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Is There Drama in Contemporary America? Is There Postmodernism in American Drama? Shepard vs. Mamet – Whose America is (More) Real?

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Abstract

Judged by the literary research conducted over the last decades of the previous and the first decade of this century, not only was drama an illegitimate offspring in the American literature but was also treated as a weak premature-born child in the postmodernist thought in general. A stage cohabitation of the postmodern experiment and a realist frame in the contemporary theatre is well illustrated by the two popular contemporary playwrights: Sam Shepard and David Mamet. By their creative opus, not only in the fields of drama and theatre, but also in other literary genres (poetry, essay) as well as in film, through a variety of different characters and situations, these two authors reveal a rich variety of the many possible variations of American social (con)text. The society will be read in their plays as a unique cultural text outside which, as Derrida said, there is nothing. America, its myths and contemporary cultural industry, its class, racial and gender conflicts and the two authors established a mutual set of influences. The playwrights borrow raw materials from the treasury of mass culture (or should it, to be true to the new consumer culture, be more appropriate to say a warehouse) break it down and re-assemble fragments into collages that articulate the contemporary issues in more condensed, more intense and more effective ways. Mamet and Shepard borrow from the contemporary culture only to pay it back with interest: they endow the cultural (con)text with a richer content, impregnated with meaning.

Keywords: Postmodernism, America, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, mass culture, consumerism

1 AMERICAN DRAMA AND POSTMODERNISM

Although American conservative politicians have dealt intensively with American drama, or rather with its playwrights, American literary scholars have long persisted in considering it “an illegitimate child“. At the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century Susan Harris Smith claimed that the “hegemony of genre” was what kept American drama outside the literary canon. Drama is an unwanted child in the American literary family, not accepted by the omnipotent father – the critic(s), with the reasons for this being of a literary-historical nature. Among these, the most pronounced are: the remnants of a Puritan discomfort with theatre, competition with European, mainly British, role-models, and last but not least – the long tyranny of New Criticism, with its strong emphasis on Modernist sensibility (Smith, 1997).

In line with the above mentioned unhappy circumstances which the American literary bastard child, “the illegitimate offspring of an unholy union between misguided American writers and the commercial stage” (Schroeder, 420-427) found itself in, Patricia R. Schroeder, the author of the essay with the rather indicative title “Legitimizing the Bastard Child: Two New Looks at American Drama”, after having voiced her wish to write on American drama, had to give a great deal of thought to what her respected American literature professor said during an informal conversation: “Unless you want to write on Eugene O’Neill, there really isn’t any American drama” (Schroeder 420-427).

According to Schroeder, American drama is also out of favour with more recent critical voices, possibly due to the American theatre’s dependency on production hierarchies dominated by white males. The same pitiless parent who once mercilessly rejected American drama now seems to be the main culprit responsible for its being out of favor with critics all the more inclined to adopt the suppressed objects (Others) from the American margin. In their view, drama is still inextricably interconnected with the *traditional* and (therefore) the *oppressive*. (Schroeder 420-427).

Judged by the literary research conducted over the final decades of the previous and the first decade of this century, not only was drama the illegitimate offspring of American literature, but was also treated as a weak, prematurely-born child within postmodernist thought in general. By the unimpressive number of studies on postmodern drama and the place of modern drama and the theatre in the seminal studies on Postmodernism, it can be concluded that postmodernism and drama are hardly on friendly terms. Christopher Bigsby, an indisputable authority on contemporary theatre, perceives, at best, only a mild interest on the part of the most prominent contemporary scholars in theatre (and consequently among all those who draw on their theories), which leads him to conclude that theatre is still

obviously marginalized within scholarly circles, and at the moment, far removed from the cultural centre (Bigsby, 1982). In his book, the indicatively titled *Postmodern/Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage*, Steven Watt (2001) notes, with some disappointment, that “drama and theatre play ancillary roles at best in the most influential commentaries on postmodernism” (p. 16). The first three theorists Watt mentions as not considering drama to be of much significance are among the greatest names in the theory of Postmodernism: Lyotard, Baudrillard and Harvey. Watt expands the list of authors and books that “legitimize” postmodern interest in various forms of discourse and diverse intellectual fields, citing the latest Routledge and University of Minnesota releases, featuring titles such as *Postmodern Jurisprudence*, *Postmodernism and Religion*, and even *Postmodern Education*. Postmodernism has a significant role in the altered geography of traditional disciplines, but there are comparatively few books on postmodern drama, and they, according to Watt, offer what at best can be termed as an unreliable articulation of postmodern issues. Cultural critics who study the performing arts are no longer interested in drama, and drama itself does not retain much value within postmodernism. Therefore, when the adjectives postmodern or postmodernist appear with the name of the genre, drama seems to be “emptied of most of the features by which it has traditionally been recognized – dialogue, a discernible narrative, character, agon...” (p.17).

In her book *Theatre of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama* (2005) Kerstin Schmidt defends the very opposite view, considering drama to be a truly postmodern genre susceptible to a postmodern analytical framework because it is

Drama and theater [that] are particularly suited to raise questions about the relationship between the text, discourse and performance, about the transformation of fixed words on the page into an articulation on stage, about presence and representation, about the pluralized and fragmented self, about the role of spatiality, and about drama’s own conditions and processes of existence – all of which are major postmodern concerns with inevitable theatrical silences that cannot be stopped or shortened by simply turning the page of the text and are teeming with meaning (p. 8).

The postmodern quality of the contemporary drama is summed up by Smith in a single word - *transformation*. Postmodern drama was born by violating earlier theatrical principles and characteristics, which are reconstituted anew in order to challenge and expand the possibilities and limits of theatrical representation. Drama is also transformed through adopting and “legitimizing” the elements that the modernist aesthetics considered unworthy of creative attention. Therefore, drama, as well as other forms which attempt to articulate the postmodern condition, is evidently under the strong influence of *mass/popular culture*, which becomes a “legitimate area of study and interest” (Blatanis, 2003, p.9).

Answering the most common objection of critics concerning postmodern indifference to social progress and engagement, Smith argues:

that it is precisely postmodernism's indeterminacy and playfulness that promotes the development of a decidedly political agenda in postmodern drama. It is particularly suited to unveiling dominant representational patterns and subverting existing hierarchies and discourses. Its conceptual openness admits those who would be excluded by restrictive and fixed concepts of theory. Consequently, postmodernism has been adopted by playwrights with a decisive political agenda, above all by feminist and/or ethnic writers (Schmidt, 2005, p.8).

In *Modern American Drama*, published two years later J. Anette Saddik (2007) explores the phenomenon of the relationship drama in the U.S. after World War II, by drawing on Aristotle's theory of representation, which she reads as a desire not to give a true picture of society, but as a way to (re)establish and strengthen the existing social hierarchy in the form in which it is imagined by lawgivers and governing structures. Therefore, drama can either reflect (and support?) the existing social order or act subversively to question the established system and the values on which it rests. The American drama of the 1940s and 1950s observes Aristotelian *mimes* – an imitation of situations and characters from real life; the actions are psychologically motivated and characters defined by their psychology. Such a realist mode is perfectly suited to Method acting, which is based on the psychological consistency of characters and the unity of their internal motivation, which in turn explain all of the characters' actions. Truth is represented as being "fixed, stable and knowable" (p. 2).

Abandoning realism in presentation, the new anti-realist drama of the 1950s and 1960s, articulates a protest against this one-sided picture of reality and such a limited understanding of the concepts of identity and truth. A theatrical setting that resists a clear definition of time and place as well as a stage identity that is no longer psychologically consistent, blurring the boundaries between a character/actor and a real person and between real existence on stage and acting, reflect the shattered illusions of (by) post-war America. A growing social insecurity becomes the enemy of Aristotelian mimetic representation (and, thus, support) of the existing order. Europe, silent before the sufferings and atrocities of the Second World War, is no longer able to provide support for any new coherent and meaningful view of life. The last attempt to ensure the integrity and wholeness to the contemporary experience ended with Modernism. Old forms, eroded by the experience of the First World War the first great armed conflict on a world scale were replaced by new, highly aestheticized ones, which were supposed to represent a new experience, a new sensibility, a purified and renewed human nature well aware of its shortcomings, but again, operating in the belief that the world can start afresh. The era in world history, which takes

place after the Second World War, marks the end of such Modernist illusions and offers a plurality of “truths” rather than one; integrity is replaced by fragmentation and authentic identity by performance. Postmodernism, as is claimed by Kerstin Schmidt (compare McHale’s definition or rather definitions in *Postmodern Fiction* (1987)) is rarely unproblematic (p.14). Theorists disagree on terminology and conceptual issues; terms such as *postmodernity*, *postmodernism*, postmodern literature or postmodern theory are perceived and defined differently. However, a postmodern(ist) state of mind finds its expression in Continental European drama in the late 1950s, and in British and American drama during the 1960s. A perception of human alienation, inherited from modernism, is intensified and deepened by a growing awareness not only of the inability to integrate into any given superstructure, but also of the impossibility of achieving integrity in one’s own being.

While Europe was gradually recovering from the physical and spiritual destruction and trauma caused by major conflict, America, both politically and economically, continued to grow more powerful, starting new conflicts across the globe. An average contemporary American had even more reasons to feel postmodern anxiety than his/her European counterpart. Grotesquely exaggerated, postmodern fears were transformed on the contemporary stage into the terrifying scream of a schizophrenically split American “Everyman”. If in Modernism truth was elusive, it was at least still a whole. Postmodernism put everything, truth included, into perspective. Although inclined towards nihilism and instability, this attitude is, according to Saddik, “liberating” for many, because it realizes that the truth is not “fixed” but “politically motivated” and “reality may depend on a person or a group that perceives it” (Saddik, 2007, p. 6).

The beginnings of modern American drama, according to most anthologies, are placed at the end of the 1950s, and are represented by anti-realist experimental pieces with an emphasis on theme and/or conflict at the expense of dramatic action and characterisation. Modern drama is “primarily a drama of postmodernism,” says Saddik, but also remains certain that “traditional realism [...] survived into the 21st century” (p. 8). Postmodern drama and traditional realism coexist in the contemporary theatre, probably because of the shared thematic interests which are a feature of both plays experimenting with form and those which retain traditional forms.

2 SHEPARD, MAMET, AND(POST) MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA

This stage cohabitation of the postmodern experiment and a realist frame in the contemporary theatre is well illustrated by the two popular contemporary playwrights: Sam Shepard and David Mamet. Across their creative opus, not only in

the fields of drama and theatre, but also in other literary genres (poetry, essay) as well as in film, through a variety of different characters and situations, these two authors reveal the rich variety of the many possible variations of the American social (con)text. Society will be read in their plays as a unique cultural text outside of which, as Derrida argued, there is nothing (Derrida, 1988, 136). America, its myths and contemporary cultural industry, its class, racial and gender conflicts and the two authors themselves have established a mutual set of influences. The playwrights borrow raw materials from the treasury of mass culture (or perhaps, in deference to modern day consumer culture, *the warehouse*), break it down and re-assemble fragments into collages that articulate contemporary issues in more condensed, intense and effective ways. Mamet and Shepard borrow from contemporary culture only to pay back with interest: they endow the cultural (con)text with a richer content, impregnated with meaning.

Although the authors of recent studies in American drama usually complain about the chronic ailment of American (and not just American) contemporary theoretical and critical thought, of this literary genre being unduly and unjustifiably neglected in the postmodern context, the use of icons – the visual markers of popular culture – in shaping a dramatic vision of the state of the contemporary American consciousness, and a blasphemous (from the Modernist point of view) marriage between “high” and “low”, elitist and mass culture, could not pass unnoticed. It is possible that the over-exaggerated “Americanness” of what Sam Shepard writes about is, in a way, an obstacle to his plays finding their place with the non-American theatre and readers’ audiences. Having said that, drama scholars outside the US have also noticed and acknowledged the freshness, vitality, energy and the courage with which Shepard, from the very beginning, introduced the visual markers of contemporary popular culture onto the stage. He simply recognizes what Douglas Kellner calls a “cultural colonization” (Kellner, 1995, p. 35) by the media and brings it into his art and onto the stage. There is almost no study, no essay or review, in which Shepard’s name is not paired with popular culture, but, nevertheless, the book that deals exclusively with the icons of popular culture in contemporary American drama, and in which the opus of this author is analyzed as exemplary, was written by a Greek - Konstantinos Blatanis (2003). Referring to the social and cultural theorists who recognized, “a central position for the visible in the cultural space of modern times” (p.10) as early as the middle of the previous century and the close relationship that the visible sign (icon/image/simulacrum) has with the market value of products within consumer culture, the author first introduces us to the multiplicity of meanings within the use of popular images and their importance for modern day existence, and then analyzes in detail how some contemporary writers have elevated them to the level of symbols and used them as formative elements in their plays. Such a study cannot even be imagined without

including Sam Shepard, in whose oeuvre an entire period (the 1970s) is often referred to as “a pop culture phase”.¹ On the other hand, the representative of the “new realism” in American drama, David Mamet, is not mentioned in this study, because he deals with the phenomenon of American consumerism in a different way, almost experimentally monitoring the behavior of an individual in a “control group” made up of desperate “logorrheic” individuals in an existential impasse. When asked whether Shepard and Mamet are postmodern writers, we cannot answer with any certainty. We will start with the easier part of the question. The creative opus of Sam Shepard has all the characteristics of the postmodern at the levels of dramatic structure, themes and characters. He began as an experimenter, a compulsive destroyer of conventions, the fearless “breaker” of the fourth theatrical wall; he turned to a more conventional family (kitchen sink) drama at the zenith of his creativity, and has remained an “archenemy” of linearity and completeness ever since. Ihab Hassan, one of the foremost postmodern theorists, listed very few playwrights on the long list of authors he considers representatively postmodern; only two American playwrights are on that list, one of them being Sam Shepard (in Schmidt, 2007, p. 9).

Furthermore, in the *Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Connor, 2004), which deals with postmodernism in all areas of human activity, and is consequently inevitably limited to rather textbook examples of postmodern art, in the chapter devoted to literature, a typically postmodern(ist) characteristic – the death of character – is explained through the work of Sam Shepard. And finally, Linda Hutcheon (2002) although chooses photography and fiction for her study of the politics (politicality) of Postmodernism, mentions the playwright Sam Shepard as an example of the postmodern representation of mass culture in art(istic) forms (p.10). Shepard is postmodern both because he “kills” character (Connor, 2004) and because he crosses the (formerly distinctly drawn) line between highbrow and lowbrow (Hutcheon, 2002, p. 33).

But, while the name of Sam Shepard sounds almost synonymous with postmodern drama and theatre, even for those least familiar with American theatre, the same cannot be said about David Mamet.² At first glance, his plays are a “homecoming” to realism, (which is) understandable and therefore with more appeal to a wider audience. They seem to be a far cry from the postmodern excursions to meta-reality, from a Shepardesque terror of images, explosion of sounds, the terrorism of the sudden and unexpected, a broken chain of causation, in other words,

1 Blatanis’ reading of a number of contemporary playwrights, including Shepard, as well as our own, has been inspired by Baudrillard’s theory of simulation and the hyperreal

2 Interestingly, in his definition of Mamet’s postmodernism Sauer uses Shepard’s play *Buried Child* to establish a postmodern model in opposition to the modernist model, provided by O’Neill in *Desire under the Elms*.

an escape from entropy. However, as shown by David Kennedy Sauer (2003), Mamet simply uses a common modernist context and, thus, the audience, used to reconstructing meaning in a modernist code, is tricked into believing that such a reconstruction is possible with Mamet's plays. Mamet's plays only appear to be modern; they are in fact "representatively postmodern" because they do not support the hierarchical binarism of the modernist drama (exterior/less important/objective - internal/more important/subjective), but rather deem all issues to be equally (un)important and superficial, while the modernist conflict between the natural and the acquired/social/cultural is part of our artificially conceived ideas of the reality informed by an image of "nature", formed by means of mass communication (p.204). Mamet's plays, in contrast to modernist ones, do not offer any satisfactory closure that gives us the answers we might expect if we followed the signs along the road. Furthermore, Mamet's plays deal with relationships in the corporate-capitalist society, and postmodernism, according to one of its most important theorists, neo-Marxists Frederic Jameson (1991), is "the cultural logic of late capitalism" As is succinctly defined by a postmodern theologian, Kevin Hart (2004), "international capitalism and postmodern culture have been in partnership for decades" even though "clearly not all the world enjoys seeing the happy couple parading around the world as if they owned it" (p.17).

Last but not least in qualifying Mamet's drama as postmodern is the irony with which he examines what Price (2001) calls "discursive hierarchy" (p.45). The dominant ideological position is confronted with the alternative, and it ends with an *aporia* - a rhetorical-logical impasse where the author likes to leave us. The Hegelian-Marxist dialectical principle in this case would be directed towards overcoming the thesis and antithesis through a synthesis, and thus the framework master-narrative of progress would find a way out of hopelessness. However, Mamet's postmodern realism, or rather a realism of an estranging reality, transfers its condition of incompleteness to the level of text, which is therefore not "closed", but opens to a plurality of interpretations that are all equally (in)credible. The postmodernist quality of Shepard and Mamet's drama is confirmed by Steven Watt in his peculiar reading of the contemporary stage with the indicative title *Postmodern/Drama*. Watt's reading of the American cultural (con)text, again inspired by Baudrillard, reveals that many contemporary American texts converge to Baudrillard's view of the culture industry, which "even with more precision" could be established for drama, illustrating this statement with a list of three American playwrights, two of which are the writers we are dealing with in this paper, the third being Kopit: "In its collective vision of the culture industry, American drama can be read as postmodern in the ways Baudrillard (and Edward Bond) describes it" (Watt, 2001, p. 140). However, in accordance with the paradox of the title, it is possible to read contemporary drama in a completely opposite vein. These

same representative samples of American drama are at the same time “decidedly anti-postmodern”, if looked at in the ways that are politically more “resonant” and are reflected in their misogyny and their penchant for clear differentiation between “high” art and mass culture. For example, in an interview at the end of the previous century Mamet is quoted as saying:

The job of mass entertainment is exactly the opposite of the job of art. The job of the artist gets more difficult [...] I like mass entertainment. I’ve written mass entertainment. But it’s the opposite of art because the job of mass entertainment is to cajole, seduce and flatter consumers to let them know that what they thought was right is right, and that their tastes and their immediate gratification are of the utmost concern of the purveyor. The job of the artist, on the other hand, is to say, wait a second, to the contrary, everything that we have thought is wrong. Let’s reexamine it” (Covington).

However liberal we want to be in interpreting the lines above, the point Mamet is trying to make is far from being in favor of the postmodern(ist) blending of highbrow and lowbrow.

The artist, according to Mamet, “renegotiates” our relationship with reality, decomposes and reviews it, suspecting the integrity of the shadows on the walls of these consumer “caves” of ours. In his plays Mamet offers a plethora of different readings of contemporary cultural texts, and thus a variety of images of America. The texts of Mamet’s plays deconstruct those of the contemporary culture, writing (also) of those who stand on the margins of the discourse of the dominant ideology. The cultural text is viewed primarily through the prism of language - the language constructs the reality of Mamet’s characters: if for Derrida there is nothing outside the text, for Mamet there is no reality outside language.

Drawing on Andreas Huyssen’s claims about existence of a certain “uncritical populist trend in a social commentary on the mass culture of the 1960s” which opens the door for a “postwhite”, “postmale”, “posthumanist” world (Watt, 2001, p. 140), Watt noted that to this brave new world one was to come neither through the drama produced by these three playwrights, nor through Altman’s movies. Mamet and Shepard, as well as Kopit and Altman, show a neurotic tendency to heal phallic prerogatives within mass culture through a proliferation of images that promote them (p. 142).

Critics sometimes hold diametrically opposing views on the artistic movements the two authors belong to, and sometimes even Shepard, let alone Mamet, is not admitted to an entirely unproblematic status as a truly postmodern author. There is an overall consensus only about idiosyncrasy of their work. Stephen J. Bottoms (1998) calls Shepard’s aesthetics “confusing” and claims his literary output is divided between at least three aesthetic trends: high or “romantic” modernism, late modernism and what is defined as the playwright’s “careful postmodernism”

(p.212). Shepard has not consciously developed his aesthetics; it was born out of the atmosphere of many American tensions and crises (ontological, existential, and cultural) that had found expression in the avant-garde theater(s) of Greenwich Village. The clash of the three aesthetic currents in New York's avant-garde theater during Shepard's formative period (1963-1971) reflects the entropic state at the national level. In accordance with its own interpretation of Shepard's art which, with typical postmodern qualities, retains some characteristics of late (high) modernism in Shepard's "theater of the present moment", Bottoms makes the following point:

Indeed, if Shepard's is a theatre of the present moment, this is a present which has less to do with the ecstatic celebration of metaphysical immanence (which would rely, paradoxically, on a stable sense of one's location in time) than with Frederic Jameson's definition of postmodernity as a schizophrenic condition in which existence seems to have dissolved into a series of fractured presents without coherent relation to past or future (p.218).

American society itself was irreversibly fragmented into sub-cultural and interest communities, and the myth of the basic integrity and honesty of the nation and its leaders was destroyed by various scandals, conspiracies and assassinations "at home" and war crimes "abroad". On the other hand, for the same author, Mamet is, "(however idiosyncratically) a confessed neoclassicist" (p. 211).

Nevertheless, Mamet's realism is not immune to critical scrutiny. Michael L. Quinn (2004) offers an interesting critical interpretation of this "realism" in the light of the American national ideology and the (im)possibility of taking a "culturally based analysis of their own literature" (p.94). Quinn argues that Mamet's realism is not grounded in a "comparison with an *a priori* reality", that it is "not [...] representational but expressive" (p.93) and that "ideologically effective aspects of (Mamet's) dramatic construction [...] are often simply taken as [...] realistic, rather than as gestures in a standard romantic ritual of American intellectual culture" (p. 94). In the above quotations, Quinn confronts the seemingly easily arguable position that Mamet supports the existing reality. It seems that Mamet's opus, not unlike Shepard's, can be "classified" into different, often mutually incompatible, currents, movements and periods.

Following Quinn's arguments we are tempted to believe that this drama cynic appears to be an American romantic(ist) as well. The link between Mamet and Romanticism is Sakvan Berkovic who "helps" Quinn discover the extremely pro-American character of Mamet's iconoclasm. How is this possible? In the American theatrical history, there is a very strong undercurrent of "community formation through dissent" and "the rejection of American culture in the name of American values is very common" (p.94). American authors believe true American values to be superior to what is offered in their cultural present. It is at the level of this

national romanticism that the „Americanness“ of Sam Shepard rests, and judging by the analysis offered by Quinn, the “Americanness” of David Mamet as well. Quinn sees Mamet as a “dissenting, revolutionary artist with a unique perspective” (p. 94). Mamet’s “romanticism” and “Americanness” are based on the identification of the essential “un-Americanness” of certain elements within the existing cultural matrix.

Invoking Veblen, Mamet assailed the greedy bourgeoisie that crushes the common man in a kind of a “dramatic jeremiad”. It is unusual, but not impossible, to understand Mamet’s work as a continuation of the Puritan literary tradition of “weeping” over a society heading toward utter destruction. Watching Mamet’s work through the prism of Berkovic’s “ritual of apostasy” from a corrupt cultural matrix apart from jeremiads Quinn finds in Mamet’s opus the construction of a “unique individuality”, as well as the need for a different society, that of a Jeffersonian or Rousseauian kind (p. 97). Mamet is, thus, both romantic and realistic, anti-American and pro-American, his moral universe is a hybrid of the Puritan ethics based on a critique of society and the need of a troubled assimilated American Jew to deal with collective anxiety. He creates an illusion of reality through dramatic action that is not a copied reality, but a reality that is created through action. The final instance of Mamet’s realism is turning to the “the healing power of memory [and] the redemptive power of love” (Kane, 1992, p. 127), an attempt to take root in the “old neighborhood”, the old faith and elegiac Yiddish rhythms imposed on colloquial American English, full of invective and the scatological, so typical of this author.

3 SHEPARD VS MAMET. WHOSE AMERICA IS REAL?

Searching for similarities in the oeuvre of the two playwrights, after the first reading we could not help seeing little but the very idiosyncratic in their plays. We found Shepard as a Byronic self-exile, a poet-wanderer, Childe Harold who voluntarily embarked on a pilgrimage into the heart of (his own) darkness and found there personal and archetypal “boogies” and then brought them out into the daylight (as well as under the stage lights), showing us that our hell is under our own kitchen table, that our demons are hiding in the fridge, and that the evil spirits of our undead fathers lies in the (American) desert.

Mamet is, again, a different type of poet, he is bard of the American (vulnerable) machismo, a Hemingwayesque elliptical poet of the “omitted”, the poet of invective who “pours” postmodern fluidity into the sturdy framework of realistic structure.

The opus of both authors offer their own idiosyncratic lenses through which America can be seen, while at the same time they themselves paint the canvas of America with fresh colors. If Shepard’s “paintings” are delicate watercolors and elusive, nostalgic landscapes of the “real” (rural?) West, and Mamet’s rough sketches

of urban dullness, are not their visions complementing one another? Is what is left out by one not clearly visible on the canvas of the other, thus making the collage of America complete? It would be very convenient if everything fitted like in a jigsaw puzzle, if the two poetic “districts” were bordered by beautiful and clearly drawn lines: what is omitted by Shepard is shown by Mamet and vice versa. But, it is not quite so. The culture that shaped them, and was shaped by them, made sure that all the key issues of American (and universal) existence are encompassed by their creative horizons to a greater or lesser degree. The essential questioning on the essence of humanness by examining the cultural determinants through which this essence is constructed, such as gender/sex, nation, race, whether belonging to the established social and cultural norm, or deviating from it, find their way into the oeuvres of both writers. However, our conclusion after reading their plays is that the two greatest (or at least the most important, and ultimately, the most famous) living American playwrights differ as much as is possible, even when all the similarities conditioned by the influence of the same cultural background are taken in consideration. There really should not be any “anxiety of influence” (in Harold Bloom’s phrase) between the two.

Autonomous, with a self-consciousness bordering with arrogance, Mamet and Shepard do not admit to (or do, but only a very few) literary influences,³ boldly declaring that they owe little if anything to either predecessors or contemporaries, that they do not read other authors and do not go to the theater. In other words, they want us to believe that they have no idea who and about what their peers are writing today and refuse to be forced into categories.

Born in the early 1940s (1947 and 1943) in the “Baby boom” era, Mamet and Shepard by their life and work, mark the second half of the century, in which the focus of global events moves towards the Western hemisphere. After two world wars on its soil, Europe was exhausted and worn out, and thanks to its economic and military superiority the U.S. becomes the absolute center of the world in the fields of finance, culture and entertainment. The U.S.A is where how to live the best and most comfortable lives is “prescribed”. America is where one goes in pursuit of your (American) dream, even if one is not American. The entertainment industry shows us through an increasingly powerful, or rather omnipotent media, how to make that dream come true and live it, or how *to pretend* to live it, with the assistance of countless means of simulation.

3 One of the identified “impacts” on Shepard is W. Whitman, who, in turn, denied any influence on his work although there would hardly be a Whitman (at least so thought Harold Blum) without an Emerson before him. On the other hand, Mamet’s literary model, collaborator and friend, Harold Pinter (who directed the London production of Mamet’s *Oleanna*) initially claimed he had not read Beckett before writing his own first play, only to deny it later. Pinter befriended Beckett and is a kind of “spiritual connection” between Beckett, Mamet and Shepard, because Shepard admits only Beckett’s influence on his drama.

Judging by what it represents for a majority of Americans, Mamet and Shepard each live an “American dream”, but they, nevertheless, talk about those less successful - the “losers”, the collateral damage suffered on the road to this dream. Their characters, one and all, are tragically maladjusted individuals who, in one way or another, in various spheres from family to business, from the kitchen to the office,⁴ with every new step move dangerously further away from American ideals. Although in all the critical texts on American drama, the two authors are placed in neighboring chapters and although they basically deal with the same questions (im)posed by the spirit of the time/culture within which their create, although their texts are simultaneously parts of and commentaries on the same cultural text, Shepard and Mamet underwent specific formative processes. Personal and cultural specificities led to the development of different interests and sensibilities, so their dramatic characters are, though faced with the same problems, illuminated from different angles and, of course, by quite different artistic means.

We may, however, say that, on the one hand, the son of an army bomber pilot from World War II, who unsuccessfully tries to calm his inner turmoil by avocado farming in rural Duarte, the proud third owner of the same name in his paternal line, and, on the other, a descendant of Polish Ashkenazi Jews, who escaped the pogroms narrowly by fleeing to the “brave new world” insisting on assimilation⁵ under the guise of cultural diversity, provide together a clearer image of what is America(an) than either of them could individually. We are of the opinion that the objective “image” of America over the last 50-odd years can more easily be seen through the plays both of them than through the work of one of them only, even if the pictures that we see are, as Baudrillard claims, just another simulation.

We must say that the joint canvas of Mamet and Shepard is largely deprived of any vision of cultural or gender otherness. If you would like to find out what America looks like in the eyes of a white male, heterosexual and mostly aggressive, drowning their disappointment and sorrows in a bottle, and settling arguments by torrents of expletives and salvos of insults, squatting on a large baggage of complexes inherited from childhood (among which Oedipal is not the most horrible) who, when words fail, resorts to the base way of reckoning of those who do not believe in dialogue – violence, then Shepard and Mamet’s drama offers an abundance of options.

4 Shepard’s characters are mostly in the kitchen, living room or a motel room; namely – in a private environment, while Mamet’s “avoid” being at home, and are always at a place where some sort of “business” is being done.

5 Mamet himself said that as a young man he had a feeling of being sent the following message by his environment: “Everything will be OK if you’re gonna be like me” (Biggsby, 2004, p. 223)

Mamet and Shepard reach out for masks and role playing in both life and in their plays. Their attitude towards their own artistic “personae” is postmodern - they will re-construct the “image” over and over again and will continue to do so for as long as they see it as an appropriate survival mechanism in the postmodern universe. Therefore, it is indisputable that Mamet and Shepard have an urge to (re)create their own personalities, which both deemed to be inappropriate from the very beginning. While Shepard dismisses his three generations old name and tradition of the farmers of the West Coast in favour of the experimental New York theater, embarking on a quest for a distinct identity, Mamet struggles with the ancestral “sin” of the negation of Jewish identity and his forefathers’ assimilation into “all-Americanness” and returns to the fold of the “old faith”, where he regains the identity that the previous two generations of his family had betrayed. The first point of arrival in the quest for both is, interestingly, theater. They decidedly refuse to shape their own personality by taking a path trodden by the feet of their parents. In their case, this personal struggle against patriarchal power structures (whose roots are situated in the archetypal rebellion of son(s) against a tyrannical father) was complemented by a typically American Emersonian belief in the possibility of “rebirth” and “self-reliance”. Like the ancient Indians, they seepostmodern jungle. Tireless in the creation of their own masks (their Jungian persona) as well as in the work which is not limited to writing plays, the field where they are undoubtedly at their best, although perhaps not the best known to a wider audience.

In a large number of recent reviews/essays on American drama, there emerges a need for a (re)definition of American drama of the twentieth century. With much less uncertainty is it possible to write about the postmodern American drama today than it was at the time of its beginnings in the 1970s. It is also much easier to write about post-modern authors, such as Shepard and Mamet, because the continuity of their topics, interests and ways of theatrical presentation, has been established over the past forty years of their creative output.⁶

Shepard and Mamet appear almost simultaneously in the American theater and it seems logical to expect that the two of them are analyzed simultaneously in a paper on American drama. But only in the past few years have authors dared to draw clearer parallels between them, possibly because their opus is broader and more comprehensive and their status in American literature is sufficiently cemented that the English language has been enriched by various neologisms; there are two new adjectives – Shepardesque and Mametesque and a compound, Mamet-speak. Being in neighboring chapters in earlier scholarly books on American

6 To be precise, Shepard begins in 1964 with the one-act pieces *Cowboys* and *Rock Garden*, and Mamet in 1970 with *Lakeboat* (revised 1980). Whereas the first of Shepard’s plays immediately drew public attention to the new, strange talent of a young Californian, the Chicagoan had to wait for a couple of years (*Sexual Perversion in Chicago*, 1974).

drama, placed and replaced in chapters for primarily chronological reasons, the works of Shepard and Mamet seemed like circles that touch, but never intersect. The points of contact are mainly based on common interest in the identity quest(ioning)s of white American males. Mamet and Shepard (with the addition of David Rabe) were first moved from the margins to the cultural/drama center, then entered “mainstream” drama, that is, the *canon* together and caught the attention of feminist criticism, which characterized their drama as machoistic and misogynist, as blind to gender otherness.

What was subtly begun by Miller – the testing of American identity against the parameters of (liberal) individualism, power, and the sustainability of the “American Dream” after the Second World War – Mamet and Shepard continued through the simultaneous articulation and calling into question of the American myth, a process which is a textbook example of postmodern techniques. They “challenge the hegemony of Anglo-patriarchal mythology” through publicly “exposing the power structures surrounding identity and social performance in America” (Saddik, 2007, p. 138).

The nodal points of their works are: the American Dream, liberal individualism, a review of the Anglo-patriarchal power structures that underpin American society and “cultural narratives (rules, values and images) by which [America] live[s] [...] from [...] the end of World War II to [...] the present day” (p. 138).

Starting from the Shepard-Mametesque axiom that speech-language is in fact action, in a broader context, their play can be considered a strong action performed by the macho “center” that “induces” a reaction from the “margin”. Shepard and Mamet’s plays, to use a deconstructionist metaphor, are “haunted” by the ghosts of what is omitted from the text, and the more this occurs, the more these ghosts are suppressed in their texts. Analyzing their body of work, we may stop before the sensitive issue of whether or not they know how to deal with the marginalized, but if we look at them as a strong provocation from the center itself which erodes its structures from within, they become (willingly or not) the “allies” of the marginal.

Mamet and Shepard share the same cultural “moment” in an identical cultural space – they simply write in/on the same cultural text and participate, in Foucauldian terms, in the same discursive processes. However, even when they clearly state that Shepard and Mamet are the most important American playwrights of the final decades of the 20th century (they reached their zenith in the 1970s and 1980s), scholars must emphasize their difference. Writing about the decline of Williams’s creative powers, Christopher Bigsby notices that “dramatic attention, meanwhile, had switched elsewhere” (Bigsby, 2004b, p. 294) mentioning Shepard and Mamet as sovereign rulers who conquered and shared the contemporary theater scene, but by using very different “weapons”. Mamet’s are “hyper-realism, the demotic prose, the forceful metaphors” and Shepard’s “lyrical, oblique myths” (Bigsby 2004b, p. 294).

Their in many ways different plays and different artistic personalities, inevitably open up the same postmodern issues: the questions of the fictional nature of personality and the possibility of authentic identity, the commoditization of myth, the role of performativity, which becomes an ontological necessity in the (re)creation of postmodern identity, and of the relationship between identity and postmodern capitalism. Performativity is a *sine qua non* (post)modern identity as “the boundaries between acting and being are continuously blurred” (Saddik, 2007, p. 139). The reality in which a postmodern man lives, Baudrillard’s hyperreality, is “also measured as such in terms of its performativity” (Lane, 2000, p. 86). The categories of good and evil and the concept of morality are not applicable to this reality; what is important is its functionality – “how well does it work or operate?” (Lane, 2000, p. 86)

The postmodern era, in correlation with late capitalism, is the archenemy of authenticity, centralization, completeness, wholeness. If you can buy everything (the issue is not availability, but only the cost), if you can produce, multiply, and make it (more) desirable through advertising, if it is possible to find a replica of almost everything, then the center, roundness and depth insisted upon by modernism are replaced by decentralization, openness and surface (sometimes superficiality), identity/individuality/uniqueness in existence and action understood as masking/acting and performance. In such a society, the “old ways” of dealing with life and work are doomed to end with the “death of a salesman”, Hoss (*The Tooth of Crime*) can only be authentic in his final act of self-destruction because his individuality only served as a model for another mask for Crow, a postmodern thief, and Aaronow (*Glengarry Glen Ross*) and Teach (*American Buffalo*) can but bemoan the collapse of male (and interpersonal) solidarity between the small gears of American business whose mechanism they are not able to understand.

Mamet and Shepard’s image of America shows that such (postmodern) condition often causes a profound sense of frustration and utter despair, after all the attempts to readjust have been exhausted. Mamet’s dramatic world is full of such characters, or rather, as

Sanja Nikčević (1994) refers to them, - losers whether they sell (Roma, Levene Moss in *Glengarry Glen Ross*) or buy the illusion of the American Dream (Lingk in *Glengarry Glen Ross*). A society in which Mamet and Shepard create is postindustrial, the alienation from nature is at its peak and hedonism and money are both the means and the end.

Modern America is another name for the paradox which is another feature of the postmodern condition. It was created based on an apparent paradox – a puritanical religious fervor, in essence Christian, that turned into the Puritan “work ethic”, discipline and materialism. An extreme sect of a religion based on love, altruism and sacrifice gave birth to pragmatism and individual liberalism, and a society based

on irreconcilable opposites – the Puritans reconciled the irreconcilable: the service of both “God and Mammon” at the same time. This, of course, leads to a complete absence of empathy for all that stands between the “individual/ nation” and “progress”. Between “us” and the “Frontier”. Finally, pragmatism abandoned both God and science, it did not need anything transcendental, there ceased to be any need for philosophy and metaphysics, their eyes were directed straight ahead and “narrowed [...] to what one could deal with”, and then theories were constructed to justify this narrowness (Nastić, 1998, p. 76). The construction of “justifications” for the American way of life *has become* the American way of life itself. The need for the constant affirmation of the correctness of the “American way” grows in proportion to disappointments and defeats. Power and performance, as opposed to truth and action, image as opposed to essence, and masking as opposed to being, are what postmodern America is. Fragmentation versus integrity. A pluralism of lifestyles whose valorization of everything only devalues everything (Nastić 1998, p. 76).

This is, also, the image of America we see in both Shepard and Mamet’s works – America is far from the promised Paradise;⁷ it is no Hell either, and to be a Purgatory, there must be a true desire for transformation. It seems to be an infinite postmodern Dantean Limbo.

The young Shepard and Mamet perceive and transmit such an image of America, while the mature Shepard “looks back in anger” (*States of Shock, God of Hell, Kicking a Dead Horse*) and the mature Mamet attempts to strike a balance between assimilation and irony, provocation and acceptance. Ultimately, Shepard and Mamet are living examples of the American paradox – both made a profit (in different aspects of life) from the very act of criticizing American values. This confirms the postmodern American creed – each lifestyle in America welcome, as long as it is American.

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7 In his philosophical travelogue Baudrillard plays with the idea of “paradise”. The American paradise is the only one possible. “Paradise is just paradise. Mournful, monotonous, and superficial though it may be, it is paradise. There is no other” says the philosopher. “If you are prepared to accept the consequences of your dreams – not just the political and sentimental ones, but the theoretical and cultural ones as well – then you must still regard America today with the same naive enthusiasm as the generations that discovered the New World.” Baudrillard argues that “Europe can no longer be understood by starting out from Europe itself.” and that American modernity key to understanding the “end of history” (107).

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Ali obstaja sodobna ameriška drama? Ali je postmodernizem v ameriški dramatik? Shepard vs. Mamet – čigava Amerika je (bolj) resnična?

Mamet in Shepard si kot dramatika izposojata iz sodobne kulture, da ji s tem poplačata z obrestmi vred: njuna dela dajejo kulturnemu (kon)tekstu bogatejšo vsebino, kar je tudi vsebina pričujočega članka.

Ključne besede: postmodernizem, Amerika, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, mass culture, potrošništvo