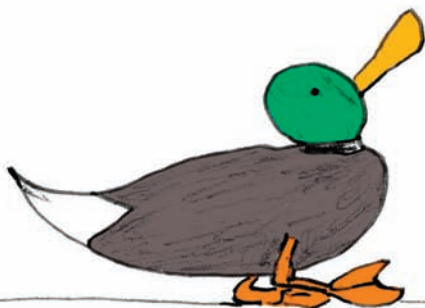


TWO UNRELATED
PLAYS

BY DAVID MAMET

DIRECTED BY NEIL PEPE
KIRK DOUGLAS THEATRE
MAY 11TH - JUNE 8TH 2008



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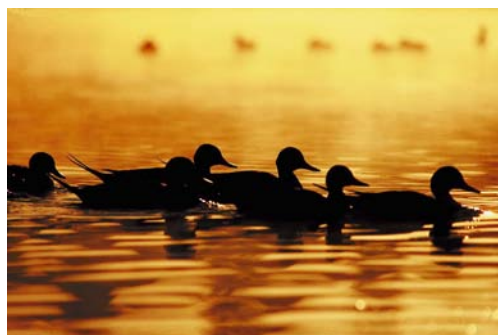
The Duck Variations AND Keep Your Pantheon DISCOVERY GUIDE



David Mamet

CENTER THEATRE GROUP has assembled a double-bill of David Mamet one-acts, comprising one of his earliest works and his most recent stage premiere. *The Duck Variations* reveals Mamet's early fascination with language in a fond elegy about two cantankerous old men, before the playwright shifted into the tough-talking swagger of his glory days. *Keep Your Pantheon*, his latest play, offers a more seasoned perspective on the perils of age, with a surprisingly comedic kick in the pants. Together, these plays book-end Mamet's celebrated career as a playwright. ●

Synopses



CENTER THEATRE GROUP'S presentation of David Mamet's one-acts, *The Duck Variations* and *Keep Your Pantheon*, offers two works positioned at either end of Mamet's impressive career as America's most prolific — and arguably most famous — living playwright. *The Duck Variations* (1972) was part of Mamet's triumphant off-off-Broadway debut in 1975, then paired with *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. More recently, *Keep Your Pantheon* (2005) was originally produced as a radio play for [BBC Radio](#) (airdate: May 28, 2007) and receives its stage premiere here.

In *The Duck Variations*, we meet Emil and George, two Jewish men in their sixties, who simply sit on a park bench and watch ducks. We witness fourteen conversations about ducks and duck behavior. Over the course of these variations on a theme, Mamet presents a sly meditation on the human condition and the meaning of life. Each ensuing conversation reveals a bit more about the reduced circumstances of these two elderly men; and their casual, conversational comments about ducks inevitably gravitate toward more substantial observations about family, career, friendship, happiness and death.

Set in ancient Rome, *Keep Your Pantheon* is a comedy of errors in which an impoverished theatrical troupe struggles to land their next gig and stay out of trouble. The plot concerns Strabo, a celebrated Roman actor who has fallen from popular favor and cannot even manage to pay the rent on his theatre space, much less catch a break under the autocratic Roman Empire. Just in the nick of time, Strabo and his actors luck into a lucrative opportunity performing for the wealthiest man in town. Unfortunately, Strabo leads his company to the wrong address and they unwittingly perform their offensive shtick for the solemn funeral of a fallen soldier in the Tenth Legion. This insensitive *faux pas* lands the actors in a jail cell, facing a death sentence. Just when they think they have been rescued with a sweet gig performing for Caesar, their luck takes yet another turn for the worse. Faithful to the bawdy humor of Roman comedies, *Keep Your Pantheon* also functions as a deceptively simple play with a substantial and modern statement about art and artifice. ●

Cast of Characters

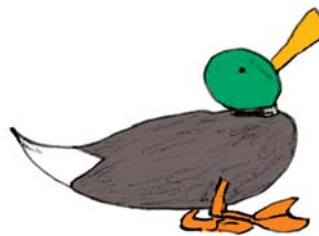
THE DUCK VARIATIONS



HAROLD GOULD
Emil Varec



MICHAEL LERNER
George S. Aronovitz



KEEP YOUR PANTHEON



ED O'NEILL
Strabo, a seasoned Roman actor



DAVID PAYMER
Pelargon, a character-actor in Strabo's company



MICHAEL CASSIDY
Philius, Strabo's handsome, youthful protégé



JACK WALLACE
Ramus, an old drunk



STEVEN GOLDSTEIN
Quintus Magnus, Strabo's landlord



DOMINIC HOFFMAN
Lupus Albus, commander of the Tenth African Legion



J. J. JOHNSTON
Titus, a soldier



VINCENT GUASTAFERRO
Herald



ROD McLACHLAN
Messenger/Ensemble



JEFFREY ADDISS
Ensemble



JONATHAN ROSSETTI
Ensemble

TALK ABOUT...

■ In *The Duck Variations*, Mamet riffs on the musical device of “theme and variations.” In a seemingly casual conversation between his characters, Mamet raises the subject of ducks — and then engages the audiences in 14 versions of the same conversation, slightly altered in tone and perspective. Stage directions in the script overtly instruct the actors to pause and prepare between each variation like musicians: “This interval is analogous to the space between movements in a musical presentation.” Does the experience of listening to *The Duck Variations* feel like a piece of music? Some would say that music does not tell a story but paints a picture and evokes thoughts and feelings. Does *The Duck Variations* do any of that?

■ Mamet made his name as a playwright with a tough-talking exploration of American masculinity in plays like *American Buffalo* (1976) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), which feature businessmen, con artists, politicians and criminals. Although *Keep Your Pantheon* is based in ancient Rome, its all-male cast invokes similar archetypes of men behaving badly. What does *Keep Your Pantheon* say about modern men and the values they attach to power, success, loyalty, honor and resourcefulness?

Hey, Mr. Producer



Why do new plays? “Why not?” says Center Theatre Group’s artistic director [Michael Ritchie](#), “Look, we’re not a museum. We’re here for the risk. That’s the conflict between art and commerce; we *are* a business but one based on taking financial risks and artistic risks.” It is a responsibility that requires him to keep one eye on the bottom line and the other eye on the horizon for new plays, new artists, new trends — and all the risks that come with them. “You gotta like the roller coaster,” Ritchie observes with a laugh. “You gotta like the unknown.”

When Mamet’s musical *A Waitress in Yellowstone* was put on hold for a second season, Ritchie and Mamet discussed their options. “Last year, he told me ‘I have nothing,’” Ritchie relates, “but this year, David suggested *Keep Your Pantheon*.” He credits director Neil Pepe with the idea of pairing the play with an earlier Mamet one-act, *The Duck Variations*. “He, much more than me,” says Ritchie, “had an opinion about using the material to create a unified evening.” All in all, Ritchie considers the switch-off to be a happy exchange. “What we’re missing,” he continues, “is a new musical by Mamet. What we’re *getting* is the world premiere of a new stage play by Mamet.”

The opportunity to launch new work is an undeniable source of pride for a theatrical producer. “A great play,” Ritchie explains, “say, *Death of a Salesman*, for example — has already been validated as a great play and all a producer has to do is to mount a solid production. But with a *new* play, nothing’s been validated and the producer participates in all the choices that bring that great new play to its first great new production. That’s something to be proud of.”

New Play Production

New plays do not necessarily jump off the page. Diane Rodriguez’s job title is Associate Producer/Director of New Play Production, but in reality, “my job is making airplane reservations, seeing shows and making nice with the artists afterwards,” she jokes. In addition to reading through a substantial stack of new scripts, “I go out in the world and see festivals. I go everywhere,” Rodriguez explains, “San Francisco, Denver, New York, including alternative theatre spaces



Diane Rodriguez

like *HERE* and *Under the Radar* in New York or *Campo Santo* in San Francisco. I’m always looking and reading in preparation for planning the next season.”

Playwrights are not the only source of new material at Center Theatre Group. “We’re exploring devised work,” Rodriguez continues. She points to Culture Clash’s *Chavez Ravine* as an example of a theatrical work that was devised in rehearsal by collaborative artists working without a scripted text. “Not that we’re abandoning the playwright at all, but we’re developing plays through collaborative artists. We’re currently developing a new piece by the creators of *all wear bowlers*, plus a magician. ‘What will that be?’ we wonder — and I guess we’ll see!” ●



Trey Lyford and Geoff Sobelle in *all wear bowlers* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in 2005. Photo by Craig Schwartz.



The Black Rider, Ahmanson Theatre, 2005, inspired vehement — and highly polarized — audience reaction. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

As artistic director of Center Theatre Group (CTG), Ritchie is responsible for as many as 22 theatrical productions a year, encompassing three venues: the [Ahmanson Theatre](#), the [Mark Taper Forum](#) and the [Kirk Douglas Theatre](#). He credits his rise through the technical theatre ranks as a stage manager for having provided him with a comprehensive knowledge of the process of making theatre. “I get it, from the first draft on the table to the close of the show,” he says. The task requires shouldering financial management, fundraising and human resources, “but in production,” Ritchie admits, “that’s where my real skills are.”

When it comes to finding those great new plays, Ritchie prefers not to attend staged readings. “The play reading becomes this awkward audition,” Ritchie notes. Instead, Ritchie prefers to read the play himself. “The thing that’s remarkable about Michael — among artistic directors — is that he likes to read scripts,” observes Pier Carlo Talenti, Literary Manager/Resident Dramaturg at CTG. “I get a thumbs-up or thumbs-down very quickly.”

“It’s very easy for me,” Ritchie explains. “I read the play, and if I want to turn the page, that’s a good sign. If I’m *not* interested in turning the page, odds are there’s not a good production there. But if it’s a comedy and I’m laughing or if it’s a drama and I’m intrigued, that’s a very good sign.” Interestingly, taste is not always a guiding concern. “Not liking a play is not always a reason not to do it,” says Ritchie.

“It’s true,” echoes Diane Rodriguez. “I’ve seen Michael finish a script and heard him say, ‘It’s not my cup of tea but I think we should do it.’ I’ve heard him say that more than once. He’s very open to shaking things up a bit, which I feel is what we’re doing.”

“You balance the art and the audience,” Ritchie concludes. “Ultimately, we’re taking our audiences on a long journey together. Not every show is going to suit the taste of every person who will attend. But I am convinced that if we consistently produce quality theatre, the audience will accept the ride.” ●

TALK ABOUT...

■ Most seasoned theatre-goers have seen a play and thought, “well, *that* wasn’t my cup of tea.” It might have been the style of the play, the quality of the production or the playwright’s attack on the subject. What plays were not “your cup of tea”? What didn’t you like about them? Have you seen any plays that you didn’t particularly like, but could appreciate on other grounds?

■ Theatrical producers take huge risks, both financially and artistically, when they stage new plays. What risks do you take in your own life, whether as part of your profession or part of your personal life? What makes something “risky”? What is *not* “worth the risk”? Why do we take risks?

■ Center Theatre Group goes to great lengths to keep current on plays, playwrights, directors, actors, designers and theatre companies. How do you find the “next new thing” in your work? And in your personal life? How do you keep up with the latest technology, trendiest restaurant, hippest club, hottest designer or newest provocative book or play? Do you rely on a website, a blog, a magazine, a friend?

Mametspeak



David Mamet's highly stylized approach to playwriting combines a certain sparse minimalism, bold, aggressive dialogue and a fascination with a particular brand of American masculinity, depicted by strong, scrappy male characters fighting like dogs to the bitter end. While these trademarks are readily apparent at the height of Mamet's career, they can also be seen in the two one-acts of this double bill. *The Duck Variations* was the first play by Mamet to receive serious attention and already it displays features revisited in Mamet's more celebrated work: a fixed setting, a slim plot, few characters and dialogue intended to reflect ordinary, everyday speech. *Keep Your Pantheon* takes a turn toward broader comedy and yet its ranks are still filled with men who wield power through words.

Mamet's signature is his keen ear for the slang and rhythms of American speech and his clipped rapid-fire attack on dialogue, reminiscent of playwrights Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett. Mamet acquired considerable notoriety for the barrage of foul-mouthed slurs and profanity exhibited in his *American Buffalo*, and again by the competitive real estate salesmen in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The rage and mean-spiritedness of Mamet's dialogue earned the moniker "[Mametspeak](#)." An oft-repeated Mamet joke concerns a businessman who admonishes a street beggar, "Neither a beggar nor a



Steven Hawley and Larry Bryggman in Mamet's *Romance* at the Mark Taper Forum in 2005. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

TALK ABOUT...

Mamet's characters tend to speak in a pastiche of expressions and adages cobbled together from many influences. Where do you pick up the expressions and catch phrases that you use? Are there catch phrases that you have acquired from television or film — or maybe the sayings of certain friends? Do you have a shorthand with your circle of friends that sounds like you're speaking in code?

borrower be.' William Shakespeare." — to which the beggar responds, "'F--k you.' David Mamet."

While extreme vulgarity is not on display in this double bill, one can still hear Mamet applying his instincts for the rhythms and nuances of language in *Keep Your Pantheon* and *The Duck Variations*. Mamet's characters use their language as a weapon in order to attack, defend, preserve or stake a claim. In *The Duck Variations*, Emil and George banter in "received" language, tossing Biblical-sounding adages ("...to find a mate and cleave into her until death does him part") and *National Geographic* platitudes ("The never-ending struggle between heredity and environment"), alongside half-remembered newspaper items, out-of-left-field catch phrases and greeting card sentiments in their efforts to describe what they see, remember and know. In *Keep Your Pantheon*, a veteran Roman actor has made a living off a gift for words and now struggles to survive by the same gift. Strabo's seasoned patter and comic timing reference the Roman comedies of Plautus as well as the Borscht Belt television sketch comedy of [Sid Caesar](#) and [Milton Berle](#). In this double bill, whether the characters are actors of antiquity living on the edge or contemporary men slipping into decline, these people have nothing but their language. ●

TALK ABOUT...

■ Mamet's name has become identified with Mametspeak, shorthand for sharp, aggressive, sometimes-vulgar, rapid-fire dialogue. Are there real people in your life whose personal names have been associated like slang with recognizable traits? (E.g. A college roommate named Lloyd was so famous for not returning items that "lloyding" became a verb meaning to permanently borrow.) If friends were to say they were "pulling a [insert your name here]," what personal trait of yours would they be referring to?

■ In *The Duck Variations*, Mamet constructs a profoundly meaningful dialogue out of a seemingly mundane conversation about ducks. Have you ever participated in a serious talk about seemingly insignificant items in order to weigh in on weightier subjects? Have you attended a funeral or a hospital visit where lighter topics were used to mine deeper truths?

Mamet in Hollywood

"Hollywood is like cocaine. You cannot understand its attraction until you are doing it. And when you are doing it, you are insane." —DAVID MAMET

David Mamet has a reputation in Hollywood as a player *and* a provocateur.

He is a prolific and enormously successful screenwriter, having written screenplays for several of Hollywood's top directors, including Bob Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Sidney Lumet's *The Verdict* and Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables*. Mamet has also achieved critical acclaim as the director of his own screenplays, including *House of Games*, *Things Change*, *Homicide*, *Oleanna* and *The Spanish Prisoner*. His screenplay for Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog* earned him Oscar and Golden Globe nominations for Best Screenplay. Mamet is currently trying his hand on television as the creator and co-executive producer of *The Unit* for CBS. He also has a new movie, *Redbelt*, scheduled for release in 2008.

Alongside these creative achievements, Mamet has a longstanding history of barbed criticism aimed directly at Hollywood. In his play *Speed the Plow*, an essay entitled "A Playwright in Hollywood" and his recent book *Bambi vs. Godzilla: On the Nature, Purpose and Practice of the Movie Business*, Mamet casts a critical eye on the enterprise of the entertainment industry. "Life in the movie business," says one of the characters in *Speed the Plow*, "is like the beginning of a new love affair: it's full of surprises and you're constantly getting f---d." Mamet's presence in Los Angeles has also resulted in a plethora of local premieres of new Mamet work for the stage, including *Romance* at the Mark Taper Forum and *A Boston Wedding* at the [Geffen Playhouse](#). ●

Resources

WEBSITES

- www.mamet.eserver.org The David Mamet Society: a one-stop shop for all things Mamet
- www.huffingtonpost.com/david-mamet/#blogger_bio A blog of hand-drawn topical and political cartoons by David Mamet
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HURJNdoJ4U&feature=related Al Pacino tackles Mametspeak

BOOKS

- [Mamet Plays, Volume 1](#) by David Mamet (Methuen Drama, 1996) *Glengarry Glen Ross* through *Speed the Plow*
- [Mamet Plays, Volume 2](#) by David Mamet (Methuen Drama, 2002) Includes *Oleanna*
- [Bambi vs. Godzilla: On the Nature, Purpose and Practice of the Movie Business](#) by David Mamet (Pantheon, 2007) Mamet rips Hollywood a new one.
- [Weasels and Wisemen: Ethics and Ethnicity in the Work of David Mamet](#) by Leslie Kane (Palgrave MacMillan, 1999) Critical analysis of the plays and films of David Mamet

FILMS WRITTEN BY DAVID MAMET

- [Redbelt](#) directed by David Mamet (Sony Pictures, 2008)
- [The Unit](#) Seasons 1 & 2 created by David Mamet (20th Century Fox, 2007)
- [Edmond](#) directed by Stuart Gordon (First Independent, 2005) Based on his play
- [Spartan](#) directed by David Mamet (Warner Bros., 2004)
- [Heist](#) directed by David Mamet (Warner Bros., 2002)
- [Hannibal](#) directed by Ridley Scott (MGM, 2001)
- [State and Main](#) directed by David Mamet (New Line Home Video, 2000)
- [The Winslow Boy](#) directed by David Mamet (Sony Pictures, 1999)
- [Ronin](#) directed by John Frankenheimer (MGM, 1998) Credited as Richard Weisz
- [Wag the Dog](#) directed by Barry Levinson (New Line Home Video, 1997)
- [The Spanish Prisoner](#) directed by David Mamet (Sony Pictures, 1997)
- [The Edge](#) directed by Lee Tamahori (20th Century Fox, 1997)
- [American Buffalo](#) directed by Michael Corrente (MGM, 1996) Based on his play
- [Oleanna](#) directed by David Mamet (MGM, 1994) Based on his play
- [Vanya on 42nd Street](#) directed by Louis Malle (Sony Pictures, 1994) Translated from Chekhov
- [Hoffa](#) directed by Danny DeVito (20th Century Fox, 1992)
- [Glengarry Glen Ross](#) directed by James Foley (Lions Gate, 1992) Based on his play
- [Homicide](#) directed by David Mamet (Lions Gate, 1991)
- [We're No Angels](#) directed by Neil Jordan (Paramount Pictures, 1989)
- [Things Change](#) directed by David Mamet (Sony Pictures, 1988)
- [House of Games](#) directed by David Mamet (MGM, 1987)
- [The Untouchables](#) directed by Brian De Palma (Paramount Pictures, 1987)
- [About Last Night...](#) directed by Edward Zwick (Sony Pictures, 1986) Based on his play *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*
- [The Verdict](#) directed by Sidney Lumet (20th Century Fox, 1982)
- [The Postman Always Rings Twice](#) directed by Bob Rafelson (Warner Bros., 1981)

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Leslie K. Johnson
Director of Education
and Outreach

Celeste Thompson
Department Manager

Kimiko Broder
Educational Programs Manager

Rachel Fain
Editorial Manager

Dan Harper
Educational Programs Associate

Emily Weisberg
Educational Programs Associate

Jennifer Hartmann
Education Services Agent

Christine Mantilla
Administrative Assistant

Corey Madden
Associate Artist and
Consultant to P.L.A.Y.

Discovery Guide Credits

Doug Cooney
Writer

Rachel Fain
Managing Editor

Howie Davidson
Editor

Jean Kling
Proofreader

Christopher Komuro
Graphic Designer

Special Thanks

Michael Ritchie
Diane Rodriguez
Pier Carlo Talenti

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