Inquiries and Challenges of Current Politics on the Contemporary American Stage:
Sam Shepard’s *Kicking a Dead Horse* and David Mamet’s *November*

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Abstract

This paper centers on two plays written and presented for the first time at the end of the George W. Bush eight-year presidency and which, to a great extent, constitute inventive responses to this particular era and its political climate that pervaded not only the US but the entire world. While differing markedly from each other, not merely in style and tone but more importantly in their respective scopes, their aims and targets, Sam Shepard’s *Kicking a Dead Horse*, a dark monologic parable—often received as a sharp tirade against America’s present state—and David Mamet’s *November*, a seemingly light-hearted satire—conceived by its author as a love-letter to his country—invite a comparative reading. Both plays offer not just a profitable insight into the limitations and restrictions of the contemporary American stage once it is faced with the challenge of accommodating the political, but also an engaging view into what remains exceptional and inexhaustible about its reserves whenever it strives to grapple with the present moment when the line between what is cast as anti-American and what is not proves more difficult to be clearly drawn than ever before.

Keywords: American theatre, 21st century, politics

The interaction between aesthetics and politics defines significantly the course of evolution Western art follows, both on the plane of theory and in terms of practice. In their endeavors to account for this close link, artists and theorists alike invariably highlight that this is both an inevitable encounter and a demanding venture. In his seminal treatise on politics and art titled “Commitment,” Theodor Adorno focuses on the oeuvre of Bertolt Brecht and carefully notes that: “[i]t is futile to try to separate the beauties, real or imaginary, of his works from their political intentions” (186). More importantly, moving beyond Brecht and the field of drama, Adorno examines general practices through which “political falsehood stains the aesthetic form” (“Commitment” 186), and usefully explains that “the less works have to proclaim what they cannot completely believe themselves, the more telling they become in their own right; and the less they need a surplus of meaning beyond what they are” (“Commitment” 187).

In candid reviews of this interaction on the contemporary American stage, attention is given to both the adversary conditions the form faces and the exceptional position it holds within the wide spectrum of current cultural production. In the early 1990s, Herbert Blau, in a poignant yet revealing fashion, argued: “our most fervent political impulses in the theater seem to be stillborn in a society where nobody except Jesse Helms takes them seriously enough to be vigilant about them at all” (24). Difficult as it might be to refute Blau’s argument, it is equally valuable to take into account Fredric Jameson’s observation on the value of works which prove theatre “an institution microcosmic of society as a whole […] an
experimental space and collective laboratory” (11). On the whole, as David Savran accurately notes, the value of the political reserves of the contemporary American stage cannot be adequately assessed without reference to the fact that “since the 1930s [it] has been positioned as a relatively oppositional cultural formation” (“Haunted Houses” 584), and without considering its precarious status as a “marginalized and endangered form of cultural production” (“Haunted Houses” 589).

The effort to assess the present moment on stage, whether one endorses connections with any given political agenda or not, prescribes that one handles the pressing and complicated issue of efficacy. The two plays discussed here epitomize precisely this challenge. Sam Shepard’s Kicking a Dead Horse and David Mamet’s November1 were developed as inventive responses to the George W. Bush era and its political climate that pervaded not only the US but the entire world. Thus, they target aspects of the dire state of the national and global context in the post-9/11 years, with the ensuing war on terror in full swing and the vastly consequential collapse of Lehman Brothers already on its way. In particular, Shepard and Mamet aspire to address a moment of permanent change and multileveled dissolution yet one also of absolute “stasis” which, in Jameson’s phrasing, through “the twin condition of market and globalization, commodification and financial speculation [...] certainly seems to have outstripped any place for human agency, and to have rendered the latter obsolete” (4). In his own turn, David Harvey offers an insightful account of how “computer-driven split-second [...] incredible volatility [of] stock trading” (323) has become thoroughly contagious and presently informs all other aspects not only of the economy, but also of the social, cultural, and political life in modernity.

It was in the early moments of the phenomenon Harvey terms a “financial Katrina” (330) that these two plays received their first productions on home ground and were tested against the challenge of accommodating the political on stage. On this plane of inquiry, it is instructive to study carefully the areas Baz Kershaw outlines as “the micro-level of individual shows and the macro-level of the socio-political order [which] might somehow productively interact” (1). In particular, interest revolves around the possibility that theater might “influence, however minutely, the general historical evolution of wider social and political realities” (Kershaw 1). Following this type of interrogation, the questions that arise in relation to the two plays studied here are formulated as follows: how difficult is it to predetermine the type of effect these works are to exert on theater-goers, given the adversary socio-political parameters of the present moment as well as the consciousness of the form’s “marginalized and endangered” position? In what ways does the preoccupation with the issue of efficacy affect all aspects of the dramatic field? In other words, how do the playwrights’ own questions over the width and depth of this effect shape aesthetics and define themes? Finally, how easily can individual works fall prey to the enemy Blau defines as “the liberal fiction of high seriousness with next to no political efficacy at all” (23)?

In Shepard’s Kicking a Dead Horse, the effort to examine and possibly counterattack the impasse and awkwardness of the highly volatile yet numb present moment is structured

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1 Kicking a Dead Horse received its world premiere at Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 2007. The first American production of the play was presented at The Public Theater in New York in 2008. November was first presented at The Ethel Barrymore Theater in New York in 2008.
around the presence of an utterly displaced figure. The sole character onstage is an art dealer who finds himself stranded as his lonely expedition westwards comes to an abrupt, unsurpassable halt when his horse unexpectedly dies halfway to a thoroughly obscure destination. Hobart Struther is outlined as “an urban businessman who has suddenly decided to rough it” (10) and is set against the emptiness of a space that vaguely recalls the atmosphere of “an open prairie at midday” (9). In short, he now faces no other duty than burying his dead horse. The impossibility of the task as well as the emphasis on excessive realistic detail—an actual dead horse onstage is what the stage directions prescribe—serve to clarify that this is a metaphorical image, as blatant and corpulent as consciously uncontainable.

The bareness of the setting and, more importantly, the very lack of action are counterweighted and simultaneously intensified by the monologue Hobart delivers. This is a direct and self-reflective rendering of a moment of stasis, as the character’s own commentary on the surroundings reveals: “Empty – Badlands – Horizon to horizon. No road – no car – no tiny house – no friendly Seven Eleven. Nada. Can’t even track where I could have left the truck and trailer” (11). Only a few minutes of his monologue suffice to show that the dream of embarking on “a quest for AUTHENTICITY” (12, emphasis in original) has led him to this absurdly fixed pose. Interestingly enough, within this stifled instance Hobart is given the chance to assess the value of unaffected confession as he looks back on his family life and retraces phases of his professional career. Answering more than anything else his need for an addressee, the character turns inevitably to the audience and himself. For most of the piece, the monologue is divided between Hobart’s own two voices and, thus, time and space is given to an inner dialogue as such. Shepard bears down to its essentials a loyally trusted technique of his that has yielded results in numerous works, from *The Mad Dog Blues* (1971) to *True West* (1980) and beyond.² Confined within the terrain that his own two voices outline, the character entertains no hope for communication with an outside agent. It is important to note that there is no single instance in which he is expected to actually interact with the spectators. Rather, his direct addresses to the audience constitute palpable evidence of the fact that the politically redeeming approach that Jameson outlines as a course in which “individuality [is] not effaced but completed by collectivity” (10) proves at present an unrealistic, almost oneiric aspiration. Hobart is destined to repeatedly return to his own non-complemented “individuality” and thus remains unable to find refuge in this desert landscape of expended interiority.

The immediate reflection between the microcosmic terrain of the bare setting and the macrocosmic one of the present sociopolitical context prescribes that the two areas are subjected to parallel examination. Thus, in particular, distinguishing what is essential and valid from what is affected and fake remains a major challenge for Hobart when he turns to the collective sphere of American ethos and identity, as his reference to the pioneers reveals: “They must have been a desperate bunch, the pioneers […] All this – space. What were they thinking? Just movement” (21-22). While retracing fragments of American history, he comments on fundamental notions and values which were early on abused, in ways not

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² In works such as *The Mad Dog Blues* and *True West*, there are strong indications that characterization and dialogue construction result through a process in which an original monologue is divided into two parts and then assigned to the voices of two closely interrelated characters.
unrelated to current widely applied practices. Pointedly enough, he voices a curt, yet sharp remark on how freedom was appropriated as a lure and eventually a trap so that Crazy Horse—in his assessment as a “true American Hero” (30)—could be defeated: “Freedom, they called it” (30). Shepard sees Hobart in a territory thoroughly removed from a pure democratic context that would ideally rest upon quintessentially American notions such as those of self-trust and self-reliance. The specificity of the moment determines that Hobart’s quest for authenticity is only translated as a terribly mutated realization of the values that central figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson heralded as truly defining American attributes. In this case, experimenting along the axis of self-sufficiency culminates to a condition of terminal self-entrapment. The absolute scarcity of reserves renders all aspirations for an Emersonian experience of authentic freedom plainly immaterial.

The wide range of the political repercussions of this self-inflicted occasion of imprisonment is carefully highlighted throughout the piece. Thus, the instructive reminder captured in the simple, short phrase, “the horse is dead” (25), informs the work aesthetically, structurally, and thematically, and serves to foreground primarily the question of responsibility. In simple terms, the audience cannot fail to ignore the clear fact that the agents of power are responsible for this state of utter collapse. All in all, the present deadlock is a direct consequence of the scheme employed to ensure that the horse is fully exploited. Specifically, one of Hobart’s two voices openly confesses: “I wanted to – fire him up” (34). The effort to attain an understanding of this collective encasement and envision a response to the surrounding deadness persists as long as the monologue spans its course. The character intriguingly draws attention to the absurdity of his own gestures: “You keep kicking your horse. HE’S DEAD! HE’S FUCKING DEAD!” (38, emphasis in original). Furthermore, the task of addressing the present moment proves equally monstrous in all its rigidity and unresponsiveness, and literally looms over the stage as the very concretization of exhaustion, not merely in terms of physical strength but obviously in relation to ideals and prospects, alternatives and assets. The crescendo of the monologue delivered against the setting of a raging storm leads to the culmination of the thematic concerns and the intensification of the structural pros and cons of the piece:

I do not understand why I’m having so much trouble taming the Wild. I’ve done this already. Haven’t I already been through all this? We closed the frontier in 1890 – something, didn’t we? Didn’t we already accomplish that? The Iron Horse – coast to coast. Blasted all the buffalo out of here. An ocean of bones from sea to shining sea. Chased the heathen Redman down to Florida. Trails of tears. Paid the Niggers off in mules and rich black dirt. Whupped the Chinese and strung them with their own damn ponytails. Decapitated the Mexicans. Erected steel walls. Sucked these hills barren of gold. Ripped the top soil as far as the eye can see. Dammed up all the rivers and flooded the valleys for recreational purposes. Run off the small farmers. Destroyed education. Turned our children into criminals. Demolished art. Invaded sovereign nations. What else can we possibly do? (42)

In full accordance with the entire metaphorical pattern prevalent throughout the work, the peak of Hobart’s address constitutes by all means an uncontrollable eruption. Yet, despite the awkward tension of the moment, the character’s outburst productively offers time and space to the question of “gratuitous sunny days [...] never deserved” (43), which apparently have
ushered in the current state of unsurpassable exhaustion. Even more importantly, the same instance allows the addressee to articulate a poignant remark on the enemy residing within borders:

Why are you such a bitter enemy?
We don’t have much in common. Do we?
No, I guess not. (44)

Hobart’s foremost enemy is precisely the enemy within and, as a result, dreaming of a “bright - shining - sunny day” (46) proves totally preposterous a gesture on his part, just as any possible recourse to the Emersonian notions of self-trust and self-reliance would be absurd for him. Thus, his anxious call for any elemental sign of a reaction endures to the last word he utters; being now invisible, he addresses the audience and himself from the grave he has dug for his horse, the body of which eventually slides towards it, yet without being totally contained. Coming face to face with its own restrictions and limitations, but also investing in its exclusive live dynamics, Hobart’s tirade delivers its potential not through a scheme of antithesis but precisely because it remains a tirade as such; as genuine and unaffected as unmanageable and incomplete.

It is instructive to note that since this is a monologue conceived specifically for the stage, there are no prescriptions for tricks or techniques of cover-up and camouflage. On the contrary, the play attempts an insight into the bankruptcy of the current socio-political context which aspires to be as open and direct as the address of its own awkwardness vis-à-vis these challenging questions. The argument that, in this case, Shepard appears to be content with offering his audience “a blunt position paper” (Isherwood), cannot be adequately supported. Since, what should not be ignored is the fact that signifying onstage one’s own shortage of means and assets, and registering one’s own struggle to identify vital resources of argumentation and expression, constitutes a polyvalent occasion of semiosis in its own right.

The play faces the wilderness of the moment and the specificity of its confines, and thus, in a certain respect, confirms Adorno’s point that, under particular circumstances, art proves the only area where “suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it” (“Commitment” 188). In this case, standing voiceless is an occurrence of severe suffering which is given ample time and space. Hobart as a character remains to the very end bereft of even the faintest trace of Emersonian freedom. Yet, the work assumes a stance which echoes and verifies this important American legacy as it almost harks back to Emerson’s call summarized in the words: “stand there, baulked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee” (231). On this occasion, the effort revolves around a persistent ‘rage,’ a feature that may indeed prove redeeming onstage once adequately handled. Furthermore, it may even serve to invite future explorations of these concerns which will, hopefully, be realized in better equipped stage vehicles and more effective forms.

In November, Mamet’s diametrically opposed tactics of reviewing the peculiarities of the exact same moment bespeak the playwright’s confidence in handling the subgenre of the farce. His response to the question of efficacy certifies that laughter is possible and may become effective, provided one exposes adequately the cynicism of the agents responsible for the very context of terminally expended resources with which Shepard struggles in Kicking a
**Dead Horse.** The qualities of Mamet’s venture and its questionable effect on stage are already manifest in the opening scene in which President Charles Smith faces the grim prospect of not winning a second term and considers the details of his predicament assisted by one of his officials:

ARCHER. You’ve screwed the country into a cocked hat.
CHARLES. Yes, but at least I’ve done something. What has the other fella done? (8, emphasis in original)

Early instances of this type of interaction allow the audience to realize that the playwright handles Charles Smith in a mode which mirrors directly the character’s general attitude and worldview. Whether he addresses thorny issues and challenges or interacts with people, the president recognizes no limits and no rules of decency and propriety. On his part, Mamet adopts a mode of ridiculing him which is equally uncompromised. The main sphere of ridicule develops around Charles’s refusal to accept the fact that this is the final phase of his presidency. President Smith refuses to account for the fact that he has long been politically dead, and instead clings passionately to the two integral parts of his survival kit, that is, his campaign sponsors and his speechwriter. For the same reason, he is seen playing around with the significance of national holidays and stretching in every imaginable possible way the limits of political correctness.

Throughout the play, action and plot development are exclusively dependent upon an infinite series of prank-like instances that this absolute manipulation of everyone and everything yields. However, precisely because Charles and his ways are subjected to a limitless and uncontained type of ridicule, it becomes impossible for the audience to distinguish what or who is being targeted every split second that the stage registers. Indeed, the political stance of the piece proves uncertain at least, and thus it is never clear whether exclamations of the type “we’re the preeminent nation in the world” (20) should be embraced or thoroughly rejected within the theoretical plane and the performative scheme the work proposes.

In his effort to identify Charles as a character, New York Times reviewer Ben Brantley explains that he is a “cheerfully corrupt” president (“Review of November”). Indeed, serious problems arise in the play precisely because the playwright casts the character in a light of “cheerfulness.” In particular, he offers his audience this occasion of absolute derision and thorough dismantling, yet without being motivated to demonstrate why it is that the case of President Smith signifies a highly lethal political anomaly. Rather, what gets approved in this work is the exact opposite route from the one Harold Pinter, for instance, follows in most of his works. As critic Basil Chiasson highlights in his discussion of the sketch *Precisely* (1983), Pinter carefully introduces audiences to “a real that is unbearable and impels [them] to think this specific political reality without abstracting it and, therefore, without obfuscating its violence and material consequences” (85). It is important to note that Mamet himself has successfully exposed audiences to the “unbearable real” in earlier works such as *American Buffalo* (1975) and *Glengarry Glenn Ross* (1983). In sharp contrast, *November* is noted for its absurd farcical tone and thrashing cynicism which eventually “obfuscate” everything, including the political violence that it sets out to castigate.
In concrete terms, one of the major questions that the play fails to answer concerns the exact sphere of signification which is aimed when opposed notions and antithetical practices are subjected to thorough undermining. In other words, the central issue in this case develops around the precise nature and ultimate target of the criticism which is voiced when democracy is “cheerfully” equated with bribing (65) or laughter is expected to be generated because Bernstein, the presidential speechwriter, is labeled a lesbian whose “head is full of trash” (66).

The questionable effect of this farce is closely related to the fact that the piece relies on a series of seriously miscalculated shortcuts. It is instructive to underline that in a theoretical piece of writing titled “Why I Am No Longer a ‘Brain-Dead’ Liberal,” published only a few weeks after the play premiered, the playwright attempts a series of similar shortcuts in his discussion of central issues pertaining to U.S. history, culture and current politics. He argues, for example, that, to a great extent, George W. Bush resembles John F. Kennedy in his ways and methods. Mamet, the essayist, resorts to a series of blatant logical shortcuts which obliterate critical distances between disparate historical moments and similarly downplay the significance of the qualities that separate different political perspectives. Regarding the article, individual readers are allowed to decide whether they will follow this type of interrogation by accepting such consequential leaps. In the case of the play, the shortcuts prove not just unconvincing but also totally ineffective.

The playwright’s effort to control his material by juxtaposing two inherently opposed worldviews produces highly debatable results. The outlooks of Charles and Bernstein are contrasted so that an effective political performative scheme can materialize. As Mamet himself explains, “[t]he argument in [this] play is between a president who is self-interested, corrupt, suborned, and realistic, and his leftist, lesbian, utopian-socialist speechwriter” (“Brain-Dead Liberal”). However, it is extremely difficult if not literally impossible for the audience to appreciate Charles’s “realistic” course of reasoning. A scene epitomizing this serious drawback develops around Charles’s decision to launch an attack on Bernstein when his pressing need for a salvaging speech is met with his speechwriter’s eagerness to get officially married with her girlfriend right at the White House. Unable to reach a deal, Charles resorts to crude harassment and in his typical tone chooses to castigate vehemently what he labels “a free pass”:

ALL THIS BUSHWA “OPPRESSION” YOU’RE BITCHING ABOUT, IS ON A FREE PASS. A. FREE. PASS. ‘CAUSE YOU’RE A BROAD. What the hell … I don’t care. Ship her to …” (71, emphasis in original)

In a reluctant mode, the scene interrogates the conditions on which this “free pass” is accessible in present-day America. The peculiar repercussions of Charles’s heated remark cannot go easily missing with Mamet’s intended audience, for the U.S. sociopolitical context has been indelibly marked by the long and ever-present fights of ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities for visibility. The playwright’s confession about his own recent moment of realization that he has long been riding on a free pass is no less obscure and perplexing than Charles’s response.
It is important to note that significant shortcomings mark even those scenes which offer an insight into the claustrophobic terrain of decision-making. Thus, the objective of the farce remains unidentified to the very last scene. The blurred political vision of the piece is accentuated when Charles experiences a moment of epiphany. The president’s abrupt change of mind, that is, his decision to step down, comes after he survives an attack by the disillusioned Native American, Dwight Grackle. In a scene the properties of which owe a great lot to popular cartoons, the dart never reaches Charles thanks to the amulet that hangs around the neck of Bernstein, who thus manages to gain the former’s consent to get married (114).

Pulverizing what the work itself casts as aspects of the liberal agenda without any valid justification and ridiculing all varying realizations of political correctness for no serious profit are gestures that leave audiences simply disoriented. The qualities of this opaque account of current politics are intensified as the play ends on the main character’s words: “Jesus I love this country” (120). For all the emphatic tone of the phrase, it remains unclear what it is exactly that Charles finds lovable in present-day America. In relation to the political efficacy of theater work, it is significant to note that Mamet has distinctly identified each play’s “own logical syllogism” (qtd in Savran, In their own Words 142) as his primary goal. However, in this case serious problems arise precisely because no adequate time and space is ever offered to the distinctive “logical syllogism” of the piece. As a result, the audience experiences great difficulty not only in identifying the work’s target of ridicule, but equally so in recognizing whether there are any perspectives and gestures that the play aspires to advocate, even if elementally.

In a peculiar fashion, November, a work that the author himself recognizes as his “love-letter to America” (Secret Knowledge 6), is ultimately informed by the whimsical cartoon-like metamorphosis of the main character in the final scene. Similarly, the playwright’s own recent denouncement of the liberal agenda emerges precariously grounded in regard to its “own logical syllogism.” Mamet’s largely unsupported arguments are complemented by an emphatic endorsement of America’s eudemonia, captured in phrases of the following type: “we in the United States get from day to day under rather wonderful and privileged circumstances” (“Brain-Dead Liberal”). It is important to note that being similar in nature to the modes in which significant and expansive areas in the play are left unattended, this debatable celebration of “America’s ‘holiday from history’” (Žižek 246) prescribes that a considerable lot is consequentially left unaddressed. Responding to the current socio-political context of the U.S. and, yet choosing to ignore the obvious fact that Slavoj Žižek succinctly captures when he notes that this ostensible holiday “was bought at the price of catastrophes elsewhere” (246) are acts of grave consequences. All in all, the playwright’s late realization that he has long profited from the very context he previously used to castigate wholeheartedly is simply shortsighted, for it cancels out indispensible perspectives such as the one Žižek highlights: “in principle, of course, one should be indifferent to the struggle between the liberal and conservative poles of today’s official politics—however, one can only afford to be indifferent if the liberal option is in power” (301, emphasis in original). In November, Mamet fails to answer whether what counts is that the liberal agenda is central or that it can be so easily derided and betrayed, and thus ends up signing a “love-letter” to his country which proves devoid of any substantial message. In sharp contrast to Hobart’s tirade, which attains
its potential by remaining loyal to its specific nature, this confession of love is by no means genuine, precisely because the very essence of such an act is utterly disregarded.

The two plays highlight in markedly separate ways the demands that political inquiries pose for the contemporary American stage. Evidently, both works experiment with different modes and techniques as they aspire to counterattack modern American theater’s strong inclination towards “straightforward narratives and emphatic engagement” (Westgate 33). However, equally obvious is the fact that these two works diverge decidedly in interrogating dilemmas and peculiarities of the enveloping sociopolitical context. In particular, the two playwrights respond entirely differently to the contention that in drama and theater, political efficacy is to a great extent synonymous with the challenge Adorno has influentially outlined as the effort to fashion “perspectives […] that displace and estrange the world [by exposing] its rifts and crevices” (Minima Moralia 247). Shepard and Mamet, in these two cases, follow opposite routes and, in a certain respect, do lie in complete disagreement with each other. Yet, the works they offer reconfirm, in their own distinct ways, Adorno’s point that in terms of political efficacy individual works are rarely in need of “a surplus of meaning beyond what they are” (“Commitment” 187).

Works Cited


