



*A. T. & T.:
Anxiety, Telecommunications and the Theatre of David Mamet*

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Price Steven, « *A. T. et T.: Anxiety, Telecommunications and the Theatre of David Mamet* », *Cycnos*, vol. 12.1 (Instants de théâtre), 1995, mis en ligne en juillet 2008.

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[Cycnos, études anglophones](#)

revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

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EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

A. T. & T. : Anxiety, Telecommunications and
the Theatre of David Mamet

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The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. On this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers. Any attempt by the radio to give a truly public character to public occasions is a step in the right direction.
Bertolt Brecht¹

Why does a phone ringing on the stage create instant tension? Why is that tension so much less for an unanswered phone in a movie scene? The answer... is simply that the phone is a participant form that demands a partner.
Marshall McLuhan²

[T]he computerization of society... could become the “dream” instrument for controlling and regulating the market system... In that case, it would inevitably involve the use of terror. But it could also aid groups discussing metaprescriptives by supplying them with the information they usually lack for making knowledgeable decisions. The line to follow for computerization to take the second of these two paths is, in principle, quite simple : give the public free access to the memory and data banks.

Jean-François Lyotard³

The democratization of information for which theorists of media have so frequently called seems to have been realized in the recent development of the Internet. With each user able to supply as well as receive a superabundance of information, the Internet has created a potentially anarchic structure virtually beyond regulation ; and in so redressing the relationships of power between supplier and user, sender and addressee, it impacts on familiar theories of communication in popular media.

The semiological richness of theatre has always made it fertile ground for the exploration of such relationships. In this paper I shall consider a representative sample of the plays of David Mamet, who has recently been the subject of Bakhtinian and speech-act studies,⁴ but whose interest in the possibilities of

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen 1974) 52.

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964) 268.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) 67.

⁴ Ilkka Joki, *Mamet, Bakhtin, and the Dramatic: The Demotic as a Variable of Addressivity* (Abo: Abo Akademi UP, 1993); David Worster, “How to Do Things with Salesmen: David Mamet’s Speech-Act Play”, *Modern Drama* 37 (1994): 375-90.

other media as they are inscribed within theatre has so far gone largely unnoticed. The inevitable exception is *The Water Engine* (1977), which at various times has existed as short story, screenplay, radio play, stage play and teleplay. In published form it is a stage play, the set of which is the interior of a radio studio in which actors are performing a Hollywood-style story itself concerned with yet further media: newspapers, letters, telephones. The invitation to critics has not gone unheeded.

But in many of Mamet's other plays are less obvious examples of a sensitivity to the possibilities of different media interactions, a sensitivity which emerges particularly in moments of dramatic anxiety or stress. *Mr. Happiness* (1978), the companion-piece to *The Water Engine*, is a case in point.⁵ At first sight this short, one-character study of a radio agony aunt is 'nothing very deep or inspiring — merely an entertainment',⁶ but the inadequacy of this view becomes clear when the play is contrasted with the work which is in many ways its source, Nathaniel West's short novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), in which the eponymous agony aunt's life is shattered and finally ended by his inability to avoid a personal involvement with one of his correspondents.

West exploits two novelistic resources which Mamet's stage play sidesteps: an omniscient narrator, and character interaction. The novel not only gives us access to the hero's thoughts, but permits competing points of view which indicate that his perspective is only one among many. This leads to a somewhat melodramatic conclusion enforced both because of the momentum towards resolution created by the patterns of character relationships, and because the novel is a typographic medium: West's novel gives us the texts both of the correspondents and of Miss Lonelyhearts, who comes to recognise that he is a sham.

Mamet's *Mr. Happiness*, on the other hand, guards jealously his independence from his listeners. The medium of radio assists him in this, for all correspondence is mediated for us through his voice, which selects, edits and judges the letters. He removes the originals from circulation, allowing him to deliver his judgments with the awesome certainty of a 'chillingly disembodied speaking voice, one which holds power over its listeners because they, like good fascisti, have eagerly handed it over'.⁷

Mr. Happiness, the wholly detached figure Miss Lonelyhearts can never become, insists on the value of 'distance'. Initially he appears to equate this with emotional distance, remarking that 'we all need somebody to just tell our troubles to. Somebody with distance' who can 'see the facts' (80-81). This spurious objectivity, however, cannot escape the discourse specificity of what

⁵ David Mamet, *The Water Engine: An American Fable and Mr Happiness* (New York: Samuel French, 1983). Subsequent references are to this edition.

⁶ Steven H. Gale, "David Mamet: The Plays, 1972-1980", *Essays on Contemporary American Drama*, ed. Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim (Munich: Max Hueber, 1981) 215.

⁷ John Ditsky, "He Lets You See The Thought There": The Theatre of David Mamet', *Kansas Quarterly* 12 (1980) 31.

he regards as facts.⁸ While one critic feels that ‘Mr. Happiness offers a mixture of pieties, popular philosophy and cant mixed in with common sense’,⁹ what he says still amounts to a highly coherent value system. His advice may be clichéd and proverbial ; but as Roland Barthes suggested, an analysis of proverbs (or what he termed ‘the cultural code’) might lead to the possibility of their ‘ideological classification’.¹⁰ Mr. Happiness’s legitimation comes from proverbs, ‘the law’, ‘the Master’, and the belief that ‘[p]eople do not change’ (74-76). He is so closely implicated in the dominant ideology that he can see no alternative to it and must impose it onto desperate people, to an extent which may be gauged by the title of his book : *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* (82). It has been suggested that ‘the essence of the play lies less in the figure of Mr. Happiness than in the orchestrated cries of suffering, the sense of incompleteness, loss, and pain, the desperation that lies behind the letters’,¹¹ but this description applies more accurately to West’s novel ; in Mamet’s play, the desperation is orchestrated by Mr. Happiness alone. He it is who decides which letters are read, which parts of them, the tone in which they are read out and the remedy offered.

For these reasons one comes increasingly to feel that the ‘distance’ to which Mr. Happiness subscribes is physical distance. At the end of the piece his physical separation from the audience is emphasised : following a plug for his book, he reminds potential buyers to ‘include your name and your return address, or we won’t know who to send it to’, and the impersonality of the whole business is underlined by the reciprocal address : ‘Box “K”, Chelsea Station’ (82). He is at pains to stress this absolute control : ‘all correspondence sent to me is absolutely confidential... My files are locked and are available to no one but myself’ (77).

His show is not the interactive forum championed by Brecht. He knows his listeners write to him in desperate circumstances ; consequently he is powerful, they vulnerable. Furthermore, his confidence in the immutability of human nature allows him to claim that everything he says is received wisdom, ‘sage advice, and it doesn’t originate here. I just echo it’ (72). He might almost be echoing Marshall McLuhan as well : ‘Radio is provided with its cloak of invisibility, like any other medium. It comes to us ostensibly with person-to-person directness that is private and intimate, while in more urgent fact, it is really a subliminal echo chamber of magical power to touch remote and forgotten chords’.¹²

Mr. Happiness is never clear about originality. There is obviously a sense in which the advice is his alone. This supposition is strengthened for the theatre

⁸ See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980) 197-245; especially 243.

⁹ C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982-85) 3: 278.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975) 100.

¹¹ Bigsby, 278.

¹² McLuhan, 302.

audience by having him physically present before us ; and by the simple precept of adopting the name 'Mr. Happiness' he appears to his audience as a 'sage'. Yet the proverbial nature of his advice indicates that it is already situated by other discourses, which doubles his impregnability : both Mr. Happiness's person and his words are invisible and unimpeachable. So his authority is never open to question, and the occulting of both the sender of the message and the message itself is facilitated by the medium through which they speak.

Radio, as is often noted, is paradoxically the most visual of media because of the autonomy of the listener's visual imagination. For Angela Carter, 'radio always leaves that magical and enigmatic margin, that space of the invisible, which must be filled in by the imagination of the listener',¹³ while Mamet himself has recorded that '[w]orking for radio, I learned the way all great drama works : by leaving the endowment of characters, place, and especially action up to the audience'.¹⁴ But radio also gives Mr. Happiness opportunities to circumvent this autonomy. First, the extent to which the listener will recreate the speaker as a physical presence is open to question. While this affords the listener a degree of authority in the discourse, it has the unsettling effect of ensuring that the listener's perception of the speaker will always be inadequate, especially since 'Mr. Happiness' suggests an abstract quality rather than a person. Moreover, while for his listeners Mr. Happiness's visual identity remains a secret, the peculiar intimacy afforded by the medium gives him a dangerously physical presence as a voice :

As soon as we hear a word in a radio play, we are close to the experience it signifies ; in fact the sound is literally inside us. To submit to this kind of invasion, to allow another's picture of the universe to enter and undermine our own, is to become vulnerable in a way we do not when we watch a film or a play, where the alien world is demonstrably outside.¹⁵

Simultaneously intimate and distant, radio, more than any other medium, speaks to a mass audience with an air of confidentiality which is assiduously maintained, to the point at which one can receive the unsettling impression that the voice has become a material presence in the room. The danger then is that it might become prurient. Mr. Happiness achieves this effect by co-opting the visual sense, constantly reminding us of the powers of sight. Banally, he recommends his listeners to 'keep your Two Eyes Open' (72), but of far greater importance are those moments at which he reminds us of what he himself sees. 'You know, I say it every week, and I'll say it again. The situations that I see — your troubles... (they're my troubles too)' (74). Mr. Happiness's exploitation of an auditory medium, then, depends for its success on the implication that the speaker is privileged in matters of visual perception also. This impression is especially powerful because, while Mr. Happiness

¹³ Angela Carter, *Come Unto These Yellow Sands* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1985) 7.

¹⁴ David Mamet, *A Whore's Profession: Notes and Essays* (London: Faber, 1994) 118.

¹⁵ Frances Gray, 'The Nature of Radio Drama', *Radio Drama*, ed. Peter Lewis (London: Longman, 1981) 51.

seems to know everything about his correspondents, they can know nothing about this pseudonymous, invisible, and generally 'distant' entity.

Yet Mr. Happiness is intended for the stage, not the radio. For the lonely hearts Mr. Happiness is both anonymous and a valued friend. For the audience in the theatre, however, he is rather different. On stage an ironic and faintly ridiculous impression is created by the fact that these professions of intimate knowledge of human behaviour are uttered by an entirely solitary figure sitting isolated at his desk. The paradoxical co-existence of distance and intimacy, so essential to Mr. Happiness's authority, is demolished by its inscription within a medium which reintroduces the spatial co-ordinates which radio cannot control.

Eric Bogosian's *Talk Radio* (1985), written several years after Mamet's play and later turned into a film by Oliver Stone, at first seems similar in many respects. On the pretext of giving ordinary people a forum to air their views, Bogosian's hero, Barry Champlain, exploits his privileged position to insult them, distort what they say, or cut them off altogether. Champlain is manipulated by outside forces and lacks the autonomy of Mr. Happiness: his performance is judged by his executive producer; there is some tension between Champlain and his operator, Stu, who deliberately feeds him troublesome callers; and Champlain is obliged to please his sponsors. This might appear to give *Talk Radio* a more realistic edge than Mr. Happiness, by showing how the presenter is subject to economic forces.

In fact, the opposite is true. In Bogosian's play Champlain makes the mistake of inviting into the studio a caller, Kent, whose deranged talk throws Champlain and his show into confusion. This is the optimism of a play which has compromised its premise: in attempting to show that talk shows are manipulative because the presenter turns dialogue into monologue, the play actually succeeds in arguing the opposite — the presenter really is vulnerable to his listeners, not simply because he has been foolish enough to confront one of them in person, but because he has antagonized them (near the end of the play he announces, 'I despise each and every one of you' [15]).¹⁶ Bogosian shows little interest in the most dangerous aspect of radio talk shows, namely that in seeming to offer a democratic forum they can in fact become a platform for special interest groups, as has happened with a number of right-wing radio stations in America and could happen with the Internet, in which the National Rifle Association (for example) has developed a keen interest. Bogosian is more interested in the protagonist, as is shown in lengthy digressions in which other characters detail their relationships with Champlain. Mr. Happiness, by contrast, is not a "character"; he is not subject to but representative of certain interests, which have no intention of alienating their audience. Mamet maximizes the implications of the medium; by contrast, Bogosian's play, like his protagonist's show, finally turns what is

¹⁶ Eric Bogosian, *Talk Radio*, American Theatre 4 (1987), pull-out section, 15.

apparently a serious, even subversive format into an example of the entertainment it purports to challenge.

As Champlain's demise in *Talk Radio* would suggest, there are good reasons why Mr. Happiness does not talk to his correspondents live over the telephone and instead responds only to letters. To enter into what McLuhan calls a "cool" medium would risk undermining his authority to an unacceptable degree :

There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone... A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in "high definition"... Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meagre amount of information... Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone.¹⁷

By avoiding the cool medium of the telephone, Mr. Happiness maintains his authority and 'distance'.

Some examples from Mamet's plays will show how telephones operate within this structure of power and evasion. *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet's Pulitzer Prize-winning play of 1983, explores the world of real-estate salesmen who are subject to the whims of two bosses, Mitch and Murray, who control the salesmen's lives but who never appear on stage (although in the filmed version of 1993 Mamet introduced a character who fulfilled many of their functions). During the course of the play the real estate office is robbed not only of its documents but also, bizarrely, of its telephones. This event cannot be explained in terms of motivation ; it makes sense only in terms of its effects, and those effects relate directly to the questions of power and anxiety which surface consistently whenever Mamet brings to the stage a medium which provides a channel of communication between onstage and offstage worlds. In *Glengarry Glen Ross* the removal of the telephones eliminates a potential source of disruption and facilitates the exercise of executive power. McLuhan notes that 'it is not feasible to exercise delegated authority by telephone. The pyramidal structure of job-division and description and delegated powers cannot withstand the speed of the phone to by-pass all hierarchical arrangements, and to involve people in depth'.¹⁸ Such democratization of the workplace would be inimical to the interests of Mitch and Murray, while by contrast the theft of the telephones renders them untouchable, and so increases their authority. Their orders are now handed down by word of mouth : 'I talked to Mitch and Murray an hour ago', says Williamson, the office manager. 'They're coming in, you understand they're a bit upset'.¹⁹ The theft of the phones reinstates a pyramidal structure of

¹⁷ McLuhan, 22-23.

¹⁸ MPcLuhan, 271.

¹⁹ David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (London: Methuen, 1984) 43.

authority, power being handed down from Mitch and Murray to Williamson, and thence to the salesmen.

This highly original exploitation of a traditional and convenient stage prop is typical of Mamet's inventiveness. It is all too easy for a playwright to use radio and telephones as a convenient means of providing the audience with essential expository information, a habit parodied near the beginning of Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968) when the char, Mrs. Drudge, switches on the radio and immediately hears a police message concerning an escaped madman in the vicinity of Muldoon Manor. Shortly afterwards she answers the telephone :

Hello, the drawing-room of Lady Muldoon's country residence one morning in early spring?... Hello! — the draw —Who? Who did you wish to speak to? I'm afraid there is no one of that name here, this is all very mysterious and I'm sure it's leading up to something, I hope nothing is amiss for we, that is Lady Muldoon and her houseguests, are here cut off from the world, including Magnus, the wheelchair-ridden half-brother of her ladyship's husband Lord Albert Muldoon who ten years ago went out for a walk on the cliffs and was never seen again — and all alone, for they had no children.²⁰

Many of the telephone conversations in Mamet's plays are, by contrast, anti-expository. This is particularly noticeable in *American Buffalo* (1975), in which three small-time criminals called Teach, Don and Bob plan but comically fail to execute the theft of a collection of coins from a customer who has found a valuable item in Don's resale shop. One of the principal reasons for their failure is that the telephone won't give them the information they require. Their attempts to get in touch with a fourth member of the gang, Fletcher, consistently fail ; and it is this which mainly accounts for the non-development of the plot which offended some of the play's early critics. Not only is the telephone mute, it occasionally hands out misleading information. Teach's perfectly logical method of discovering whether the "mark" is at home by telephoning him backfires because, typically, he is unable to keep the idea stable in his head, and rings the wrong number. He transfers responsibility for the mistake away from himself, the incident becoming 'bizarre', and soon vents his anger on 'that fucking phone'.²¹ The telephone seems almost to have become a character in its own right. At moments Teach's idiom makes this fusion absolute : the coin collector is the 'phone guy' (28), just as the speaking clock is the 'phone broad' (65). By the end of the play the telephone seems almost to be conspiring in the characters' downfall : Bob tells Teach and Don that Fletcher is at Masonic Hospital, and is beaten up when they telephone Masonic and discover that he isn't there ; but when Ruthie, yet another figure who never makes an appearance, telephones to say that Fletcher is at a different hospital Teach and Don, who

²⁰ Tom Stoppard, *The Real Inspector Hound*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber, 1970) 15.

²¹ David Mamet, *American Buffalo* (London: Methuen, 1984) 73-75. Subsequent references are to this edition.

had assumed Bob's story was entirely bogus, both lose face. In each case the telephone simply offers the characters proof of their own errors, yet their rigorous denials — 'I never felt quite right on this', says Teach (100) — again seem to attribute responsibility to the phone itself, which is indeed a disruptive force insofar as it subverts audience expectations of conventional expository narration.

Further examples of this collocation of power, anxiety, absent figures and telephones is seen in *Speed-The-Plow* (1988), Mamet's satire on Hollywood, in which the plans of two executives, Gould and Fox, are temporarily disrupted by Gould's sexual interest in his temporary secretary, Karen. Telephones perform many functions in this play, but as far as Gould is concerned the provision of helpful information isn't one of them. Gould finds himself at the midway point between two demanding absences. From below, he is plagued by hopeful clients :

This morning the phone won't stop ringing... N'when I do return my calls, Charl, do you know what I'll tell those people?... I'm going to tell them "Go through Channels."'²²

Gould intends to use "channels" as a buffer zone between himself and troublesome hangers-on. However, "channels" also distance Gould from his boss, Richard Ross, whom Gould cannot contact without going through switchboard. Here Karen is crucial. To borrow Teach's term, one of Karen's roles is that of 'the phone broad', and her inefficiency with the console encapsulates Gould's difficulties in dealing with Ross, while her difficulties in responding positively to Gould's requests for coffee further suggest his impotence — relative to Ross — in dealing with his subordinates. Ross, like Mitch and Murray, inverts the everyday function of the telephone and turns it into a means of avoiding the dangers of direct verbal communication. Karen and the switchboard are buffers between him and Gould ; and while there is no suggestion that Ross is deliberately evading Gould, these buffers work against Gould's interests and confirm his passivity.

As the play develops, Karen's role becomes more active as she tries to persuade Gould to give the go-ahead to an art picture instead of the action-adventure "buddy film" he had been discussing with Fox, in which a star called Duggie Brown is to play a character who escapes from prison. Interestingly, one of the things which makes the Brown character so attractive to Fox and Gould is that in his escape he will demonstrate his facility with media, 'his knowledge of computers... his money... His Links to the Outside' (13). In all the examples above Mamet's figures of authority retained their power by using media as a semi-permeable membrane : information flows only one way. Telephones, radio, computers and cash are both the barriers between the senders of prescriptions and their addressees, and the means by which these prescriptions are carried. Duggie Brown's character is a hero

²² David Mamet, *Speed-the-Plow* (London: Methuen, 1988) 6. Subsequent references are to this edition.

because he has gained access to these media and begun to reverse the flow of information, breaking free of imprisonment and realizing a dream of escape. That Mamet's work has consistently explored the disruptive effects of media interactions suggests that he is a playwright somewhat less committed to a monologic authorial control of reception than he is often represented as being. While his own remarks have tended to identify his plays with an Aristotelian, linear and mythic formal structure, and while critical discussion has become more and more focused on the single issue of masculinity, the plays themselves have continued to destabilise these constructions by insisting on the disruptive effects of unseen, offstage forces. This is emphatically true of the most recent full-length play, *Oleanna* (1992), whose audiences were sometimes provoked almost to violence by the story of a male academic accused of sexual harassment by a female student. In *Oleanna* once again the onstage drama between John and Carol is constantly interrupted by the demands of a ringing telephone bringing messages from outside about John's academic tenure, his house, his wife; and while the messages are more conventionally expository than is usually the case in a Mamet play, they nevertheless again construct an alternative world which both interacts with and problematises the world onstage and draws attention to the real theme of the play, which is that facts (such as the nature of John's offence) have no privileged status beyond what has been conventionally agreed. That these facts are subject to questioning by differing versions brought in from outside suggests that Mamet, far from presenting his audience with a monologic argument, is acutely aware of the stage as a site for the presentation of conflicting versions of truth as they are encoded within competing media. Perhaps a greater critical sensitivity to the differing effects of these media will begin to open up new areas of debate on the merits of his work.