ABSTRACT

Critical appraisal of David Mamet as a dramatist has so far primarily dealt with his ethical concerns—what the playwright describes as “our relationships to each other.” But relatively little investigation has been made into Mamet's metaphysical concerns—"our relationship to God.” The present study seeks to explore the metaphysical dimensions of Mamet’s plays by examining the spiritual issues they project. It posits that the pervasive ethical chaos of present-day American society, in Mamet’s moral vision, is due to the human soul’s deracination from the universal realities of God, Destiny and Moral Law.

Contemporary American society is depicted in Mamet’s plays as a World of Lies characterized by delusions, deceptions and disloyalties. But Mamet’s artistic vision centers, not on these external social realities, but on inner spiritual realities—especially the absence of truth (“honest action”) in contemporary American culture disconnected from God, the Truth of the universe. The cure for the moral illnesses of American society, and of humanity on a wider level, lies in the acknowledgement of the reality of Truth as God and the performance of truthful actions. The present study, hence, regards Mamet’s plays as dramatizations of the need for humans’ commitment to Truth.

Two seminal philosophies inform Mamet’s artistic vision—Judaism and Stoicism. As a profoundly religious Jew Mamet believes in the Universal Intelligence that governs humanity and nature as a Whole. As an ethicist he has imbibed the Stoic moral philosophy that advocates a virtuous life “lived in accordance with nature,” that is, in accordance with the Reason (God) that governs human reason. The Stoics posit that in the face of supernatural realities
humans, with their free will, must perform everything within their power, and remain indifferent to the transcendent forces outside of their control. When they engage themselves in moral actions that accord with God’s moral laws, they can live in peace. Mamet’s plays, bringing to the stage the false gods worshipped by contemporary humanity—carnality, riches, success, fame, power, etc—seek to drive home, as subtext, the importance of truth for humanity’s peace.

The study is divided into five chapters. The Introduction states the thesis that Truth, both as a spiritual attribute and as a metaphysical principle, governs Mamet’s art. It emphasizes the need to be attuned to Mamet’s dramatic theories and his philosophical vision in order to perceive his central artistic purposes. Chapter II analyses five one-act plays—Lake boat, The Duck Variations, Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Reunion, and Edmond—to bring out how the linguistic anarchy of the characters gradually reveals their longing to be connected to each other in harmonious relationships. Chapter III deals with five classically structured plays—American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross, Speed-the-Plow, Oleanna and The Cryptogram—in which the protagonists’ confrontation with the Lie ultimately ends up in a moment of truth that makes them “whole.” Chapter IV analyses Mamet’s autobiographical play The Old Neighborhood as a revelation of how, through moral actions, the true Jew can explode the lies about his race. Chapter V concludes with an emphasis on the three amoral forces that psychically ruin the godless American society: corporate greed, perverted sex, and the megalomania caused by power. It affirms that in Mamet’s spiritual vision only moral actions governed by the divine principle of Truth can redeem present-day humanity from its psychic tragedy.