

Mamet, Race, and the Right

BY DAN RUBIN

When David Mamet moved to Santa Monica, California, in 2003, he joined Ohr HaTorah, the synagogue of Rabbi Mordecai Finley. Finley is a rare creature: a conservative shepherding a congregation of Hollywood liberals. In a 2011 interview with Andrew Ferguson, a reporter with the *Weekly Standard*, the rabbi recounts an early conversation with Mamet, when the playwright asked which democratic presidential candidate Finley and his wife intended to vote for in the 2004 primary. “We said, ‘None of them,’” Finley recalls. “Dave said, ‘Oh no—you’re not going to vote for Nader!’ I said, ‘No.’ And then you could see it hit him. ‘Not Bush!’ ‘Well, yes. Bush.’ Dave was apologetic. He thought he’d embarrassed us. He said, ‘Oh I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to pry! I shouldn’t have asked!’ I said, ‘No, no, it’s really not a problem. It’s not like we try to keep it a secret.’” It was Mamet’s first conversation with a conservative.

At the time, Mamet was still “addicted” (his word) to the liberalism he had been raised on growing up in Chicago. His parents were first-generation American Jews: his father was a labor lawyer who represented more than 300 unions; his mother was a former schoolteacher. “Jews of my day were Democrats, were Liberals,” he writes. “Everyone in the acquaintance of my parents’ generation supported the NAACP and the ACLU, knew the Rosenbergs were innocent and Whittaker Chambers guilty; no one would cross a picket line; and for a Jew, a vote Republican would have been as for him to endorse child sacrifice.” It was a mentality that was never challenged during Mamet’s career in the famously liberal entertainment industry. He tried to convert Finley to the Left; the rabbi, in turn, gave him works from his collection of conservative theorists. Mamet was stunned by what he read.

Over the course of G. W. Bush’s second term, Mamet studied. Ten months before the 2008 election, he debuted *November*, his first overtly political play, which, beneath its fast-paced lampooning of government in general, was his farewell to the Left. Months after the play opened on Broadway, he wrote the controversial essay “Why I Am No Longer a ‘Brain-Dead Liberal’” for the *Village Voice*, and earlier this year, he released *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture*, his 200-page pledge of allegiance to conservatism.

Rabbi Finley’s curriculum on conservative thought introduced Mamet to the works of Shelby Steele, to whom the playwright has dedicated his play *Race*. Steele is an award-winning senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, where he has specialized in the study of race relations, multiculturalism, and affirmative action since 1994, focusing on the consequences of contemporary social programs. He’s written numerous books on race in America, most recently *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006) and *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can’t Win* (2007).

Like Finley, Steele is an oddity: a “black conservative,” which he begrudgingly describes as “one who votes against one’s people.” Like Mamet, Steele did not join the Right until the middle of his life. Born in the 1940s, he was raised in a liberal household in segregated Chicago. He watched his parents “struggle against an unapologetically racist America,” and by the time he reached college he was hungry for the “black rage” preached by comedian and social activist Dick Gregory, whose “raise your consciousness” campaign shaped Steele’s young political identity.

During his senior year, Steele led black students into the college president’s office with a list of demands (which Steele read as he dropped cigarette ash on the carpet), and, upon graduation, he worked in Great Society programs: post-civil rights efforts aimed at correcting years of oppression by injecting money into blighted communities. He saw these well-meaning attempts fail to do “little more than engender a kind of upscale corruption.” When he entered graduate school for literature in the 1980s, his politics remained intact: “Despite all the corruption and incompetence I had seen in those programs . . . I was still politically very far to the left. If I was not as intensely ‘black’ (by then a term of political identity) as I had been in college, I nevertheless wore my blackness on my sleeve even as I read Proust and Kafka and Dostoyevsky.”

Ultimately, it was the expectation “to be black”—to champion minority issues that he did not necessarily support, like affirmative action and “ethnic literature” courses—that made him weary of the Left. He writes, “White racism had made my race the limit of my individuality. But now the new black consciousness . . . wanted me to voluntarily, even proudly, do the same thing that racism had done: make my race more important than my individuality. . . . I simply couldn’t take the schizophrenia required to stay in the cultural and political world that I had always belonged to.”

Since moving to the right, Steele has argued that American society missed an opportunity in the years between the victories of the civil rights movement and the onset of the black power movement. “For Martin Luther King and the older civil rights generation, racism was simply a barrier, a tragic aberration in an America that was otherwise essentially open and fair,” he writes. They banked black freedom on “democratic principles and black advancement on individual responsibility.”

But for the leaders of the generation that followed,

Racism was not a mere barrier but the all-determining reality in which we lived. . . . Ugly human prejudices like racism did not just remain isolated in the hearts of racists. These dark passions worked by an “invisible hand” to generate societal structures that *impersonally* oppressed.

This belief in social determinism has hobbled America, Steele believes. It excused black America from responsibility for its own troubles, while white America fell into a “vacuum of moral authority that comes from simply *knowing* that one’s race is associated with racism.” White America forfeited its ability to speak on matters of race—any race. For making any racial criticism, a white person or institution could be branded as racist, “threatened with a stigmatization that can gravely injure businesses and ruin careers,” Steele argues. And so, the conversation has stalled.

Race is Mamet’s first play since his conversion. *November*, written less than two years earlier, captures the playwright’s man-behind-the-curtain revelations about politics (especially his native liberalism): there is no secret knowledge, no magic power that the government possesses that prepares it to meet the country’s challenges. *Race*, which opened on Broadway in December 2009, is also a play about America, but, as the title suggests, it zeroes in on race and, Mamet writes in his 2009 *New York Times* article “We Can’t Stop Talking about Race in America,” “the lies we tell each other on the subject”:

What has our 230-year national experience been but a dialogue about race? . . . [*Race*] is intended to be an addition to that dialogue. It is a play about lies. All drama is about lies. When the lie is exposed, the play is over. . . . For just as personal advantage was derived by whites from the defense of slavery and its continuation as Jim Crow and segregation, so too personal advantage, political advantage, and indeed expression of deeply held belief may lead nonwhites to defense of positions that, though they may be momentarily acceptable, will eventually be revealed as untenable.

Mamet agrees with Steele that Americans’ inability to speak openly and honestly about matters of race infects what should be our most impartial civil sector: the judiciary. O. J. Simpson went free, Steele suggests, because his lawyers pitted empirical evidence against “the *reputation* of racism for distorting and manipulating fact.” O. J. was found not guilty, in other words, because he once would have been found guilty. Mamet—whose father, even after the career-making debut of *American Buffalo*, asked his son, “When are you going to chuck all this nonsense and go to law school?”—writes in *The Secret Knowledge* that freedom cannot exist without objective law:

Justice is corrupted by consideration, not of whether or not the accused committed the crime, but of supposedly mitigating factors of his childhood, race, or environment. If weight is given, in extenuation, to his supposed goodness to animals or to his mother, he is then liable to leniency based not upon the needs of the citizenry (protection), but upon the criminal’s ability to dramatize his plight. If he may

entertain, and play upon the emotions of the judge and jury, if he and his defenders may flatter the ability to “be compassionate,” and call it courage, society is weakened. Laws, then, decided upon in tranquility, without reference to the individual, and based upon behaviors, are cast aside or vitiated by reference to merit, fairness, or compassion, all of which are inchoate, subjective, and nonquantifiable.

Democracy is put at risk when fears and bias influence legal proceedings. And yet, that is the world in which we live—it is the world in which *Race* lives—and the world in which lawyers work.

“Some people say that the client’s gotta pay you to do your best,” Mamet’s father told him. “The client’s not paying me to be best, the client’s paying me to win.” It is a line Mamet put in his 1991 movie *Homicide*; it is a concept he has held onto and dramatized in *Race*. The play gives us three lawyers who know courtrooms are never places of tranquility. They are flooded with emotion—especially when race is involved. It is not their job to mitigate those emotions so “the truth” will out. They manipulate our emotions to win.

This article was excerpted from “Mamet, Race, and the Right,” which appears in its entirety in Word on Plays. See below for details.

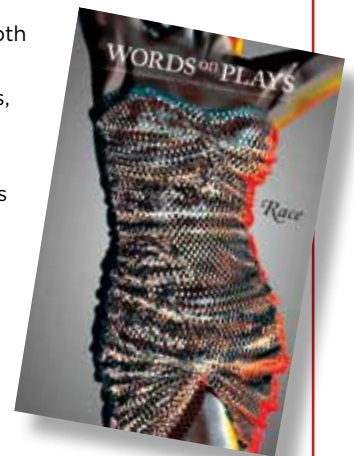
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