

# A chronicle of our time

by David Deaton

## Writing in Restaurants

David Mamet  
(Faber & Faber, 160 pp.)

David Mamet is a name you should know.

You probably already do, from his screenplays for *The Verdict* and *The Untouchables*.

But also in this decade Mamet has quietly established himself as the best American playwright since Edward Albee.

*Writing in Restaurants* shows that Mamet is no slouch, either, in the category of prose-writing. This slim volume of anecdotes, articles and addresses is a thorough delight.

Whatever the subject — whether it's analyzing *The Cherry Orchard* or recalling the banished joys of pool halls — Mamet reveals a fresh and lucid intelligence. The man has things to say.

Mamet has a special gift for speaking of "that which we know to be true." His work is a marriage of intellect and intuition. Strewn throughout are such casually brilliant observations as:

"Only two legitimate national

holidays remain: the Super Bowl and the Academy Awards."

"Apathy ensues when the individual is too afraid to look at the world around him."

"As Victorians assiduously expunged reference to sex, so do we expunge direct reference to what we desire most, which is love and a sense of belonging."

Ironically, the only subject on which Mamet proves less than fascinating is his discontent with the ever-moribund theatre. He wails too loudly. His strictures border on dogmatism and sound as though they were written by a Very Serious Young Man.

Most disappointingly, these early Mametfestos shed scant insight into a prodigiously fertile artistic imagination. All we learn from his autobiographical disclosures is that Mamet is Jewish and college-educated — aspects not readily inferable from his tough-talking plays.

Oh, yes. Mamet is a family man. He has a mother, wife and daughter whom he loves very much (*True Stories of Bitches*).

Except when deploring his own field, Mamet expounds in a voice of sweet reasonableness

rather than outrage or horror.

That's quite a feat when you're discussing the end of the world, which Mamet does with exhilarating persistence. How many people would let this drop on a lecture audience at Harvard:

"Our civilization is convulsed and dying and it has not gotten the message. It is sinking but has not sunk into complete barbarity, and I often think nuclear war exists for no other reason than to spare us that indignity.

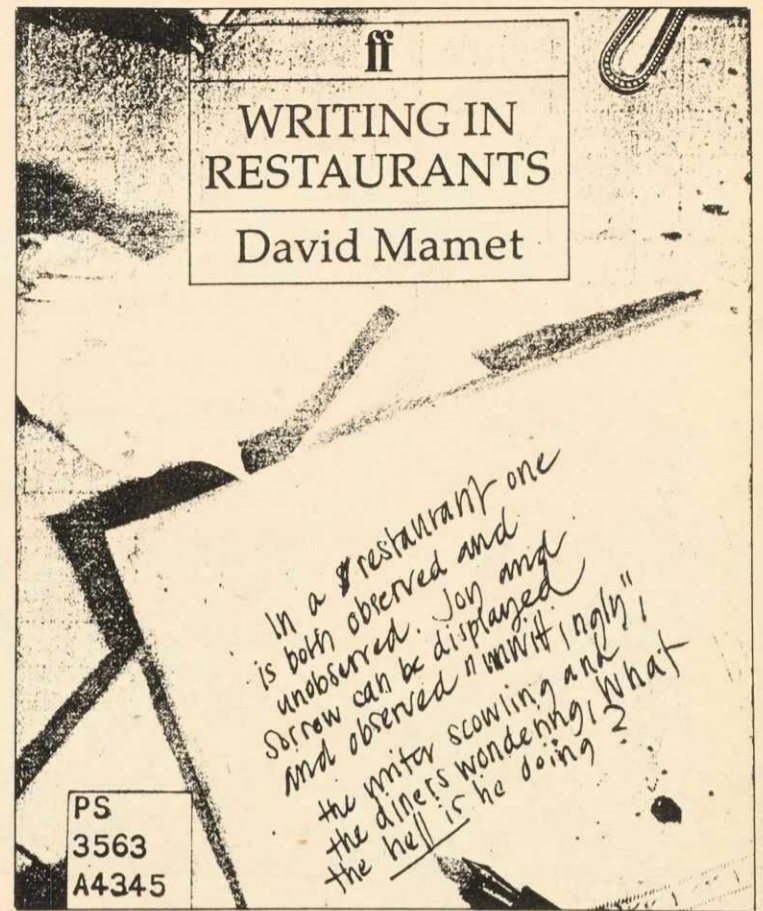
Mamet is not joking. He boldly maintains, "The world is decaying rather rapidly, and there is *nothing* we can do about it." Now there's a thought to put your mid-terms in perspective!

Is Mamet himself apathetic? Not at all. He may accept that "we live in an evil time, a time of final decay," but he resists the counsels of despair:

"Every reiteration of the idea that *nothing matters* debases the human spirit."

What counsel or consolation does Mamet offer his readers? Not much, folks! All we can do is hold on to our integrity at all costs.

"Keep your principles few and simple," Mamet advises, "so that



you may refer to them quickly."

Few of the thirty selections in *Writing in Restaurants* are this grim in subject. There are twice as many pieces which exist simply to charm and amuse. And they do.

Yet the very abundance of Mamet's good humour makes his doom-saying that much more astonishing. Oncoming catastrophe is just another item he

wants to pass on to us.

This is not a hysterical millennialist talking, it's America's premiere playwright. Must not attention be paid?

Hamlet calls actors "the abstract and brief chronicles of their time." In this quirky collection of pieces, Mamet (a former actor) has given us a superlative chronicle of our time.

Let's hope he's mistaken.

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