

Exploring an Understudied Area in David Mamet

Németh, Lenke Mária. *“All It is, It’s a Carnival”*: Reading David Mamet’s Women Characters with Bakhtin. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2007. 144 pp.

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In 1999 the author of the book reviewed below published an article in which she surveys critical responses to the productions of three of David Mamet’s plays in Hungary, from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. That article is rather short, mainly because of the scantiness of the material, yet Németh perceptively remarks in it that the Hungarian critics employ “indigenous” filters in their approach which “best exemplify the possibility of multiple interpretations of Mamet’s dramas” (“Critical Response” 315). During the years after the publication of this writing by Németh until today Hungarian critical response to the work of Mamet has not become enriched considerably, unless we regard the commentaries on the internationally successful film-versions of his major plays, so a book-length study about the American playwright is more than welcome in our country. The present monographic work is based on Lenke Mária Németh’s PhD dissertation, the writing of which was supervised by Professor Zoltán Abádi Nagy. An elegantly produced and efficiently proof-read volume, it saw the light as the 27th piece in the relevant publication series of the University of Debrecen.

True to her above quoted proposition that the Mametian dramatic world can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways, Németh embarks on a new territory of research: she devotes the book to Mamet’s female characters, deploying Bakhtin’s theories as the basic critical underpinning. At first sight, both of these approaches surprise the reader: why to focus on women in an analysis of the characteristically macho world of the theatre of Mamet, and why to apply, in the interpretation of plays, theory by Bakhtin, who, as the author makes it clear, did not think much of the genre of drama, especially in comparison with the novel.

Németh has included a couple of introductory chapters to answer these questions, which broaden the scope toward a variety of further relevant critical and thematic issues as well as theoretical ramifications. One important consideration of the author is the interface between Mamet's position in contemporary American drama and the postmodern. From the respective trains of thought it can be inferred that Mamet is and is not a postmodern writer at the same time. Németh writes that the "dispersed self," a salient attribute of the postmodern, "is not objectified in any visible manner but manifest in the discourse of the characters, as in Mamet's plays" (47). Even if, she continues later, "[f]rom the perspective of the central thematic concern in postmodern dramatic works, Mamet affiliates with the group of postmodern dramatists ... we cannot label Mamet's drama as postmodern as plot—even if it is rudimentary, ... and character still exist in his plays" (48). The implication is that the playwright's work is characterized by liminality, which corresponds to one of the main principles of Bakhtin's theory of the carnival and reinforces the contention of the author that the Mametian world is a carnivalized one. Regarding trends in American drama Mamet, as an inheritor of Arthur Miller's humanism, while the creator of fragmented discourse and identities in his own plays, can be seen as taking an in-between position.

Another important consideration of the author is to look at the adaptability of Bakhtin's views on the novel to drama, and the possible interpretation of his views on drama in relation to changes in the genre (from modern to postmodern), and to Mamet's drama. Németh confronts a unique complexity of issues here. On the one hand, she concerns herself with the polyphonic structure of character arrangement, which can be "dialogized" or undialogized" in her terminology, depending on the presence of dialogicity between the represented consciousnesses in the Bakhtinian sense. "In contrast with *undialogized polyphonic design* prevalent in postmodern drama, in [Mamet's] plays *dialogized polyphonic structure* operates" (56–57, emphasis in the original), she states. On the other hand, Németh opines that "the subversive and decentering carnival spirit and style have much in common with similar impulses in postmodernism" (70), therefore the carnivalized space of Mamet's drama can be regarded as a postmodern feature. Once again, the paradoxical nature of Mamet's work is implied here. To explore details and nuances against a broader context, it would have been worthwhile to take note of other critics' interpretation of Bakhtin's thoughts on drama in relation to

Anglo-American dramatic works. Feminist scholar Helene Keyssar, for instance, enlists, among others, Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds*, and Adrienne Kennedy's *The Owl Answers* as plays in which "the spectacle and dialogue of theatre mediate but do not resolve differences; the essential strategies of these plays is to bring together diverse discourses in such a way that they interanimate each other and avoid an overarching authorial point of view" (122). The presence of the carnival spirit and hereroglossia in much of modern drama is evident, according to Keyssar, which calls Bakhtin's convictions about the rigidities of drama as a literary form into question. In spite of Bakhtin, the development of the genre in the twentieth-century displays cross-generic traits which allow for assessment and evaluation through Bakhtinian lens. Németh's study offers a thoughtful example of how a critic can utilise such a multi-dimensional approach.

After the suspense generated by the theoretical chapters that provide the necessary analytical tools, the second half of the book discusses Mametian texts to verify the author's initial claim about the importance of the female characters in the male-dominated world of the dramatist. Németh postulates that "the women characters challenge the authority of the patriarchal society, thereby they shake its foundations and also subvert some of its long-established social and cultural conventions. Concurrently with this transaction, the women characters lay bare the corrupt and debased value system of patriarchy" (16). Drawing on Bakhtin's ideas and terms, it is the specific modes of laying bare that Németh takes account of and evaluates in her discussions. While stressing Mamet's unconventional portrayal of women, she points to the ambiguities of the representational process and convincingly argues that the crowning-decrowning phases of the carnival can be applied to the analysis of the Mametian female characters' subversion of American business values with some caution. She finds that the "crowning" (in fact, self-empowerment) of Carol in *Oleanna* proves to be a highly dubious transaction, while it operates in alternative ways and with different effects in *House of Games* and *Speed-the-Plow*.

The misogyny ascribed to Mamet by several female critics is thoroughly challenged by Németh's analysis of the dramatic space and context in which the women characters learn to emulate male violence and aggressiveness, as it happens in the love relationships the early plays *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *The Woods* portray. An especially

thought-provoking part of the study is the section where Németh departs from Bakhtin's formula of self-completion as it appears in the Russian writer's essay "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity." Interpreting the implications of the model for her own analytical purpose, the author explores how Mamet, through the women protagonists of the plays entitled *The Cryptogram* and *The Old Neighbourhood*, reveals "the lack of the dialogical self" as a fundamental malaise in contemporary American society (108). The fact that these works embody versions of the family play, a traditional subgenre justifiably prominent in national theatre history, gives even more weight to Mamet's exposure and critique of the said (and sad) lack.

Carefully argued and employing a precise scholarly vocabulary, the study, on the whole, is a credit to the author and her research supervisor as an original contribution to Mamet criticism. The comprehensive bibliography at the end of the book provides a valuable list of core material for other researchers. "Paradoxical," a word which occurs in the text not a few times referring to Mamet's links with the postmodern, is appropriate also for noting that the intellectual curiosity and informed ambition of the author to include such a wide array of theoretical assumptions and possible models entails a weakness; in the given space Németh is not always able to make sufficient connections between the topics she engages with. A more sustained treatment of the issue of women's new roles growing out of the variously experienced female victimization in patriarchal society, for instance, would have necessitated some tightening of the relevant analytical threads. Thus the book itself is not without some postmodern fragmentation, which, however, might work beneficially in inspiring readers to fill in the gaps and revise their former, perhaps unduly fixed judgements of Mamet's world and its concern with gender.

Works Cited

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