

# Language: Text & Subtext

"Inarticulateness becomes the direct theatrical representation of interior stress, of psychic missed-connections... the theatre of inarticulation ...may prove significant because, ironically, it lets us better understand: in other words because it lets us see the thought there."

**John Ditsky on Mamet**



Rehearsals



Rehearsals

### Playing the scene.

- ▶ Once you have discussed the text and the subtext, paying attention to rhythm and punctuation, try various ways of playing the scene. Exaggerate the subtext so that it becomes obvious to the point of being farcical. Try playing the scene again without any conscious playing of the subtext at all.
- ▶ To what extent does an actor need to reveal or conceal the subtext when acting this scene? How obvious is the subtext in this particular production?
- ▶ Did you feel that the audience needed to concentrate hard to be aware of the nuances of the text? If so, is this a good thing?

David Mamet has directed many of his own plays and has written extensively on directing and acting. At an early age, Mamet was influenced by Stanislavsky, through his training with Sanford Meisner. He believes in "playing the moment" and his work is said to be perfect for method acting. Jack Shepherd, an actor who has appeared in *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, suggests, "Prepare at home, and in rehearsal, in performance - let go."

"The business of acting is not to play the subtext. The business is to play the text and the subtext will look after itself."

**Director, Angus Jackson**

### Further exploration:

See Anne Dean's **David Mamet. Language as Dramatic Action** for more on Mamet's language.

Read David Mamet's **True and False** for his views on acting method.

Go to [www.bemorecreative.com/one/1286.htm](http://www.bemorecreative.com/one/1286.htm) for further information on Stanislavsky.

# “The whole truth lies in what you leave out.”

## Mamet



**Text: The spoken dialogue.**

**Subtext: The unspoken words  
of the characters.**

*(Neelands)*

Mamet's language may draw on other playwrights of the time, but his brand of "poetic realism" is unique, to the extent that the term "mametspeak" has been coined. All aspects of this carefully constructed dialogue are essential, not only in what is said, but also in what is revealed behind the words.

Many of Mamet's plays are brief and concise.

The language and the rhythms of the language are all important - even the obscenities need to scan! Mamet believes in the power of language to influence action "...the language we use, its rhythms, actually determine the way we behave, rather than the other way round." The beat, pauses, commas, and words in parenthesis all need to be carefully observed in performance. And it is only in performance that Mamet's work can truly come to life and be appreciated.



## The subtext.

"Voltaire said words were invented to hide feelings. That's what this play is about."

### Mamet on *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*

▷ Like Pinter, Mamet is aware of the use of language to conceal, and underlying the spoken language, the plays are rich in subtext. Examine this section from *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and make your own notes on what you think

**Dan and Bernard** are securing the office at the end of the day.

**Bernie** So what are we doing tomorrow, we <sup>1</sup>going to the beach?

**Danny** I'm <sup>2</sup>seeing Deborah.

**Bernie** Yeah? <sup>3</sup> You getting serious? I mean seemed like a hell of a girl, <sup>4</sup> huh? <sup>5</sup> The little I saw of her. <sup>6</sup> Not too this, not too that... very kind of... what? <sup>7</sup> (*Pause.*) <sup>8</sup> Well, what the fuck. I only saw her for a minute. I mean first impressions of this kind are often misleading, huh? <sup>9</sup> So what can you tell from seeing a broad one, two, ten times. <sup>10</sup> You're seeing a lot of this broad. <sup>11</sup> You getting serious? But what the fuck, <sup>12</sup> that's your business. Right? <sup>13</sup>

**Danny** Umm. <sup>14</sup>

**Bernie** So what are you guys going to do, maybe... what? Go to the zoo, or shopping? ... <sup>15</sup> She looked very intellectual. <sup>16</sup>

**Danny** Um. <sup>17</sup>

**Bernie** That's not always a bad thing. <sup>18</sup>

**Danny** No.

**Bernie** I mean what the fuck, <sup>19</sup> a guy wants to get it on with some broad on a more or less stable basis, who is to say him no. (*Pause.*) <sup>20</sup> A lot of these broads, you know, you just don't know. You know? <sup>21</sup> I mean what with where they've been and all. I mean a young woman in today's society ... time she's twenty two-three. <sup>22</sup> You don't know *where* the fuck <sup>23</sup> she's been. (*Pause.*) I'm just *talking* to you, you understand. <sup>24</sup>

the subtext is, before looking at the ideas that are already there. These may be different from your perception. Look for this section during the performance: what impression do you have?

- 1 Repetition of "we" at this point confidently assumes they will be together.
- 2 Marks himself as an individual - guilty or defiant?
- 3 Feigned surprise that Danny would want to spend time with a woman?
- 4 Falsely praises her to build confidence.
- 5 Testing his response.
- 6 Immediately plays down his statement - "I couldn't really tell."
- 7 She's not outstanding in any way.
- 8 Allows time for this idea to permeate.
- 9 Undermines the praise again and then seeks concurrence.
- 10 "You don't know her well enough to tell either."
- 11 Doesn't name her - she's just another woman.
- 12 As a sexual connotation - that's all it's about.
- 13 Or is it only your business?
- 14 Doubts creeping in? Not listening?
- 15 Boring "women's" alternatives to the beach.
- 16 Intellectual as opposed to attractive.
- 17 Even shorter response - is he annoyed or worried?
- 18 "But it usually is."
- 19 "It's just a sexual thing."
- 20 Allows time for Danny to realise it could affect their friendship.
- 21 Almost demands agreement.
- 22 Reminiscent of conversation about the "prostitute" in the opening conversation - that's what she is.
- 23 Re-enforces sexual nature.
- 24 "I'm on your side - I'm comforting you in your unfortunate situation."