done otherwise than as we did.”<sup>13</sup> From then on, the past is of little importance to Edmond. He is looking ahead for his new identity free of his past mistakes and concepts. Only towards the end of the play, in the prison, does Edmond, in Mamet's words, “examine his roots, [...] examine his actions in the past and try to begin to address, legitimately, things over which he has been confused or upset. Or repressed for a number of years.”<sup>14</sup> He has been living “in a fog for thirty-four years”<sup>15</sup> and he tries to draw a lesson from his past mistakes.

Edmond does not want to change his past so that it fits his current condition and so that he could play out his new role, new identity. Rather, he decides to turn a new leaf and start over. He is “[l]iberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even his own existence [...]”<sup>16</sup> He is the product of the 1970s, the “me” decade, as Tom Wolfe called it,<sup>17</sup> focused on his struggle, unaware, and uninterested in anything else. He tries to fulfill his new life with sex and a feeling of having the power, but he fails time and time again. Later, when a pimp tries to mug him and Edmond beats him severely, something breaks in him and he believes that this is the new beginning he was looking for, he is born-again, so to say. He then

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<sup>13</sup> David Mamet, *Edmond* (New York: Grove Press, 1983) 15. Unless stated otherwise, all emphasis is original.

<sup>14</sup> Carroll, 97.

<sup>15</sup> Edmond, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 102.

<sup>17</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 102.

meets Glenna, a waitress whose passion and dream is acting. In other words, she has something to look forward to, unlike Edmond, who broke up with his earlier life. He is provoked by her confidence, when she says “I am what I am.”<sup>18</sup> She is the only character apart from Edmond with a name in the play, and Edmond feels they connected and that they could start over together. She has no intention of changing her life, though, and Edmond thinks her indifferent. They end up fighting and Edmond stabs Glenna to death, blaming it on her unwillingness to succumb to his manipulation: “You stupid fucking ... *now* look what you’ve done. (*Pause.*) Now look what you blood fucking done.”<sup>19</sup> He was ready to throw his past away and wanted someone to accompany him in his search for new identity, but Glenna refused and she had to die for it.

### **4.3 Egotism and Business**

In Mamet’s plays, the relationships between people are based on power. As already mentioned in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, the tale-teller and the listener, the teacher and the student are pitted against each other in his plays. They struggle for power and the ultimate goal, to force the other to accept their world view as their own. If this fails, they resort to violence to save their dignity, thus, ironically, undermining what is left of their dignity and credibility. This is another way of looking at what happens to Edmond preaching to Glenna. He fails as a teacher when Glenna refuses his new-found belief that people should not lie to themselves lest they are lost completely. In Kane’s words, “Edmond’s behaviour is an extreme manifestation of what for David Mamet constitutes the bane of contemporary society: a total self-centredness which profoundly alienates individuals from each other and

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<sup>18</sup> Edmond, 75.

<sup>19</sup> Edmond, 78.

undermines all relationships.”<sup>20</sup> Edmond is in a similar position at the end of the play, in his cell. His cellmate listens to him preaching, and agrees with him, and Edmond can feel he has intellectual advantage, but he is physically weak and is subjugated by the other prisoner’s intimidation. He says to his cellmate that “[e]very fear hides a wish,”<sup>21</sup> and Edmond’s wish is for life to be simple. On his strange Odyssey he was pushing himself further away from the society and like Hoss in *Tooth*, he has his identity imposed by the others, only he seems content with this outcome.

Of all the myths in modern America, Mamet is most interested in business. Although business is a more prominent subject in the second play discussed in this thesis, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, he is pointing out in *Edmond* that business has infiltrated all realms of human life and society and how it is paralyzing relationships among people. As Edmond goes through his crisis, everywhere he encounters cynical negotiation. When in Scene four he goes to a night club, he discusses a deal with a B-girl that would be favorable to both sides, so that he would pay as little as possible for his entertainment, but he takes too long and ends up being thrown out. He is considered a waste of space, because he is not willing to accept the terms of business. At the peep show, a woman promises he would have a good time, even though she is not allowed to touch him – she can only take money from him. Her mechanical “Take your dick out. (*Pause.*) / Take your dick out. (*Pause.*) / Come on. Take your dick out.”<sup>22</sup> and “Give me ten bucks. (*Pause.*) / Give me ten bucks. (*Pause.*) / Put it through the thing [...] Put it through the thing.”<sup>23</sup> is mirrored not without a bit of irony in Edmond’s “Can I have my ten? [...] Give me my ten back. (*Pause.*) / Come on. Give me my ten back.”<sup>24</sup> Their discussion is without any trace of emotions, purely matter-of-fact business proposal and haggling. In a

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<sup>20</sup> Kane, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Edmond, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Edmond, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Edmond, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Edmond, 32-3.

whorehouse he has a very polite discussion with a prostitute about sex he cannot pay for and he leaves dissatisfied once again.

All encounters are related to money. When the man in the bar at the beginning asks him, “What are the things to do? What are the things anyone does? ... (*Pause.*) *Pussy* ... I don’t know ... *Pussy* ... *Power* ... *Money* ... uh ... *adventure* (*Pause.*)”<sup>25</sup> Bigsby’s description of Mamet’s drama applies well in this instance: “What is real is money, property, objects. Beyond that there lies only uncertainty and threat. Character and identity seem to dissolve into social role precisely because that is fixed, unyielding and hence free of anxiety.”<sup>26</sup> This is what Edmond achieves in the end. Instead of a new identity for a man who at the beginning felt “like [his] balls were cut off,”<sup>27</sup> he ends up in a harmless role of a prisoner craving a simpler life. He is perpetually given an illusion of a bargain trade, getting pleasure for a good price, but as is the case of the whorehouse, he just pays entrance fee only to be forced to pay again to the prostitute, because that is how the business works. You cannot get something for nothing; if anything, your greediness is called and you are left with nothing for something. And Edmond is exploited; seen only as a good piece of business instead of a human being with needs and emotions.

Edmond admits at the beginning that he has not felt like a man in a long time. Neither is he a husband, because he left his wife and his identity as a man is thus disrupted. He probably has not had sex in a while, because he is “incompatible”<sup>28</sup> with his wife and he does not find her attractive. In order to make quick amends he wants to get a woman, but since he does not follow the business rules of the modern society, from bars to whorehouses to pimps, he fails. Glenna, then, represents a great opportunity for Edmond to feel like a man again. They have sex, but that is suddenly not enough for Edmond. Like Teach in *American Buffalo*

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<sup>25</sup> Edmond, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Edmond, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Edmond, 24.



or Bernard in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, Edmond feels the need to manipulate others, intimidate them in order to be able to define his identity in this crisis. He needs to feel his masculine power of manipulating his woman, telling her what to do and what to be, as if he became greedier after he got a taste of his long-lost manhood. When Glenna rejects his attempts to boss her around, pleading him to leave, because “WHAT DID I DO, PLEDGE MY LIFE TO YOU? I LET YOU FUCK ME. GO AWAY.”<sup>29</sup> She was hoping for a casual evening to blow off steam, firmly convinced about her own identity as an actress who only happens to work as a waitress for now, while Edmond wanted to persuade her she is being indifferent. One cannot wonder, then, that she was defending herself fiercely – she did not want to admit uncertainty, thus casting doubt over Edmond in a moment when he started to regain control over who he is, and she paid for it.

#### 4.4 The Identity Crisis

Although Edmond has been feeling at loss about himself all the time, he gets to experience what it is to live without a stable identity when he gets beaten on a street and as a result loses his wallet. Without it he is shunned by a hotel clerk because in his eyes what he looks like is what he is, in Dean’s words, “another battered individual, possibly drunk and disreputable, with whom it would be a mistake to become involved.”<sup>30</sup> As a hotel clerk, he has probably seen enough con men hoping to score easy money with a made-up story about a lost wallet and he quite coldly tries to get Edmond away from the lobby. The clerk leaves out pleasantries and gets to the point – the price for a night in the hotel. After he finds out Edmond cannot pay, he is unwilling to waste any more time with him. Edmond is disgusted that in the modern society people are judged by their looks, but if he is not able to confirm his

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<sup>29</sup> Edmond, 77.

<sup>30</sup> Dean, 160.

social identity by traditional and institutionalized methods like a credit card or an ID, a new identity will be forced on him by the conformist society.

After this experience Edmond ends up buying a survival knife for his own defense against a world that stopped caring. Even after that, he tries to connect with people and prove that the society is not beyond redemption when he talks to a woman in a subway station. His innocent efforts to start a conversation make the woman anxious and her testimony eventually leads to his being apprehended. If not having an identity rendered him an outcast in the hotel, being nice without no apparent reason to a complete stranger is similarly suspicious. Again, Edmond fails to grasp what behavior is expected in a modern society and that everyone should keep to their own business. Dean's claim that Edmond's murder of Glenna "is no doubt intended to illustrate the breakdown and violence of the whole of modern society, to symbolize the lack of understanding between people,"<sup>31</sup> applies here as well. People not only stopped understanding each other, they do not care any longer about anything but themselves and their profits, a popular topic Mamet tends to develop his plays around.

Later in her book, Dean describes Edmond as

the archetypical 'alienated' individual; he feels cut from his history, his traditions, and his sexuality. Schizophrenically separated out into various roles, split into a series of sexual, social, and economic functions that make impossible a fully harmonious existence, he has lost his sense of uniqueness.<sup>32</sup>

As Schechner pointed out in his study of performance, a modern man is often playing out different roles in his life.<sup>33</sup> Shepard in his plays lets his characters to use role-playing to their advantage; they do it deliberately, albeit with varying success. Crow in *Tooth* is very skilled in adapting, while his rival Hoss dies because he did not manage to transform adequately to

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<sup>31</sup> Dean, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Dean, 148.

<sup>33</sup> Discussed in the second chapter of my thesis, page 17.

the requirements of the new times. Edmond, on the other hand, is forced into playing roles he is unfamiliar with and when he finally tries to create a role of his own, his lack of creativity and ruthless rules of the modern society cause his downfall. Moreover, he is limited by his inability to deal with his past. He has nothing to support him and to base his roles on; he is rootless and clueless.

Edmond is in the best shape in Scene fifteen, in the coffeehouse. There, he is a confident macho man who knows what he wants, or pretends to know it. One can almost feel his transformation in the opening sentences of the scene, addressing the waitress: “Edmond: I want a cup of coffee. No. A beer. Beer chaser. Irish whiskey. / Glenna: Irish whiskey. / Edmond: Yes. A double. Huh.”<sup>34</sup> He’s looking for a macho drink that would reflect his current mood after he had beaten up the pimp. A coffee, a beer, not even a glass of Irish whiskey sounds right. He has to get a double, to show off how confident he is in himself. The success is immediate; the waitress is captivated by him. The very last word of this scene is very symbolic: Edmond. He utters his name for the first time here, for Glenna’s, audience’s, and most importantly, his own sake. This is the first time Edmond is in a real conversation that does not include money, sex or violence. He has not had a chance to introduce himself to anyone until now. Such a commonplace activity has become rare in his world, and therefore it is very important to Edmond. By this time, however, it is only an empty gesture from his side, as the next scene shows. He has already become too cynical as a result of what he had experienced to appreciate Glenna’s individuality and a conflict is imminent.

Carroll divides Edmonds journey into three stages, which resemble a cleansing ritual,

departure, initiation and return [...] His ‘departure’ from the familiar first leads him through the one-upmanship of ‘business’, then into aggressive violence and sex [...] then he moves to a contemplative territory where he can examine his past and

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<sup>34</sup> Edmond, 66.

understand what has driven him, so that in the end communion and a kind of reintegration are in sight.<sup>35</sup>

In the initial stage, Edmond is unclean and he sets out on a quest at the end of which he wants to find peace and a new ability to survive. The journey is full of danger – tricksters, con men, pimps – and Edmond has to prove his manhood by overcoming these obstacles. By beating up the pimp he has seemingly won, but Glenna represents a new challenge. Edmond should prove that he has made peace with who he is, but he explodes. Thus, the liminal phase, the place of not-here-nor-there, where a new identity is created in a ritual, does not come until the end of the play, when, as Carroll writes, “he deeply examines his past experience [.]”<sup>36</sup> From this point of view Mamet seems optimistic. He allows Edmond to find a new self that emerges in the final scene. That is one way of understanding Carroll’s critique of Bigsby who sees Edmond in the play’s finale as a man who “sets out on a quest for self-knowledge and experience which leaves him baffled and imprisoned.”<sup>37</sup> Even though to end up in a prison does not seem liberating, he could be, as his cellmate crudely puts it, “some fuck locked up, [who has] got time for reflection.”<sup>38</sup>

In one of the most intense scenes in the play, shortly before Edmond stabs Glenna, there is a rapid change in the tone and language structure, suggesting fear and anxiety she goes through when Edmond starts harassing her:

Glenna’s hysteria is powerfully suggested in the way her syntax and grammar become fragmented into shards of speech. She begins one sentence and veers wildly away from it, only to return moments later in the middle of another. Mamet builds the action of the scene into the lines: as Edmond moves towards Glenna, her panic mounts [.]<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Carroll, 99.

<sup>36</sup> Carroll, 103.

<sup>37</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 105, quoted also in Carroll, 98.

<sup>38</sup> Edmond, 102.

<sup>39</sup> Dean, 169.

In her outburst, she uses primarily monosyllabic words: “Get out! GET OUT GET OUT! LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!!! WHAT DID I DO, PLEDGE MY LIFE TO YOU? I LET YOU FUCK ME. GO AWAY.”<sup>40</sup> Two words stand out, though: alone, away. These words become more emphasized as a result of the speech rhythm, underlining Glenna’s dread and desire rather to be lonely than with him.<sup>41</sup> The horror in her voice peaks and she attacks what Edmond has stood for.<sup>42</sup> Her speech becomes even more broken up and chaotic: “Will somebody help you are the get *away* from me! You are the *devil*. [...] Get *away* from me I curse you, you can’t kill me, get away from me I’m *good*.”<sup>43</sup>

the language

Moreover, Mamet plays with another notion he develops further in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, namely the dialectics between *talking* and *doing*. As already mentioned, the tellers’ power is dependent on the listeners. If they do not listen, the teller is impotent. This is also what happens to Edmond, and he tries to get a hold of the situation before it spirals out of control. Glenna does not believe saying anything would change things. Edmond insists on talking to her, but she will not listen. When she tries to take initiative, to break free from under his spell, to do something, take action, simply rejecting the role of a passive listener, he is scared and tries to quiet her down, eventually losing self-control. She was supposed to be a listener and she quite simply broke the deal.

During the play, Edmond’s changes in his belief in self and his masculine identity are traceable in his speech as well. At the beginning, he is shy, because he realizes he is not in rhythm with the society and finds himself lacking social skills, not comprehending how he is supposed to behave. Talking to a whore in a brothel, he asks her coyly that he would “like to have an intercourse” and is surprised when the whore replies she would like that too. After all,

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<sup>40</sup> Edmond, 77.

<sup>41</sup> For the discussion of the importance of rhythm and Mamet’s use of it as a result of his experiences as an actor, see C. W. E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 216.

<sup>42</sup> Mentioned in Dean, 169.

<sup>43</sup> Edmond, 78.

she is going to get paid for it – by him. Edmond is almost a tragic figure here, lost in his own time of ruthless business creeping over to all aspects of human existence. After he will have gained some experience the hard way, he approaches Glenna, an innocent waitress, as if she were a street hooker, completely devoid of his previous gentlemanly manners: “Edmond: *I want to go home with you tonight.* Glenna: Why? Edmond: Why do you think? I want to fuck you. (*Pause.*) It’s simple as that. What’s your name?”<sup>44</sup> He is quite cynical, unlike the Edmond from the beginning. Ironically enough, even if he is more experienced now, he still handles the situation outside the social context. His choice of words is inappropriate, albeit apparently successful, and it makes him believe he found a person he can relate to and who would listen to him and he gets that much more frustrated when he finds out he was wrong.

In the prison, when given the space to reflect on what has just happened, he seems confident and tries to persuade his audience and himself that he has finally come to a conclusion how he can survive. However, when faced with direct reality, his thoughts are worthless and he cannot act; he is left speechless. When the prisoner threatens Edmond to kill him if he does not comply, he replies, “I ... I ... I ... I ... I can’t, I can’t do, I ... I ...”<sup>45</sup> In the next scene he talks to the prison chaplain about his current situation and feels confident again, giving the chaplain preaching about God’s powerlessness. He is merely frustrated, because he found out that the axiom of the American dream, “nothing is impossible,” failed him. When the chaplain forces him to face the reality, to confess why he killed Glenna, Edmond is, once again, incapable of thought: “I ... (*Pause.*) I ... (*Pause.*) I *don’t* ... I ... I *don’t* ... (*Pause.*) I ... (*Pause.*) I *don’t* ... (*Pause.*) I *don’t* .... (*Pause.*) I *don’t* think ... (*Pause.*) I ... (*Pause.*)”<sup>46</sup> When Dean talks about this scene, he calls attention to

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<sup>44</sup> Edmond, 67.

<sup>45</sup> Edmond, 92.

<sup>46</sup> Edmond, 97.

[the] repetition of the personal pronoun, which had so recently been used to boldly proclaim Edmond's new-found confidence, [and which] is now an indication of his struggle to make sense of what has happened to him. His idea of a vital person has dissolved, leaving behind only an impotent stuttering, heartbreaking in its desperation.<sup>47</sup>

In the final scene Edmond is still talking in incomplete sentences and empty phrases, but his cellmate complements him this time, and together they manage to communicate.<sup>48</sup>

#### **4.5 *Glengarry Glen Ross***

If the earlier of the two plays "is about the American ethic of business, ... about how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ethical compromises called business,"<sup>49</sup> in Mamet's 1983 play *Glengarry Glen Ross* "the pursuit of money under the guise of free enterprise becomes an excuse to deceive and steal."<sup>50</sup> As Bigsby put it, he is "rejecting the unrestricted individualism of American myth and deploring the corruption of American business [while] he equally rejected welfare liberalism as destroying initiative and eroding the will to act."<sup>51</sup> The heroes of *Glengarry* are salesmen set against each other in a competition for the most sales in which the winner gets a car, while the loser will be fired. The rules of a fair competition are ridiculed by the way the system works, because only the salesmen with the best record get the best leads to potential buyers, while the rest get leads literally going nowhere. The difference between the successful and the rest thus becomes larger still.

The seemingly friendly behavior of the salesmen between themselves is ridiculed later, when each salesman fights his own battles, disregarding his colleagues and clients, with profit

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<sup>47</sup> Dean, 186.

<sup>48</sup> See for example Carroll, 103 who also discusses how Edmond and the prisoner complement each other's sentences.

<sup>49</sup> Kane, 96.

<sup>50</sup> Kane, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 63.

and success the key words, expressing Mamet's view of the American capitalism: "Hurrah for me and fuck you."<sup>52</sup> Ricky Roma and Shelly Levene are two of the salesmen who at one point talk about forming a partnership in order to make more sales. However, both Levene and Roma represent the individuality and ruthlessness of the American business ethics, as well as Mamet's axiom quoted here. When Levene is trying to make a deal with the office manager Williamson to get himself a competitive advantage, he tells him to give Roma and Moss, two another salesman, "stiff" instead of the good leads, simply because "[they] ain't been in the office yet."<sup>53</sup> In similar fashion, Roma has no problems exploiting Levene despite their agreement to "go out together, [...] split everything right down the middle [...] fifty-fifty."<sup>54</sup> After Levene is out of sight, Roma exemplifies how the business is done in order to be successful when he tells Williamson that "[my] stuff is mine, whatever [Levene] gets, I'm talking half [...] My stuff is mine, his stuff is ours."<sup>55</sup> The play's epigraph, "ALWAYS BE CLOSING," underlines the play's context in which anyone "exists potentially to be 'sold': the customers, the salesmen, even the audience."<sup>56</sup>

The myth of business and frontier are closely connected in *Glengarry*. Mamet, when talking about the play, said that

in America we're still suffering from loving a frontier ethic – that is to say, take the land from the Indians and give it to the railroad. Take the money from the blacks and give it to the rich. The ethic was always something for nothing [...] The idea to go West and make your fortune, there's gold lying in the ground, was an idea promulgated by the storekeepers in the gold rush and the railroads in the westward expansion as a way of enslaving the common man and woman [...] playing on their greed. As W. C. Fields said, you can't cheat an honest man. So, because we've been rather dishonest about our

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<sup>52</sup> Kane, 123, Dean 190.

<sup>53</sup> David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (London: Methuen, 1984) 9. Unless stated otherwise, all emphasis is original.

<sup>54</sup> *Glengarry*, 63.

<sup>55</sup> *Glengarry*, 64.

<sup>56</sup> Kane, 131.



basic desire to get something for nothing in this country we've always been enslaved by the myth of the happy capitalist.<sup>57</sup>

Everybody has a dream of their own and therefore a weakness others try to exploit. The clients dream of establishing a new frontier, however symbolic, by buying a piece of land, while salesmen are supplying their masculine identity with self-confidence by playing on those desires. Like in *Edmond*, human relationships have been corrupted by money and emotions are replaced by manipulation. Although chasing what they believe is their dream, people remain empty inside because no success is fulfilling. Getting rich does not equal being happy and seeking success by any means available has led to the “diminishment of important emotional bonds,” leaving people “essentially very unhappy; on the surface they may be tough and smiling, but underneath this brittle veneer, they are aware of the terrible void in their lives.” Despite that they continue their pursuit of material wealth simply because they do not know any better. “In this world, business has become an end in itself [and] people can become enmeshed in their jobs, almost losing their identity behind a job title.”<sup>58</sup>

Bigsby writes that the “mercantile drive which had underpinned the myth of frontier individualism has lost its energy and sense of purpose.” The notion of making your own luck based on courage and strong will is false. What is left is the cynicism of the salesmen who perpetually try to exploit those who choose rather to still believe in the power of free will than acknowledge that the individual is no longer free to pursue his luck. Instead of the “true myth (which brings people together)” people are living their “fantasy (which separates them),”<sup>59</sup> eventually ending up alone. The salesmen are pushing their clients by appealing to the idea of America as the land of opportunity. You just need to take it and become whatever you want. Roma reels Lingk, his client-cum-victim with a tantalizing speech about the prospects

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<sup>57</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 111, Dean, 190.

<sup>58</sup> All three quotes in Dean, 191-2.

<sup>59</sup> All three quotes in Bigsby, 71.

awaiting him if he is brave enough. Again, by making a short pause before the key word here, not only Lingk, but the audience as well is intrigued to listen to what Roma has to say:

Stocks, bonds, objects of art, real estate. Now: What are they? (*Pause.*) An opportunity. To what? To make money? Perhaps. To *lose* money? Perhaps. To ‘indulge’ and to ‘learn’ about ourselves? Perhaps. *So fucking what? What isn’t?* They’re an opportunity.<sup>60</sup>

The same could be said of Levene. He believes he can make his situation better on his own, and seizes his opportunity by resorting to unlawful tricks. However, instead of confirming his climbing up the company ladder, he is caught up in his own dream where he has pulled a great sale off a weak lead. Williamson explains to him that the couple he supposedly sold the property to “are insane. They just like talking to salesmen.”<sup>61</sup> Their check will never clear, rendering Levene’s sale and the reason of his moralizing speech he gave to Williamson earlier worthless and pathetic. Levene realizes his newfound confidence and belief he could make it was based on a lie that he may or may not have been aware of, but which kept him safe until he was forced to face the facts and have his fantasy shattered. In the end, Levene goes through what the company’s clients experience once they realize their dreams have been exploited for profit and they are left without the money or their “opportunity.”

#### **4.6 Identity and Manhood in *Glengarry Glen Ross***

In *Edmond*, the main character is going through a quest of finding who he really is. The only thing he knows at the beginning is what he does not want to be. One can say the exact opposite of the salesmen in *Glengarry*. They know exactly what they want to be, and

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<sup>60</sup> Glengarry, 25.

<sup>61</sup> Glengarry, 62.

they are avoiding any effort to find out who they are because that is bad for business and for what they do, which is considered nearly an art form by them. They “see themselves as existential heroes whose status and identity derive from what they do; mythic figures, they depend on their own resources [.]”<sup>62</sup> They are considered based purely on their results and no personal affairs are a part of the game. Dean notices that

the only time we hear of anything other than salesmanship is when one of the workers is either in trouble or working towards a sales coup [... In] the existential world of the salesman, each man is *only* a salesman; he is not what he has done, or what his personal life has made him, but what he is at the present time.<sup>63</sup>

When Levene tries to appeal to Williamson in order to get the leads before the others, or when he is begging after it has been clear he was behind the burglary, no one listens. For the business, there is nothing more to Shelly Levene than his abilities, which prove doubtful at best throughout the play, and therefore he is not worth saving. Although Kane talks about *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* when she writes that if the “characters seem without real identity to us, it is because in their isolation they have none, only the words and the shared values of a society which offers no possibility for real contact,”<sup>64</sup> the same could be said about the salesmen in *Glengarry*. Their shared values are closed deals and the commission, with anything else phased out as insignificant. In Levene’s words, “a man’s his job”<sup>65</sup> and that is what there is to it. It is their whole identity and therefore they fear the most any thought that if they lose their “personal or public roles,” there will be nothing beyond them.<sup>66</sup> Instead of talking about their personal lives and opinions, they go to the restaurant, talk about each other’s success and failure and trash talk the office manager. That is all part of their defense

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<sup>62</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 120.

<sup>63</sup> Dean, 218.

<sup>64</sup> Kane, 93.

<sup>65</sup> *Glengarry*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 134.

mechanism. In other words, “[caught] up in their daily rituals, the characters are never able to question the ultimate purpose of their activity.”<sup>67</sup>

In the environment of the play, “the job of selling worthless property through guile and chicanery both defines and is defined by the salesmen’s concept of manhood.”<sup>68</sup> To sell means to become a man and only a true man can make a good salesman. It seems that all salesmen consider this their maxim. Levene talks about his sale as if it were a sexual intercourse and by closing the deal he got his balls back after a period in which he has not been able to make a deal.<sup>69</sup> Ironically, when Williamson wants to help Roma with his client, lying about the contract status, he actually makes matters worse for him and as a result he is crudely attacked verbally by Roma: “What you’re hired for is [...] to help *men* who are going out there to try to earn a *living*. You *fairy* [...] you never open your mouth till you know what the shot is (Pause.) You fuckin’ *child* ...”<sup>70</sup> Kane notices that abuse used here by Roma is “equivalent to ‘non-man,’ and thus to nothing, to worse than nothing.”<sup>71</sup> The same could be said of Edmond’s abuse of the pimp who wanted to mug him. The pimp, in Edmond’s eyes, challenged his masculinity and in return he beat the mugger not only physically, but also verbally, forcing ‘non-man’ images on him: “You *coon*, you *cunt*, you *cocksucker* ...”<sup>72</sup> Williamson is constantly abused by the salesmen who consider him a necessary evil who distributes their sales but who is not one of the “men.” He tries to become one of them by lying to a customer, but receives only more abuse for his bother. Only after he was able to expose Levene as another “non-man” when he ridiculed the contract he closed, was Williamson able to recover his self-confidence.

The salesmen’s sales pitch is not much more than an exercise in manipulation, using any possibility to take an advantage over the opponent. The vocabulary, dodgy methods used

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<sup>67</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 116.

<sup>68</sup> Kane, 129.

<sup>69</sup> Kane, 131 compares Levene’s experience to a military engagement, another manhood indication.

<sup>70</sup> Glengarry, 57.

<sup>71</sup> Kane, 131.

<sup>72</sup> Edmond, 64.

to stick to the salesmen's maxim "ALWAYS BE CLOSING" and lying are tools to acquire power in their own game. Acting self-confident is a great part of the "game," but as Dean noticed, behind "the foul-mouthed, incessantly 'macho' bravado lies a desperate bluster, a braggadocio show of power by men who are only too aware of their powerlessness."<sup>73</sup> Although this could be said about Moss, Aaronow and Levene especially, Roma seems so confident he has even persuaded himself he is the benchmark salesman who has the right to use the others for his own gain. He is cocky and overconfident. What the play seems to suggest, though, is that he will inevitably end up the same as his colleagues: on a cold streak, with the best leads and subsequently any possibility of a bettering his position out of his reach. After all, that is what happened to Levene, the guy who used to be good, but now his nickname is the only thing left. Roma, in a rare occasion where he seems to speak candidly admits Levene "The Machine" has taught him all he knows. Now he is at the top, and while that is a place all of them want to be, no one is willing to admit to themselves that there is only one way to go from there – down. The fall seems inevitable in the world where the only thing more worthless than emotions is the past success. Bigsby sees Roma as "the last of the frontiersmen in a world which surrendered to mediocrity [,]"<sup>74</sup> but he is more one of those entrepreneurs who sold the land to people willing to challenge the frontier. One of those who were lying to their potential customers for so long about the great opportunity waiting for them that he started believing it himself.

"All of the salesmen are storytellers, and their stories show their adeptness at taking advantage of narrative [...] to 'sell' an idea, a dream or a personality."<sup>75</sup> In other words, they are playing roles according to the situation they are in. And just like Hoss and Crow in *Tooth*, these deceivers are either skilled or bound to fail. Since Roma is the best salesman in the bunch, he is inevitably the most cunning talker. On the other end of the list is the

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<sup>73</sup> Dean, 194.

<sup>74</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 120.

<sup>75</sup> Kane, 60, reiterated in Bigsby, 1945-2000, 218.

inexperienced Williamson, but also Levene, although he is arguably the most experienced salesman in the company. It only shows that salesmen cannot live off their past and they are only as good as their last sale.<sup>76</sup>

Roma shows off his abilities at the end of Act One, at first making the audience believe he knows the man he is talking to personally, only to reveal it is merely a sales pitch about a couple of units of worthless land. However, his best performance comes when the same client comes to him with a task to cancel the contract. In a second he makes up a story so that he can run away without discussing the deal in too much detail, but it does not end there. Levene is with him, and he helps Roma with this bit, with very little information to work with. It is a wonderful piece of improvisation on their part:

Roma: You're a client. I just sold you five waterfront Glengarry Farms. I rub my head, throw me the cue 'Kenilworth'.

Levene: ... What is it?

Roma: Kenilw...

*James Lingk enters the office.*<sup>77</sup>

After that they go on for over five pages of playing their ad hoc roles with Roma leading the way and Levene catching up after his initial hiccup. He is rusty, but here the old "Machine" shows up. He is so fired up he starts at Williamson for ruining their bit in front of the client, eventually letting slip the fact that he robbed the office and thus ruining his career. He gets overly excited and makes the same mistake he reproaches Williamson for: "You can't think on your feet you should keep your mouth closed."<sup>78</sup>

Levene is so excited over the show he puts on with Roma for Lingk because he was not able to make a successful performance recently. It is the same reason why his judgment is

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<sup>76</sup> See also Bigsby, *Mamet*, 115.

<sup>77</sup> Glengarry, 45.

<sup>78</sup> Glengarry, 57.

clouded about the sale he has allegedly made – his performance was so intoxicating that he did not think clearly. Recently, in his slump, his performance was not convincing enough, like in the very first scene, where he tries to haggle with Williamson over the leads. He is begging, reasoning, and eventually trying to bribe him, without any success. When he brings his family into it, Williamson is not interested – anything outside the office and other than the salesman’s record is of no interest to anyone. The situation is mirrored in the final scene, after it is clear Levene was the culprit. Once he realizes the sale will not save his job he tries to appeal to Williamson’s sentiment, but he is cut short. He lost his bargaining position and his sales record, and with it, symbolically, also his power to persuade and perform.

#### **4.7 The American Myths Destructed**

Salesmen make their living by word; talking is what gives them deals and commission. They are constantly fighting for attention, having to rely solely on their speech: “The customer – who has the purchasing power – is largely silent. The salesman has to construct an alternative world with nothing more substantial than words. He is an actor entirely dependent on his audience for survival [.]”<sup>79</sup> Language in Mamet’s plays tend to reflect the ruthlessness of the business America, sometimes almost ridiculing its crippling effect on the society, like when the pimp explains to Edmond how his profits are cut by the time “you get done piecing off the *police*, this man *here* ... the *medical*, the *bills*, you know.”<sup>80</sup> *Glengarry* goes a bit further in removing human emotions from the language. The characters are fighting for power in dialogues and speeches. By forcing others to hear them out, they not only get a possibility to close a deal, they confirm their belief in what they are doing:

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<sup>79</sup> Bigsby, *Mamet*, 115-6.

<sup>80</sup> Edmond, 63.

The only way to reverse the process of disintegration which destroys self-confidence and eventually identity itself is to replace the terrifying image of one's decay by a positive image of oneself, constructed and projected – principally in speech – to be reflected in the admiring attitude of an 'other.' Indeed, if the other listens to me, my discourse is validated, and so is the verbal self-image I have created through it.<sup>81</sup>

This way the characters utilize their ability to control what Maclean called teller-hearer relationship not by providing little information, but by keeping the “others” attention by offering what they crave – an opportunity.

Although *Edmond* is a story of a man going through a personal crisis and *Glengarry Glen Ross* is a play about dishonest salesmen, the two plays share a lot of what defines Mamet as a playwright. His passion for language, critique of the disintegration of human relationships and the deconstruction of the American myths that are the main force behind the modern rush of people after success and recognition are the center of his attention and as much a feature of most of his plays, such as *Speed-the-Plow* (1988) or *Oleanna* (1992), as the figure of cowboy and the notion of the unreachable West is unforgettably related to Shepard. *Edmond* has lost his faith in his identity and roams the city in quest for who he really is, while the salesmen in *Glengarry* are doing their best to keep out of questioning the notion of their own identities by focusing the attention on the clients, letting them deal with their dreams and hopes and what they are willing to sacrifice to get them. The frontier is now only a dream in a world where money and power are above all else.

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<sup>81</sup> Kane, 77-8.



## 5. Conclusion

In the discussed plays, both Mamet and Shepard are sympathetic to their characters and their struggle for an independent identity, but while Mamet is rather cynical and biting critical of the modern American society, Shepard is more poetic and his characters are more tragic. Also the modern myths and rituals are dealt with accordingly. Shepard's are dreamy, romantic ideas of the Old West and everything it includes. Mamet, on the other hand, elaborates on themes he outlined in earlier plays, namely the myth of American business and American frontier and their ethics.

Shepard's characters are dreamers unsuited for the modern world. They cannot function properly and therefore they try to escape the reality. The mythology of the American West or music helps them cope with the struggle and offers an outlet for their frustration and powerlessness. His characters are a reaction to the post-1960s sentiment in the United States, when people felt detached from who they thought they were after World War II and in 1950s. The characters compensate this feeling of a fragmented identity by constantly switching roles within a social context. They believe that by negating their roles they get to start over with a blank sheet and become whoever and whatever they wished, and that having a clean sheet so that one could make anything is better than to try and repair shattered remains of their identity. They cannot cease in their search because they consider stability destructive, but at the same time the continuous efforts to move ahead only makes them realize that by constantly trying to escape and change shapes they avoid the very notion of self they are trying to catch.

On the other hand, Mamet's characters are ruthless and cynical. Even though he is a generation younger than Shepard, Mamet also reacts to the changes in the society during the 1960s. His characters seem to be down-to-earth businessmen, but in reality they are con men,

small-time crooks and wannabe-thieves who prey on other people's need for myths and dreams. They offer a false comfort of achieved freedom to those hoping to make their dreams come true, exploiting their weaknesses for financial gain as well as for reinforcing their self-imposed idea of themselves as proper and successful businessmen. Or, like Edmond, they are confused men hoping merely to make sense of their existence, but unlike Shepard's tragic dreamers they face a cruel, pitiless world of modern America where everything is just about business and nothing more (or less) and where money are more valuable than emotions and trust.

Mamet has always been hailed for his eye for colloquial speech in his plays and the two plays discussed in this thesis are very clever in their use of language as well. Mamet mirrors the character in the way one speaks, or keeps quiet. Short, fractional, ungrammatical outbursts with profanities interchange with longer sentences; subtle change in vocabulary reflects a change in context or a change of a social role. Deep feelings surface in incoherent speech in cut phrases. Dean says that "Mamet writes with extreme economy of expression. With very few words, he is able to convey a great deal."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there are only a handful of occasions where any of his characters speaks three or more sentences at once. In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, the characters use language as a means to manipulate the others, while in *Edmond* the main protagonist's fragmented talk reflects his confusion and inability to offset what the world has become.

This is a rather different approach from that of Shepard's, who offers long monologues to allow the audience glance into the characters' souls and minds. Rather than colorful profanities, his characters paint a picture with words, a combination of their dreams, memories, experiences and hopes. The characters often drift off in long monologues that often do not seem to make sense. The contradictive and confusing nature of their speech reflects the

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Dean, *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990) 36.

characters' image of themselves and the world around them that ceased to be reasonable and has become very subjective and thus the speech sounds as if it were out of this world, often similar to ritual chanting meant to call the spirits for help.

Although both authors use mainly indoor settings in the selected plays, with Shepard the audience has a feeling of a vast space surrounding the story and the characters, which is supported not only by the eloquent language and suggestive images, but also by the way the scene is set up. Shepard is very particular about the stage and the way the characters are dressed, because it all emphasizes their dreaminess and disorder. Mamet's stage is simple and dreary, emphasizing the decay of the morale and destruction of characters' belief system. His characters are often trapped in small rooms, prison cells or offices, trying to force their way out. This reflects, again, the way they are entrapped on the inside, in their own distorted images of themselves and in the denial about their importance and power.

Shepard uses father-son dialectics in order to explore characters' struggle with themselves and their past. The different roles they assume throughout the plays are important in relation to the members of their families and what they represented in the characters' lives. Here, Shepard reflects on the American myth of family as the single most important element in one's life, as something heroes live and die for, and notices that family, as much as other myths scrutinized in the two plays, is no longer a force in the society that has become so violently individualistic after the enthusiasm coming from winning the war. On the other hand, although there is a distinct father-son bond between some of the characters in the plays discussed here, family does not play a great part in Mamet's drama. If one were to apply Maclean's notion of the struggle between the teller and the hearer in a dialogue, one could say that Shepard's characters exploit each other emotionally, while Mamet's characters use all their power to force others into submission. Shepard depicts a character's struggle with him- or herself, whilst Mamet's businessmen transfer the problem by confronting others and thus

forcing them into a defensive position, paradoxically making their own deficiencies all the more noticeable.

In the matters of role play and the significance of rituals in the two playwrights' works, there is a number of differences worth noting. In Shepard's plays rituals are very personal, religious and closely connected with the nature. The Boy and the Witch Doctor in *La Turista* use pagan chanting to free Kent from the prison that his body and the civilization have become. In *Tooth*, Act Two is a ritual in itself, a trial by fire for both Hoss and Crow. Neither Kent nor Hoss can free themselves of the past holding them in order to go to a new stage in their lives, to transcend their current suffering. Therefore, they are forced to accept that they never become complete again, one has to die, the other runs away, disappears, fulfilling the dream of so many Shepardian characters. They are unfit for the modern world because they are too fragile to adapt. They cannot switch roles as it suits them, and thus they are stuck at their respective fragmented selves, shattered parts that could never become whole again.

The rituals are present also in Mamet's world, but their function is slightly different. They are both secularized and depersonalized, functioning more as a social element within a specific group of people or for specific purposes than a strictly personal institution. Instead of chanting and initiation rites, the businessmen in *Glengarry* implement social rituals that can get them a competitive advantage over their colleagues, bosses and clients alike. They drink in a bar to make innocent conversation with a potential client, they are keeping male friendship only to get any piece of information they could use. The entire concept of salesmanship is a manhood ritual, proving one's ability and cunning. Thus, the ritual is an end in itself, and the characters use it like they use the role play – not to uncover what has been bothering them, but to hide it deeper in a futile hope they would not have to deal with it at all.

In this understanding, Mamet's characters are very tragic in their own way. On the surface they are successful, driven, self-confident, but that does not make them either better or

happier than Kent or Hoss (or Crow, for that matter) from Shepard's plays. The society in which they thrive is heartless and condemned to doom if people do not start being more thoughtful and suppress the individualism (the 1970s were dubbed the "me" decade, after all) at the expense of humanity. The society pressures them into a corner and forces them to act as they do, but every society is formed by the individuals who are in turn responsible for it. The same could be said of Edmond who is more like a character from a Shepard play. He is a tragic individual trying to make sense of his broken up psyche, but the violent and pitiless environment pulls him down eventually. He becomes as ruthless, manipulative and unforgiving as the society and it ends up being his doom. People cannot remain arrogant or unconcerned, because the world could turn out like in *Tooth* – a world full of murderers killing for fun.

The plays that have been discussed in this thesis cover three different decades (from *La Turista* in 1966 to *Glengarry Glen Ross* in 1983), times when the United States was going through a lot of changes both politically and socially. The end of World War II came with new hopes and dreams, but subsequent conflicts in Korea and Vietnam discouraged the people and created a strange feeling among Americans of not belonging to their own country, and thus not knowing who they were. Although from different decades, the plays comment on the situation in the country that was gradually becoming very fragmented internally – individual interest groups (African-Americans and other national minorities, women, homosexuals) fighting for their rights and privileges or plain survival.

The time span, however, caused differences in focus. Sam Shepard was in the midst of the creative wave of artists trying to change the concept of the theater in America in late 1950s and 1960s and thus his plays are much less traditional in terms of plotline and character psychology – an effect of his Off- and Off-Off-Broadway experience. His characters are feeling out of this world, but there are still family members they can relate to, who could believe in them and help them. The two plays by Mamet, on the other hand, were written in

early 1980s, a time of great individualism, poor ethics and feverish efforts to be successful at all costs. At this point, the people had ceased to share anything in common, except for their common goal to be better than everyone else. Family became a myth that is good for stories but not life, just like the Great West, the cowboy, the pioneers and the frontier earlier. Thus, Mamet focused on the denial people had been living in, believing in their own truth and discarding others as mere instruments of their ascent in a ruthless world driven by business. The rituals no longer served as an important gateway in one's development. They became commonplace, mere routines to give everyone an illusion they can control their lives because they know how the everyday world is functioning. In the end, however, the salesmen in *Glengarry* or Edmond Burke have merely tried to repress the feelings Hoss and Kent express so strongly in a time that saw the family, close relationships and personal identity to dissolve and the myths and rituals that historically helped keep the faith have lost their influence in a gradually secularized world that stopped believing.

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