

LENKE NÉMETH

ACADEMIA AS A CARNIVALIZED SPACE:  
A BAKHTINIAN READING OF DAVID MAMET'S  
*OLEANNA*

Conversational dissonance manifest in the characters' disjointed utterances and pauses to chart their innermost conflicts as well as a recurrent concern with the corrupt world of American business have become David Mamet's trademarks since his first major success with *American Buffalo* in 1975. Business appears to be a congenial *site* into which Mamet projects all his worries, concerns, and criticism about an America that is portrayed as falling apart. In the space and context of business, he can address nearly all the themes he has been haunted by: corruption and venality in business, the degradation of the business ethic into deception and betrayal, the decline of American values, the decay of American idealism, the loss of the American Dream and of the frontier spirit, urban alienation, the communication breakdown between people, and the discordant relationship between men and women.

On the face of it, Mamet's highly provocative and controversial play *Oleanna* (1992) explores a student-teacher relationship, the consequences of ineffective teaching, and the issue of sexual harassment in the context of American higher education. Apparently, this pedagogical environment is a far cry from the world of cutthroat competition in the business world powerfully portrayed by Mamet in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1993) and *Speed-the-Plow* (1997), the latter dealing with the corrupt Hollywood film industry. In my reading, however, *Oleanna* could easily be aligned with Mamet's previous "business plays." My assumption is that the

intrusion of business-like mentality onto the terrain of higher education conventionally believed to be free of economic forces causes frictions between a female student and her professor. In the present context I am going to challenge the widely-held claim sustaining that *Oleanna* indicts political correctness on college campuses in America.<sup>1</sup> Since the world emerging in Mamet's drama evokes a chaotized world characterized by radical transformations and subversions of conventional routines (degraded value system, aborted human relationships), it is legitimate to claim that it has been saturated by a "carnival sense of the world" (Bakhtin 107). Thus, the approach I intend to take will rely on Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's concepts and descriptive-analytical tools inherently pertaining to carnivalized literature.

For the present analysis, however, I find it necessary to introduce *business space* as a new *carnival image*. Acquiring a large number of various functions, business transforms into a multi-dimensional and multi-functional *space* that absorbs and assumes the characteristics of a *carnival image*. Like the traditional images of carnival (fire and laughter), which "unite within themselves both poles of change and crisis: birth and death (the image of pregnant death), blessing and curse [...]" (Bakhtin 126), *business space* also encompasses *ambivalence* and *dualism*, the fundamental requirements of an artistic image as initiated by Bakhtin.

When endowed with artistic qualities in representation, the Mametian *business space* possesses an enormous character-shaping force since it considerably determines the reactions and actions of characters. The negative pole of *business space* manifests itself most blatantly in the *degradation* of human values and *disfigurement* of human relationships. In accordance with its dualistic nature, the "blessing" of *business space* is embedded precisely in its "curse": its immensely degenerating effect may bring to a character a lucid insight into his own nature and his relations with others (the professor in

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Arthur Holmberg. "The Language of Misunderstanding." *Theater* 24.1 (1992): 94-95. Showalter Elaine. "Acts of Violence. David Mamet and the Language of Men." Rev. of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, by David Mamet. Odeon Haymarket, London. Rev. of *Oleanna*, by David Mamet. Orpheum Theatre, New York. *Times Literary Supplement* 6 Nov. 1992: 16-17.

*Oleanna*), or may engender the women characters' revolt against the corrupt occurrences and practices in the patriarchal order (Carol in *Oleanna*).

The operational force of this new image, however, is not restricted to merely dramatic works that are conventionally labeled as "business plays." Assuming a *protean nature*, this image tends to intrude both the public and private realms of the characters' lives in Mamet's dramatic oeuvre. For instance, imprints of this image are inscribed in the love relationships of the couples in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), in *The Woods* (1977), and in *House of Games* (1987). Thereby *business space* seems to acquire a sense of *quasi-transcendence* that can substitute for the lack of transcendence conspicuously absent from Mamet's plays.

The uneasy welding of the Academia and business space and its effects on human relationships as thematized in *Oleanna* can serve as a blatant example of the degenerating influence of *business space*. What on an archetypal level may seem to be an "unending struggle for power between male and female" (Holmberg 95), from the perspective of carnivalization, the conflict between the university professor and his female student dramatizes the destructive effect of business space on human values and relationship.

Influenced by business space pervading the "Groves of Academe," both John and Carol view their careers in a purely business framework. The negative side of the carnival image of business space gives rise to the emergence of their *business-oriented selves*, which means that for both John and Carol, a drive for existential security has replaced a genuine and devoted interest in teaching and pursuing studies in college, respectively.

"Critical carnivalistic situations" illuminate to what extent their business-oriented selves have gained control over their acts. By studying for a college degree, Carol is planning to make herself marketable. Her ambition is perfectly in tune with the American ethos of vertical mobility and, clearly, this pragmatic understanding of education seems to be the best chance for her social advancement and economic betterment. Yet, the system that takes her money in tuition cannot "guarantee" her education. The problem Carol confronts at the college can be translated into business terminology: she does not get good value for her money. As her complaints below reveal, apparently, besides her money, she invests her energy into

learning, and she does what she is expected to do, yet she fails the professor's course:

CAROL. I'm just: I sit in class I ... (*She holds up her notebook.*) I take notes ...

JOHN. (*simultaneously* with "notes"): Yes. I understand. What I am trying to

tell you is that some, some basic ...

CAROL... .. I ...

JOHN. ... one moment: some basic missed communi...

CAROL. I'm doing what I'm told. I bought your book, I read your ...

JOHN. No, I'm sure you ...

CAROL. No, no, no. I'm doing what I'm told. It's *difficult* for me. It's *difficult* ... (Mamet 6)

However, swamped by the multiple pressures of his career options, John is unable to comprehend Carol's grievances. This brief dialogue exchange also illustrates his impatient and arrogant attitude toward Carol, which can be attributed to the distorting effect of *business space* on *his* personality. From the first moment of their encounter, he is distracted by the financial troubles of a new house that he has already contracted to purchase, counting on the advancement of his expected tenured position. The professor's acts and discourse—obviously, under the influence of his *business-oriented self*—are reminiscent of a businessman rather than a professor. I suppose that the italicized words in John's excuse below, in the drama, function as explicit subtextual indicators of John's agitated state of mind and a business-like lexis dominating his discourse: "I have a *telephone* call that I have to make. And an *appointment*, which is rather *pressing*; though I sympathize with your concerns, and though I wish I had the time, this was not a previously *scheduled meeting*" (12–13).

A "carnivalistic paired scene" underlies that both Carol and John give priority to financial security over a love of learning and a love of teaching, respectively. Desperately trying to convince the professor why she needs the pass grade, Carol alludes to the difficulties arising from her different social and economic background:

JOHN... . wait one moment. I ...

CAROL. It *is* true. I have *problems* ...

JOHN... . every ...

CAROL... . I come from a different *social* ...

JOHN... . ev ...

CAROL. a different economic ...  
JOHN... . Look:  
CAROL. No. I: when I *came* to this school:  
JOHN. Yes. Quite ... (*Pause*)  
CAROL... . Does that mean nothing?  
JOHN. ...but look: look...  
CAROL... . I ... (7–8)

Again, the professor's business-oriented self prevents him from taking any notice of Carol's plea. A "paired scene" of the above incident in the second act, however, spotlights a totally different side of the professor, for whom financial security and upward mobility seem to be the first priorities. The two scenes taken together reflect "the ambivalent whole," namely the professor's hypocrisy when in power and his true motives when deprived of power. In *his* "critical situation," the impending threat of losing the tenure brings to John a revelation about his own nature and his relations with others. As his chances of obtaining the tenure severely diminish, due to the student's charges against him, he discloses his true motivation for the tenured position: "That tenure, and security, and yes, and *comfort*, were not, of themselves, to be scorned; and were even worthy of honourable pursuit" (44). By complaining about the personal loss, he would suffer if he did not get the tenure, he tries to win Carol's sympathy: "I will lose my *deposit*, and the home I'd picked out for my wife and son will go by the boards" (45). The empowered Carol, however, turns out to be an excellent student who has mastered her professor's strategy. Adopting the same cynical attitude as John exhibited toward her in the first Act, she entirely ignores his plea, and replies: "[w]hat do you want of me?" (45).

In addition to its character-shaping power, *business space* also operates as a structuring principle in *Oleanna*. As a result of the destructive influence of *business space*, higher education has undergone a process of *commercialization* both in its aims and practice: knowledge has been *commodified*, and simultaneously, the method of instruction has been *depersonalized*. Concurrently, both the professor and the student appear to be the beneficiaries as well as the victims of these phenomena, as I will argue below. Ironically, the professor's opinion highlighting these disturbing tendencies in higher education unambiguously reveals a fundamental "carnivalistic

contrast” between his discourse and his acts. His disregard for Carol’s problems, and the evidence of his own university career, which is basically motivated by working for power and security, prove to be the most precise illustrations of all the aspects of his critique.

The professor claims that higher education does not educate but “it is something-other-than-useful” (28), and he even degrades it to a mere “ritual” that “all are entitled to” (28). He ascribes the loss of clearly set objectives in higher education to its democratization process whereby masses of people have gained access to colleges: “I say college education, since the war, has become so a matter of course, and such a fashionable necessity, for those either of or aspiring *to* to [sic] the new vast middle class, that we *espouse* it, as a matter of right, and have ceased to ask, ‘What is it good for?’” (33) Yet, *he may well be* one of the beneficiaries of this crucial transformation, as his earlier confessional remark suggests: “I came *late* to teaching. And I found it Artificial. The notion of ‘I know and you do not’; and I saw the *exploitation* in the education process” (22). Nevertheless, from the aggressive and condescending style the professor exhibits toward Carol at the beginning of their encounter, one can conclude that he has completely adopted the “I know and you do not” model as well as conclude that he has completely adopted the “I know and you do not” model as well as the principle of *exploitation* condemned by him initially.

The professor’s vivid description of the deficiencies of a *ritualized* form of college education illuminates that the concept of *educate* has undergone a drastic semantical carnivalization: “[w]e shove this book at you, we say read it. Now, you say you’ve read it? I think that you’re *lying*. I’ll *grill* you, and when I find you’ve lied, you’ll be disgraced, and your life will be ruined. It’s a sick game” (28). This kind of *depersonalized* method of instruction leads to the “mass production” of graduates rather than *education* in its genuine, original sense. In other words, the original meaning of the etymologically related Latin *e-ducere* meaning “to foster” and “to bring forth” hidden capabilities and talents from a disciple has degraded *to grill*.

Furthermore, a “carnivalistic contrast” between the professor’s apparent *achievements* in his professional career (he has published several books, he will be granted tenure) and his *failure* to teach the

student in *his* own special field of research, namely, in *higher education*, exemplifies the distorting effect of business priorities on his professional approach of teaching. He may well be successful in the *quantifiable* aspects of his career (number of books, rise in payment), yet he has failed in all the roles that a student demands of a teacher: “to acknowledge him in whatever ‘role’ it may be--authority, benevolence, militancy, knowledge, etc” (Barthes 384). In a scene that I qualify as a “carnivalistic scandal,” Carol admits that she does not understand *any* of his books and spells out the help she needs “*Teach me. Teach me*” (Mamet 11). Ironically, the title of his book, *The Curse of Modern Education*, carries with it a striking, undercutting “carnivalistic overtone” as well as the dualistic effect of business space: this is the book whose ideas the professor is unable to communicate to the student, yet its success has greatly contributed to his expected promotion. In a “paired scene” in the third act, Carol’s effort to ban the professor’s books from the curriculum seems to be legitimate from *her* point of view. There is no need for *his* books if he proves to be incompetent in communicating through the ideas in them.

John’s confrontation with the student’s desperate plea to teach her intensifies John’s sense of responsibility, and apparently, he turns into an understanding and helpful educator. He acknowledges that Carol cannot blame herself for not having understood a thing: “that’s my *fault*. And that is not verbiage. That’s what I firmly hold to be truth. And I am sorry, And I owe you an apology” (17). Feeling shattered by this realization, and also, urged to be acknowledged and appreciated by the student, the professor attempts to restore and build a positive self-image through a reassuring relationship with Carol. So, on the face of it, he becomes generous, considerate, and sympathetic with the student. Paradoxically, the disfiguring influence of business space also saturates these newly evolving traits, and they will completely confuse Carol. John’s apparently generous offer to change her grade to “A” signals the operation of business principles: “Your grade for the whole term is an ‘A.’ If you will come back and meet with me. A few more times” (25). By transgressing the rules and norms at the university, he actually *buys* and *trades* in the student’s appreciation. Eventually, he employs corrupt, manipulative practices for his own interests.

Also, in order to fascinate the student with a *personal* and *ancient* mode of instruction, John begins to teach her, somewhat belatedly. He employs *anacrisis*, a basic device of the Socratic dialogue, “a means for eliciting and provoking the words of one’s interlocutor, forcing him to express his opinion and express it thoroughly” (Bakhtin 110). The professor exhibits the method in this fashion:

JOHN. So we confound the *usefulness* of higher education with our granted right to equal access to the same. We, in effect create a *prejudice* toward it [...]

CAROL... ..that it is prejudice that we should go to a school?

JOHN. Exactly.

CAROL. How can you say that? How ...

JOHN. Good. Good. *Good*. That’s right! Speak up!

(Mamet 30)

John’s attempt to show Carol this remarkable method of teaching is badly misunderstood by her. Though the professor clarifies to the utterly amazed Carol that: “that’s my *job*, don’t you know. [...] To provoke you” (32), Carol feels not only puzzled but also grossly embarrassed. Instead of promoting reflection on the aim of schooling as perceived by the professor, the anacrisis prompts *ambivalent* reactions in Carol, and will accelerate an “abrupt change of fate,” a reversal of roles between the professor and the student from the second act. She is confronted with a new method of teaching and a more personal voice that puts her on the alert. Carol can justifiably suspect some ulterior motives in the professor’s radically altered behavior. Viewed in this light, Carol’s decision to report the professor to the Tenure Committee appears to be legitimate.

There is, however, also another side to the coin, which exemplifies the destructive effect of the *business space* on Carol. To obtain knowledge that is taught in this new way defies the utilitarian principles of business as this knowledge should be worked for and not just simply *bought* and *consumed* like a commodity. The generation of “Carols,” however, view their university careers in terms of a business enterprise, where *knowledge* has degraded into a *commodity* that can be purchased at a university that has decayed into a *market*. This *commodity-nature* of knowledge evokes Jean-Francois Lyotard’s anticipation concerning the state of knowledge in a postmodern



society: “Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be *sold*, it is and will be *consumed* in order to be *valorized* in a new production: in both cases, the goal is *exchange*” (4, emphasis added).

Paradoxically, when the professor discloses his *human* side—not yet distorted by his business-oriented self—he tries to fascinate the student with a new effective mode of teaching, and in general, he treats Carol on equal terms—leads to the student’s hostile reactions and eventually, precipitates John’s disempowerment. The student will base her charges against the professor exactly on his apparently human acts and discourse. This incident palpably shows that carnivalization penetrates the deepest core of this play: what is human is not even recognized, and the evidently human seems to be inauthentic.

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