

Smalec, Theresa. *Ron Vawter's Life in Performance*. Chicago: Seagull Books, 2018, 224 p. (ISBN 978 08 57425 52 2)

Holmberg, Arthur. *David Mamet and Male Friendship: Buddy Plays and Buddy Films*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, ix-xii 260 p. (ISBN 978 11 37303 18 3)

*Ron Vawter's Life in Performance* by Theresa Smalec is the revised trade edition of her doctoral dissertation, *Body of Work: Reconstructing Ron Vawter's Life and Performance Career* (NYU, 2009, supervisor Richard Schechner). The change in title, somewhat reminiscent of Stanislavsky's autobiography, *My Life in Art* (1926), not only marks the five hundred page Ph.D.'s reduction to a more manageable study but also better foregrounds its central idea: that Vawter's acting personae were rooted in his real life personae. In this regard he may even have been a man 'passing' throughout his life, except perhaps during his final months. For some, this hypothesis will seem inconsistent with Vawter's long association with The Wooster Group, whose acting practice is based on gestural acting and physical tasks rather than on narrative and identification, except when mediated by personal or found objects brought to rehearsals. Vawter was indeed known to 'stand in' for absent characters while avoiding conventional actors' emoting, instead functioning more as what Bruce Porter once dubbed a 'stealth performer'. Unlike Brechtian performers who break character and therefore depend on a degree of illusionism for their 'Verfremdung' or alienation to be effective, Vawter's 'lieutenancy' allowed for the co-existence of real life and performance personae. The point of reference here, though, would seem to be Vsevolod Meyerhold, whom Smalec does not mention anywhere. The French rendition of Vawter's 'standing in' proves fortunate since he was a Second Lieutenant, having joined the Special Forces in 1965 and followed Officer Candidate School only finished while has already enrolled as a literature student at Siena College in Albany, NY (1967-1971). That he earned his military commission on Ascension Day, 1968, may well have inspired Vawter's subsequent fantasy of being dropped behind enemy lines as green beret chaplain. His military father, however, deemed the National Guard a convenient means of avoiding that his son be drafted and sent to Vietnam, though Smalec remarks that a simple college deferment would have served him equally well.

Such qualifications are illustrative of Smalec's biographical method, in which she draws on primary sources—talks with teachers, family members, partners and friends, collaborators and colleagues—without losing her critical distance. The critical literature on the two companies, The Performance Group and The

Wooster Group, which Vawter was primarily associated with and which constitute a major interest of the present book, is thus for the most part neglected in favor of personal interviews extensively quoted from and contextualized, and possibly deserving separate publication as supplement to the present volume. Besides conducting this extensive oral history, Smalec delved into the available archives—from the Vawter Papers at NY's Public Library to the Schechner Papers at Princeton U—or assembled the material herself when this proved necessary, e.g. by checking Siena College's campus newspaper and yearbooks, or local newspapers for reviews. Throughout her biographical reconstruction Smalec maintains a style free from jargon which makes the book eminently readable.

One of the first myths Smalec dispels is that Vawter lacked any theatre training when, dressed in military outfit, he started attending The Performance Group's rehearsals of Sam Shepard's *Tooth of Crime* (1973). This was after his move to New York, where he was allegedly working as an army recruiter. Smalec failed to confirm or deny the latter claim, repeated in several published interviews. What she did discover, though, is that as a literature student at Siena College, Vawter acted in and directed close to a dozen shows for its Little Theatre Club—well-known authors like Albee, Wilder, Pirandello, and Osborne, besides more obscure ones like William Henry Smith and the Canadian John Herbert. He also appeared in community theatre productions of O'Neill and Williams. The danger of Smalec's biographical reading of this repertoire is that all the parts Vawter played potentially become informed by everyday experiences and relationships, even if in the case of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* he demonstrably based his part of the stage director, almost in a documentary manner, on the play's actual director, his fourth year fellow student Tom Mohler. Smalec mentions the emerging avant-garde and postmodern practice of opening out to everyday reality and resisting professionalization, notable among Fluxus artists. But in the context of Pirandello's play she perhaps insufficiently problematizes the futility of efforts at catching the flux of life in performance. That much is implied by her point that Vawter's obtrusive presence at the rehearsals of *Tooth of Crime* came to be experienced as part of the environmental performance rather than leading to its disruption.

The relevance of Vawter's training at the Little Theatre is enhanced by intermedial experiments prefiguring some of the technological practices familiar from the companies he would become associated with. Here Smalec's occasional usage of the term 'multimedia,' next to 'intermedia,' downplays the integration and transposition of media and subject matter in these companies' output. She

similarly underestimates the writerly or discursive mediation in Spalding Gray's monologues that did without technology, even if he may have left the company in search of greater artistic control and a more direct contact with his audiences. Vawter's early use of video in his *Rashomon* (1970), doubling the stage action and further multiplying the perspectives already set in motion in Ryunosuke Akutagawa's stories, as well as in their screen and musical adaptations, certainly anticipates the perspectivalism at work in the Wooster Group's Rhode Island Trilogy. In fact, Smalec very much redresses the standard view of *Three Places* as the joint creative effort of Gray and Wooster Group director Elizabeth LeCompte, by insisting on Vawter's artistic contribution.

Smalec's performance emphasis, however, occasionally leads her to miss eventual textual sources of certain intermedial effects. In *Rumstick Road*, the spectral, ventriloquist act resulting from the superimposition of the image of Bette Gray's face on that of Libby Howe, may well derive from the presence of the medium through which the dead husband in Akutagawa's *Rashomon* is allowed to testify. Alternatively, the records vandalized in *Nayatt School* may have been of personal import to Gray, but they also stand in for the Chamberlaynes' venerable collection in T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, and by extension for the canonical drama text itself, the first one explicitly tackled by The Wooster Group. The introduction of canonical drama indeed signaled a move away from Gray's biographical theatre, even if he still associated Celia Coplestone's plight with that of his mother Bette, whose religious bent, manic depression and suicide the Rhode Island Trilogy came to terms with. In fact, Eliot already informed the earlier *Rumstick Road*, since its program sported a quote from the *Four Quartets* and the set's perspectivalism equally resonates with that of *The Cocktail Party*. In a December 11, 1978 *Village Voice* interview with Robert Coe, LeCompte admitted that Eliot's play "had been the central focus of *Rumstick* until quite late in the rehearsal period".

For the rest, it may have been worth adding that the 1950 vinyl long-playing recording of *The Cocktail Party*, as directed by Martin Browne and used by Gray, followed closely upon the play's 1949 premiere at the Edinburgh Festival. At that time the vinyl lp was something of a technical innovation, given its displacement of the brittle shellac and 78 rpm playback speed in favor of 33½ rpm. Though the technology dates from 1930, its introduction by RCA Victor during the Depression was a commercial failure. RCA further developed the product and relaunched it at a 1948 New York press conference in combination with reliable and affordable playback equipment, although the fanola pickups featured onstage

in the Rhode Island trilogy were children's plastic versions. Here, then, Gray's private history subtly shifts into the Wooster Group's media archeology.

Another myth that Smalec's biography dispels is that Vawter completed his training as a priest. While it is true that he briefly followed the Franciscan formation (probably between one and two years), she insists that Siena College is a secular liberal arts college whose faculty admittedly consisted of friars. Vawter may have joined its residential Franciscan program out of interest in the saint's conversion from warrior to pacifist or out of curiosity at the all-male life—fantasies of which would feed into The Wooster Group's *Point Judith (an epilog)* where they are matched by the equally masculine vision of life in an all-female convent, fueled by Mary's postulancy in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Alternatively, the residential program was simply a ploy to escape his constricting home. Fact is that the dorm life led to his first gay relationship with fellow Franciscan student Kevin Daly after he had quit the program and made his home in downtown Albany. After graduating Vawter moved to the West Coast for some graduate studies in drama at Stanford University (1971-72) and an appearance as Mortimer, the ruthless leader of the nobles in Marlowe's *Edward II*. Upon his return from Palo Alto, he then briefly joined the campus theatre at the State University of New York, Albany, for a production of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*. The sudden death of Vawter's father on September 14, 1972, in the middle of rehearsals, jeopardized his performance of the revolutionary hero, going by the notes of its director, Janka Burian. Yet, it also freed Vawter from pursuing a military career, albeit not of his real life military persona.

Legend has it that Vawter, after moving to Manhattan, accidentally walked by Wooster Street's Performing Garage on his way home from the recruiting office, but the latter's address, when checked, appeared to house the Department of Motor Vehicles. Smalec doubts that Vawter as a National Guardsman was actually detailed as an army recruiter. It is more likely that the aspiring actor realized he would exert a far greater fascination upon the Performance Group as a non-performer, if not a possible informer—after all the company had just staged the controversial *Commune*. These were indeed the days when New York's experimental theatre set great stock on authenticity, personality, and charisma as opposed to conventional theatre training. The ploy must have worked since Vawter was taken on by Schechner, although as a manager, and it is in this capacity—and that of drummer, a skill going back to the high school band Vawter played in—that he joined the cast of *Mother Courage and her Children*. As a result it remained moot to audience members whether he was playing the part of

Ordnance Officer or not. Similarly, when he joined Elizabeth LeCompte in *A Wing and a Prayer* (dir. Ellen LeCompte) Vawter's everyday dancing prowess came in handy.

The subtle blurring of the line separating everyday life and stage life would also become a feature of *Sakonnet Point* (1975) which LeCompte and Gray developed concurrently and which retrospectively would be labeled the first Wooster Group production. In the conflict that ensued between LeCompte and Schechner, especially after their India tour, the two dominant director figures—there were others, like Stephen Borst who directed Vawter in *Sly Mourning* (1975)—the newcomer initially acted as managerial go-between or in Smalec's pun, as 'piece keeper' and 'consolari' or center of trust. She even goes so far as to dub him a 'shadow governor', though Vawter in his diffidence might have denied this. For a while LeCompte and Schechner kept working simultaneously, giving rise to the notion of an undercover theatre troupe, a motif that would return throughout the Wooster Group repertoire. The increasing strain on human and financial resources ultimately led to what Smalec reads as the symbolic shoot out of *Cops* (1978), pitting as it did followers of both directors against each other. Schechner himself preferred to explain the metaphorical violence as relief for his private separation from Joan MacIntosh, partly so she could pursue a career on Broadway. The official break followed with *The Balcony* (1979) after which Schechner resigned and turned over to LeCompte the Performing Garage shares. In the meantime Vawter had also outed himself as homosexual to his limited artistic circle. His part as Irma, the brothel madam in Genet's play, made for his gradual transformation as drag queen. And *Sly Mourning* had been produced by Shaman Company, which explicitly advertised itself in the *Village Voice* as gay and lesbian theatre. Still, that production's pathological medical discourse and death fantasies undeniably linked homosexuality to its social and discursive repression. This helps to explain Vawter's lingering reserve about fully outing his homosexuality. It even led Kevin Daly to consider Vawter's relationship with Nancy Reilly as cover-up for that with Greg Mehrten, the former actor of Mabou Mines and mainstay in Vawter's life. In similar self-imposed attempts at heteronormativity, Rauschenberg and Cage even went through short-lived marriages with resp. Susan Weil and Xenia Andreevna Kashevaroff.

In the course of Vawter's subsequent career with The Wooster Group his life personae became superimposed by an increasing number of intertextual layers, but Smalec, in keeping with her biographical project, remains attentive to the private subcurrents. These pertain to other company members as well, not just to

Vawter or Gray for that matter, the only other fellow actor already to have received a biographical portrait in William Demastes's *Spalding Gray's America* (2008). <sup>1</sup>Ultimately this private undertow has turned The Wooster Group's protracted work-in-progress into a complex collective autobiography, whose group dynamics gave rise to the theatrical exploration of several 'families' (rig workers, nuns, Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos, Dr. Vogler's troupe in Bergman's *The Magician*, Geinin...), much as Smalec's oral history has turned her own biography into a collaborative enterprise. While these personal resonances remain unnoticed to most spectators, they give a special urgency to the artists' ongoing creation and composition work, besides substituting for the conventional onstage identification between performer and character.

Thus, Jim Strahs's 'Rig' in *Point Judith (an epilog)* (1979) still opposed the personae of Vawter and Willem Dafoe, whom Schechner had brought in as lead for *Cops*, despite his earlier promising the part to Vawter. Two years later, however, 'The Party'-scene from *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)* (1981) turned their two characters into "affable coworkers" which they indeed had become offstage. For Vawter in particular, the latter production's exploration of racism through the controversial use of blackface and the reenactment of Pigmeat Markham routines extended his concern with his alleged Choctaw lineage. As he told Ross Wetzsteon in an October 17, 1989 *Village Voice* interview, his paternal grandfather apparently "bought himself a squaw off a Choctaw reservation". This possible lineage had already been alluded to in 'Rig', whose original building sequence was cut and reserved for *Route 1 & 9*. The biographical detail also harks back to the opening scene of *Rumstick Road* (1977), whose toponymic title and former habitat of the late Gray is explained by different Native American genealogical stories. Smalec's study does not weave the intertextual tapestry very systematically, and stops short of making explicit certain motifs, whether constrained by her page limit or biographical focus. On the one hand, she informs us that Vawter acted as assistant director and dramaturg for *Rumstick Road*, by offering his expertise on Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca, the subject of his MA thesis at NYU, which prolonged the art historical courses he took at Siena College. On the other hand, she omits the fact that his interest in his ethnic roots also anticipates The Wooster Group's decision to cast the Trojans as Native Americans in their production of *Troilus and Cressida* (2012), begun as a collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company and revived without them as *Cry, Trojans!* (2014). It is true that these productions postdate Vawter's prematurely ended life. Still, the fact that his partner Greg Mehrten, besides playing the Trojan match-maker Pandarus, doubled as the scurrilous Greek slave

Thersites resonates with the lingering marginalization of homosexuals, evident as early as *Sly Mourning* and the 'Rig'. Such updates would also have enhanced the discussion of Vawter's collaboration with Mehrten on *Pretty Boy* (1984), created for Mabou Mines but done at the Performing Garage, as well as Vawter's major solo work, *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (1992), his double portrait of two utterly different AIDS victims.

The final years of Vawter's life were overshadowed by his infection with AIDS. They also turned him into an activist. Smalec carefully reconstructs the harrowing events surrounding the creation of *Frank Dell's The Temptation of St. Antony*, beginning in November 1986 when Vawter lapsed into a coma after suffering a brain seizure. This crisis may have been AIDS related, though at that point neither he nor Mehrten had been tested. The company members' wake around his hospital bed certainly provided LeCompte with the central stage image for *Frank Dell*, then being developed. It was only after Vawter's recovery during the Spring 1989 filming of *Internal Affairs* (dir. Mike Figgis) in Los Angeles, where he caught pneumonia, that he was diagnosed HIV positive. The knowledge that his life would in all likelihood be cut short led to Vawter's farewell from The Wooster Group, so he could devote himself to solo work, even if he was increasingly hampered by the illness and the side-effects of AZT, the only available medication at the time. Once again, Smalec deems it fitting that Vawter took leave of his theatrical family in performance. The Wooster Group's *Brace Up!* (1991) features him standing in for Colonel Vershinin, saying farewell to one of Chekhov's three sisters when his army post leaves their town. In a similar way, *Point Judith*, the Rhode Island Trilogy's final instalment, had served as an artistic farewell to Gray. That production's inset nuns' home movie shot on the sound near New London even recalled the video ending of Vawter's *Rashomon*, a pantomime reenactment of the story in Kabuki masks, shot on a Cape Cod beach. This parallel possibly explains why the scenario for Vawter's touching yet mocking farewell scene—a clumsy film shoot with glycerine-fueled tears—was recycled from *Nayatt School* (1978), the penultimate episode of the Rhode Island Trilogy.

In *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (1992), the solo project that followed Vawter's theatrical farewell from The Wooster Group, he would increasingly attenuate the tense distance that separated his real life and stage personae, much as Gray did in his low-tech monologues after his departure from The Wooster Group. It does not matter that Smith's portrait was an archival reconstruction and Cohn's speech to the American Society for the Protection of the Family a research-based

collaborative invention, written up by Gary Indiana. While Vawter's condemnation of Cohn's homophobia and his fear of Smith's flagrant homosexuality were mitigated by his empathy for their suffering and death of AIDS-related illnesses, it was in his introductory remarks to the audience, so Smalec argues, that he came closest to divulging his true self. Here, the biographer seems to forget that introductions still belong to that liminal space in-between everyday life and art, the more since she admits that at heart Vawter was a performer.

Having longed for years to break into the movie business, Vawter finally also got to play a part in *Philadelphia* (1993, dir. Jonathan Demme). Based on Geoffrey Bowers's unfair dismissal from the law firm Baker & McKenzie, this was the first big budget Hollywood production on AIDS to cast an HIV positive actor, though the lead was played by Tom Hanks. Smalec believes the movie helped portray homosexuals more empathetically and less stereotypically but critics like Robert Corber regretted the fact that this involved a de-queering and de-eroticizing. All the same, *Philadelphia* served an activist purpose, which was a throwback to Vawter's final years at Siena College when he and fellow-student Joseph Cali in November 1969 spearheaded anti-Vietnam protests.

The ultimate theatricalized self-exposure, however, came with *Philoktetes-Variations* (1994, dir. Jan Ritsema), in which Vawter's physical weakness and wish to die onstage led him to address the spectators, his naked body barely covered by a veil, from within an upright coffin. It is as if he wanted to conduct his own obsequies, just as for *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* Vawter mixed some of the late Smith's ashes within his eye make-up. What many saw as a streak of morbidity nevertheless followed from the paradox that performing kept Vawter alive, yet drained his remaining resources even more. He also increasingly wanted to put AIDS on the political agenda. In hindsight Smalec finds it ironic that during the rehearsals of *Tooth of Crime* Gray was the only one to interpret Vawter's real life persona as another 'front' or formal mask. For that reason his final self-performance in Ritsema's production invites comparison with Gray's own 2004 'creative' suicide by jumping off the Staten Island Ferry, since that final ending can also be interpreted as an environmental staging of sorts in which art and life come perilously close. Given such close parallels, Smalec could perhaps have delved into environmental theory, beginning with Schechner's writings. Now she only references Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), instead of further fleshing out the complex dynamic of art and reality, her overall subject.



All in all, Smalec's biography of Ron Vawter (1948-94) is a heart-felt tribute and memorial to a great actor and key member of New York's avant-garde theatre. Its acting focus and oral history methodology at the expense of the wider critical debate may keep some readers hungry for more. But then, in her final pages the author invites her readership to prolong her scholarship and thus to keep Vawter's memory alive as well. Insofar as his stage repertoire is not exhaustively dealt with by Smalec and her biography excludes a more extensive treatment of his movie performances, the call for supplementary research is out.

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Holmberg's *David Mamet and Male Friendship: Buddy Plays and Buddy Films* offers a look at the Mamet canon from the perspective of male Sbonding. After a brief introduction and opening chapter foregrounding *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), the book moves from *Homicide* (1991) and *American Buffalo* (1975), through *A Life in the Theater* (1977) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), to *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974). The next chapter deals with the legal history of homosexuality and the explosion of homophobia at the end of the nineteenth century in relation to *Romance* (2005). The volume is then rounded off with chapters on *Duck Variations* (1971) and *Edmond* (1982).

No explanation is provided for the creative works' achronological treatment. Nor does Holmberg have a developmental argument about male friendship that could warrant the resequencing of Mamet's output. Instead the critic variously illustrates and expands his topic—displaying his vast knowledge in the process—according to the needs and opportunities offered by the individual works. Meanwhile he subtly twists accepted views, as when he off-handedly dubs *Speed-the-Plow* "Mamet's acid love letter to Hollywood" (7) rather than simply the scathing critique of the movie industry it is usually seen as. Holmberg's tenuous link between his chapter 5 on *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984) and chapter 6 on *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974) is that 'erotic fantasy' is the sizzle that sells the real estate (121), just as it binds the latter play's Danny to Bernie in a familiar pattern of male camaraderie. If there is any development between these plays, it seems to be from submerged homoeroticism to more explicit sexuality, but that development is again undone in the next chapter on *Duck Variations*, and again in the final one on *Edmond*. If *Romance* "makes explicit what many earlier Mamet works dramatize implicitly"—that "eros can play a part in male attraction and attachment" (179)—then a linear arrangement of the plays' analyses may have required Holmberg to end with the sex farce. As it is, two more chapters follow its discussion, those on *Duck Variations* and *Edmond* which Holmberg deems "Mamet's most provocative work" (189). Since both plays dramatize a search for

peace as well as friendship, their final analysis imbues the book's final pages with an elegiac sense. Like the chapter on *Romance*, that on *Edmond* offers an exciting interpretation in that to Holmberg the play presents a take on Plato's *Phaedo*. This dialogue dramatizes the death of Socrates and the key to acquiescence: a virtuous, responsible life in which communal duties are not shirked and the value of friendship is acknowledged. If *Duck Variations* parodies deeper existential questions like the conflict between free will and predetermination, *Edmond* confronts us with these issues in a more harrowing manner.

In the absence of any straightforward developmental argument, Holmberg tends to make the links between his chapters implicit. Thus *Edmond*'s insight that "every fear hides a desire" is anticipated in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, through the "sexual peek-a-boo" (138) which Danny and Bernie play at Marshall Field's, after Bernie claimed (truthfully or falsely) that as a child he was molested by a guy in the movies. Only seldom do we get explicit analytical cross-references between the works discussed and the wider Mamet repertoire, as when Joe Mantegna is invited to compare Ricky Roma's combined pep talk / sales pitch to Link with the advice Edmond gets from an anonymous man in a bar on how to regain his masculinity (192). The ambiguity of the fortune-teller at the start of *Edmond* (gifted or a con-woman) harks back to *The Shawl* (1985) but Holmberg does not say so, perhaps because he realizes he should perhaps have dealt with the latter play in the context of his buddy theme, given the homosexual relation between John and Charles. The analysis of *Edmond*, coming at the end of *David Mamet and Male Friendship*, is indeed an ironical return to Holmberg's earlier study, *David Mamet and American Macho* (CUP, 2012), dealing as it does with Edmond's threatened masculinity and puritan guilt as much as with the homosocial theme.

Except for *Romance* the plays Holmberg discusses have all been dealt with before in detail by critics occasionally also touching on the homosocial aspect of Mamet's work. It is a contested area tied to the controversial misogyny and homophobia of his male characters. That these are all too often equated with the author is a "moronic" confusion Holmberg rightfully warns against (127). Important earlier sources on his subject are Bob Vorlicky's *Act Like a Man: Challenging Masculinities in American Drama* (Michigan UP, 1995), dealing with strictly male-cast plays, not just Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *American Buffalo*, and David Radavich's frequently reprinted "Man among Men: David Mamet's Homosocial Order" (1991, 1994, 2004). These two sources are properly acknowledged by Holmberg, though others are at times dealt with in a more

cavalier fashion by blanket references to books, book chapters or articles, even when individual passages are quoted, e.g. from Freud (10n13). Holmberg enlists Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* into the queer cause because the psychoanalyst understood the polymorphous character of pre-Oedipal desire as a liberation from a compulsory heteronormativity. What Holmberg omits is that Freud also tended to define homosexuality in pathological terms, by conceiving of narcissism, melancholia and hysteria as symptoms of a so-called homosexual ailment. The point is worth making because Holmberg (building on Bigsby) also describes Edmond as a homophobic narcissist (195), which from the psychoanalytical perspective would seem to be a self-conflicted characterization requiring further explanation. Not referenced by Holmberg is Vorlicky's essay on *November* (hotReview July 8, 2008), which together with *Romance* and *Keep Your Pantheon* has been said to constitute Mamet's gay trilogy. *Keep Your Pantheon* (69, 161) is mentioned but not discussed, whereas *November* is not touched upon at all. Holmberg's gender study nevertheless offers a focused and systematic update of the homosocial subject, drawing on a wide range of contextual studies (sociological, psychological, sexual, anthropological, linguistic, etc.), adding occasionally more anecdotal topical excursions, whether to etiquette guru Emily Post (53) or to TV anchors Peter Jennings and Tom Brokaw (88). These tend to provide a breath of fresh air in discussions of what some will consider perhaps all too familiar material. Thus the chapter on *Duck Variations* has little new to offer after the excellent discussions of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Romance*.

As literary director of the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA Holmberg, who teaches at Brandeis University in Waltham MA but like Mamet hails from Chicago, is very well read and able to expand his points with relevant passages from world literature, at times translated by himself, as is the case with a bit from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (71n29). Holmberg is clearly a Francophile since every other page contains a French phrase, an idiosyncrasy that should perhaps have been reigned in somewhat. A sample includes *badinage* (20), *cri de coeur* (23), *policier* (23), *faux death* (209n21), *chacun pour soi & bon mot* (36), *beau idéal* (40), *ménage à trois* (50), *mal à propos and savoir faire* (59), *derrière* (66), *décor* (70), *le bon ton* (216n1), but also the perhaps unnecessary German "aneinander vorbei sprechen" (22) since "speaking past each other" will do just as well (hence its parenthetical inclusion). Here and there we find the odd Latin and Greek phrase—*asinus asinum fricat* (36), *the eromenos-erastes paradigm* (52), *noli me tangere* (65), *gluteus maximus* (67), *primum mobile and summum bonum* (78), even a personal coinage "carpe noctem" (111). Fortunately the book as a whole is written in a very accessible, racy, frequently witty style, even where it builds on

solid scholarship. In the chapter on Mamet's sex farce, *Romance*, Holmberg most obviously rises to the occasion.

Given Holmberg's breadth of knowledge it is equally refreshing to see that he draws on the odd European scholar, like George-Michel Sarotte's 1974 Ph.D. on male homosexuality (published in 1975 and translated in 1978). In his quest for more precise descriptions of the feelings of Mamet's male characters (50), Holmberg indeed invites us to adopt Sarotte's distinction between homoeroticism, homosexuality and homogenitalism. While often criticized for being "latent homosexuals" or "closet queers" (145), Mamet's male characters belong perhaps more to what Holmberg, now building on Gary Cross, has also called "boy-men". The latter topic has already been dealt with in Holmberg's earlier *American Macho* and is reprised in the present volume's chapter on *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. After all, Bernie and Danny's sexual yarns and smut are 'boy talk' supposed to maintain their heterosexual gender identity and fend off homosexual panic: the "adolescent cast of their fantasies signals a reluctance to grow up" (122). Just as the notion of 'boy-men' suggests a conceptual overlap, Sarotte's categories form a homosocial continuum which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick demonstrated, nineteenth century homophobia severed when it established the homo-hetero dichotomy in which heterosexuality's legitimation requires homosexuality's stigmatization and criminalization. In a brief comparison of *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* with the movies *Husbands* (1970, dir. John Cassavetes) and *Carnal Knowledge* (1971, dir. Mike Nichols, scripted by Jules Feiffer) Holmberg underscores that homoeroticism and heteroeroticism coexist, that there is no "strict dichotomy between gay and straight" (133), and that both have complex feelings towards both sexes. In the discussion of *Homicide*, though, Holmberg's denial of any erotic subcurrent in what he earlier called Sullivan's "Liebestod" (24, 30) possibly smacks of Hollywood's disavowal. Buddy films are a staple but more often than not male bonding is dealt with in an evasive way, exemplary of the impoverishment of the issue in the puritan US (5). Still, in *Homicide*, the eventual denial of any eroticism between Gold and Sullivan fits the latter's failure to respond to Gold's identity crisis on an emotional level and Mamet's insistence that male friendship need not be sexualized.

Holmberg's Francophilia—evident in his vocabulary and sources—could have been even more productive had he developed his claim that Mamet is the "Molière of male masochism" (75), a statement inviting perhaps more precise historical and generic categorizations. Later Holmberg calls Roma the "Tartuffe of free-market capitalism" (100) and Edmond, Mamet's miser (194) as well as a self-

degrading egotistic bourgeois gentilhomme (201). An extra reference to the ART production of *The Miser* remains hidden in a note (217n12). This may be because late nineteenth century US capitalism's redefinition of manhood in terms of financial success rather than loyalty and military prowess, as in older cultures, is intricately tied to Calvinism's confusion of virtue and grace with wealth, as illustrated by Max Weber's classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1950). Ironically, Holmberg criticizes Jonathan Cullick for reducing Moss to a caricature (86) by interpreting his communal discourse prior to his betrayal of Aaronow as the mask for his competitive discourse, when in fact these two discourses cannot be separated. Holmberg's own reading of this scene would seem to warrant calling it tragicomic rather than comic or melodramatic, if we go by Nina Baym's "Melodrama of Beset Manhood" (1985), relied on by Holmberg in his chapter on *Homicide* (32, 211n35). *Romance* is more of a sex farce which "Feydeau would have been proud to pen" (170). And Edmond may be a miser like Molière's anti-hero but the label of melodrama falls short to describe a play that is "both savagely funny and diabolically violent" (194). This tension is also demonstrated in Stuart Gordon's screen adaptation and the interview Holmberg had with Kenneth Branagh, explaining the audience's conflicted response. More generally Holmberg, like Gerald Weales before him (201), enlists Mamet into postmodernism on account of Edmond's fractured identity and the unresolvedness of the plays. Yet the critic also relies on Lukács's 1909 "The Sociology of Modern Drama" to describe Edmond as a modern bourgeois hero waging a battle with his inner demons (197), since Mamet in an interview with David Savran "cited Brecht with his deadly hatred of the bourgeoisie as a major influence on the play" (197).

The greatest asset of the present study is Holmberg's practical experience with productions of several of the plays under discussion, especially while working with Robert Brustein at the ART. These credentials not only allowed him to establish a personal relationship with Mamet—as Holmberg reminds us in the body of his text (e.g. on 28)— they also gave him access to major performers and directors (Gregory Mosher, Matthew Broderick, Dustin Hoffman, Alec Baldwin, Alan Alda, James Foley, Joe Mantegna,...), who answered questions, addressed his students or granted him interviews generously excerpted in the volume under review. Insofar as Holmberg has been teaching these plays—a point on which he also insists—his views have been tested in the classroom, mostly in a combined analysis of play text and eventual movie adaptation, helped by copies of the movie scripts, whenever these differ from the produced version. Tracing such differences is actually one of Holmberg's sound enough methods to approach his

material selectively. When he did not have trade editions or personal copies of these scripts, he consulted the Grove Press Archives, the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University Library, the David Mamet Archives at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, and Samuel French Press, presumably not just for the two different endings of *Glengarry Glen Ross* (99).

The major problem with *David Mamet and Male Friendship* is its relationship to the already mentioned *David Mamet and American Macho*. The earlier book's first chapter on the western genre is only briefly referenced in the more recent companion volume (32, 156), besides some passim references to its fourth chapter on boy culture in the notes. For the rest no rationale is provided for the connection between the two volumes and the relegation of a play like *Lakeboat* to one volume at the expense of its treatment of male friendship in the other. The older volume includes more innovating discussions, e.g. of the unpublished 1990 filmscript based on James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer*, the unpublished playscript of *Lone Canoe or The Explorer*, and of episodes from the television series *The Unit*. The latter TV series, however, equally pertains to the homosociality theme of *David Mamet and Male Friendship* through the "idealized father-mentor-pal" relation between Sergeant Major Jonas Blane and Bob Brown, the newest member of the team (*American Macho* 45-46). True, Holmberg's more recent volume returns to *The Unit* at the end of the chapter on *Romance* (177), shortly to compare the play's subversion of the compulsory homo-hetero axis as a defense against polymorphous sexuality with that in the TV series "Old Home Week" episode.

Arguably the respective themes of Holmberg's two volumes cannot be dealt with apart from each other. Macho behavior is often the result of insecurity about manhood, triggered amongst others by the taboo in twentieth and twenty-first century America against homosocial relationships and their threat of a feminized manhood. That threat was already experienced following the first feminist wave, the closing of the frontier, and the increasing urbanization, as argued in the opening chapter of *American Macho*. The frontier myth has been frequently dealt with in connection with Sam Shepard. It tends to be overlooked with regard to an urban writer like Mamet (*American Macho* 67), but not entirely so in the extant criticism on *American Buffalo*. Holmberg deals with it passim in *American Macho* and more at length in *David Mamet and Male Friendship* (35-55), also with regard to the tall tales of Bernie in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (123). In Shepard criticism, masculinity has been dealt with, too, notably by David Savran, not referenced by Holmberg, except for his interview with Mamet from *In their Own*

*Words* (TCG, 1993). In *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary Culture* (Princeton UP, 1998) Savran approaches the masculine sense of a feminine victimization from a psychoanalytical perspective. Masochistic feelings are central to male movies, as well as part of the salesmen's self-demeaning everyday condition in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (*David Mamet and Male Friendship* 28, 74, 79). This humiliation is brought home by Blake (an addition to the screen adaptation played by Alec Baldwin), the emissary from Mitch and Murray, the alpha male who castrates Levene, terrorizes Aaronow, and maddens Moss, just as men in the 1970s felt threatened in their masculinity by second wave feminists. Holmberg's historicized interpretation in which the consecutive waves of feminism made men more insecure could of course be countered by research demonstrating that women have been made equally insecure by their lingering disenfranchisement in the work place or their exploitation in advertising, an evolution harking back to Mamet's beloved Thorstein's Veblen and the conspicuous consumerism of the leisure class, which Holmberg touches on in *American Macho*.

In the end, the lack of any comparisons with other canonical American dramatists does not detract from the value of Holmberg's *David Mamet and Male Friendship*, which in combination with *American Macho* forms an indispensable source on the subject of masculinity in American drama and theatre at large. The increasing conservatism of Mamet, as expressed in opinion pieces and *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture* (2011), may require counterforces like Holmberg's study to demonstrate the lingering worth and complexity of Mamet's creative work, which tends to be misrepresented as a result of his interventions in the public debate. Insofar as male friendship and gender in general in Mamet's work are all too often dealt with in a reductive manner, Holmberg's rich and never burdensome cultural contextualizations provide an essential contribution to the field.

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Callens, "Spalding Gray's levenslessen." *Documenta* 29.2 (2011): 139-149.