

- **David Mamet on Dramatic Structure**
- People perceive in terms of cause and effect – therefore how we write for an audience must take this into account
 - A plot is an exercise in cause and effect
- **What does a character want, why does she want it, why now, what happens if she doesn't get it?**
 - These are the core questions about character
 - Every hero doubts herself, every hero wants to quit, every hero reaches that point where they believe they are not equal to the task
 - Nonetheless, the hero finds strength from somewhere, and achieves a result which elevates them to the status of a god or kills them
- The Purpose of Drama
- For Mamet, the purpose of drama is to define the clan
 - For example, in sports, we are united in our love of the rules
 - Without the rules the sport would be incoherent and we would have no expectations or common understanding
 - If in the middle of a basketball play someone can just trip another player, or pull out rope and tie a player's feet, then there would be no rules and nothing to understand
 - The fans are united both in their love team, but at a higher level, in their love of the governing rules that make the game possible
- In Drama we're given a premise: the hero wants something
 - This want can be small, can be large
 - It can be trying to lift the plague on Thebes, it can be trying bring civil rights, can be to fly the Atlantic
 - We will follow this journey to the end and the end will be 1) surprising and 2) inevitable
 - The end is always surprising yet inevitable
 - The surprising and inevitable ending is where the reader can't believe they missed something so obvious about life this whole time
 - The reader wonders how they didn't see it coming because throughout the story they identified with the hero and thought along with her
- A neurosis is false understanding between cause and effect

- Drama is a way of discharging leftover energy
 - At the end of the drama we realize we're wrong – that our first understanding of cause and effect was wrong, and we are brought to a richer understanding of the basic premise of cause and effect
- Good drama does not teach
 - What is NOT the purpose of drama is to make people better, to give them ideas, to espouse good causes
 - This is no more the purpose of drama than it is the purpose of a joke – a joke is meant to be funny, not to be a cautionary tale, not to enlighten
- The only purpose of drama is to entertain
 - People don't come to drama to be taught, only to be entertained
 - The dramatist does not know better than the collective audience and its intricate individuals
 - It would be like going to a dentist for a cleaning and while you are in the chair having the dentist try talking you into an investment opportunity – this is not why you came
 - Do not take advantage of your audience by using the captive setting for false purposes
- The purpose of drama is not to investigate reason but to free us from reason
 - We take a reasonable proposition we're trying to find an answer to and then show how we have always been looking in the wrong place
 - Humans seldom overlay their actions onto their beliefs
 - We have a dark side to our human nature and we have to find a way to deal with it
 - This side is inherently unreasonable and cannot be accessed with reason
 - But drama is unreason, and thus an effective tool
- Dramatic Rules
- The hero in the story wants one thing
 - According to Aristotle the whole purpose of drama is the hero's journey
 - The journey must transform the hero (total reversal)
 - The journey must happen in the fewest steps possible
- The story begins when something precipitates events
 - E.g.: Aunt Martha died, and the first relative to get to her house will get her whole estate – until these two facts became known, there was no story
 - The point where the writer can't think her way out of the plot is where great writing comes from
- The hero must undergo 1) recognition and 2) reversal of status

- Every story must have a beginning, middle, end
- Every story is the hero's journey
- The hero cannot just intuit the journey and the purpose of it – the hero must be brought to these insights
 - The hero does not know the answer before she started out – if she did, the story would be pointless
- The unity of time, place, and action
 - The hero has to be doing only one thing, in one place
- Be simple in your storytelling so the audience can follow it, in order that you as the writer can mislead them
 - Each scene is a simple attempt to solve the problem, and it fails, thus we must go on to the next scene
 - The next scene now gives us more information to solve the problem but also gets the hero in more trouble
 - As the hero progresses into the story, the hero is stuck in the journey, all the good ideas have fallen by the wayside, the world makes no sense to the hero
 - The hero must now struggle with simply coming back to a sense of self, and a sense of purpose,
 - And at the end of the middle, the quest is clarified and it enables the hero to proceed to the end
 - So drama is an exercise in failure – the hero attempts to keep solving the problem and keeps failing
 - The things encountered along the way are the writer using her imagination, unafraid of the challenge of starting and not knowing the way
- Tell the Story, don't stop, be interesting, make sure everything is on the line
 - Don't stop means don't divert anywhere that is not part of the journey – that's not the premise the writer first sold to the reader in the opening pages
 - Anything that's not the plot, throw it away – if it gets in the way of the progression, throw it away
 - If you think you should cut it, you must
 - You have to get out of the scene and not extend it – the audience is ahead of you anyway and will get to the scene's meaning before you, so the faster you can get out, do it
- Your hero and your main characters are your best characters – they get all the interesting lines and dimensions
- Story Ideas

- Our own life experiences are somewhat similar to everyone else's and sufficiently different that they at least interest us and lead to somewhere other people haven't been
- Don't be interested in themes, be interested in telling a story
 - A joke is there to make you laugh, drama is there to entertain you
 - You don't inquire into the theme of the joke – either it makes you laugh or it doesn't
 - Same for drama – either it entertains you or not
- A good writer threw out what a bad writer kept
 - Even, perhaps, vice-versa
 - The truth of the story is going to be where you don't expect it
 - The tired old storylines of someone that we all know – that we're not good enough, we're a bad person, etc – these do not lead to surprising stories
 - But looking closely at that small, unique thing in the psyche may bear fruit
 - It's always where you don't expect it
 - The truth is there somewhere – you have to look for it, and you have to trust that it is there even when you don't believe it is
- Character
- People in drama talk because they want to get something from each other – they are pursuing a specific goal
- Characters are what they do – habitual action, says Aristotle
 - We don't trust someone's own observations about themselves – we think that person crafted that story to manipulate us
 - We know people by watching them – by concluding in this circumstance this is what this person will habitually do
 - The reader is there to see what the character does – they will be the ones who determine what the character is
 - One gets to know the character by watching how they act
- There is no strategy the character won't employ, no length they will not go to, no action they will not take
 - Like a young kid trying to get out of going to bed – they will pull out all the stops
- Don't manipulate change in the character – this is manipulating the reader as well
 - You don't have to make the character change

- The character, moving through a set of events, will reveal him- or herself and will not be able to help changing
- You can't have a character who can do everything – the reader will lose interest
 - Superman has to have kryptonite
- Plot
- Everything must tend towards the climax and resolution
- A plot must have a precipitating event before which the plot did not exist
 - This precipitating event inspires the hero to go on a journey that has a specific end
 - At the end of the journey, the question raised at the beginning is answered
- The plot states a proposition and then solves it
- In the middle of the plot, the hero is sufficiently far along on the journey that she forgets what precipitated the journey, has forgotten what she's supposed to do and must be revived
 - This ends when the hero purges herself of her uncertainty and fear – she admits it, she accepts she is fearful and unsure how to proceed
 - Here the hero has hit bottom and only now can she proceed – because now she has a greater understanding of the problem
- It is easy to open a story – because you are setting up an interesting world
 - What is harder is figuring the way out of it
- Always address the real problem in the story
 - If the hero must figure something out, must become something – then you as the writer have to prove how they got there
 - These are the problems that sometimes even the writer doesn't know how to solve – the writer must sit down and work and find a way forward
 - The thing you are always hoping to avoid and not address in the story will be the hole that readers notice
- The plot is usually hiding – it has to be discovered
- Perhaps the most direct route through the plot is not a straight line – there are detours that must be made (always in service to the plot) and only by taking that route can you get to the end
 - Sometimes you cannot drive in a straight line, you have to drive around a mountain
 - A plot is a series of incidents; each incident has to be an essential step in achieving the goal

- The incidents that take a person from their house onto an airplane involve things like leaving the house, getting a cab, going through airport security, arriving at the gate, getting on the gangway, and eventually boarding the plane
 - These are essential incidents – taking away one means the person does not get on the plane
 - It would be impossible for the person to get on the plane if just one of these incidents is taken away
 - At the same time, stopping off on the way to get fitted for a suit or get a haircut are NOT essential to getting on the plane
 - You can still get on the plane without stopping at the tailor or salon, but you can't get on the plane if you don't go through security
- The incidents that takes us away from our direct route are there to help us get back to the direct route
 - A detour came up that we had to take, and by taking it, we are doing it to get back the direct route
 - Because the direct route can't be taken at the point of the detour – we must take the detour (the difficulties create the journey) in order that we may best get back to the direct route
 - All we care about is the journey – we must stick to the journey and if there are detours, they are there because they are essential and will help us get back to the journey
 - Even what seems to be random must relate directly back to the journey (and it is okay if this requires some cleverness or imagination on the part of the audience)
 - The arbitrary incidents relate back to the first cause
- In a three act structure – at the end of Act I, all the hero's great initial ideas run out
 - The second act ends with a revelation that allows the hero to keep going after the journey has faltered
 - The hero realizes something that will inform the end of the journey
 - This realization often comes seemingly by accident
- The nature of the action changes from one act to another
 - In the first act you are using the knife to cut bread so you can go to work and have a good day and earn the socializing after work
 - In the second act you have your after-work party going over to your girlfriend's house and you use the knife to shave and look good

- In the third act you go to your girlfriend's house and find her with another man and you use the knife to kill them
 - It's the same knife that drives everything, but it is looked at in different perspectives
 - This device is known as The Three Uses of The Knife
- Each scene must affect and advance the journey of the hero
- Case Study – Structuring the plot: *American Buffalo*
- In a tragedy, people have more or less good intentions but end up ruining each other in a way that they could not foresee
 - And at the end of the play this ruination is revealed and it is inevitable, yet surprising
- In *American Buffalo*, the Three Uses of the Knife is that at first the thieves encounter a rich man who has a coin collection and they want to rob that collection
 - The second use is that one of the thieves says they have to kick the other thief's son out of the robbery scheme because it is a valuable collection and a risky robbery and therefore not appropriate to use to teach the son a lesson
 - The third use of the knife is the kid returning to the thieves with a coin that the kid has purchased (but the kid says he merely found), in an effort to show the thieves that he is capable of procuring a valuable thing and thus worthy
- Why do we have scenes structured into acts which are themselves structured into an overall narrative – there is a natural rhythm to human attention, one that takes mental breaks
- Case Study – Structuring the plot: *Glengarry Glen Ross*
- In tragedy there is the hero's recognition and reversal of the situation leading to a surprising and inevitable catharsis that moves the audience to fear and pity
 - Drama does not contain recognition or reversal – it is merely a slice of life that leads us at the end to say: isn't life like that
 - We say life is just like that, what an interesting trip I just had
 - We get to go backstage on some interesting aspect of life
- If the reader knows that eventually you will get to a punchline, they will trust you and follow you along
 - Narration is informing people – this is terrible to do to the reader
 - Instead of informing, start with intriguing
 - If you cut out the narration, the spin, it is easier to see what's going on
 - Intrigue instead of inform
- Dialogue
- **Dialogue comes from what the character wants**
- Strive to write dialog in a rhythmic way because human speech is rhythmic

- The greatest writer in the English language, Shakespeare, wrote in meter
- Don't make the reader fight against the current of a clunky line
- Dialogue expresses the things people want from one another
 - People speak to get a result
- Bad dialogue is dialogue about a point that has already been made
- When writing dialogue, something gets between our natural ability to quote speech and make witty, pithy constructions – usually it is our attempted erudition
- Think of dialogue as variations on a theme, each party contributing
- Narration and Exposition
- Drama has nothing to do with information
 - Information is the compiling of facts
 - Don't bore them with facts, the job is to be interesting
 - Stop trying to convey information, stop trying to add obvious establishing shots
 - Exposition is the excess flesh of the drama
 - Take it off but don't cut too deeply – if the reader is keeping up then you have not cut too deeply, if the reader loses interest you have not cut enough
 - The question for the writer ought to be: what can you leave out
 - As painful as it is to cut, it is far more painful to put something in that is not interesting to a reader and derails the success of the story
 - The question is not would you miss it if you took the scene out, the question is if the *reader* would miss it
 - If you have to narrate it, the audience might understand, but they may no longer care for how you have taken them out of the drama
- Scenes
- Every scene has to answer three questions
 - 1) Who wants what from who
 - 2) What happens if they don't get it
 - 3) Why now
- The scene has to contain an attempt of the hero to achieve a goal
 - The goal has to be part of a journey from point A to point B
- The urgency of the scene is informed by the stakes, what's on the line
 - E.g.: If you don't get to Los Angeles in time, they are going to shoot your dog
 - This will get you going with a considerable investment of resources to get to Los Angeles
 - But if the story becomes: if you don't get to Los Angeles in time they're going to shoot your wife

- Now the question of what happens if you don't get what you want (to get to LA) has a much more personal answer, and to stop them from shooting your wife you will invest way more resources than to stop them from shooting your dog
- The scene has to be essential
 - It does not matter if the scene is good – all scenes should be good
 - The only thing that matters is if the scene is essential
- Take out the obligatory scene
 - This scene often takes the form of “Let me explain to you everything that has happened so far...”
 - This is the reaction scene to the preceding action
- If the scene is boring you, it will bore the reader
 - If there's any doubt, there's no doubt – cut it
 - Often the writer will try to over-do the text, do something interesting with the scene to overcome the fact that the scene is boring
- Writing Process
- The story has to be crafted, but made of parts that are inspired, not conscious or logical
 - If you know, at the beginning, that you as the writer are in a lot of trouble, the audience will know too and they will lose interest
 - The reader will go through what you go through as the writer, and mimic the way in which you wrote it – if you write with your conscious mind then the reader will read it with their conscious mind and never tap into their own subconscious (Which is where beauty is found)
- The scenes will inform the structure, and if you start with the structure then that will inform the scenes
 - If you go through the process of being inspired and realizing your story is not about what you thought it was about, then this is a great journey that the audience will go through with you
- Writing is mainly thinking, and rewriting
 - You have to stand being bad, otherwise you will never be good
- If the outline doesn't work, the story will not work
 - Fix it in the outline, otherwise you will have to fix it in a more final version and this is much more difficult
- Writing is rewriting because it's getting the bad writing out and fixed
 - In your work, don't go over the stuff we can't figure out day-to-day
 - You want to write drama about the stuff that is hard to figure out and doesn't quite have a rational solution

- **The writer's biggest fear should be that the audience will beat him to the punchline**
 - They will beat you to the punchline if you let them
- Billy Wilder: Individually, the audience are idiots, collectively they are genius...you cannot fool them
- You cannot extort a gasp out of a reader – if you can get one, you've done something amazing
 - This is also the test of whether what you're reading is good – did it make you gasp, did it have some emotion the writer wasn't trying over-hard to set up
- Entertain them but don't flatter them
 - Flattery is theft – you are trying to steal from someone, even in a small way, their ability to make an independent judgment
- As a writer, you are telling a story around the campfire
- The audience is willing to suspend disbelief and put your writing in a third category beyond true and false
- The audience's journey, and the hero's journey, and the writer's journey are all the same
 - The audience understands correctly that the story's journey is about themselves, because it is also about the writer who is human like them
- The Theater is the place we come to hear the truth
- The writer's domain are the concepts eternally out there, the pre-verbal ones: love, justice, truth, beauty
- The writer must have courage– It's a terrible idea to write about a certain topic: here I go!
- Don't be quick to discard the unusual because you will be usually keeping the run-of-the-mill
- Don't look how other writers do it – figure it out for yourself
 - Things will come out of you this way whose causes are not complete within you but only become complete when manifested
 - As the writer, if you can foresee it, the reader can too and will lose interest
- The writer is trying to get the truth out of the story, not trying to get something out of the reader, not even understanding
- You want the reader to think: where did that come from
- You want to create a form that did not exist
- Life as a Dramatist
- You get everything wrong; the hard part is uncertainty
 - But just get in the habit of doing it
 - Dedicate yourself to your craft and eventually you will be rewarded with something which is not from your conscious mind

- You have to be able to put up with uncertainty – many people would rather put up with lethargy, with failure, than put up with uncertainty
 - Figure it out
- Art comes when it costs you something; the cost is always something you weren't prepared to pay
- Being a writer is not entering the race of making a lot of money – you are entering a different race
- Only aspire to things you can award yourself: honor, dignity, dedication, honesty, patience, perseverance
 - Don't desire things you can't award yourself: fame, riches
 - Only avoid things that you can avoid: dishonesty, sloth, intemperance
 - Don't hate those things you can't avoid: dishonesty in others

- **Summary**
- [Below is a concise summary of Mamet's theory of story]
- The purpose of the story is the hero's journey, and the journey transforms the hero
 - The drama begins with a precipitating event that inspires the hero to go on a journey
 - Before the precipitating event there is no story
 - In drama we're given a premise: the hero wants something
 - The hero wants something -- the hero goes on a journey to get it -- the hero achieves a result that either kills them or elevates them to the status of a god
 - What must be shown: 1) what does the hero want 2) why does she want it now 3) what happens if she doesn't get it
- The hero cannot merely intuit the journey and the purpose of it – the hero must be brought to these insights
- Each scene is an attempt by the hero to solve the problem, and it fails, thus we must go on to the next scene
 - The next scene gives us more information to solve the problem but also gets the hero in more trouble
 - As the hero progresses through the story, the hero becomes stuck – all the good ideas have fallen by the wayside, the world makes no sense to the hero
 - The hero must now struggle with simply coming back to a sense of self and of purpose
 - In the middle of the journey, the hero must be revived
 - Then at the end of the middle, the quest/journey is clarified for the hero and it enables the hero to proceed to the end
 - So drama is an exercise in failure – the hero attempts to keep solving the problem and keeps failing
- At the end of the first act, all the hero's great initial ideas run out
 - The second act ends with a revelation that allows the hero to keep going after the journey has faltered
 - The hero realizes something that will inform the end of the journey
 - This realization often comes seemingly by accident
- The hero must undergo 1) recognition (anagnorisis) and 2) Reversal (peripeteia)
- The end of the journey, where the hero's transformation is complete, is always surprising and inevitable
 - SURPRISING AND INEVITABLE
 - The surprising and inevitable ending is where the reader can't believe they missed something so obvious about life this whole time

- The reader wonders how she didn't see it coming because throughout the story she was following along with the hero and thinking in-line with the hero
 - Yet at the end of the drama we realize we are wrong – that our first understanding of cause and effect was wrong, and we are brought to a richer understanding of the basic premise of cause and effect
 - In Drama we take a reasonable position we're trying to find an answer to and then show how we have always been looking in the wrong place
- Plot – Plot is causal
 - Plot is a causal series of incidents, each of which is an essential step in the hero achieving his/her goal
 - E.g.: The essential incidents in order to go from your house to boarding an airplane include: leaving your house, getting into some transportation to take you to the airport, going through airport security, arriving at the gate, walking down the gangway, and eventually boarding the plane
 - These are all essential incidents – taking just one of them away means you do not board the plane
 - Stopping at the tailor to get fitted for a suit is NOT essential to boarding an airplane
 - You can still get on a plane if you haven't stopped at a tailor that day, but you can't if you haven't gone through security
 - There may however be incidents that act as detours
 - For example, we can't catch a train to the airport because the train is out of service – this may mean a detour of getting a cab
 - The purpose of detours then is not irrelevance but it is to get us back to the journey as quickly as possible
 - Each scene must advance and affect the journey (even detours)
 - Every scene has to answer three questions
 - 1) Who wants what from whom
 - 2) What happens if they don't get it
 - 3) Why now
 - The plot did not exist before the precipitating event
 - Dialogue
 - Dialogue comes from what a character wants
 - Dialogue expresses the things people want from one another
 - People speak to get a result

- Don't make the reader fight against the current of clunky dialogue
- Bad dialogue is dialogue about a point that has already been made, or an attempt to catch the reader up on past events
- Think of good dialogue as variations on a theme, each party contributing
- The Rules of Drama
 - The purpose of drama is to entertain
 - Drama is not the exhibition of reason – it is the freeing from reason
 - In drama, we take a reasonable proposition we're trying to find an answer to and then show how we have always been looking in the wrong place
 - In your work, don't go over the stuff we can figure out day-to-day
 - You want to write drama about the stuff that is hard to figure out and doesn't quite have a rational solution
 - We have a dark side to our human nature and we have to find a way to deal with it
 - This side is inherently unreasonable and cannot be accessed with reason or common thinking
 - But drama is unreason, and thus an effective tool
 - Everything must tend towards the climax and resolution
 - The Three Uses of the Knife
 - From a song by Huddie Ledbetter (known as "Lead Belly")
 - *"You take a knife, you use it to cut the bread, so you'll have strength to work; you use it to shave, so you'll look nice for your lover; on discovering her with another, you use it to cut out her lying heart."*
 - So it is the knife that drives everything, drives the story, but it is looked at from different perspectives and assumes different roles
 - In Tragedy, people have more or less good intentions but end up ruining each other in a way that they could not foresee
 - Narration is informing people – it is a terrible thing to do to a reader
 - Drama has nothing to do with information – information is the act of compiling facts
 - Don't bore them with facts, the job is to be interesting, to entertain
 - Instead of informing, aim to intrigue
 - If you have to narrate it, the audience might understand but now they may no longer care because you have taken them out of the drama
 - EXPOSITION IS EXCESS
 - The story has to be crafted, but made of parts that are inspired, not conscious or logical

- If you go through the process of being inspired and realizing your story is not about what you thought it was about then this is a great journey that the audience will go through with you
 - The audience is willing to suspend disbelief and put your writing in a third category beyond true and false – if they sense it is inspired and not merely crafted
 - The audience understands that the story's journey is about themselves because it is about what it's like to be human
- If you know, at the beginning, where you are going then you are in trouble – the audience will know too and they will lose interest
 - The worst thing of all is the audience beating you to the punchline
- **The writer's biggest fear should be that the audience will beat him/her to the punchline**
- Dedicate yourself to the craft and eventually you will be rewarded with something which is not from your conscious mind
 - If you write the story from your conscious mind, the reader will read it with her conscious mind and never fully enter the story because of this
 - You must write with your unconscious mind in order to tap into the reader's subconscious, where beauty is found
- The writer's domain are the concepts eternally out there, the pre-verbal ones: love, justice, truth, beauty
- The story must contain a recognition and a reversal
 - Drama that does not contain a recognition or a reversal is then meant as a slice of life and at the end the goal is to have the reader say: isn't life like that
 - This slice of life is inviting the reader backstage on some interesting aspect of life
- Take out the obligatory scene – the reaction scene, the scene that tries to explain everything that has happened thus far
 - Often with an unnecessary scene the writer will try to overdo things like dialogue, action, or setting in order to overcome the fact that the scene is not essential and not interesting
- The only thing that matters is if the scene is essential
 - If it is not essential cut it out,
 - No matter how well written it may be, if the scene is not essential, cut it

- If there is any doubt as to whether the scene is essential then there is no doubt...it is not, and must be cut
- Writing is mainly thinking, and rewriting
 - Writing is rewriting because it's about getting the bad writing out and fixed
- In your work, don't go over the stuff we can figure out day-to-day
 - You want to write drama about the stuff that is hard to figure out and doesn't quite have a rational solution
- You want the reader to think: where did that come from?
- Art comes when it costs you something; the cost is always something you weren't prepared to pay