

DAVID MODERN NOIR MASTER

MAMET

IN CONVERSATION WITH EDDIE MULLER

In one of the last Film Noir Foundation public events before the Coronavirus curtain dropped, Eddie Muller hosted an evening with multifaceted writer-director David Mamet at the Aero Theatre in Santa Monica as part of NOIR CITY: HOLLYWOOD 2020. The festival was put on ice just days later. Muller surprised Mamet by presenting him with the FNF's Modern Noir Master award (previous recipients: Stephen Frears and James Ellroy). *House of Games* (1987), Mamet's debut feature as writer-director, was screened for a capacity crowd that included its star, Joe Mantegna, and the post-film talk was lively, fiery, and fun. As a coda, Mamet selected a personal noir favorite to be screened (not one of his own). The audience that night was fortunate to witness this unique event, especially as it happened only days before California put stay-at-home orders into effect. Here are highlights from a spirited conversation between Muller and the filmmaker he introduced as "America's greatest living storyteller."

Muller and Mamet meet pre-show outside the Aero Theatre
Photo by Sasha Lebedeva





Joe Mantegna, a colleague of Mamet's from their Chicago theater days, costarred with Mamet's then-wife Lindsay Crouse in *House of Games*, Mamet's directorial debut and the first of several cinema tales he'd spin revolving around "confidence"

Eddie Muller: The Film Noir Foundation not only aims to restore films, but we try and keep the noir flame alive by showing that there is a continuum at work between the films we love and what's going on today. So every once in a while, when it hits us, we give an award to what we call a modern noir master. Now of course David's work is not limited to noir, but we feel enough of it is in that tradition that we want to give you this award. I'm going to read what it says here:

"The Film Noir Foundation presents its 2020 Award of Modern Noir Master to David Mamet in recognition of the storytelling skill and distinctive voice that has plumbed the dark recesses of America's history and extended the noir ethos to a new generation on stage, page, and screen. Los Angeles, California, March 9th, 2020."

And as an added bonus, this glass artifact was created by Samantha Fuller, the daughter of Sam Fuller, so there is some bloodline in that piece as well.

David Mamet: Thank you very much.

EM: I am so happy that you are here to do this. Obviously, we're going to talk a lot about noir, and I want to hear what you have to say about whether you see some type of noir influence in the work that you have done. What's your connection to the whole noir thing?

DM: Oh, that's a very good question. I always was a voracious reader—that's what I did instead of going to school—and one of the genres that I read was the California novelists, of course Dashiell Hammett and Joseph Hansen and Raymond Chandler, who was wonderful, and then Ross Macdonald. And there was always something in them—there was always something weird about the California story as opposed to the New York story, which was about some guy trying to find himself. And the Chicago noir is about some guy

trying to get ahead in the world, you know? But the story of California seems to be the story of people who are lost and who have no identity, and they find out what they thought they were wasn't really who they were, and their father wasn't their father, and their uncles were schtupping them and impersonating somebody else. And the noir films, you know all the guys getting out after World War II, with nothing to do and no money except an idea and the PCH [Pacific Coast Highway]—they're all the story of what happens *now*. They were all very, very influential in my upbringing and instead of going to school, what I used to do in Chicago was go to the Quad Theater, which was then twenty-four hours a day, and they changed the bill every day and the guy who ran it was a cinephile, heaven-sent. He would run, like, two weeks of just Saul Bass titles, right?

EM: That's a programmer!

DM: Oh yeah! We all went to the movies and we got an education.

EM: One of the things people overlook when they talk about old noir films, when they focus on the visual style and all that stuff, they don't talk as much about the language. And I find the language is a huge part of it. And you have now achieved "Mamet-speak." People refer to that all the time in your work. Did noir films have any influence on your approach to the language? Because when I see *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992), or [House of Games], or so many of the things that you've done, the language reminds me of noir. It has this rhythm and style to it that is just amazing, so ...

DM: Oh, well, thanks. No, it's just . . . to me, the most important thing in film noir is not having enough money. The thing that got me started with film was *The Killing* (1956) with Sterling Hayden by (Stanley) Kubrick. And Kubrick was very much influenced by



Discussing his fondness for film noir, Mamet cited André de Toth's 11-day wonder *Crime Wave* (1953) and Jules Dassin's 1956 caper masterpiece *Rififi* as films that inspired him to try his own hand at directing movies

a previous film called *Crime Wave* (1953), which was directed by Andre DeToth. It has the same cast as *The Killing*, and somebody said to Andre deToth, "How'd you make such a good movie?" and he said, "Because they said, I'll give you two hundred grand," and [he] said, "I'll do it for a hundred grand," and they said, "We'll give you twenty days," and he said, "I'll do it in eleven days." So he shot it in eleven days, filming nights. So the thing about film noir is you don't have any money, which means you don't have any time, which means you don't have any time or money to shoot stuff you're not gonna use, right? So if you're not gonna shoot stuff you're not gonna use, you better think real hard of what you're *gonna* shoot, which makes for a great movie. And the other thing is, they didn't have any money for special effects, which is why they're shooting on Mulhol-

“ So the thing about film noir is you don't have any money, which means you don't have any time, which means you don't ... shoot stuff you're not gonna use, right?”

land Drive and the PCH in the middle of the night, so they had to have a good idea, and not enough time, and a couple of bucks.

EM: *There you go. So, when you made House of Games, did you feel like you were making a noir?*

DM: No, it's just making a movie. I mean, I don't know, it was . . . you may note that there were two things that influenced me very much when I was shooting. I wrote a movie for Bob Rafelson, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), and we were shooting it up in Santa Barbara and I was commuting back and forth to Los Angeles in the car and listening to the radio, and so one of the things that I did was that I saw *The Killing* when I was up there, and the other was [hearing] Glenn Gould playing the "Toccatina in C Minor" by Bach, C minor fugue, which was a theme here, and I was listening to this thing and Jesus Christ, this son of a bitch has written the best piece of music in the world and all it is is a C minor triad, and it's the greatest accomplishment in humankind. So I started thinking about the reiteration, you know, it's a very, very short theme, how you reiterate it in surprising ways.¹

EM: *Wow. Okay. That connection is fabulous. I couldn't imagine that—but I'm happy to know it. You mentioned to me that a film that inspired you to become a director was Jules Dassin's Rififi (1955), right?*

DM: Oh, yeah! Well, *Rififi*, of course it's a work of genius and of course Dassin got kicked out by HUAC—the House Un-American

¹ Eddie Muller confession: Mamet's comment here took me completely by surprise, especially as I was not familiar with Gould's version of this Bach piece. I read the room in a flash and elected not to follow this thread—not realizing Mamet was revealing an amazing insight into his process, and the style of writing that's become his signature. In the moment, I missed it. But now you can comprehend it for yourself, with this [link](#), in which you can hear the thematic reiterations that helped inspire "Mamet-speak."



Activities Committee—after directing some of the toughest movies in America, you know—*Brute Force* (1947), *Night and the City* (1950), and *The Naked City* (1948). He got kicked out and goes to Paris, doesn't have any money, doesn't even speak French, and somebody tells him about this story. He read the book and said, "I don't get it."

EM: Yeah, he didn't like the book. Actually Jean-Pierre Melville was going to direct the movie and—

DM: Really?

EM: Yeah. And he said, "No, let this guy do it. He's a great filmmaker and he can't get any work because the American government is actually stopping him from being hired overseas." Anyway, I only brought that up because I see that influence . . . in *Heist* and so many movies that you've done, I find the noir tradition. I want to ask you about the actors in your movies. You have a fabulous stock company that you use, and when I directed some theater I found your book *True and False* (1997), about acting, to be one of the absolute best texts I've ever read on the subject. And I know that you have a couple of folks in the audience tonight who were in *House of Games*, so I'm hoping you'll tell us a little bit about your approach to acting. Is there any difference in that approach between theater and film?

DM: Well, kind of. I think that's a very good question. I was present on a lot of sets, I worked on a couple of movies with Sidney Lumet—we only shot one of them—and I wrote a movie for Bob Rafelson, and was married to Lindsay Crouse and was on the set of a lot of movies that she did. And I looked at the directors and I said, "You know what, I would do this a little differently." And Sid Lumet, who was a genius director, he said the only reason he never got an Oscar was he never called up a realtor in Beverly Hills. But Sidney used to rehearse, put everybody in a room and rehearse them for weeks and weeks, months and months. And Sidney had spent his life as an actor, he was one of the Dead End Kids, spent his life in the theater, grew up in the Yiddish Theater, and that's the way he did things. But I said, "No, you know, I have my own theater company, I've worked with these people and I've known most of them all my life," so when people said, "How do you rehearse?" I said, "The rehearsal is Take One and we ain't gonna do Take Two." So that's my method.

EM: Well, that's very noir-inspired, like you were saying. "We're not wasting time here, we're gonna do this." A play you wrote was turned into a film called *Edmond* (2005), which I think is totally noir. And I saw William Macy [its star] interviewed after a screening of this film and they asked, "What's the hardest part about performing a David Mamet piece?" And he said, "Remembering the words." And the audience laughed.

DM: Well, he doesn't have that problem.

EM: Well, he said, "No, I'm being serious. David has a very specific thing you're supposed to do and I just work very hard at remembering the words." Can you just express a little bit about your approach to this? Because in your films, actors have a very stand-and-deliver style.

DM: Well, Jimmy Cagney said, "What is acting? Hit your mark, look the other guy in the eye, and tell the truth." I mean, all the actors that we love, they didn't do much of anything except tell the truth and—my God, that's good enough, isn't it? I don't want to see somebody doing tricks, you know, I don't want to see somebody show me their technique. I don't know what the technique of acting is other than the ability to stand still and let it come out of your mouth 'cause you're brave. And that's what I look for, and that's



Asked what was most difficult about acting in a Mamet show, William H. Macy replied, "Remembering the words." He wasn't joking.



“ I don’t know what the technique of acting is other than the ability to stand still and let it come out of your mouth ’cause you’re brave. ... That’s why we love Sterling Hayden, right?”

what I love. I think that’s what we all love. It’s why we love Sterling Hayden, right?

EM: As a writer you have accomplished everything. You have written nonfiction, fiction, novels, stage plays, film scripts, your own scripts, adapted other people’s scripts. Is there any difference to your approach in these different projects? When you’re writing for the stage, is it just the same as writing for the screen, or totally different?

DM: No, when you’re writing for the stage, what you’re trying to do is tell the story through dialogue. Period. ’Cause that’s all you got. The stage directions don’t make any difference. Good actors won’t even read them. What you’re trying to do is delineate a story that’s told between two people or more, each one needing something from the other, and the only way they can get it is through talking. But the perfect film shouldn’t have any dialogue at all, because what you’re looking for is the cut. So I was thinking about this the other day. My wife and I, we watch movies every night, so it occurred to me: how do we know when it’s time to get up and go pee? And the answer is, when you look at the first mini-second of the scene, you can tell there ain’t gonna be nothing happening there, right? They’re all gonna sit down and explain stuff to each other and so forth. And that’s the time we all go—

EM: That’s the pee break.

DM: That’s right. So the whole trick is—a guy called me up, this friend of mine, he’s a movie director and he said, “Will you come in and see my film? It’s in the cutting room and I have a little problem with this scene.” I said, “Yeah, I’ll fix your problem and we can save the movie.” I said, “I can do that. I’ll tell you how to fix the problem: throw the scene out.” Because that’s always what you’ve got to do. It’s a good thing to have talent, but sometimes the difference between someone who is a really fine writer and *almost* a fine writer is the ability to *throw it out*. Like Hemingway said, “Write your best story

and take out all the best lines.” If you can throw out a scene because it hurts the progression, you know something about storytelling.

EM: Years ago, when I first started entertaining the idea of being a writer, I read something you had said that has stuck with me always. I cut it out and put it on my desk. It had to do with equating writing to carpentry, and the observation was, “Your job is to make a better chair. It’s not about you, it’s about making a better chair.” Am I quoting you accurately?

DM: I don’t remember it, but . . .

EM: Well, I just found that very compelling. It’s not about you as the carpenter or you as the writer. The job is to make a piece of work people want to sit in, that they want to be in, want to live in—

DM: Well, yeah, because when people come away and say “Oh, what magnificent visuals,” it’s because the movie is no goddamned good. What else could they mean?

EM: Great cinematography? It’s like, I’m not seeing that one, right? If that’s the first thing you say.

DM: Well, my daughter Clara, who is an all-around good kid, and is a filmmaker, she was talking one day about her favorite shot. She said it was in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), she said she loves the shot when the camel is walking in the distance, and the camel is walking and walking and walking and it just holds forever. And I started to laugh and she said, “Dad, why are you laughing?” And I said, “You don’t know—you don’t understand what he did. The real genius of that shot was that camels cannot walk in a straight line because they need to spread the weight. They can only walk in a straight line backwards, so what David Lean did was get the fucking camel to walk backwards for a mile and a half, and then he flipped the film!” And she goes, “Oh really?” I said, “NO!” [*big laugh from audience*]



The late historian, raconteur, and master close-up magician Ricky Jay was Mamet's best pal and frequent collaborator (left, *House of Games*)

EM: Are there any others of those you've made up?

DM: No, but there's an interesting anecdote about George Stevens. I know George Stevens, Jr. He runs the Kennedy Center and, of course, is George Stevens's son. And I was talking to him on the phone one day and I said, "George, I gotta ask, there's a scene in *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959)—right, it's like *Everybody Loves Raymond* with Nazis, you know? *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Anne Frank is in this fuckin' thing, she's in the attic, and then there's a cat, for those of you who remember seeing the movie, and the cat gets its head into a funnel, a funnel and the cat, the cat falls off, the funnel falls, and all the Nazis are ready to kill all the Jews. Apparently it happened, anyway but nonetheless, and so I was talking to George Stevens Jr. and I said, "How in the world did he get that shot?" He started to laugh, and he said, "What my dad did was he got six cats and put them on six sets with six cinematographers and said to each of them, 'Shoot the fucking cat until the cat does something special and then we'll work that cat into the movie.'" Isn't that great?

EM: Amazing. But now I don't know whether to believe you or not! It's just like *House of Games*—is this guy for real, or are you conning me with this? That's pretty good. Okay, I have to ask you about critics and the role of critics, because I'm a little unnerved by the social media phenomenon because of a) the shortening of the attention spans, and b) just the way social media seems to only review the artists and not the art.

DM: Well, I don't know how to turn on my telephone, so I really don't know anything about social media. But interesting you should say that about critics because—by the way, thank you all for coming out. I would say he who risked his health with me today would be my brother.

EM: I know! [gestures to the packed auditorium] Not bad!

DM: So I went to the store to buy toilet paper, okay? And they were sold out of toilet paper, so I said, "Well, what are we gonna do?" So I renewed my subscription to the *New York Times*.

EM: [laughs] But anyway . . . I think this is a very serious thing. Recently you previewed *play here in town*, and there was a critic who said he wasn't going to review the play, and then he ran a piece that was essentially a review of the play. But I'm curious because it seems to me that the culture has reached this point where all they want to talk about is the artist and not really focus on the artists' work. And I know how much energy and effort goes into producing the work, and then to have it ignored in favor of just talking about the writer? It just dovetails with what I was saying—that it's not about you as the artist, it's about the art that you create.

DM: Well, critics, to be fair, are a bunch of feral whores.

EM: That's what I was going for!

DM: But I have to make a couple of exceptions. This goes back to Joey [Mantegna] and my old days in Chicago. One guy was the critic for the *Daily News*, then the *Chicago Tribune*, called Richard Christiansen, and we were doing plays in a five-seat theater. Joey at the Organic [Theater Company] and me with Billy Macy, and he [Christiansen] in effect was responsible for the Chicago theater phenomenon. He discovered *Grease* (1971) and he went to these little theaters around town and said, "This is the best theater that I've ever seen in my life." So he was very much responsible. For the sake of that one man, I have to spare the city. And two other Chicagoans were [Gene] Siskel and [Roger] Ebert, who I knew quite, quite well. And I did this movie [*House of Games*] and they came out and said it was the year's best film—which influenced Orion not to release it.

EM: How does that work?

DM: Exactly. I was talking to the guy who was then the head of



Muller suggested that *Glengarry Glen Ross* is the work for which Mamet will be most remembered. The 1992 film version starred Al Pacino, Kevin Spacey, and Jack Lemmon

Orion, his name was Bill Bernstein. I said, “You know we made this movie for no fucking money, nobody got paid, and you’re not going to release it? Nobody’s making any money.” And he said, “You’re a young fellow, let me explain the movie business to you. You get no money now, but we get all the money later.” ... So the film got a lot of really wonderful notices, except I think they showed it to a few people in Encino and called it a day.

EM: *You managed to have a pretty damned good career after that, so—*

DM: Yeah, but what does it mean when my mother has to live on welfare?

EM: *There’s a special person in this film—a lot of great people in this film, right? I mean everybody. I’m sure everybody saw William Macy make his little appearance in the Western Union office—but I want you to talk about Ricky Jay a little bit.*

DM: Well, the great Ricky Jay just passed on and he was my dearest friend and closest collaborator, the greatest magician of his day and one of the singular lights in the history of magic. We’d talk a lot about the confidence game, because he was an expert on the confidence game, and how the confidence game was very, very much like making a movie. How you have to, as he’d always say, “how you have to lead the mind to its own destruction.” You have to keep the audience moving just like the confidence game, to the point where when you make the switch—when we made the switch here in the movie, when they actually ask the woman for the money, I was so nervous. I said, “Rick, Rick, Rick,” and he said, “Listen, there comes a time when you just gotta ask for the money.” Isn’t that great?

EM: *Absolutely. A lesson everyone needs to learn, actually. I have wanted to ask you this—so, okay, I do Noir Alley. At first they were going to let me have guests on the show, and somehow that’s kind*

of fallen by the wayside. And what I’ve always wanted to do when I have a guest is ask a special question, a coda to the whole thing, right? So I want to ask you this, which I’ve only been able to ask of one other person: What is your death-house meal?

DM: I’m gonna reveal so much about myself.

EM: *That’s the whole point of this question!*

DM: Okay, it’s gonna be three bottles of Dom Perignon, a carton of Camels, and every fucking potato chip in the world.

EM: *Okay, that is good. The only other person I’ve ever asked that question to was Jacqueline Bisset.*

DM: What did she say?

EM: *It was like, scrambled eggs and a warm baguette ... there was a certain wine that she had to have, and a perfectly ripe peach.*

DM: Awww. A perfectly ripe peach. What about that wonderful moment in *Bullitt* (1968) when [Steve McQueen] gets into bed with her, and she’s all frowsy with sleep and he says, “Thank you,” and she says, “For what?”

EM: *For wearing my shirt so well. That was fantastic. Okay, so this is kind of like the death-house question—sorry, I’m a noir guy, I ask these potentially gloomy things—but what’s the thing you think you’re going to be remembered for? When the obit appears, it’s going to say this in line one. And is it the thing you want to be remembered for?*

DM: When they write about me in a hundred years, I want them to say, “Wow, is he still alive?” [huge audience laughter]

EM: *It’s Glengarry Glen Ross, by the way.*

DM: Yeah?



Alec Baldwin's incendiary single scene in the film of *Glengarry Glen Ross* had a surprising backstory, Mamet revealed

EM: Yeah, I think that's it. Which I now believe is the new great American play. *Glengarry Glen Ross* is the great American play.

DM: Well, I gotta tell you—I gotta tell a story about Mr. Mantegna. The play was written for him to play the lead. We played it in Chicago and then we went to Broadway with the Chicago cast, and Joe sits me down one day and says, "I've got this big long monologue, that one where I'm alone onstage. We did it in Chicago, it was great, but I'm not sure if I completely, *completely* understand it." So I said, "Okay, Joe," and we talked about it. We talked about it over lunch one day, and he's like, "Yeah but I'm not sure . . ." And so I get this fucking poster board and we had like different colors for things and he still doesn't understand it. We're in rehearsal and finally one day I said, "Okay Joe, I've got an idea," and he says, "Fuck it—I'll just say it." Which he did. And he not only won the Tony Award, but more importantly, it was the first time—actually I think the only experience I've had—of sitting in the audience watching them all as one think, "Oh my God, I'm watching a star being born."

EM: And when you wrote the screenplay for the film version, how did you come to include what is now the most famous scene [not in the play], the one with Alec Baldwin: "Second prize is a set of steak knives, third prize is you're fired."

DM: Alec was going to be in the movie, he was going to play one of the parts, but he was in a contract with someone else. It was one of those situations, it happened a lot, when somebody says, especially in television, "We got you a contract, we probably aren't going to use you, but we still have you under contract until this out-date." So he had to *not* do the movie. And he called me up and said, "I'm so sorry, what do we do?" I said, "Jesus Christ, I'm not directing the movie. [But] I'll do whatever I can." And he said, "Well, why don't you write me another scene?" So I did.

EM: Wow. That is fantastic. So, I have to set this up, because we have a special second feature for those of you who want to stay, and it connects with conversations [David and I have had] before. We've never met, but we have corresponded, and let's just tell people that what they're going to see here was your choice.

DM: Yeah—you'd heard of this movie but had never seen it, right?

“ It occurs to me that as you get older, your taste buds dull . . . I particularly want [movies] to be more bitter and less sweet, more bitter, less sweet.”

EM: Correct. And it was cool because it goes back to when we were talking about *The Killing*, and David said, "Have you ever seen this other movie?" So I'm going to let you set this up because this was your choice. But I can tell you that it's special because this is a 35mm print from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and we had to jump through a few hoops to get it released from the Academy because it's on the "to be preserved" list. But it has not been, so, you know, we weren't sure—that's why it's a surprise second feature, right? We didn't know if we were actually going to be able to show it when we had to go to press. And I had originally said, "I think David Mamet in person with *House of Games* is enough for one night," but hey—we're going to show a special second feature.

DM: Well, I think this movie's an absolute treat. I think it was Steve McQueen's first film after he got out of the Marines and it occurs to me that as you get older, your taste buds dull, so if you like Bergman and Ray, all that stuff . . . I particularly want it to be more bitter and less sweet, more bitter, less sweet, and this movie just couldn't get any more bitter. It's a heist film, a real kick 'em in the balls movie. Joey and I have a couple of friends who were bank robbers, and one of them said, "I used to love to get out there in centerfield and rack the shotgun and say, 'Everybody stand still or there's gonna be blood, shit, and hair all over that wall!'" So that's the movie you're about to see.

EM: From 1959, it's *The Great St. Louis Bank Robbery*. The title that comes up on the screen will say *The St. Louis Bank Robbery*, but then they decided, you know, who's going to go see that? So it's called *The GREAT St. Louis Bank Robbery* on all the posters. Very early Steve McQueen, directed by two men, Charles Guggenheim, and I believe John Stix is the codirector. Charles Guggenheim's son, Davis Guggenheim, is here, and thank you, Davis, because it was his okay that allowed us to show his father's personal print of the film. This is such a treat, seriously. I'm not being hyperbolic when I say we are in the presence of one of the major literary giants in American history. What a treat. David, thank you so much for coming down here tonight.

DM: Thank you. And thank you all for coming out under these strange and uncertain circumstances. ■