WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Sexual Perversity
in Chicago

BY DAVID MAMET
DIRECTED BY PETER RIEGERT
GEARY THEATER
JANUARY 5—FEBRUARY 5, 2006

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SYNOPSIS, CHARACTERS, AND CAST OF

SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO

Sexual Perversity in Chicago opened with David Mamet’s Duck Variations at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York on June 16, 1976, directed by Albert Takazauckas.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

DANNY SHAPIRO, an urban male in his late twenties       David Jenkins
BERNARD LITKO, a friend and associate of Danny           Gareth Saxe
DEBORAH SOLOMAN, a woman in her late twenties            Marjan Neshat
JOAN WEBBER, a friend and roommate of Deborah            Elizabeth Kapplow

THE PLACE

Various spots around the North Side of Chicago, Big City on a lake.

Model of the set for Sexual Perversity in Chicago designed by Kent Dorsey
THE TIME
Approximately nine weeks one summer.

SYNOPSIS

Danny Shapiro and Bernie Litko are coworkers who spend most of their time together in bars, regaling each other with elaborate stories about their dating conquests and trying to decipher the workings of the minds (and bodies) of women. Joan Webber and Deborah Soloman are roommates, two single women in Chicago trying to make sense of the erratic behavior of men. At the bar, Bernie tries, without success, to pick up Joan. At a museum, Danny successfully makes a move on Deborah. As Danny and Deborah’s dating relationship becomes more serious, Bernie and Joan each express their disapproval of the partnership, though in very different ways. Joan is chilly and hostile toward Danny. Bernie is lewd and inappropriate about Deborah. Bernie has a tendency to rhapsodize about the nature of women, often recounting sexual exploits to illustrate his points. Joan repeatedly bashes men, interspersing her frustration with moments of confusion and existential crisis.

When Danny and Deborah decide to move in together, their relationship begins to crumble, much to the satisfaction of Bernie and Joan. Bernie advises Danny during encounters over drinks and at a porno theater, while Deborah decides that she is dissatisfied with the relationship and moves out. Bernie’s answer to everything is tits and ass, distilling all problems with women down to simplistic catch phrases and pompous revelations. Joan counsels Deborah about how she can grow from her failed relationship and tells her that she is not to blame. Danny and Bernie end the play on the beach, debating the virtues of various parts of the female body, while they are ignored by the attractive women who walk by.
“THAT IS NOT WHAT I MEANT”

BY JESSICA WERNER

Danny: I love you.
Deborah: Does it frighten you to say that?
Danny: Yes.
Deborah: It’s only words. I don’t think you should be frightened by words.

—Sexual Perversity in Chicago

When David Mamet published a collection of his lectures on theater in 1997, he chose for his book’s title The Three Uses of the Knife, explaining that the knife is a perfectly simple, yet versatile, symbol for his own penetrating, even at times threatening, approach to drama. It’s an apt guiding image for a playwright whose unmistakably sharp, blisteringly real language onstage has always been known for two things: being precise and cutting deep.

Mamet recounts in the book an anecdote famously told by the blues singer Huddie Ledbetter (“Leadbelly”): “You take a knife, you use it to cut the bread, so you’ll have the strength to work; you use it to shave, so you’ll look nice for your lover; on discovering her with another, you use it to cut out her lying heart.” For Mamet, this graphic three-liner illustrates the essential economy and ideal progression of dramatic structure, and it also demonstrates, he writes, “the attempt of the orderly, affronted mind to confront the awesome.”

Whether he’s writing about low-life con artists (American Buffalo), scheming real estate salesmen (Glengarry Glen Ross), political correctness and sexual harassment in academe (Oleanna), or the romantic entanglements of urban twenty-somethings (Sexual Perversity in Chicago), Mamet has throughout his career created characters who “confront the awesome” complexities of one thing in particular: our confoundingly inarticulate attempts to make ourselves and our deepest yearnings understood by one another. This struggle to speak exactly what we mean is felt most acutely when matters of the heart come into play.

“My plays are about people trying to become connected,” Mamet told the Chicago Tribune Magazine in 1977. “People who are confused, full of very contradictory impressions, trying to do good—to get Tolstoyan about it. But no one knows how. No one ever quite makes it.” Language may be the most advanced system we have for communicating our desires, Mamet seems to be saying in all of his plays, but it is woefully inadequate for the task.
GETTING INTO TROUBLE

Mamet was just 25 years old when he wrote *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* at Chicago’s Organic Theater in 1973, touching off a career that very soon had the theater communities of New York and elsewhere standing up and taking notice. Mamet had graduated in 1969 from Goddard College in Vermont (which he would later call “sex camp,” dismissing the mock-intellectual pursuits of students whose main obsession, as he saw it, was with getting each other into bed). After a junior year taken off to study acting with Sanford Meisner in New York, Mamet began to write plays, honing his dramatic voice in short, minimalist one-acts (including *Lakeboat*, *Duck Variations*, *Squirrels*, *Reunion*, and *All Men Are Whores*). He was enamored of Harold Pinter, a playwright he extolled for writing “the stuff you heard in the street, the stuff you overheard in the taxicab.” Mamet was drawn to people, most often men, whose actions speak louder than words, to gangsters and thieves and macho swingers, to “people who don’t institutionalize their thought,” he told the *New Yorker*s John Lahr in 1997. His ear became trained on the everyday slips and fractured rhythms of ordinary individuals’ verbal attempts to get through to each other, stumbling through slang and curses and awkward silences, lacking polish yet unexpectedly expressive.

“Voltaire said words were invented to hide feelings, and that’s what this play’s about, how what we say influences what we think,” a brash 28-year-old Mamet told the *New York Times* in one of his earliest press interviews, talking about *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, his first commercially produced work and his breakout success. The play—about two single young men and two single young women in Chicago, each looking for love and sex and a way to navigate the up-for-grabs mores of the ’70s dating scene—opened in June 1976 at the Cherry Lane Theatre, in a now legendary off-Broadway premiere featuring actors Peter Riegert as Danny and F. Murray Abraham as Bernard (and directed by longtime a.c.t. director Albert Takazauckas). The play ran for an entire year, winning the *Village Voice*’s Obie Award for best new American playwright, and was singled out by *Time* magazine (with Mamet’s *Duck Variations*) as among the year’s ten best plays.

“Mamet’s reputation just exploded during that year I performed in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*,” said Riegert, in a conversation in December, shortly before he began rehearsals as director of a.c.t.’s production of Mamet’s bold career-making play. “*Sexual Perversity* alerted the whole theater world that here was a ferociously interesting writer, who understood that words are what get us into trouble, and it’s words that get us out of trouble.”

Critics caught on quickly that this signature mix of jargon, machismo, and broken emotion heralded the arrival of one of the finest linguistic craftsmen in American drama. When Mamet’s *American Buffalo* opened on Broadway the next year, he earned the 1977 Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best American play and was hailed as the most exciting
Broadway debut of a new American playwright since Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Jack Kroll in Newsweek described Mamet as “that rare bird, an American playwright who’s a language playwright…the first playwright to create a formal and moral shape out of the undeleted expletives of our foul-mouthed time.”

“Sexual Perversity in Chicago caused a lot of tumult when it premiered because [the dialogue contained] so many ‘fucks’ and ‘shits,’” remembers Riegert, “but its drama reached far beyond the graphicness of the words themselves. I think one thing the play is really about—and it’s even more apparent now that we’re re-examining it 30 years later—is the degree to which nothing really changes. The world changes around us, but the dynamic of how people relate to one another really doesn’t. And that’s the ‘perversity’ Mamet is talking about; not four-letter words. What was true back then is true now. No matter how sophisticated we think we are, we make the same mistakes in our attempts to communicate and understand each other. I think human beings are funny in their own self-destructive ways. We’re a lot closer to what we make fun of than we realize.”

Even though Sexual Perversity in Chicago recalls a post–sexual revolution, pre–aids era in which the roles between the sexes in and out of the bedroom were being freely reimagined, the play’s triumph may be its ability to transcend its historical moment of bellbottoms and one-night stands and reveal a bitter truth: that intimate relationships are minefields of buried fears and misunderstandings. “When I reread the play, I thought, this sure isn’t politically correct, but it is absolutely immediate and as entirely dead-on today as it was 30 years ago about the ways that people have always screwed up their love lives, and always will, if they’re too scared to truly connect and commit to anything larger than themselves,” says a.c.t. Artistic Director Carey Perloff, who has directed Riegert in Pinter’s The Birthday Party (at New York’s Classic Stage Company, 1988) and Celebration (at a.c.t., 2001) and invited him to retackle Mamet’s early masterpiece at a.c.t., this time as director.

After nearly 35 years as a successful actor—including his straight shot to fame as Boon in John Landis’s Animal House in 1978—Riegert started working as a director about five years ago. He adapted his first film, By Courier, from an O. Henry short story, and the film was nominated for an Academy Award for best short live-action film in 2001; his first full-
length feature, *King of the Corner*, was released in 2005. He arrives at A.C.T. with a uniquely informed perspective on a play that helped launch his career, as well as on its famous playwright. “It’s interesting to return to this play so many years later, and to work with actors who are now the same age I was when I was in it,” says Riegert. “I can’t wait to see what they find.”

**THE INSATIABLE NEED TO BE UNDERSTOOD**

It has been easy for some critics to label *Sexual Perversity*’s four characters (as well as many of Mamet’s other misguided strivers) as hopeless cynics about love, but Riegert is quick to disagree. “I don’t really see them as cynical. I see Danny and Deborah and Bernie and Joan as struggling to get along, trying to make their way as adults. If the play is cynical about anything, I think it’s cynical about the romanticization of the fact that we actually get any better at this struggle to understand each other.

“There’s this wrestling match [between the sexes] that has gone on forever, and this play sits squarely in that tradition,” adds Riegert. “*Sexual Perversity* reminds me of a refrain in the T. S. Eliot poem ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’:

If one, settling a pillow by her head,
    Should say: That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all. . . .
That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all.

“I think that is exactly what Mamet writes about, as well as what Pinter and Beckett write about: while we have language to communicate, and communicating is something we’re supposedly good at, we are actually often misinterpreted, seeming to be something we’re not and saying things that belie what we seem. The confusion and inability to get across what you mean in *Sexual Perversity*, written in the 1970s, is consistent with ‘Prufrock,’ written in 1917. Men and women have always complained about the insatiable need to be understood. Just like in *Sexual Perversity*, we give each other advice and we say things we later don’t mean, perpetuating this endless need for clarity amid rife contradictions. I guess that’s why human beings created art, because language wasn’t enough. We needed metaphor.

“Music is a good analogy for understanding how to do a Mamet play. Reading his plays, and speaking his lines as an actor, is a lot like reading a score, since he’s a writer with a very developed sense of meter. Every single word is its own note, and every pause is as valuable as a word or a paragraph. It’s a kind of musicianship, like scoring a piece for instruments, and in this case it’s for a four-piece combo.”
A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID MAMET

BY HANNAH KNAPP

Born in Flossmore, Illinois, on November 30, 1947, David Mamet had a difficult childhood. His parents divorced when he was ten years old. After the divorce, Mamet lived in various Chicago suburbs with his mother and younger sister, Lynn, until the age of 16, when he moved to the Lincoln Park area to live with his father. There he worked as a busboy at Second City and backstage at Hull-House Theater, both young, vibrant theater companies, where he gained early experience of the theatrical life. He attended Goddard College in Vermont, where he earned a bachelor of arts degree in English literature, and spent his “junior year abroad” at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City, where he studied acting under the famed Sanford Meisner.

After writing a revue (Camel) as his senior thesis paper, Mamet graduated from Goddard College in 1969 and worked a variety of theater jobs, including acting with a professional theater company at McGill University in Montreal and stage-managing The Fantastiks off Broadway. In the fall of 1970, he returned to Vermont as an acting instructor at Marlboro College, where he directed students in an early version of his first play, Lakeboat. In 1972, he formed the St. Nicholas Theater Company, in Vermont, with William H. Macy and Steven Schachter. It wasn’t long, however, before Mamet returned to his native Chicago and began acting and peddling his scripts around town. In the summer of 1974, he reformed the St. Nicholas Theater Company with Macy, Schachter, Patricia Cox, and musician Alaric “Rokko” Jans. They kicked off their company’s career with Mamet’s Squirrels.

It wasn’t until Mamet convinced Gregory Mosher to direct the premiere of American Buffalo at the Goodman Theatre Stage Two in October 1975, however, that his playwriting career truly began to take off. Two months later, Sexual Perversity in Chicago and Duck Variations opened off-off Broadway, the former garnering Mamet an obie Award for best play (it had also won the Jefferson Award for best new Chicago play in 1974). The St. Nicholas company moved into a permanent space, opening with the transfer of American Buffalo from the Goodman Theatre.

In January 1976, American Buffalo opened in New York at the St. Clements Theater, earning Mamet another obie and Jefferson. Mamet resigned as artistic director of the St. Nicholas, but kept close ties with the company’s actors, employing them in 1977 for the Goodman Stage Two premiere of A Life in the Theatre and long afterwards in many of his plays and films. In February 1977, after earning various grants and fellowships, American
Buffalo opened on Broadway (starring Robert Duvall, Kenneth McMillan, and John Savage) at the Barrymore Theatre, where it ran for 135 performances and won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. Mamet married actress Lindsay Crouse at the end of the year.

During the next few years, Mamet produced a string of plays in Chicago that later transferred to New York, among them The Water Engine (1977), The Woods (1977), and Edmond (1982). Revivals of several of his plays were produced in New York, Chicago, and New Haven as Mamet began to dabble in screenwriting, beginning with The Postman Always Rings Twice in 1981 and The Verdict in 1982, which earned Mamet an Academy Award nomination for best adaptation.

In 1983, Glengarry Glen Ross premiered at the National Theatre in London, winning the Society of West End Theatre Award for best new play, moving on to Broadway in March 1984, and earning Mamet the Pulitzer Prize. That same year, Mamet and Gregory Mosher, the director of the premiere production of American Buffalo and artistic director of the Goodman Theatre, helped found the New Theater Company in Chicago, which included many of the actors with whom they had worked before, among them Macy and Crouse. This company went on to produce Mamet’s adaptation of Chekov’s The Cherry Orchard and his original plays The Shawl and The Spanish Prisoner in 1985. The following year, Mamet and Macy began holding acting workshops at Mamet’s Vermont home, developing their method, which they called “Practical Aesthetics,” and eventually forming the Atlantic Theater Company in New York.

in 1991, after divorcing Crouse. Among his most recent ventures is creating and writing a new television series, “The Unit,” which is currently in production.

Mamet has continued to write plays. The most notable works of the last decade or so are *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), a scathingly funny dissection of Hollywood cupidity; *Oleanna* (1992), produced to general uproar over its controversial presentation of sexual politics (produced at a.c.t. in 1994); *The Cryptogram* (1995), a dysfunctional family tragedy, which earned Mamet another Obie; *The Old Neighborhood: Three Plays* (1998), a gentler exploration of the idea that we can never go home; *Boston Marriage* (2001), a comical depiction of lesbian love in turn-of-the-century upper-class America; and *Romance*, a wild courtroom farce, which opened off-Broadway in April and in London in September (2005).

Mamet’s work in all three media—films, essays, and plays—continues to delight audiences with its sharply honed dialogue and down-to-earth characters, ensuring that, at 58, he is far from ending his prolific career.
When I met David Mamet this summer, he made me the gift of a Boy Scout knife. On one side of the knife was the Scout motto: “Be Prepared.” The words, which invoke both prowess and paranoia, seemed to sum up the twin themes of Mamet’s work, and of his guarded life. We were sitting in the back room of his headquarters, on the second floor of a two-story yellow clapboard building on Eliot Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at a table with a large Second World War poster hanging over it which read, “Loose Talk Can Cost Lives! Keep It Under Your Stetson.” There was no identifying name on the bell to the front door or on the office door. You had to feel your way along until you found Mamet hidden away, which is how it is with him. Mamet, who is masterly at communicating his meanings in public, is prickly in private. He is a small but powerfully built man; in the stillness of his presence and in the precision of his sentences, he exudes an imposing, specific gravity. “Fortress Mamet” is how Ed Koren, the cartoonist and Mamet’s Vermont neighbor, refers to the emotional no-go area that Mamet creates around himself, and I was acutely aware of this hazardous moat as Mamet eased into a chair across the table from me, wearing his summer camouflage: a khaki baseball cap, khaki shorts, and a purple and brown Hawaiian shirt. Over the years, Mamet has adopted many fustian public disguises to counterpoint a personal style that Albert Takazauckas, the director of his first off-Broadway hit, Sexual Perversity in Chicago, in 1976, characterizes as “blunt, blunt, blunt.” He adds, “It’s his lovely cover.” As the star of Chicago’s booming off-Loop theater scene in the early seventies, Mamet affected Che’s guerrilla look: fatigues, combat boots, a beret, and, for good measure, a cape. After his Pulitzer Prize for Glengarry Glen Ross (1984), his play about salesmen in a cutthroat real-estate competition, Mamet assumed a Brechtian swagger: cigar, clear plastic eyeglass frames, and open collar, which consolidated in one iconic image the powerhouse and the proletarian. Now, in his mellow middle age, Mamet has forsworn the cigar and adopted the posture of rural gent: work boots, bluejeans, Pendleton shirt, and trimmed beard. In all these guises, the one constant is Mamet’s crewcut, which dips like a tree line over the craggy promontory of his broad forehead and gives him an austere first appearance. “The crewcut . . . is an honest haircut,” he has written. “It is the haircut of an honest, two-pair-of-jeans working man—a man from Chicago.”
Mamet is certainly a workingman, even though, at a million and a half dollars a movie, he’s far from a wage slave. He has written twenty-two plays, six collections of essays, two novels, and fourteen films, five of which he also directed. He belongs in the pantheon of this century’s greatest dramatists; he has done for American theater at the end of the century what his hero, the iconoclastic sociologist Thorstein Veblen, did for American sociology at the beginning: provide a devastating, often hilarious new idiom to dissect the follies of American life. Mamet’s muscular imagination strips dialogue of literary nicety and robs plot of that naturalistic decoration which has progressively tamed theater. His plays, though rooted in reality, are fables, whose uniqueness lies in their distinctive music—a terse, streamlined orchestration of thought, language, and character which draws viewers in and makes them work for meaning. No other American playwright, except perhaps Tennessee Williams, has ranged so widely. (Mamet is the only major American playwright ever to succeed as a screenwriter.)

Mamet graduated from Goddard College, which he calls “sex camp,” in 1969. By 1975, he was famous. His psychological makeup then, as now, was “essentially that of an unsure student who has finally discovered an idea in which he can believe, and who feels unless he clutches and dedicates himself to that idea, he will be lost.” At 16, he had become a dogsbody and bit player at Bob Stickinger’s innovative Hull-House Theater, in Chicago. “It was the first time in my confused young life that I had learned that work is love,” he wrote later. He was by then well read in the literature of avant-garde drama, especially the plays of Harold Pinter. “It was the stuff you heard in the street,” he says. “It was the stuff you overheard in the taxicab. It wasn’t writerly.” He adds, “Pinter was sui generic. He was starting out with his vision of the world, and he was going to write it.” (Pinter would later champion Mamet. “He sent me, unforgettably, Glengarry Glen Ross, with a note saying, ‘There is something wrong with this play. What is it?’” Pinter recalls. I wired him immediately. ‘There is nothing wrong with this play. I’m giving it to the National.”) Mamet began playwriting in his final year of college, after a summer vacation spent working as a busboy and odd-job man at Second City, Chicago’s improvisational theater, and watching comic players like Peter Boyle, Robert Klein, and David Steinberg; the quick cuts and blackouts of their revue format became part of Mamet’s early punchy minimalism. “For the next ten years,” he said, “none of my scenes lasted more than eight minutes.”
Mamet had also taken off his junior year to study acting in New York with the renowned Sanford Meisner, at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Meisner believed that “every play is based upon the reality of doing,” that “good acting comes from the heart,” and that “there’s no mentality in it.” He urged his students to “fuck polite”; he devised the Word Repetition Game, in which two actors play off each other, each repeating exactly the words the other has just said, in order to bring out real emotion and impulsive shifts in behavior. Mamet wasn’t chosen by Meisner to go on to the next year of classes, but when he began writing plays his distinctive fractured cadences and overlapping dialogue gradually transferred the rigors of the Word Repetition Game from the stage to the page. “I think the rhythm of his dialogue actually comes from the repetition exercises,” says Scott Zigler, who has been a member of the Atlantic Theater Company since its inception, in 1985, and is directing The Old Neighborhood on Broadway. “The rhythm is simply the rhythm of being in the moment.” For instance, Sexual Perversity in Chicago begins:

Danny: So how’d you do last night?
Bernie: Are you kidding me?
Danny: Yeah?
Bernie: Are you fucking kidding me?
Danny: Yeah?
Bernie: Are you pulling my leg?
Danny: So?
Bernie: So tits out to here so.

But if it took Mamet a few years to absorb Meisner’s teaching into his writing, it took him no time to incorporate Meisner’s rogue ideas into what Mamet called his South Side Gypsy attitude. His senior-year project was his first completed play, Camel—a revue composed of 34 blackout bits based on “the more potent pieces of my journal.” (It’s a method that Mamet still uses, mining material from the daily ledgers he keeps.) He had never directed a play “in my whole sunlit lifetime,” he wrote in the project notes. But, he went on, “I remembered that Acting is Doing. So I just started doing.” Mamet had the chutzpah to charge 50 cents admission, a gesture that ruffled a lot of hippie feathers. “I wanted to communicate to the public at large that this was going to be no ordinary theatrical event,” he wrote. Also, he added, “I felt like it.” The last sentence of the project report served as Mamet’s envoi to college life: “It’s time for the actor to find another big rock to push up that long hill.”

Everyone, including Mamet, conceded that he was not an actor. But in 1970, after undertaking various acting stints and odd jobs, Mamet found himself back in Vermont—
this time teaching acting, first at Marlboro College and then, in 1971, at his progressive alma mater, which had no grades, no requirements, no tests. “So here comes Mamet dressed in tailored sailor pants, this tight shirt, with impeccably done hair. He walks like he’s got a ramrod up his butt, and he just laid down the law,” the actor William H. Macy, who is one of Mamet’s closest friends, and who was nominated for an Academy Award last year for his performance in Fargo, says of Mamet’s arrival in class. “The first thing he said was, ‘If you’re late, don’t come in. If you’re not prepared, don’t do the class. If you want to learn to act, I’m the guy who can teach you. If you’re not here for that, leave.’ The class just looked at each other, going, ‘Who is this fucking guy?’” Macy continues, “But he won us over. He was not egotistical in any way. He just had this unshakable confidence.” Mamet was in the habit of fining latecomers a dollar a minute and then burning their money. After about a year and a half of study, according to Macy, Mamet “walked in one day and said, ‘I’ve written these plays.’ It was Sexual Perversity in Chicago”—a comedy about the vagaries of dating which, a few years later, would become Mamet’s first hit. “In that incarnation,” Macy goes on, “it was a bunch of blackouts—about 12 of them. A role for everyone. Who knew he even wrote?”

Mamet himself seems never to have doubted his playwriting ability. “I was just sure,” he says. “I mean, how are you sure you got a fastball?” He adds, “Writing was something I could do. I figured, Well, if you fuck this up, you deserve everything that’s gonna happen to you.” When Mamet was about 22, a friend sent a draft of Sexual Perversity in Chicago to Mike Nichols, who had recently made Carnal Knowledge; he said he’d have it turned into a movie right away except that he’d just made one like it. “I thought, Oh my God, these guys actually believe in me,” Mamet says. “I better start working right now. I better have another play and another play after that.” In 1972, he formed the St. Nicholas Theater Company, in Vermont, with Macy and another of his students, Steven Schachter; in 1973, they shifted their base to Chicago, where, Mamet writes, “the air feels new, and all things seem possible.”

Mamet, who worked in the Windy City only between 1973 and 1977, is either Chicago’s most famous New York playwright or New York’s most famous Chicago playwright. “Chicago is very, very different from New York,” he says. “In Chicago, you lived with your theater company. The money that you made you shared. If you didn’t work together, you starved. You weren’t in it for an individual career.” Chicago’s earthiness extended to its pragmatic literary tradition, which carried with it “an intolerance for the purely ornamental.” “Performance art—whatever the hell that may be—would have been completely foreign to Chicago, which is very meat and potatoes,” Mamet says. “If it’s a comedy it
would be a good idea if it were funny.” Mamet and his cohorts, who soon added the actress Patricia Cox to their founding group, lived by their wits. They helped fund their productions by giving acting classes. “We invented this myth of the Chicago theater scene,” says Gregory Mosher, who considers having bumped into Mamet in 1975 “the central fact of my life.” “What made the Chicago theater scene was that no one cared. The audience didn’t care. They were profoundly indifferent to everything we did.”

In those days, Mamet resided and wrote at the Lincoln Hotel. “His room was the size of a closet. He had no belongings. It was Spartan like you can’t believe,” Macy says. But “from the very first day I met him,” a Chicago playwright, Alan Gross, recalled in the Chicago Tribune in 1982, “David told me he was an important American playwright. . . . He was completely self-encapsulated. He knew exactly what he wanted to do and what was expected of him; he had a great rap, a great act.” According to the program note for St. Nicholas’s debut production, the company was named for the patron saint of “mountebanks, prostitutes, and the demimonde.” And Mamet had a bit of mountebank in him. “He was very, very fast on his feet,” the company’s first literary manager, Jonathan Abarbanel, says, referring to what he calls Mamet’s “intellectual Barnumism.” Abarbanel once told the magazine Chicago, “He would be talking—‘As Aristotle said, blah blah blah.’ Or, ‘I was rereading Kierkegaard the other day.’ I remember saying, ‘Aristotle never said that! You weren’t reading Kierkegaard!’ And he’d go, ‘Shhh! Don’t tell anyone.’”

While Mamet waited tables, drove taxis, and cleaned offices to support his theatrical habit, he turned Chicago into a kind of raffish playground. “He always had very good luck with the ladies,” Macy says. “Oh, man, smooth as silk.” (One of Mamet’s best come-ons—“Is anyone taking up an inordinate amount of your time these days?”—is memorialized in Sexual Perversity in Chicago.) He explored the city’s gritty corners, whose vernacular he savored and kept note of. Among his actor friends, Ed O’Neill had been a football star at Ohio University; Dennis Farina had been a policeman; and J. J. Johnston, a walking lexicon of underworld phrase and fable who was from the South Side, had been a bookie. Having been raised on high culture and hated it, Mamet was drawn to “people who don’t institutionalize their thought.”

…

Mamet’s rhythm gave the words and the pauses an unusual emotional clout. “Dave’s dialogue is a string of iambics, which can often be broken down into fives,” Mosher says. “For example, ‘But all I ever ask (and I would say this to her face) is only she remembers who is who and not to go around with her or Gracie either with this attitude: The Past is Past, and this is Now, and so Fuck You’ is, I believe, 27 iambics in a row.” Joe Mantegna, one of Mamet’s favorite actors, talks about seeing Mamet “tapping it out with his pen” while
actors speak their lines. Sometimes Mamet could be even more insistent. “He sits in the back of the house going, ‘Pick up, pick up, pick up!’” Mosher says.

In Mamet’s plays, speech becomes the doing that reveals being; identity is dramatized as each character’s struggle to speak his meaning. For instance, Teach [in American Buffalo], who is full of big plans, can’t think clearly. When he makes his sensational entrance cursing “Fuckin’ Ruthie,” who has insulted him for eating a piece of toast off her plate, we hear a syntax that reels backward like his fearful, scrambled mind:

Only (and I tell you this, Don). Only, and I’m not, I don’t think, casting anything on anyone: from the mouth of a Southern bulldyke asshole ingrate of a vicious nowhere cunt can this trash come.

Over the years, so many people have written Mamet to complain about the “language” in his plays that in the eighties he had a form letter printed which read, “Too bad, you big cry baby.” Once, while talking on the phone in the kitchen to the producer Fred Zollo, Mamet reached into the refrigerator to help his daughter Willa get a Fudgesicle. “Oh, fuck,” he said. “Daddy, don’t use that language,” Willa laughed. Mamet replied, “That language put that fuckin’ Fudgesicle in your mouth.” In his plays Mamet relishes slang for its impoverished poetry; it helps to create the sense of energy and of absence which his work dissects. In Sexual Perversity it’s the absence of self-awareness (“‘Cunt’ won’t do it,” Deb says to the inchoate Danny. “‘Fuck’ won’t do it. No more magic. . . . Tell me what you’re feeling. Jerk.”); in American Buffalo it’s the absence of beauty and possibility (“There is nothing out there,” Teach says after trashing the shop. “I fuck myself.”); in Glengarry Glen Ross it’s the absence of community and calm (“Fuck you and kiss my ass,” Shelly “the Machine” Levine crows at Williamson, the guy who gives out the property leads, after making what he fondly thinks is a sale). Out of the muck of ordinary speech—the curses, interruptions, asides, midsentence breaks, and sudden accelerations—Mamet carefully weaves a tapestry of motifs which he sees as “counterpoint.” “The beauty of the fugue comes from the descant, from the counting,” he says. “The melody line is pretty damn simple. Anyone can write that.” When he composes, Mamet says, he doesn’t picture the characters onstage; he hears them. “The rhythms don’t just unlock something in the character,” he says. “They are what’s happening.”

Until Mamet emerged, American commercial theater was primarily a literary, naturalistic theater, where words were a libretto for the actor’s emotions, and where the actor determined the rhythms. To be successful, the author had to become invisible. But Mamet brought the author’s voice back onto the stage; his ideas about acting protect the
author's voice at the expense of the actor's invention. "The words are set and unchanging. Any worth in them was put there by the author," he writes mischievously in True and False. "If you learn the words by rote, as if they were a phone book, and let them come out of your mouth without your interpretation, the audience will be well served." This is, to say the least, controversial. . . .

Mamet, like Pinter or Beckett, is perhaps not the best interpreter of his own vision. (The Cryptogram, for example, was given an excellent English production by Mosher which Mamet did not see, and was directed by Mamet, first in Cambridge and then in New York, without the same impact.) But once he had defined his voice he was determined to defend it. He even traded punches with the actor F. Murray Abraham during the New York production of Sexual Perversity in Chicago when Abraham rejected Mamet's tempo in his line readings. "He was like a man on a mission," says Fred Zollo, who met Mamet in those early years and went on to produce most of his major plays as well as many of his films. "I just wanted to be so far ahead," Mamet says. "I didn't want to look back and find somebody gaining on me. If I couldn't write a play, I'd write a movie or I'd write a poem or I'd direct something or I'd teach a class or write a book. I didn't care." He continues, "I ain't gonna go home."

... Writing has always been Mamet's way of containing terror, or what he calls "mental vomit." "David's brain is a very busy place. It's very cluttered," Lynn Mamet says. "Writing's the only thing that stops the thinking, you know," Mamet says. "It stops all the terrible nonsense noise that's in there." In The Edge, where the billionaire bookworm thinks himself out of the backwoods, Mamet quite literally shows the triumph of thought over terror. It's something that he clearly works hard at in his own life. Across the room, on a table in front of the sofa, his serious reading is laid out: D.W. Winnicott's Thinking About Children; a special Hebrew prayer about "the good wife," whose 22 verses are traditionally read by the husband to his wife on holy days; and Seneca's Letters from a Stoic. Mamet has underlined only one passage in Seneca: "Each day . . . acquire something which will help you to face poverty, or death, and other ills as well."

When Mamet set out on his theatrical journey, the teachings of the Stoics emboldened him. "The stoical motto is 'What hinders you?'" he explains. "I'd like to be able to write clearer. 'What's stopping you?' I'd like to be able to figure a project out. 'What's stopping you?' I mean, let's say Sophocles took 18 years to write Oedipus Rex. It's not under your control how quickly you complete Oedipus Rex, but it is under your control whether or not you give up." He adds, "It doesn't have to be calm and clear-eyed. You just have to not give up."

...
In his high-school yearbook, to print beside his nerdy photograph, Mamet had chosen the quotation “And so make life and that vast forever one grand, sweet song.” He seems somehow to have lived up to his early romantic plan, even if his song is a fierce, rueful, sometimes cruel one. Just how his talents and his life have come together so well seems, like all blessings, both miraculous and inexplicable.

MAMET’S PLAYS SHED MASCUULINITY MYTH

BY C. GERALD FRASER (1976)

David Alan Mamet, a young Chicago playwright, has a keen ear and is not reluctant to admit that he grew up inside the cocoon of traditional American masculinity myths.

Both of these things are evident in two one-act plays of his [Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations] at the Cherry Lane Theater, in Greenwich Village, the first of his plays to be commercially produced.

An authentic representation of how men often talk about women, some dialogue in his Sexual Perversity in Chicago sounds as if it came straight off the walls of a public men’s toilet. The play itself is not another aspect of the so-called battle of the sexes; it concerns the confusion and emptiness of human relationships on a purely physical level.

SOCIETY AND DEATH

[Sexual Perversity], Mr. Mamet said during an interview in his hotel room, is about society; [The Duck Variations], about death. But Sexual Perversity is also about David Mamet himself—28 years old, male, white, single, a college-educated Middle Westerner.

“Sexual Perversity in Chicago?”

“Well, that’s just, unfortunately, tales from my life,” Mr. Mamet said. “My sex life was ruined by popular media. It took a lot of getting over. There are a lot of people in my situation. The myths around us, destroying our lives, such a great capacity to destroy our lives.

“Voltaire said words were invented to hide feelings. That’s what the play is about, how what we say influences what we think. The words that the older [character] Bernie Litko says to Danny influences his behavior, you know, that women are broads, that they’re there to exploit.

“And the words that Joan says to her friend Deborah: men are problematical creatures which are necessary to have a relationship with because that’s what society says but it never really works out. It’s nothing but a schlep, a misery constantly.”

Blunt language? “There’s a lot of vicious language in the play,” Mr. Mamet said, “and that’s different. The real vicious language is the insidious thing, calling somebody a little girl or this girl. That’s a lot more insidious than calling somebody a vicious whore—which is also insidious, but you can deal with it.”

What is not directly dealt with, Mr. Mamet explained, are the myths that men “go through.”
“You have to sleep with every woman that you see, have a new car every two years—sheer utter nonsense. Men never have to deal with it, are never really forced to deal with it, deal with it by getting colitis, anxiety attacks, and by killing themselves.”

Mr. Mamet credited the women's liberation movement with turning “my head around a lot.”

He added: “Women have babies, they have the menstrual period, for god's sake, they have the children, they have something to do with the universe.”

WRITTEN IN 1973
When he was writing Sexual Perversity in Chicago in 1973 at the Organic Theater, Mr. Mamet said, he had never written parts for women. “I kept getting huutzed by the director and the women in the cast, you know, write parts for women. I said I don't know anything about women, they said ‘Well, you better find out, you're getting too old,’ so I tried.

“The fleshier parts are the man parts, I'm more around men; I listen more to men being candid than women being candid. It's something I've been trying to do more of in the last few years. Women are very different from men, I think.”

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: DAVID MAMET

BY GEOFFREY NORMAN AND JOHN REZEK (1995)

PLAYBOY: WHY IS THERE SUCH TENSION BETWEEN THE SEXES?

MAMET: This has always been a puritan country and we’ve always been terrified of sex. That terror takes different forms. Sometimes it is overindulgence and, of course, at other times it’s the opposite.

WHY SHOULD THIS BE A TIME OF REPRESSION?

For one thing, there is economic scarcity. People tend to get cranky when there aren’t so many jobs to go around. Also, I think our expectations are scrambled. Sexual drive is designed to make sure the species will survive, as much as we fight the fact. But for young people today, it is very difficult to say, “Fine, either with you this year or with someone else next year, I’m going to get married, buy a house, get a job, settle down and raise kids.” It’s terrifying for them to say that. They can’t get married. There aren’t any jobs. They can’t buy the house and have the dog named Randy. Our expectations have become greater than our ability to meet them.

SO THE ALTERNATIVE IS THE KIND OF ANTAGONISM WE SEE BETWEEN THE SEXES.

Alternatives are going to emerge. In the Seventies and Eighties, there was the notion of continual romantic involvement. You said, “I don’t want to get married; I just want to go out there and have a good time.” That worked for a while and then, suddenly, it didn’t seem like such a good idea anymore. Back in the Sixties or Seventies, National Lampoon published a story of a rumor about a new strain of the clap that guys brought back from Vietnam. If you got it, you died. Very funny.

So now you can’t become committed to somebody because you can’t support a family, and recreational sex is out because AIDS might kill you. As a result, society is going to bring us to some sort of intermediary mechanism, something to keep people wary about getting involved with each other. Here it comes—sexual harassment. The culture has to supersede. Alternatives will emerge to take the problem off our shoulders.

“Gee, what does she want of me?” It’s a rhetorical question. It means, “I don’t understand, better back off.” On the other hand, “I need him to be more sensitive to me.” That’s poetry. It doesn’t mean anything. It means, “I’d better back off because of my fear.”
... 

DO YOU THINK YOU CAN UNDERSTAND AND EMPATHIZE WITH THE FEMALE POINT OF VIEW IN THIS HOSTILE CLIMATE? YOUR CRITICS WOULD SAY YOUR POINT OF VIEW IS ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY MALE. CHEAP SHOT?

Not cheap, but inaccurate. . . I’ve noticed over the past 30 years that a lot of what passes in the theater is not drama but rather a morality tale. “Go thou now and do likewise.” That’s very comforting to someone who is concerned or upset. When you leave the theater and you say, “Oh, now I get it. Women are people, too.” Or, “Now I get it, handicapped people have rights,” then you feel very soothed for the amount of time it takes you to get to your car. Then you forget about the play. If, on the other hand, you leave the theater upset, you might have seen a rotten play. Or, you might be provoked because something was suggested that you could not have known when you came into the theater. Aristotle said we should see something at the end of tragedy that is surprising and inevitable.

BUT WHILE YOUR STRUCTURE IS CLASSICAL, THE SPEECH IS ENTIRELY MODERN AND URBAN, AND, SOME CRITICS HAVE SAID, FREE OF CONTENT. HOW DO YOU GET YOUR CHARACTERS TO CONVEY ANYTHING?

There is always content in what’s being said. That content is not necessarily carried by the context of the words. There has never been a conversation without content. If you’re in a room where a lot of people are talking with one another and you can’t hear a word of what’s being said, you can still tell what the people are saying because their intent communicates itself.

One of the things I learned when I studied acting is that the content of what is being said is rarely carried by the connotation of the words. It is carried by the rhythm of the speech and the posture of the speaker and a lot of other things. All conversations have meaning.

SO MEN AND WOMEN USE SPEECH DIFFERENTLY?

Probably. But men talk differently to other men under different circumstances. Conversations with their peers in a bar vary from conversations with strangers in a bar. No one ever talks except to accomplish an objective. This objective changes according to the sex of the person, the age of the person, the time of day. Everybody uses language for his or her own purpose to get what he or she wants. I think the notion that everyone can be everything to everybody at all times is a big fat bore. Men have always talked with one
another. I find it interesting that in the past five or six years, women have started talking with one another. It’s called “consciousness-raising,” whereas men talking with one another is called “bonding.”

**IS THE ROUGH, PROFANE TALK CHARACTERISTIC OF YOUR PLAYS EXCLUSIVELY MALE LANGUAGE?**

Anyone who would think that apparently hasn’t met my sister [screenwriter Lynn Mamet Weisberg]. I have never found the issue of profanity to be very important. In the plays I was writing, that’s how the people actually spoke. It would have been different if I had been writing a bedroom farce. But I wasn’t. I was writing about different kinds of people, people whom I knew something about.

... 

**[DOES] YOUR GIFT FOR DIALOGUE GIVE YOU A BETTER-THAN-AVERAGE ABILITY TO SIZE UP PEOPLE FROM WHAT THEY SAY? TO TELL, FOR INSTANCE, WHEN THEY ARE LYING?**

I have a good sense of what people are like and when they are lying. Except when I’m emotionally involved. Then, like everyone else, I am hopeless.

**HOW DO YOU SEE THROUGH A LIE—OR A CON?**

There are clues—they are called “tells,” because they tell you something.

**WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN?**

We see them all the time but sometimes we choose not to because we’re emotionally involved. It is in our interest to disregard the fact that someone was late, forgot a telephone number, got the wrong size or forgot a birthday.

But these are things most of us know. Or, if we don’t, you can’t learn them from me.

THE MAGIC OF WOMEN

BY DAVID MAMET (2005)

ONE
Some people declare difficulty with the formulation “I pray to God,” as they find it ludicrous to state as a certainty that God exists. I have no doubt of God’s existence, but I doubt my own.

Not to burden a legitimately self-occupied reader with my own dreary problems, but I’ve never been quite sure that I exist; and have always considered myself, at best, a figment of someone’s imagination. As that imagination cannot (as per supra) be my own, imagine my consternation.

Work both distracts and fulfills me. It brings me great joy. But this joy, yet again, is that of nonexistence. In work I am happy, as I am subsumed, and, so, again, “not there.” I am sure many philosophers (the bulk, no doubt, German) have felt as I, and have expressed themselves, if not more cogently, at least in longer or more-compounded words.

I have felt fairly certain that I exist in dealing with my children, their needs taking precedence—at most times—over my troubled state; and with women. I like women. I have a perfect marriage; most of my colleagues, over the years, have been women. I think I get along with them, in the main, better than I do with men. I find it easier to spend extended time with women than with men. This essay prompts me to ask why, and to respond that, I believe, it is because I feel they do not care if, in fact, I exist.

TWO
Women, to me, are much more interesting than men, who run to type with a depressing regularity.

And there is seldom a male interchange free of invidious comparison. Who, each assesses, is wealthier, smarter, fitter, stronger?

Women make such assessments, too, but of the man per se, not of the man as a potential adversary. Perhaps this is why I find their company so restful.

Then, there is sex. Call me limited, but I still find it astonishing; that a woman would allow or desire me to do that...? This may be attributable to the sclerotic self-image described above. For, indeed, I have known men who take women’s sexuality completely as a matter of course.
Many of these men have been that which an earlier age described as “successful with women.”

This is not to say that I, myself, have not behaved boorishly, or even inexcusably, with women. I have, and, should I roast in hell, it will be with a sense of justice served.

But these men I write of were, notably, devoid of that sense of gratitude mentioned above.

I do not know whether their success was due to straightforward bluntness, or to a sense of relief on the part of their women. Perhaps to both.

Perhaps the men were as those Polynesian islanders of the Bounty Era who, sailors related, took sex truly as a matter of course. Perhaps these successful men were untouched by a sense of gratitude. Perhaps this freed them to act in a manner, finally, more responsible than my own.

In any case, my particular experience of women, neurotic or whole, has been of their generosity.

I also find rather magical their capacity for sexual abandon...

Perhaps I simply find it erotic; but, then, what is the difference? Our great philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote in his seventies, mourning the coming of age and the attendant passage of the “magic glow of desire.”

In America, we live in a world curiously prudish and puritan. Sexuality may be decried as license or permitted as pornography. But it cannot simply be acknowledged. (This is one of the reasons for the Left’s paternalistic championship of things homosexual: The word has “sex” in it, and that one may pronounce it is, in these times, an erotic adventure.)

’Twas said of old that two of the world’s most beautiful sights are fear in a man’s eyes, and desire in a woman’s. Each, of course, indicates surrender. This is a display of a different order than mere acquiescence—we may find gratification in acquiescence, but we will not find beauty. Men do not surrender well. Their capitulation, in these dishonest times, most usually has in it an element of sullen reserve—“but wait ‘till next time.”

The Japanese swordmasters wrote of a state of conquest called “to hold down the pillow.” Here, the beaten opponent is, spiritually, rendered unable to raise his head to look upon his victor—he has been truly subdued. This opponent has made the ultimate acknowledgment—that his life is no longer his own. The woman overcome by desire has, similarly, if only temporarily, pledged her life.

For the period of erotic transport she has removed herself, and, so, her lover, from the sad hypocrisy of the world and its endless negotiations.
Here, rather than triumph, a transient and reversible emotion, the attendant may feel awe.
For he is participating in the irreducible.

FOUR
The magic of women is their frankness.
Men are, in the main, prevaricating, temporizing, and pathetic creatures. We do not deal well with loss, success, or change. Women seem to handle these more effectively.
Perhaps this is an effect of their less-equivocating biology: Pregnant is pregnant, for all of our contemporary fascination with sanctimony.
Speaking of which, our modern temporal religion has set out, as do all religions, to regulate sex.
Our effort lacks both the mystery of the Catholic and the rationality of the Jewish faith. It is just good old-fashioned wish-fulfillment: Canute has commanded the sea, and the sea will, of course, obey.
But, as the Christians and the Jews have long known, the sea will continue to be its own master—we will be both driven and driven mad by our sexual urges, and reiterating failed commands will not increase their efficacy.
Military officers are hounded from the service in disgrace for unsanctioned sex between marriages; the poor Democrats are denied office because Janet Jackson bared her breast. Everyone, Red and Blue, meanwhile, continues doing what comes naturally—but, perhaps, with increased anxiety, and, so, diminished joy.
In our day, we are deprived not only the frankness of a Mme de Stael but also that of Pee-wee Herman—those things not specifically allowed are forbidden. What a dreary prospect.
How grateful, then, is frankness.
It is the most charming of feminine characteristics.
When coupled with simplicity, it may be known as freshness; with experience, sophistication.
It makes bearable the pain of bad, and increases the happiness of good, news.
It is the opposite of pomposity, encouraging the hearer toward an unencumbered worldview, and it is particularly the province of women, and of the good woman most especially.

FIVE
Proverbs 31 is known as “The Woman of Valor,” and is traditionally read by the Jewish husband every Sabbath to his wife.
• It enumerates frugality, temperance, circumspection, and application as among the virtues of the good woman. But I was puzzled by this verse: “Her husband is known in the Gates when he sits among the elders of the Land.”
• Why should the accomplishments of the husband be found in a poem dedicated to those of the wife?
• Pondering at length I have coupled my question to an observation. We know of the man perhaps overlooked or ill-valued—a slight acquaintance or coworker, perhaps.
• We, later, meet his wife, and find her to be without blemish—straightforward, upright, strong, considerate, and kind.
• We reason that if this woman found the man acceptable, he must possess virtues unrevealed by our cursory examination. And he is, thus, known in the gates because of his election by his wife.
• I have found in women the magic to inform, to reform, to incite, to instruct. It may be that I have been fortunate in my associations (as I have, indeed), and that a mindlessly egalitarian sensibility might condemn my experiences as “anecdotal,” which is to say unscientific—but then, I am not writing about science, but magic.

Excerpted from the April 2005 issue of Best Life. © 2005 David Mamet.

AND BEYOND: ARE MEN REALLY NECESSARY?
I don’t understand men.
  I don’t even understand what I don’t understand about men.
  They’re a most inscrutable bunch, really.
  I had a moment of dazzling clarity when I was 27, a rush of confidence that I had cracked the code. But it was, alas, an illusion.

Excerpted from Are Men Necessary?: When Sexes Collide, by Maureen Dowd (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, © 2005).
HOW FAR WE HAVE COME
Dating through the-Decades

1970s: HOW TO TURN YOURSELF INTO A SEDUCER
Very few women have ever made the first sexual move toward a man in their lives. *Men* make passes at us. We do something else—we behave in ways that provoke them to seduce us—but that’s different from our initiating sex, just as waiting for a well-earned promotion is different from laying the groundwork, then *asking* for it.

Women are far more liberated, socially and sexually, than ever before. But seduction—the activity that turns a social relationship into a sexual one—seems to be the last frontier of the revolution. Most of us still practice the kind of “seduction” that was described in a 1955 manual called *How to Manage Men*: “It depends to some extent on one’s distribution of curves, a developed instinct, and a large degree of sheer feline cunning.” Traditional feminine “seduction”—what we were brought up to practice, and still do—is *ersatz* seduction, passive and veiled. And, by staying passive, we’ve cut ourselves off from the pleasure of initiating sex when we want it. That is seduction, and it’s time women learned to master the art. . . .

Nowadays, though, we cannot get as far as we once did with the techniques of seductiveness. The woman who is “merely” seductive is likely to find herself, all lures in operation, with her glance lingering almost imperceptibly on an empty chair. Sex is no longer such a scarce commodity that men will pounce whenever it is offered, however surreptitiously. They are, poor darlings, almost numbed by the availability of

*Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner with girlfriend/model Barbi Benton in 1970. © Henry Diltz/CORBIS.
women. (We do outnumber them, and we’re getting more and more openly sexual.) As a result, it now takes more to gain a man’s erotic attention than putting out the standard seductive flags and waiting. It also, in a sense, takes less. The seductress’s elaborate codes are going out of fashion. Men seem to be looking for women capable of simpler forms of sexual communication, who will relieve them of the burden of initiative. . . .

Herewith, a list of the basics.

1. **Consider the man’s frame of mind.** Like women, few men are in a constant state of sexual readiness. Their vulnerable moments come and go just as ours do, and introducing the idea of sex is easier if his mood is hospitable. Most women seem to feel instinctively that tricks of any sort (like making his drink triple-strength) are wrong, and they are right! A bit of mood setting, sparked by genuine emotional warmth on your part, should be adequate. The elaborate build-up to seduction is something we sneer at when men practice it, so why copy their mistakes? Remember the essence of successful seduction is self-confidence, which means you shouldn’t need a roomful of pornographic watercolor paintings to excite him—you are supposed to be enough.

2. **Be direct about your intentions.** The best thing you have going for you is the fact that you want him. Act on the basis of real sexual desire, and that desire is not a handicap but an asset: It’s what makes you look prettier than usual and generate more energy—itself a turn-on.

   Women have been trained to conceal their desire, to let it show only equivocally, in the belief that he’ll be tantalized by “Does she or doesn’t she mean that?” But being the seducer means that you don’t have to—shouldn’t—be ambiguous. This change of attitude is the basis of seduction. Try to make your gestures and words direct rather than deliberately confusing.

3. **Seize the moment of truth.** Let’s assume you sense he’s feeling responsive (odds that your instincts will be correct are about 99.9 percent). What then? How to proceed depends on your personality type. If you’re a nonverbal, touch-loving person, put your arms around him and hug or kiss him on the mouth. (Avoid half-hearted gestures, like tentative touches on his hair. The most successful male seducers, remember, are the ones confident enough not to have to sneak up on you.) If you express yourself more comfortably in words and are more insecure physically, be a verbal seducer: “I feel an overwhelming urge to kiss you,” or “Are you feeling as turned on as I am?”

4. **Learn to live with the occasional rejection.** Heed your instincts, and you won’t often end up with an unwilling man; you’ll have sensed his unreadiness before the moment of truth. But once in a while you will fail as a seducer because you want him so much or find
out he's a male “tease” who turns you off at the last minute, or because his ego just isn't ready for a seducing woman.

If he's human, he'll allow you a graceful exit—by saying he's just not in the mood for sex, nothing personal. Believe him (and remember how often you've had to say that to men). Remember how many men eventually seduced you because they knew how to handle the first rejection with grace, and liked you in spite of it? On the other hand, if he should turn out to be one of those creeps who think women who make passes aren't “real” women (i.e., passive), exit as quickly as possible. You can learn nothing from such a man, and he would probably have been a boring lover anyway.

5. Practice. You can nourish confidence by seducing a man you feel truly secure with. Yet another way to gain understanding of how good it feels to be active and unmanipulative with men is to practice being more overt and aggressive about all your feelings. Try taking the social initiative more often. When you're with a man, don't always let him be the one who sets the emotional tone and direction. With each change in the degree of initiative you show, you'll move closer toward true sexual equality with men and to the joys such equality can bring.


1980s: MANSPEAK
My friend Xenia believes that lack of communication about “promises” to call is the largest small problem between men and women today. The most sensible woman is liable to come unhinged when a man of substance showers her with adulation—then fails to follow through. He admires her work, her beauty without glasses, her rapport with her children, her spontaneity. Things have never come together quite this fast. On a scale of one to ten, this one's a fifteen. Just one hitch: there's no sequel. Now I know it's the moment for sexual rapprochement, and carping on men is tired stuff (besides, it produces poor results). But would someone please tell me what's going on?

Men are running scared, you say. Intimacy is so threatening, the moment he feels, opens up, and drops his guard—he drops his woman.

But perhaps the problem is really a conflicting approach to language. Women, by and large, are literal-minded enough actually to mean what they say. But men, particularly in coed situations, deploy language more fancifully. One could label their seductive, high-flying jargon “Manspeak.”

Without being divisively judgmental, and in the spirit of disinterested research—like Margaret Mead’s among the Samoans—one might well ask: Why the hell do they do it?
Hypothesis #1: It is entirely possible, I believe, that users of Manspeak don’t experience themselves as duplicitous. Simply, they belong to what Jung called the “discontinuous” type, a charitable title for someone with the memory of a fruit fly. While the “continuous” type, according to Michael Malone in Psychetypes, “believes in verbal consistency,” feeling “distress if the past is invalidated,” the “discontinuous” type has “a weak sense of the past, perceiving it as “insignificant.”

This discontinuous type, moreover, “easily gets involved in whatever is presented at the time regardless of prior involvements or long-term situations.” So a prior involvement, like a wife, might become obscured by whatever is presenting at the time. The only major drawback being that the priors are apt to conclude that he is an irresponsible swine when he was only being Totally Discontinuous.

Hypothesis #2: When employed to flatter and seduce, Manspeak is a vestigial form of “the line.” As an appendix or tonsils once performed a useful function, so, back in the pre-Grease era, sweet talk greased the way. Today, though, She is likely as willing as He and requires neither unctuous praise nor false promises—so the line is superfluous, luffing unwanted in the breeze. But just as the appendix continues to hang in, so the fellow in heat continues to emit lines.

Though much less endearing, the linesman reminds me of my dog. Before bedding down, he turns several circles of the rug through some body-memory of ancestors flattening the prairie grass.

My friend Norman, however, assures me that Manspeak is still a vital ingredient of courtship. Though a fellow can reasonably expect to score, Manspeak, like the Concorde, speeds him to his destination. Anyway, says Norman, the badinage, the game, is the fun part. Above all, says Norm, a man enjoys overcoming her resistance and triumphing where others have failed, locking antlers, in his imagination, with herds of prior thwarted swains. “The pleasure,” asserts Norman, “is in the act of seduction, not copulation.” Which strikes me as very refined, not to say Continental.

Hypothesis #3: Manspeak functions as a verbal form of masturbation, which, in the age of sexual joy, has seen a dramatic resurgence. It’s especially adaptive for the married or spoken-for man encumbered by “prior involvements”: He can diddle himself with seductive language and get high as a kite on romantic possibility—without ever having to come through significantly. Eat his cupcake, so to speak, and not have it too. Women, of course, are far too prosaic to appreciate such uncommon delights.

Hypothesis #4: With a certain rigidity, a man carries into his personal transactions the language and formulas of business. When he tells Max in Sales, “I’ll get back to you later in the week,” he means, “sometime in the dim future”—exactly the way Max hears him.
Similarly, when he tells a woman, “Call you tonight,” he could mean any time from 8:00 p.m. to never. But unlike Max, she, alas, is a literalist.

**Hypothesis #5:** Above all, men have a hard time giving women the bad news. They fear inordinately women’s anger, a confrontation of any sort—and the “Gosh, it was wonderful”s and “I’ll call you soon”s ensure a hassle-free getaway. Seen charitably, Manspeak is a clumsy form of consideration, designed to let the woman down easy. No need, since civilized intercourse thrives on ellipses, to spell it out.

The question arises: should women, besides resisting the impulse to buy peekaboo teddies at the first hint of ardor, attempt to crack the Manspeak code? Devise a crib for translating lines laid on them in the course of an average season.

“Let’s elope to Brazil,” for example, could be heard with the amendment: “If something else doesn’t come up.” “You’re special,” might mean: “Like all human beings and snowflakes, none of which the Lord created identical, and until dawn.” “It wouldn’t be fair to get involved with you until I’ve resolved my feelings for my wife,” might be decoded as: “If my wife takes me back it’s off, and if she doesn’t we can still get it on.”

But the forms of Manspeak are various, and it’s hard to keep a clear head in its presence. More efficacious, perhaps, might be a sound-scrambling minidevice that would convert Manspeak the moment it starts befouling the environment into a sort of classy Muzak—Gluck one time, operatic highlights the next—so the listener wouldn’t have to deal with the stuff at all. And once the ersatz ardor ran its course, a pair could resume conversation, no muss, no fuss, and pursue the ramifications of the latest rise in interest rates.

As for all the “I’ll call you tomorrow”s any woman who values her sanity should discount them as so much linguistic static and consider a phone solely an instrument of business.

**LIBERATION SHOCK**

The notion that all men are oppressors, rapists, or some variant thereof marked a necessary phase of the feminist revolution. But the moment has come to retire man-hating to its niche in history. It is time to view men in a calmer light, to understand how it looks from their side.

Like women, men are also boxed in by constricting roles: If she is a sex object, he is a success object. The corporate fat cat with the chips to lay on the board can glory in such a role. But what of Joe Average, hassled by the boss, jostled by the competition, his earnings siphoned off by taxes and inflation? This put-upon fellow is nonetheless expected to take responsibility for the whole show, from sex to subsistence to finding a parking space. He is expected to play God. He must never, on pain of sissyhood, fear, falter, or fail. And unlike a woman, he can’t turn to his own sex for comfort and support, because he is so thoroughly
conditioned to maintain a front of invulnerability and control. Of itself, this seems an unworkable agenda. But now, compounding the garden-variety stresses, comes a new whammy: the women’s movement.

To discover how they are absorbing the shocks of liberation, I talked to a wide spectrum of men across the country. Though an “enlightened” minority lauds feminism as the greatest “ism” to come down the pike, many more men feel fearful, angry, and above all, bewildered. Generally speaking, the bewilderment arises from the fact that if women are in transition, men are standing still. The sexes are out of sync, and communication is at an all-time low. More than ever before, men, locked in the past while women sprint toward the future, are at a loss to figure out what women want.

Even the most superficial social transactions have turned bewildering. Placed on the defensive, accused of being either macho or condescending, a man feels he can do no right. If only he knew how not to offend. He used to know how not to offend. He even used to know how to please. But these days, the whole English language is a minefield, from words for the female sex (he jettisoned “gals” and “girls” long ago) to the word “manhole.” And the simplest gestures of civilized life have become political dynamite: Should he walk curb-side? Help on with coats? Take arms? Light cigarettes? Open? Order? Pay? Stand? Sit? Lead? Follow?

But the social hash is only the surface. Deeply troubling to men is the fact that their former helpmates suddenly view them as Oppressors dedicated to the exploitation of the female sex. Yet these men remain as they’ve always been: loyal, upstanding husbands and providers—which is precisely the problem.

Still other men are disoriented by a fundamental disagreement with women over the traditional contract between the sexes, which reads: He brings home the bacon, and she’s there for him. Men by and large are upholding their part of the contract. Women, though, are saying, Let’s rethink the whole contract. Both have their reasons: Men want to stay with the old contract because they feel it offers them an okay deal; women want to change it because they’re in search of a better deal.

Women are saying to their take-charge, care-taker husbands: I can’t afford the risk of relying on your goodwill for my survival. Because should you default on your goodwill, I’m up the creek.

Along with economic self-reliance, women want a better quality domestic life, with shared household duties only the beginning. Highest priority would be the forging of a new style of relationship marked by greater mutual awareness, with the emphasis on “mutual.” Always, in the old contract, she was there for him—but in the new one he would also be there for her.
Couples who survive the inevitable collisions arising from women’s struggle for self-worth seem to have in common adult strategies and caring attitudes. They understand, in one husband’s words, “the importance of talking and trusting,” of slogging through the knotty stretches till smoother terrain is in view. Each believes that the other is worth it; if all else is in flux, their mutual commitment remains stable. They place their investment in their marriage and family above the cult of self, above the imperatives of narcissism. And this sense of partnership, in which her gain equals his, allows them to convert the shocks of change into unsuspected pleasures.

Excerpted and adapted from I’ll Call You Tomorrow and Other Lies between Men and Women, by Erica Abeel (William Morrow and Co., © 1981).

1990s: WHAT ARE THE RULES?

How many times have you heard someone say, “She’s nice, she’s pretty, she’s smart . . . why isn’t she married?” Were they talking about you, perhaps? Ever wonder why women who are not so pretty or smart attract men almost effortlessly?

Frankly, many women we know find it easier to relocate to another state, switch careers, or run a marathon than get the right man to marry them! If this sounds like you, then you need The Rules!

What are The Rules? They are a simple way of acting around men that can help any woman win the heart of the man of her dreams. Sound too good to be true? We were skeptical at first, too. Read on!

The purpose of The Rules is to make Mr. Right obsessed with having you as his by making yourself seem unattainable. In plain language, we’re talking about playing hard to get! Follow The Rules, and he will not just marry you, but feel crazy about you, forever! What we’re promising you is “happily ever after.” A marriage truly made in heaven.

If you follow The Rules, you can rest assured that your husband will treat you like a queen—even when he’s angry with you. Why? Because he spent so much time trying to get you. You have become so precious to him that he doesn’t take you for granted. On the contrary, he thinks of you constantly. He’s your best friend, your Rock of Gibraltar during bad times. He’s hurt if you don’t share your problems with him. He is always there for you—when you start your new job, if you need surgery. He even likes to get involved in mundane things, such as picking out a new bedspread. He always wants to do things together.

When you do The Rules, you don’t even have to worry about him chasing other women, even your very attractive neighbor or bosomy secretary. That’s because when you do The
Rules, he somehow things you’re the sexiest woman alive! When you do The Rules, you don’t have to worry about being abandoned, neglected, or ignored.

Men are different from women. Women who call men, ask them out, conveniently have two tickets to a show, or offer sex on the first date destroy male ambition and animal drive. Men are born to respond to challenge. Take away challenge and their interest wanes. That, in a nutshell, is the premise of The Rules. Sure, a man might marry you if you don’t do The Rules, but we can’t guarantee that yours will be a good marriage.

This is how it works: if men love challenge, we become challenging! But don’t ask a man if he loves challenge. He may think or even say he doesn’t. He may not even realize how he reacts. Pay attention to what he does, not what he says.

As you read this book, you may think that The Rules are too calculating and wonder, “How hard to get do I have to be? Am I never going to cook him dinner or take him to a Broadway show? What if I just feel like talking to him? Can’t I call? When may I reveal personal things about myself?”

The answer is: Read The Rules. Follow them completely (not a la carte) and you will be happy you did. How many of us know women who never quite trust their husbands and always feel slightly insecure? They may even see therapists to talk about why their husbands don’t pay attention to them. The Rules will save you about $125 an hour in therapy bills.

Of course, it’s easy to do The Rules with men you’re not that interested in. Naturally, you don’t call them, instantly return their calls, or send them love letters. Sometimes your indifference makes them so crazy about you that you end up marrying them. That’s because you did The Rules (without even thinking about it) and he proposed!

But settling for less is not what this book is about. The idea is to do The Rules with the man you’re really crazy about. This will require effort, patience, and self-restraint. But isn’t it worth it? Why should you compromise and marry someone who loves you but whom you’re not crazy about? We know many women who face this dilemma. But don’t worry—this book will help you marry only Mr. Right!

Your job now is to treat the man you are really, really crazy about like the man you’re not interested in—don’t call, be busy sometimes! Do all of this from the beginning—from day one! Do it from the second you meet him—or should we say, the second he meets you! The better you do The Rules from the beginning, the harder he will fall for you.

Keep thinking, “How would I behave if I weren’t that interested in him?” And then behave that way. Would you offer endless encouragement to someone you didn’t really like? Would you stay on the phone with him for hours? Of course not!

Don’t worry that busyness and lack of interest will drive him away. The men you don’t like keep calling after you’ve turned them down, don’t they?
Remember, *The Rules* are not about getting just any man to adore you and propose; they’re about getting the man of your dreams to marry you! It’s an old-fashioned formula, but it really works!

We understand why modern, career-oriented women have sometimes scoffed at our suggestions. They’ve been m.b.a.—trained to “make things happen” and to take charge of their careers. However, a relationship with a man is different than a job. In a relationship, the man must take charge. He must propose. We are not making this up—biologically, he’s the aggressor.

Some women complain that *The Rules* prevent them from being themselves or having fun. “Why should dating be work?” some ask. But when they end up alone on Saturday night because they did not follow *The Rules*, they always come back to us saying, “Okay, okay, tell me what to do.”

Doing what you want to do is not always in your best interest. On a job interview, you don’t act “like yourself.” You don’t eat cake if you’re serious about losing weight. Similarly, it is not wise to let it all hang out and break *The Rules* as soon as you begin dating a man.

In the long run, it’s not fun to break *The Rules*! You could easily end up alone. Think long term. Imagine a husband you love, beautiful sex, children, companionship, and growing old with someone who thinks you’re a great catch.

Think about never having to be alone on Saturday nights or having to ask your married friends to fix you up. Think about being a couple! Unfortunately, however, you must experience some delayed gratification in the first few months of the relationship to achieve this marital bliss. But has wearing your heart on your sleeve ever gotten you anywhere?

There are many books and theories on this subject. All make wonderful promises, but *The Rules* actually produce results. It’s easy to know what’s going on when you do *The Rules*. It’s very simple. If he calls you, pursues you, asks you out, it’s *The Rules*. If you have to make excuses for his behavior—for example, he didn’t call after the first date because he’s still hung up on his exgirlfriend—and you have to think about every word he said until your head hurts and you call him, it’s not *The Rules*. Forget what he’s going through—for example, “fear of commitment” or “not ready for a relationship.” Remember, we don’t play therapist when we do *The Rules*. If he calls and asks you out, it’s *The Rules*. Anything else is conversation.

Excerpted from *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right*, by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider (Warner Books, © 1995).
2000s and Beyond: What's a Modern Girl to Do?

When I entered college in 1969, women were bursting out of theirs '50s chrysalis, shedding girdles, padded bras, and conventions. The Jazz Age spirit flared in the Age of Aquarius. Women were once again imitating men and acting all independent: smoking, drinking, wanting to earn money, and thinking they had the right to be sexual, this time protected by the pill. I didn’t fit in with the brazen new world of hard-charging feminists. I was more of a fun-loving (if chaste) type who would decades later come to life in Sarah Jessica Parker’s Carrie Bradshaw. I hated the grubby, unisex jeans and no-makeup look and drugs that zoned you out, and I couldn’t understand the appeal of dances that didn’t involve touching your partner. In the universe of Eros, I longed for style and wit. I loved the Art Deco glamour of ’30s movies. . . .

I took the idealism and passion of the ’60s for granted, simply assuming we were sailing toward perfect equality with men, a utopian world at home and at work. I didn’t listen to [my mother] when she cautioned me about the chimera of equality.

On my 31st birthday, she sent me a bankbook with a modest nest egg she had saved for me. “I always felt that the girls in a family should get a little more than the boys even though all are equally loved,” she wrote in a letter. “They need a little cushion to fall back on. Women can stand on the Empire State Building and scream to the heavens that they are equal to men and liberated, but until they have the same anatomy, it’s a lie. It’s more of a man’s world today than ever. Men can eat their cake in unlimited bakeries.”

I thought she was just being Old World, like my favorite jade, Dorothy Parker, when she wrote:

By the time you swear you’re his,
Shivering and sighing,
And he vows his passion is
Infinite, undying—
Lady, make a note of this:
One of you is lying.

I thought the struggle for egalitarianism was a cinch, so I could leave it to my earnest sisters in black turtlenecks and Birkenstocks. I figured there was plenty of time for me to get serious later, that America would always be full of passionate and full-throated debate about the big stuff—social issues, sexual equality, civil rights. Little did I realize that the feminist revolution would have the unexpected consequence of intensifying the confusion between the sexes, leaving women in a tangle of dependence and independence as they entered the 21st century.
Maybe we should have known that the story of women’s progress would be more of a zigzag than a superhighway, that the triumph of feminism would last a nanosecond while the backlash lasted 40 years.

Despite the best efforts of philosophers, politicians, historians, novelists, screenwriters, linguists, therapists, anthropologists, and facilitators, men and women are still in a muddle in the boardroom, the bedroom and the Situation Room.

COURTSHIP
My mom gave me three essential books on the subject of men. The first, when I was 13, was *On Becoming a Woman*. The second, when I was 21, was *365 Ways to Cook Hamburger*. The third, when I was 25, was *How to Catch and Hold a Man*, by Yvonne Antelle. (“Keep thinking of yourself as a soft, mysterious cat. . . . Men are fascinated by bright, shiny objects, by lots of curls, lots of hair on the head . . . by bows, ribbons, ruffles and bright colors. . . . Sarcasm is dangerous. Avoid it altogether.”)

Because I received *How to Catch and Hold a Man* at a time when we were entering the Age of Equality, I put it aside as an anachronism. After all, sometime in the 1960s flirting went out of fashion, as did ironing boards, makeup, and the idea that men needed to be “trapped” or “landed.” The way to approach men, we reasoned, was forthrightly and without games, artifice or frills. Unfortunately, history has shown this to be a misguided notion.

I knew it even before the 1995 publication of *The Rules*, a dating bible that encouraged women to return to prefeminist mind games by playing hard to get. (“Don’t stay on the phone for more than 10 minutes. . . . Even if you are the head of your own company . . . when you’re with a man you like, be quiet and mysterious, act ladylike, cross your legs, and smile. . . . Wear black sheer pantyhose and hike up your skirt to entice the opposite sex!”)

I knew this before fashion magazines became crowded with crinolines, bows, ruffles, leopard-skin scarves, ’50s party dresses and other sartorial equivalents of flirting and with articles like *The Return of Hard to Get.* (“I think it behooves us to stop offering each other these pearls of feminism, to stop saying, ‘So, why don’t you call him?’” a writer lectured in *Mademoiselle*. “Some men must have the thrill of the chase.”)

I knew things were changing because a succession of my single girlfriends had called, sounding sheepish, to ask if they could borrow my out-of-print copy of *How to Catch and Hold a Man*.

Decades after the feminist movement promised equality with men, it was becoming increasingly apparent that many women would have to brush up on the venerable tricks of the trade: an absurdly charming little laugh, a pert toss of the head, an air of saucy triumph, dewy eyes, and a full knowledge of music, drawing, elegant note writing, and geography. It
would once more be considered captivating to lie on a chaise longue, pass a lacy handkerchief across the eyelids and complain of a case of springtime giddiness.

Today, women have gone back to hunting their quarry—in person and in cyberspace—with elaborate schemes designed to allow the deluded creatures to think they are the hunters. “Men like hunting, and we shouldn’t deprive them of their chance to do their hunting and mating rituals,” my 26-year-old friend Julie Bosman, a New York Times reporter, says. “As my mom says, Men don’t like to be chased.” Or as the Marvelettes sang, “The hunter gets captured by the game.”

These days the key to staying cool in the courtship rituals is b. & i., girls say—Busy and Important. “As much as you’re waiting for that little envelope to appear on your screen,” says Carrie Foster, a 29-year-old publicist in Washington, “you happen to have a lot of stuff to do anyway.” If a guy rejects you or turns out to be the essence of evil, you can ratchet up from b. & i. to c.b.b., Can’t Be Bothered. In the t.m.i.—Too Much Information—digital age, there can be infinite technological foreplay.

Helen Fisher, a Rutgers anthropologist, concurs with Julie: “What our grandmothers told us about playing hard to get is true. The whole point of the game is to impress and capture. It’s not about honesty. Many men and women, when they’re playing the courtship game, deceive so they can win. Novelty, excitement, and danger drive up dopamine in the brain. And both sexes brag.”

Women might dye their hair, apply makeup, and spend hours finding a hip-slimming dress, she said, while men may drive a nice car or wear a fancy suit that makes them seem richer than they are. In this retro world, a woman must play hard to get but stay soft as a kitten. And avoid sarcasm. Altogether . . .

WOMEN’S MAGAZINES

Cosmo is still the best-selling magazine on college campuses, as it was when I was in college, and the best-selling monthly magazine on the newsstand. The June 2005 issue, with Jessica Simpson on the cover, her cleavage spilling out of an orange croqueted halter dress, could have been June 1970. The headlines are familiar: “How to turn him on in 10 words or less,” “Do You Make Men M-E-L-T? Take Our Quiz,” “Bridal Special,” Cosmo’s stud search, and “Cosmo’s Most Famous Sex Tips: The Legendary Tricks That Have Brought Countless Guys to Their Knees.” (Sex Trick 4: “Place a glazed doughnut around your man’s member, then gently nibble the pastry and lick the icing . . . as well as his manhood.” Another favorite Cosmo trick is to yell out during sex which of your girlfriends thinks your man is hot.)

At any newsstand, you’ll see the original Cosmo girl’s man-crazy, sex-obsessed image endlessly, tiresomely replicated, even for the teen set. On the cover of Elle Girl: “267 Ways
to Look Hot.” “There has been lots of copying—look at Glamour,” Helen Gurley Brown, Cosmo’s founding editor told me and sighed. “I used to have all the sex to myself.”

Before it curdled into a collection of stereotypes, feminism had fleetingly held out a promise that there would be some precincts of womanly life that were not all about men. But it never quite materialized.

It took only a few decades to create a brazen new world where the highest ideal is to acknowledge your inner slut. I am woman; see me strip. Instead of peaceful havens of girl things and boy things, we have a society where women of all ages are striving to become self-actualized sex kittens. Hollywood actresses now work out by taking pole-dancing classes.

Female sexuality has been a confusing corkscrew path, not a serene progressive arc. We had decades of Victorian prudery, when women were not supposed to like sex. Then we had the pill and zipless encounters, when women were supposed to have the same animalistic drive as men. Then it was discovered—shock, horror!—that men and women are not alike in their desires. But zipless morphed into hookups, and the more one-night stands the girls on “Sex and the City” had, the grumpier they got.

Oddly enough, Felix Dennis, who created the top-selling Maxim, said he stole his “us against the world” lad-magazine attitude from women’s magazines like Cosmo. Just as women didn’t mind losing Cosmo’s prestigious fiction as the magazine got raunchier, plenty of guys were happy to lose the literary pretensions of venerable men’s magazines and embrace simple-minded gender stereotypes, like the Maxim manifesto instructing women, “If we see you in the morning and night, why call us at work?” . . .

AND THE FUTURE . . .

Having boomeranged once, will women do it again in a couple of decades? If we flash forward to 2030, will we see all those young women who thought trying to Have It All was a pointless slog, now middle-aged and stranded in suburbia, popping Ativan, struggling with rebellious teenagers, deserted by husbands for younger babes, unable to get back into a work force they never tried to be part of?

It’s easy to picture a surreally familiar scene when women realize they bought into a raw deal and old trap. With no power or money or independence, they’ll be mere domestic robots, lasering their legs, and waxing their floors—or vice versa—and desperately seeking a new Betty Friedan.

Excerpted from “What’s a Modern Girl to Do?” by Maureen Dowd, which first appeared in the New York Times, October 30, 2005

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How do you think sexual mores, dating, and male-female communication have changed since Sexual Perversity in Chicago was written (1973)? What social factors have influenced that change: e.g., the rise in sexually transmitted diseases, or more equitable economic status between men and women? How has the feminist movement affected relationships between men and women?

2. With which character do you identify most in the play (if any)? Do any of the characters remind you of people you know or have known?

3. What does this play say about relationships between men and women?

4. What does the play say about friendship? Why do Bernie and Joan criticize Danny and Deborah’s relationship? Why does it fail? How could they have found a way to stay together?

5. Think of yourself 30 years ago, or imagine yourself 30 years from now. What advice would your older self give your younger self about finding a mate? Would your younger self listen?

6. Are there fundamental differences in the way men and women behave and in the way they communicate? How does this play illustrate that?

7. What do you think of Mamet’s dialogue? Is it realistic? Poetic? Do you find Mamet’s use of coarse language offensive? Why or why not? How would the play be different if the story was told without coarse language?

8. How does the rhythm of the dialogue reflect what is happening between the characters on stage? When they interrupt themselves and each other, what do we learn about their state of mind? About their feelings for each other?

9. How do you think the play might be different if it were written today? If it were written by a woman? By a gay man or lesbian?
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION . . .

ON AND BY DAVID MAMET


t.e.k. “Pinter Patter.” Time, July 12, 1976.


WEB SITES OF INTEREST


ON DATING, SEX, LOVE


