

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Race

By David Mamet

Directed by Irene Lewis

American Conservatory Theater

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Elizabeth Brodersen

Director of Education

Dan Rubin

Publications Manager

Michael Paller

Resident Dramaturg

Emily Hoffman

Publications and Dramaturgy Associate

Emily Means

Education and Publications Fellow

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WARNING: Quotes from *Race* may include offensive language.



WE WILL
DEFEND
OURSELVES
AGAINST
SEXUAL
ASSAULTS

STOP
RAPE
FROM
FREE

JUSTICE

Characters, Cast, and Synopsis of *Race*

The original Broadway production of *Race* opened December 6, 2009, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York City. A.C.T.'s production is the West Coast premiere.

Characters and Cast

HENRY BROWN	Chris Butler
JACK LAWSON	Anthony Fusco
CHARLES STRICKLAND	Kevin O'Rourke
SUSAN.....	Susan Heyward

Setting

An office.

Synopsis

SCENE I. Henry Brown, a black attorney, and Jack Lawson, his white partner, grill a prospective client: Charles Strickland, a rich white man accused of raping a black woman in a hotel room. The fast-talking lawyers send Strickland out into the waiting room to write down every incriminating thing he's ever done; this buys them time to debate whether or not to take the case. They decide to call Nicky Greenstein (an attorney who has already turned Strickland away) for information, and they tell their associate, Susan (a black woman), to call a man named Kelley to get documents about the crime scene. Jack learns that Greenstein rejected Strickland because two witnesses (a white preacher and his wife) came forward to say that, through the hotel-room wall, they heard Strickland say, "I'm going to fuck you now, you little nigger bitch." The partners decide not to take the case.

Susan reenters with the documents the partners requested and a check from Strickland. Henry is furious with Susan for taking the check and almost issuing Strickland a receipt—an act that would have contractually obliged the firm to defend him. No harm done, an innocent mistake, Jack tells Henry. He asks Susan to thank Kelley for the documents. Susan admits that she did not get the documents from Kelley;

OPPOSITE Outside the Joan Little trial, 1975. *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, North Carolina. Courtesy Danielle L. McGuire, atthedarkendofthestreet.com.



she got them from the district attorney's office. As a result, they are now listed as the attorneys of record and are obligated to defend Strickland.

Jack has an inspiration: he realizes there were no sequins mentioned in any of the statements related to the case, including those made by the chambermaid who cleaned the room. The alleged victim was wearing a red sequined dress and claims Strickland "ripped it off" her: if the dress had been ripped, sequins would have flown everywhere. No sequins, no ripping; no ripping, no coercion, no rape. Jack begins to devise a defense.

SCENE 2. Jack decides that they will stage a dress-ripping demonstration in the courtroom and suggests they use Susan as the model. Strickland enters with a statement of apology he wants to take to the press; the lawyers try to talk him out of it. Jack continues to talk their defense through with Susan, who interrupts his line of argument and begins to cross-examine him about the investigation he undertook before hiring her. She thinks he investigated her more thoroughly than is usual; Jack owns up to this, explaining that he had to be especially sure she would be a good employee because if he ever wanted to fire her she (as a young black female) could allege discrimination. Susan lays into Jack about the illegality of applying differing standards of investigation to employees of different races, but Jack gets Susan to admit that she is actually upset because he asked her to wear the dress in the courtroom. Jack apologizes. Henry barges in with new evidence: a postcard written by Strickland in college to his black roommate. In it, he compares the Caribbean night to "being in some hot, black . . ."

SCENE 3. Jack and Henry question Strickland, who is genuinely surprised to hear that the postcard could be considered racist and is subsequently overcome with remorse. He again proposes apologizing to the press, and, again, the lawyers attempt to dissuade him.

Susan enters with news that the chambermaid has amended her statement: she now remembers finding sequins in the hotel room. Jack wonders what could have prompted “a half-literate illegal hotel maid” to return to the police to change her story.

Henry dismisses Susan and tells Jack that he thinks she sold them out. Henry has always been wary of “her privileged, Affirmative Action self,” and he reminds Jack that he did not want to hire her, in part because of her views on race, as articulated in her college thesis, “Structural Survivals of Racism in Supposedly Bias-Free Transactions.”

The partners bring Susan back in, and she admits that she has believed Strickland was guilty from the moment he stepped into their office. They accuse her of selling them out, and Jack orders Susan to leave. As she does, Henry gets a call informing him that the first responding police officer from the hotel crime scene has turned in a “missing” part of his report: it includes information about sequins. He also learns that Strickland has confessed.

Jack wants to know whether Susan betrayed him. She says it does not matter either way, “because, White Man, he was guilty.”

Early costume renderings for Jack Lawson (opposite) and Susan (right), by costume designer Candice Donnelly



Stepping into a Lawyer's World

An Interview with Director Irene Lewis

By Dan Rubin

Director Irene Lewis arrived in San Francisco to begin rehearsing David Mamet's *Race* on September 24, a week after she opened Alice Childress's *Trouble in Mind* at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. She first staged *Trouble in Mind* during the 2006–07 season at CENTERSTAGE, where she was artistic director from 1991 to 2010, but when initially asked to direct the 1950s backstage drama about black actors battling racism in professional theater, she did not understand its appeal. "I thought the play was hopelessly dated and old-fashioned." Then she asked her colleague, black actress E. Faye Butler, to read it and see if she found it believable: "'Oh, yes,' she said," Lewis remembers. "So I said, 'Okay, I'll do it.' Because I realized [my reluctance] was a case of whites—of me—being out of touch with certain African American realities."

Over Lewis's 20 years at the helm of Baltimore's leading professional theater, her commitment to diversifying CENTERSTAGE's board, staff, and repertory was responsible for developing a substantial following in the black community, which makes up more than 60 percent of the city's population. "I made sure that a third of all of the programming was represented by works with issues that resonated with the African American community. It was more than just a token kind of thing, and the community responded and really started to support us. They were our bread and butter, quite honestly. I think the top ten sellers were African American plays."

When Lewis launched the initiative two decades ago, she was mentored by Marion McClinton, a black director and playwright who was one of August Wilson's closest collaborators and is the author of *Police Boys*, which Lewis produced during her first season at CENTERSTAGE. "I am not saying I know a lot. I don't. But I know when to listen," says Lewis. "And Marion guided me away from precipices that I never would have seen: how something I was doing could be misinterpreted [by a black audience]. Even a graphic. A play choice." Even now, she enters each rehearsal process as an open book, coming in with questions rather than answers. "Just last year when I directed *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, I thought, 'Oh my God, the first 20 minutes are just five African American musicians talking.' But, over the course of rehearsal, when it was explained to me, line by line, by the African Americans in the scene what was actually being said beneath the text, it became sheer poetry and absolutely riveting."

Lewis has dedicated her career to bringing challenging theater to life. “I was always after the widest swings you could get in a six-play season, the widest swings in theatrical experience,” she told the *Washington Post* in 2011. In her final season at CENTERSTAGE, for example, she balanced Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming* with *The Wiz*, which proved to be the biggest financial success in the company’s history. She has directed classic plays by Shakespeare, Molière, Chekhov, Ibsen, Marivaux, Shaw, Wilde, Goldsmith, Goldoni, Ford, Schiller, Granville-Barker, Stoppard, and Wilder, among many others: “I like to be in a room with an author who is ahead of me. When you’re in the presence of these writers, it is so illuminating. What percentage of their work will you really be able to get up on that stage? I like chipping away at a play.”



Irene Lewis

She has also directed an eclectic range of musicals, from *The Pajama Game* to *Sweeney Todd* to *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and such “undervalued modern works” as Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation*, Brecht’s *Happy End*, and Ugo Betti’s *The Queen and the Rebels*. She has worked on countless new plays by playwrights of color and produced commissions of Lynn Nottage’s *Intimate Apparel*, Kwame Kwei-Armah’s *Elmina’s Kitchen*, Keith Glover’s *Thunder Knocking on the Door*, and Kia Corthron’s *Splash Hatch on the E Going Down*.

Racial themes are front and center in Mamet’s newest play, and Lewis intends to stick to her tried-and-true practice of relying on the insights of her black actors to guide her through moments she may not fully understand. “Whenever I’ve directed plays with whites and African Americans in the cast, I’ve always said, ‘Listen, on some of these issues we have to listen to our black colleagues, because we don’t know shit here.’”

Even though Lewis claims to be “of no help before rehearsals begin; my answers are on the stage,” she was kind enough to share her insights into *Race* during a phone interview days before starting in A.C.T.’s studios:

As a white woman, have you ever felt any hesitation directing works by black writers? There’s an interesting line towards the beginning of *Race*: “There’s nothing a white person can say . . .”

“. . . on the subject of race to a black person.” Well, as long as I stay open, I don’t feel that way at all. It’s when you come in with a preconception, or you fail to listen, that you have a problem. You think you know, but you don’t. We’ll learn a lot from the discussions that will be had around the table [during rehearsals]. We’re dealing here not only with race, but also with three lawyers and a “master of the universe.”



Today, after rereading the play, I wrote down questions to ask when we start: Should we like these people? Should we hate them? Should we have sympathy for any of them? Should we be enlightened by their insights as lawyers? Is any one of them to be trusted? Is this a usual or a special case? Does the audience need to see the charm that they would turn on if they were in front of a jury even though we're just in the law office?

When I was going to Yale's drama school, I worked as a waitress in the law school. And let me tell you (I usually would not generalize about a group of people), those law students were horrible. Entitled. We were their fellow students, but they didn't care. It was unbelievable, to me anyway: "I want my ice cream firm!" I will never forget that. I walked right into the kitchen and I said, "Patent Leather"—that's what we called him because his hair was slicked back—"Patent Leather wants his ice cream firm!" So we would, of course, melt it down.

The audience sees lawyers up there onstage, and what do you think the play is saying about them? What is not believable and what is? What is true and untrue? Who tells the best story? It's just wonderful because it seems to be the truth.

The best story appears to be the truth?

No. The play seems to be the truth *about our system*. It's an adversarial system. It has nothing to do with getting to the truth. It's who *wins*. You just can't believe what you're watching when you look at some of these trials.

Have you seen *Race*?

I've never seen it. Thank god. I love to direct plays I've never seen. People have said, "Oh my god, where did you get that?" And I say, "Why? Is it supposed to be different?" That's the joy of it—the discovery.

What is the role of theater in terms of conversations about race?

I think what a piece of theater says about race is as varied as the artists that have created it. Especially the writer. When I first started putting black work onstage, I was very nervous about how I portrayed certain roles. For instance, in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, there's the role of a maid who rises to the top and becomes an aristocrat. A black gal came in from Juilliard to audition, and she was the best person who read for the part. I said, "Lisa, you were the best person who read, but I am hesitant to cast a black person as the maid after just starting out on this initiative." She forcefully said, "It's a fabulous role and I want it." I decided right then and there that I wasn't going to have any kind of policy. That it was going to be up to the individual artist. And I still feel that way.

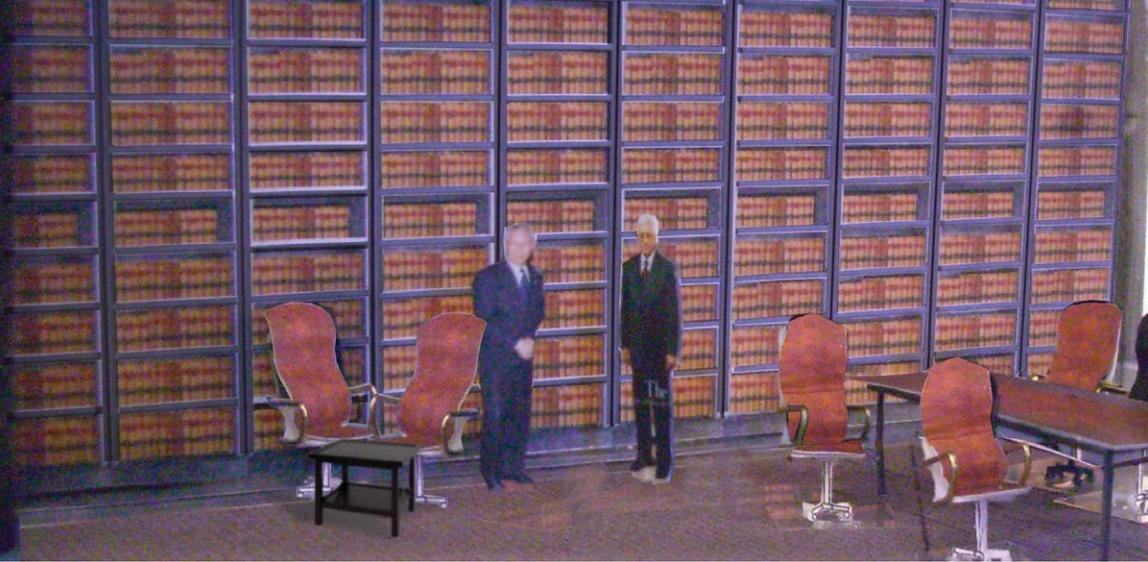
Did you get any flack for your initiative to bring more black work to CENTERSTAGE?

Oh god, yes! When I first started 20 years ago, I knew I'd lose some of the audience and they'd be replaced. They started screaming at our staff in the box office. We got hate mail, the whole nine yards. But most of the theater's board came around when they saw that the black plays were paying for the white plays. Some of them never got it: they would ask, "What group are we going to go on to next?" or, "Isn't it wonderful what we're doing for the African American community?" or (and this was a big one), "But do they come to *our* plays, Irene?" I said, "I don't care. They've been watching us for hundreds of years!"

I was very interested in these stories. It was a process of self-education, really.

Early costume renderings for Henry Brown (opposite) and Charles Strickland (right), by costume designer Candice Donnelly





Did you choose the plays you programmed at CENTERSTAGE for the stories themselves or as part of an agenda?

You have to be very pragmatic when you run a theater, because you have to have balance. You have to be able to pay people's salaries, and that means audiences are going to have to come see the shows. I found interest in everything I directed, because I chose all the hard ones, like *Mary Stuart*. I wanted to do those plays. But there had to be a couple that appealed to a wider audience. These are very tough economic times, and unfortunately it has affected programming at a lot of theaters.

***Race* seems to be one of the “hard ones.” What are the challenges that you see in preparing for your first rehearsal?**

When I was reading the play again, I thought, “How much of this can the audience take at once? Does it need an intermission?” It's a lot to be bombarded with, and it has to go fast. The language moves so fast that it doesn't give the audience a lot of time to digest what they've just seen. But you've got these lawyers, and their weapons are words. They annihilate whomever they're talking to.

It feels like a different vocabulary that the audience has to learn. They've got to adjust their ears, just like when you do Shakespeare: you usually start off slower than you would normally speak. For the first 20 minutes of a Shakespeare production, you let the audience's ears get used to the language. I think there is something to be said for doing that with Mamet, even though *Race* starts off in the middle of a scene at a very high pitch. How do we acclimate the audience to think this fast?

Right after A.C.T. decided to produce *Race*, Dominique Strauss-Kahn was charged with the sexual assault and attempted rape of a woman of color in a hotel room, not unlike the accusations Strickland faces in the play.

I couldn't believe that! It came right on the heels of *Race*. Just yesterday [Strauss-Kahn] apologized to the woman from the hotel, but he is really a serial abuser. He did *some-*



thing bad, we all know that. He got to walk on what happened in New York, but other victims are coming forward.

Who knows what really happened between him and that woman? That's one reason I intentionally want to see Susan and Strickland when they are outside the office: you can see them through the glass wall when they're outside in the little seating area. I didn't want to lose awareness of them.

Susan comes in and, when prompted, agrees that Strickland has been flirting with her. Are you intending to show that through the glass?

I think the flirting can be subtle, but it probably happened all through his conversation with her. He is probably pretty careful in the beginning, but she does say in her speech: "Accused of raping a black woman, he encounters a black woman, who knows of the accusation, who is there to defend him, and he flirts with her." But he's a master of the universe. He's used to no one saying no to him.

Susan is crucial in terms of how this play evolves, because she is the most enigmatic of the characters. You don't know what her agenda is. I think you pretty much get the others' agendas, but she's complicated. And she's a different gender as well as a different generation than the men.

Do you think that this is, in fact, a play about race, or is it about something else?

I don't know yet. Certainly Susan's agenda has a lot to do with race. She could easily be played from the point of view "I'll be damned if I'm going to let this guy off. This is a white racist." That's one way you could do it, but there are many ways. It's wonderful watching the answers unfold, rather than coming in with them.

But I think the interesting thing about the play is that there aren't any answers. It's all in the eye of the beholder. You almost don't know what's happened at the end. "Wait a minute. He did what?"

I find it fascinating to step into the "lawyer world." The way they act in the office is not the way they act in front of a jury. In court, they sell the story. The wordplay is just endless. Lawyers just really love this stuff, I think. I think it's their bread and butter, and I think, if I do my job right, we have to find it delicious.

ABOVE Photo of the *Race* set model by scenic designer Chris Barreca

David Mamet

A Brief Biography

By Dan Rubin

David Mamet was born in Chicago, Illinois, on November 30, 1947, the son of Lenore and Bernard Mamet, first-generation Americans descended from Russian and Polish Ashkenazi Jews. His mother had a short fuse and a sharp tongue. His father, a tough labor lawyer, was a hard and critical man. “We lived in an emotional hurricane,” Lynn, Mamet’s younger sister, recalls. “There was a great deal of pressure for us to be the best Americans we could be. There was no room for us to make mistakes.” Mamet remembers growing up on Chicago’s South Side: “We liked to while away the evenings by making ourselves miserable, solely based on our ability to speak the language viciously.”

After his parents divorced bitterly in 1958, Mamet lived with his mother and her new husband in Olympia Fields on the outskirts of Chicago. After a series of blowups, Mamet, age 15, went to live with his father in Lincoln Park on the north side of the city. He loathed school but was a voracious reader; by 16, he was well-read in modern drama, and he especially liked the works of Harold Pinter. He took on bit parts at the Hull House Theater: “It was the first time in my confused young life that I had learned that work is love,” he later wrote.

Mamet attended Vermont’s Goddard College, and—after spending his junior year “abroad” studying acting with Sanford Meisner at New York’s Neighborhood Playhouse and then spending the summer working as a busboy and odd-job man at Second City, Chicago’s improvisational theater—he began writing plays his senior year. His first dramatic work was *Camel*, a revue of 34 scenes taken from “the more potent pieces” of his journal: he charged his classmates 50¢ to attend because, he later said, “I wanted to communicate to the public at large that this was going to be no ordinary theatrical event.”

Mamet graduated in 1969 and worked a variety of theater jobs, but he returned to Vermont in 1970 to teach acting first at Marlboro College (where he directed students in his first play, *Lakeboat*), and then at his alma mater, where he founded the St. Nicholas Theater Company with students William H. Macy and Steven Schachter, who performed his one-act plays *Duck Variations* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*.

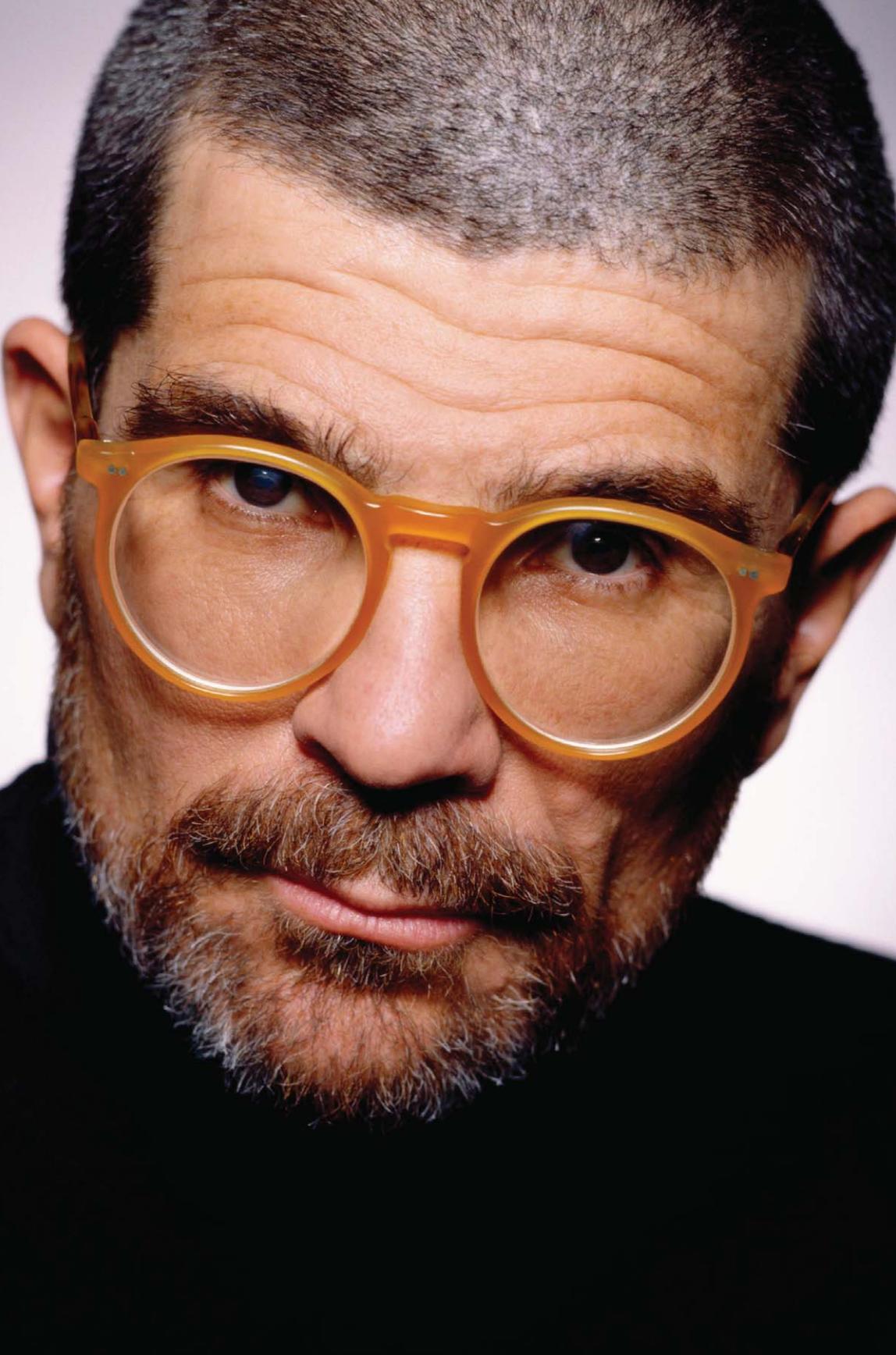
The three men relocated to Chicago and, along with Patricia Cox, were instrumental in “inventing the myth of the Chicago theater scene,” director Gregory Mosher remembers. To pay rent, Mamet waited tables, drove taxis, cleaned offices, and, for a time,

worked at the Playboy Club, all the while exploring the city's underbelly and making note of its vernacular. He talked his way into a junk shop poker game played by petty thieves; they called him Teach because he taught drama at Pontiac Correctional Center (where many of them had done time). It was fodder for *American Buffalo*, which Mosher, by then in charge of Goodman Theatre's Stage Two, premiered in October 1975.

In January 1976, *American Buffalo* opened off Broadway in a production that won Mamet an OBIE Award for Best New American Play. Mamet moved to New York; *American Buffalo* moved to Broadway's Ethel Barrymore Theatre in 1977 and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. He began supplementing his playwriting with screenwriting starting with the 1981 remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *The Verdict* in 1982, the same year he began work on *Glengarry Glen Ross*. He sent *Glengarry* to Pinter for advice: "There is something wrong with this play. What is it?" Pinter wired him back, "There is nothing wrong with this play. I'm giving it to the National." It premiered at London's National Theatre in 1983, winning the Society of West End Theatre Award for Best New Play. It moved to Broadway in March 1984. *Glengarry* earned Mamet a Pulitzer Prize and was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play (the 2005 revival won four Tonys, including Best Revival of a Play). He was nominated for another Pulitzer in 1985 for *The Cryptogram*.

Since the 1980s Mamet's reputation as a playwright, screenwriter, director, and essayist has continued to grow. His plays include *A Life in the Theatre* (1977), *The Water Engine* (1978), *The Woods* (1979), *Edmond* (1983), *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), *Oleanna* (1992), *The Old Neighborhood* (1997), *Boston Marriage* (1999), *Faustus* (2004), and *Romance* (2005). He has adapted three plays by Chekhov (*The Cherry Orchard*, *The Three Sisters*, and *Uncle Vanya*) and Harley Granville-Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance* (which A.C.T. commissioned and premiered in 2005). His screenplays, many of which he directed himself, include *The Untouchables* (1986), *House of Games* (1987), *We're No Angels* (1989), *Homicide* (1990), *Hoffa* (1992), *Wag the Dog* (1998), *The Spanish Prisoner* (1998), *The Winslow Boy* (1999), *State and Main* (2000), *Heist* (2001), *Spartan* (2004), and *Redbelt* (2008); he also created the television series *The Unit*, which he wrote from 2006 to 2009. He has written multiple books, including *Writing in Restaurants* (1988), *The Cabin: Reminiscence and Diversions* (1992), *Make-Believe Town: Essays and Remembrances* (1996), *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (1997), *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Structure and Purpose of Drama* (1998), *On Acting* (1999), *The Wicked Son: Anti-Semitism, Self-Hatred, and the Jews* (2006), and *Bambi vs. Godzilla: On the Nature, Purpose, and Practice of the Movie Business* (2007).

In recent years, Mamet has become vocal about politics. *November*, his first political play, premiered on Broadway in 2008. It pokes fun at the partisanship that plagues Washington. Months later, he printed an incendiary article in the *Village Voice* entitled "Why I Am No Longer a 'Brain-Dead Liberal,'" about the lessons he learned while writing *November*. Since then, Mamet has published many articles espousing conservatism, culminating in the 2011 publication of his latest book, *The Secret Knowledge: On The Dismantling of American Culture*. In 2009, he wrote and directed his first conservative-era play, *Race*.



Mamet, Race, and the Right

By Dan Rubin

“The human mind may be worshipped, but it cannot be trusted. This is why we have laws.”

—David Mamet, *The Secret Knowledge*

Part 1: Political Conversion

David Mamet’s liberalism is arguably the most significant casualty of the Hedge Wars that rocked Santa Monica, California, in 2004. Mamet had just moved to the left-wing community when the city exhumed a nearly forgotten 60-year-old decree prohibiting hedges taller than 42 inches. Infractions carried a fine of up to \$25,000 a day.

Mamet joined protests, spoke at hearings, and wrote an op-ed piece for the *Los Angeles Times* titled “Community Theater: The High Drama of Tall Shrubbery”:

The Council, strapped for money, as are all organizations, had hired a consultant to comb through the city statutes and find those whose more stringent enforcement might generate revenue. . . . [But] the Council’s Wise Experts testified that the hedge ordinance existed for safety reasons—and were that not enough, that it also existed to afford pedestrians an unimpeded view of their neighbor’s property. . . . It is interesting hogwash. There is no right to public viewing of private premises—the very idea is un-American.

The city council retreated, but when they amended the ordinance they added a number of new regulations to be enforced by a new “hedge commission.”

“It made no sense,” Mamet told Andrew Ferguson, a reporter with the *Weekly Standard*, in 2011. “But this is how government works—all government. I saw there’s no difference between the hedge commission and the U.S. government. It’s all the same principle.” Mamet realized that core conservative thinking—a wariness of the invasiveness and ineffectiveness of big government as it infringes on the rights of individuals—was not as absurd as he had previously presumed.

Before fighting for the preservation of the “traditional, beautiful, historical, and healthful” foliage of his community, Mamet had attended to politics only haphazardly—and

OPPOSITE David Mamet © Robin Holland/CORBIS OUTLINE

claimed to avoid it altogether in his plays. “I don’t believe that the theater is a good venue for political argument,” he told *Playboy* in a 1995 interview. “Not because it is wrong, but because it doesn’t work very well.” Following the midterm election of 2006, however, Mamet set out to write a play specifically about politics and, he remembers, “as part of the ‘writing process’ as I believe it is called, I started thinking about politics.”

Of course, the many books of essays and articles he has written for the *Huffington Post* and other online outlets are filled with Mamet’s political quips, musings, and even cartoons. But these (he now feels) were merely regurgitations of the liberal beliefs he had taken for granted throughout his life: “Jews of my day were Democrats, were Liberals. . . . For a Jew, a vote Republican would have been as for him to endorse child sacrifice,” he explains. “It was, of course, easier to worship my won capacity for ‘good thinking’ than actually to think, which is to say to compare my actions with their results.” Until the 2004 presidential election, he had never even spoken to a conservative: “I didn’t know what a conservative was. I didn’t know much of anything.”

November, as the new play was called (completed ten months before the 2008 presidential election), captures a midpoint in the playwright’s personal political transition. He was flirting with conservatism, but mostly he was trying to show that all partisan politics, including his native liberalism, are faulty: “In writing my political play I realized, then, that I was in no way immune from the folly of partisanship, of muddle-headedness, and of rancor in political thought; that I enjoyed the righteous indignation and the licensed spectacle as much as anyone, for the feeling of superiority it gave me. That I was, in short, a fool. That, for a writer, is an excellent place to begin.”

In this unabashedly politically incorrect play (his “love letter to America,” he has called it), Mamet pits a conservative first-term president, on the brink of being ousted from office, against his liberal, lesbian speech writer, who passionately voices the thesis of the drama:

It seems: We are “a nation divided.” But: *We* aren’t a “nation divided,” Sir. We’re a democracy we hold different opinions. But: We laugh at the same jokes, we clap each other on the back, when we made that month’s *quota*, and, Sir, I’m not at all sure we don’t love each other.

It is a positive sentiment: although the Right and Left infuriate each other, inherently people are people, united by our everyday humanity. Then, as now, Mamet adored America. “My grandmother came to this country, and she and her two boys were abandoned by her husband,” Mamet told Ferguson. “She couldn’t speak English. No education. And during the Great Depression she was able to work hard and save and she put them both through law school. I mean, what a country. That’s a hell of a country.”

Ultimately *November*, a digestible comedy spoofing politics on both sides of the aisle, was not as shocking as Mamet’s defense of it. Reacting to a New York critic who found the play offensive, the playwright wrote an article for the *Village Voice* (he titled it “Political Civility”; his editor retitled it “Why I Am No Longer a ‘Brain-Dead Liberal’”) in which he stated:

The play . . . [is] a disputation between reason and faith, or perhaps between the conservative (or tragic) view and the liberal (or perfectionist) view. The conservative president in the piece holds that people are each out to make a living, and the best way for government to facilitate that is to *stay out of the way*, as the inevitable abuses and failures of this system (free-market economics) are less than those of government intervention. I took the liberal view for many decades, but I believe I have changed my mind.

A dismayed Left disapprovingly crossed its arms; the Right opened its own wide to welcome its newest convert.

As a liberal writer/director working in theater and film, Mamet had not garnered much attention for his political views: he was another articulate entertainer raging against hypocrisy and greed. His conversion to the Right, however, made him something of a novelty. His initial hesitation to speak about political issues—"I'm not the guy to ask about politics," he told *New York* magazine in 2008. "I'm a gag writer."—has evaporated, and in 2011 he released *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture*, a 200-page pledge of allegiance to conservative principles.

As might be expected from a writer who (he's first to admit) has made his living alienating the public, there are moments in the book when Mamet is provocatively harsh. Speaking as one who was once duped, he equates liberals to the "confidence man's mark" and accuses liberalism of being a "parlor game" that is destroying American culture. Liberal arts universities are shams (this is not a new thought for him: he has long referred to his own alma mater as "sex camp"), and "social justice" is an oxymoron. "The notion that there is a supergovernmental, superlegal responsibility upon the right-thinking to implement their visions" cannot but end in a totalitarian society built upon the whims of well-intentioned leaders who value equality over liberty, he purports.

But at the heart of the book is a very simple argument: the foundation of American democracy is the principle that everyone is created equal and should, thus, receive equality of *opportunity* under the law—whether or not everyone achieves equality of *result* should rest upon individual initiative, not the state. For when has the state done anything beneficial for society? "The Emancipation Proclamation and the Voting Rights Act," Mamet answers. "Then I would have to stop and think."

"Don't you *care*?" is a question Mamet gets a lot now that he has become a champion of the dissolution of social programs. He responds: "I care about Justice and suffering, and wonder, as has every sentient being in history, about the disparity in society of wealth and happiness, and about the seemingly inevitable corruption of our representatives, and about the imperfection and apparent injustice of many of our laws." He has always cared, but the revelation of the last few years "is that *all* good people care, but that they may be, legitimately, divided as to the means to address and the potential to understand and to correct disparity, sorrow, and injustice."

He often reassures his liberal readers that their hearts are in the right place. He looks back on the 2007–08 Writers’ Guild of America strike, however, with less generosity, perhaps because he cared too much. Labor unions representing some 12,000 film, television, and radio writers demanded, among other things, greater protection with respect to the burgeoning genres of reality television and “new media” (the internet). The strike lasted four months, and it became for Mamet (the son of a union lawyer) another milestone in his conversion to conservative thought.

“They were risking not only their own jobs but the jobs of everyone who had nothing to gain from the strike—the drivers and scene painters and people who are on set 14 hours a day working their asses off,” he told Ferguson. “These working people were driven out of work by the writers—10,000 people losing their jobs at Christmastime. It was the goddamnedest thing I ever saw in my life. And for what? They didn’t know what they were striking for—just another inchoate liberal dream.”

Liberalism had invaded the movie set—Mamet’s utopia of pragmatism, camaraderie, and work ethic. Every night after shooting, he makes a point of going among the crew and thanking each member personally (or at least he did in 1997, when John Lahr reported this fact); and despite Mamet’s reputation as an inflexible s.o.b., Ferguson writes, “I never heard a cross word about him, after talking to colleagues and acquaintances; I’ve never talked to anyone who’s heard a cross word about him.”

On set, Mamet sees America’s promise realized. It is a place where one can find people from all walks of life—all “races, incomes, political persuasions and religions, and ages, men and women”—dedicated to doing the best work they can towards completing a common goal. He writes,

This perception was the beginning of my love affair, or, let me say, my recognition of my love affair with America. We do things differently here. We were and are a country of workers and, as such, get along so well that we became the preeminent power in the world. This came about not through a “lust for power,” not through colonialism or “exploitation,” but as a result of our ethos and cohesion. It begins with the notion that all are created equal.

The definition of “all” has widened over time; and the history of our country, when finally written, will appreciate that this widening was the essence of our Republic; that we, in the process of devotion to the essentially religious goal, the “self-evident truth,” managed to shape, through our Industry and through our art, a new and better world.

For the four months of the writers’ strike, liberal politics disrupted the industriousness of this workers’ paradise. And for so doing, it would not be soon forgiven. *November* premiered a month before the strike ended; Mamet’s *Village Voice* article was published one month after. The political Left has been in Mamet’s crosshairs ever since.

Part II: “This Play is Dedicated to Shelby Steele.”

When Mamet moved to Santa Monica, California, in 2003, he and his wife, actress Rebecca Pidgeon, joined Ohr HaTorah, the synagogue of Rabbi Mordecai Finley. Finley is a rare creature: a conservative shepherding a congregation of Hollywood liberals. He recounted an early conversation with Mamet to reporter Andrew Ferguson: Mamet had asked the rabbi which democratic presidential candidate Finley and his wife intended to vote for in the 2004 primary. “We said, ‘None of them,’” Finley recalled. “Dave said, ‘Oh no—you’re not going to vote for Nader!’ I said, ‘No.’ And then you could see it hit him. ‘Not Bush!’ ‘Well, yes. Bush.’ Dave was apologetic. He thought he’d embarrassed us. He said, ‘Oh I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to pry! I shouldn’t have asked!’ I said, ‘No, no, it’s really not a problem. It’s not like we try to keep it a secret.’”

At the time, Mamet was still “addicted” (his word) to liberalism. He did his best to convert Finley with books like Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, which, Finley told Ferguson, “were highly polemical, angry books. They were very big on sympathy and compassion, but really they weren’t.” He continued, “They simply weren’t logically coherent. And Dave is very logical in his thinking. . . . The Left flattens people, reduces people to financial interests. Dave’s an artist. He knew people are deeper than that.” Finley returned Mamet’s books with selections from his own collection of conservative works: Thomas Sowell’s *A Conflict of Visions*, Paul Johnson’s histories, and the economic texts of Milton Friedman. “He came back to me stunned. He said, ‘This is incredible! Who thinks like this? Who are these people?’ I said, ‘Republicans think like this.’”

Finley also introduced Mamet to the work of Shelby Steele, to whom the playwright has dedicated his play *Race*. Steele is an award-winning senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, where he has specialized in the study of race relations, multiculturalism, and affirmative action since 1994, focusing on the consequences of contemporary social programs. He’s written numerous books on race in America: *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (1991), *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* (1999), *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006), and *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can’t Win* (2007).

Like Finley, Steele is an oddity: a “black conservative,” which he begrudgingly describes as “one who votes against one’s people.” Like Mamet, Steele did not join the Right until the middle of his life. Born in the 1940s, Steele was raised in a liberal household in segregated Chicago. He watched his parents “struggle against an unapologetically racist America,” and by the time he reached college he was hungry for the “black rage” preached by radicals like Dick Gregory, whose “raise your consciousness” campaign shaped Steele’s young political identity.

During his senior year, Steele led black students into the college president’s office with a list of demands (which Steele read aloud as he dropped cigarette ash on the president’s carpet). Upon graduation, he worked in Great Society programs—post-civil

rights movement efforts aimed at correcting years of oppression by injecting money into blighted communities—in Iowa, Minneapolis, and East St. Louis. He vividly saw these well-meaning attempts fail to do “little more than engender a kind of upscale corruption.” When he entered graduate school to study literature in the 1980s, his politics remained intact: “Despite all the corruption and incompetence I had seen in those programs . . . I was still politically very far to the left,” He writes. “If I was not as intensely ‘black’ (by then a term of political identity) as I had been in college, I nevertheless wore my blackness on my sleeve even as I read Proust and Kafka and Dostoyevsky.”

Ultimately, it was the expectation “to be black”—to champion minority issues that he did not necessarily support, like affirmative action and “ethnic literature” courses—that made him weary of the Left. He writes, “White racism had made my race the limit of my individuality. But now the new black consciousness . . . wanted me to voluntarily, even proudly, do the same thing that racism had done: make my race more important than my individuality. . . . I simply couldn’t take the schizophrenia required to stay in the cultural and political world that I had always belonged to.”

Since moving to the right, Steele has argued that American society missed an opportunity in the years between the victories of the civil rights movement and the onset of the black power (“white guilt”) movement. “For Martin Luther King and the older civil rights generation, racism was simply a barrier, a tragic aberration in an America that was otherwise essentially open and fair,” he writes. They banked black freedom on “democratic principles and black advancement on individual responsibility.” But for the leaders of the generation that followed,

Racism was not a mere barrier but the all-determining reality in which we lived. . . . Ugly human prejudices like racism did not just remain isolated in the hearts of racists. These dark passions worked by an “invisible hand” to generate societal structures that *impersonally* oppressed.

Steele laments that, so soon after black Americans won their right to individuality, they pawned off this freedom by subscribing to a social determinism that enslaved them to a perpetual state of victimhood. President Johnson promoted his Great Society in his 1965 commencement speech at Howard University: “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of the race and then say, ‘You are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.” Steele interprets: “If you were black, and thus a victim of racial oppression, this new morality of social justice meant you could not be expected to carry the same responsibilities as others.”

Steele subscribed to the idea of social justice for decades; now he argues that this relaxation of standards for black Americans was a new form of racism. Moreover, all white Americans—even those who years before had shared the fight against Jim Crow laws—found themselves conflated into the group of the oppressor as they fell into a “vacuum of moral authority that comes from simply *knowing* that one’s race is associated with racism.” Regardless of their actions and predilections, white Americans were guilty

of racism until they proved otherwise, a reality encapsulated by now-lampooned “some of my best friends are black” comments, but, Steele worries, more seriously seen in careful policies that refuse to hold black Americans responsible for troubles that plague black communities. Steele: “No black problem—whether high crime rates, poor academic performance, or high illegitimacy rates—could be defined as largely black responsibility, because it was an injustice to make victims responsible for their own problems.”

By admitting to the country’s racist history, white America forfeited its ability to speak on matters of race—any race. For making any racial criticism, a white person or institution could be branded as racist, “threatened with a stigmatization that can gravely injure businesses and ruin careers,” Steele argues. And so, the conversation has stalled.

Mamet himself experienced this paradigm in 2009, when he found himself in a provocative conversation about race while teaching a seminar on dramatic structure at The University of Texas at Austin. “All was going well,” he writes, “until I suggested that the heroine of the story we were constructing be kidnapped by some Arab terrorists. One student asked, ‘Haven’t the Arabs been picked on enough? Why,’ he asked, ‘did you specify *Arabs*? As terrorists.’ ‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘They came to mind, perhaps as Arab terrorists bombed New York.’” The class unraveled into a “rather stilted and formulaic repetition of pronouncements,” which Mamet capped:

“All *right*,” I said. “Here’s my favorite joke: What did Custer say when he saw the Indians coming?” (PAUSE) “Here come the Indians.” This was met with that pause we all know, within which the right-minded search for a clue as to the comment’s indictability. Was it a criticism of the Native Americans? How could it be otherwise? On the other hand, were *not* these people actually *called* Indians? “Here come the Native Americans,” of course, does not scan. And so on, ran that dreary brutally foolish pause which was the end of the class and is the end of Liberal Education. . . .

The class members were not stupid, they were, as they should be at that age, idealistic; and the university’s disinterest in educating them to be of use in their society had turned their natural energy and idealism into a developmental difficulty. They were being drugged with self-indulgence.

The students’ account is, as one might expect, somewhat different. “Mamet called Muslims terrorists and Arabs pedophiles. He also, unsurprisingly, spewed misogynist rhetoric in addition to his racist diatribe,” wrote Diana Grisanti, who attended the workshop as an M.F.A. playwriting candidate, on a friend’s blog. Grisanti and other students filed a complaint that Mamet made “racially derogatory comments” and demanded that the school follow its antidiscrimination policy by banning his return.

That would have been difficult for UT Austin. In 2007, its Harry Ransom Center had acquired Mamet’s archives of more than 100 boxes of material from the playwright’s career: manuscripts, correspondence, multiple drafts of plays and screenplays, and 175 journals. (“I started keeping a journal over 40 years ago. . . . Virtually everything I’ve written since: plays, screenplays, nonfiction and novels, existed first in hardbound, lined

notebooks full of black and blue ink.”) The playwright had been signed for a four-year annual residency.

The humanities coordinator for the Ransom Center responded to the student backlash in an email that was quoted in the school newspaper: “There seemed to be no reason why the visit shouldn’t proceed as planned. In fact, the student response [to the upcoming seminar] has been overwhelming, and we regret that we can accommodate only one student for every ten who applied.”

Mamet’s opinion about black America specifically has been influenced by Steele, but it is also connected to his passion for his Jewish heritage. “Did we, the Jews, feel bad for Blacks?” he asks. “Yes. What did we do about it? We joined the NAACP. Was this effective, appropriate, insulting, paternalistic? How would *I* know?” Mamet seems to be responding directly to Steele’s accusations that white America’s response to black hardship was misguided. That the playwright is reacting directly to the scholar’s theories on “white guilt” is even clearer in what follows:

Did they do it because they felt “guilty”? The suggestion would have been greeted as psychotic. What did my parents’ generation have to feel guilty about? They came here with nothing, 60 years after slavery’s abolition, fleeing their state in Europe as slaves or semislaves, and scant years ahead of Hitler’s assassins. They supported the NAACP out of a sense of *tzedakah*, which is to say “righteousness.” Was their response insufficient, or misplaced? No doubt. But it was not risible. And the South Shore Country Club, eight blocks from my house, and Restricted, allowing No Jews, was eventually bought by Elijah Muhammad, restricting *all* whites, and life goes on.

In fact, Mamet asks, who exactly should be held accountable for crimes committed against black America a lifetime ago?

Is the American Government of today guilty of slavery? If so, are those African American members of the Government equally guilty? Or, are the American People alive today guilty? If so, which citizens? The Black as well as the White? Is the guilt heritable, or not? If so, then would not those (the great majority of) Americans whose ancestors did not arrive until after slavery be exempt from apology? Are the ancestors of the 300,000 white males who died to defeat slavery excepted from apology? If not, on what basis are the descendants of slaves *entitled* to it?

Mamet does not deny that black Americans likely see racial bias and prejudice where he does not, just as he is sensitive to anti-Semitism where non-Jews are not. But, he argues, “There is *no* position closed to any African American because of his race. Our laws and our culture as a whole have conclusively *rejected* racism. Why does it delight the Left to claim the contrary?”

Part III: Corrupted Justice

Rabbi Finley set the curriculum for Mamet's crash course in conservative thought, introducing Mamet to the works of Steele, whom the playwright befriended. (A former professor of literature, Steele has been an admirer of Mamet's work since the 1970s.) *November* captured the playwright's man-behind-the-curtain revelation about politics (especially liberalism): there is no secret knowledge, no magic power that the government possesses that prepares it to meet the country's challenges. *Race* is Mamet's first play since his conversion. Like *November*, it is a play about America, but, as the title suggests, it zeroes in on race and, Mamet writes, "the lies we tell each other on the subject":

What has our 230-year national experience been but a dialogue about race? . . . [*Race*] is intended to be an addition to that dialogue. It is a play about lies. All drama is about lies. When the lie is exposed, the play is over. Race, like sex, is a subject on which it is near impossible to tell the truth. In each, desire, self-interest, and self-image make the truth inconvenient to share not only with strangers (who may, legitimately or not, be viewed as opponents) but also with members of one's own group, and, indeed oneself.

Mamet agrees with Steele that Americans' inability to speak openly and honestly about matters of race infects what should be our most impartial civil sector: the judiciary. O. J. Simpson went free, Steele suggests, because his lawyers pitted empirical evidence against "the *reputation* of racism for distorting and manipulating fact." O. J. was found not guilty, in other words, because he once would have been found guilty. Mamet—the son of a lawyer, who even after the career-making debut of *American Buffalo* asked his son, "When are you going to chuck all this nonsense and go to law school?"—writes in *The Secret Knowledge* that freedom cannot exist without objective law.

Justice is corrupted by consideration, not of whether or not the accused committed the crime, but of supposedly mitigating factors of his childhood, race, or environment. If weight is given, in extenuation, to his supposed goodness to animals or to his mother, he is then liable to leniency based not upon the needs of the citizenry (protection), but upon the criminal's ability to dramatize his plight. If he may entertain, and play upon the emotions of the judge and jury, if he and his defenders may flatter the ability to "be compassionate," and call it courage, society is weakened. Laws, then, decided upon in tranquility, without reference to the individual, and based upon behaviors, are cast aside or vitiated by reference to merit, fairness, or compassion, all of which are inchoate, subjective, and nonquantifiable.

Democracy is put at risk when fears and bias influence legal proceedings. And yet, that is the world in which we live—it is the world in which *Race* lives—and the world in which lawyers work.

"Some people say that the client's gotta pay you to do your best," Mamet's father told him. "The client's not paying me to be best, the client's paying me to win." It is a line



Mamet put in his 1991 movie *Homicide*; it is a concept he has held onto and dramatized in *Race*. The play gives us three lawyers who know courtrooms are never places of tranquility. They are flooded with emotion—especially when race is involved. It is not the lawyers' job to mitigate those emotions so "the truth" will out. They manipulate our emotions to win.

Has David Mamet really changed? Steele suggests not: "I think he has the same values today that he did before. He's said to me he thinks he might have always been conservative without knowing it. All that happened was, he finally found a politics that suited his values." That's not, however, what the playwright says. To his mind, it has been a long, hard exodus. "Forcing yourself into a new way of thinking about things is a wrenching experience," he told Ferguson. "But first you have to look back and atone. You think. 'Oh my god, what have I done? What was I thinking?' You realize you've been codependent with the herd. And then, when you decide to say what you've discovered, out loud, you take the risk that everyone you know will look on you as a fool."

PHOTO ABOVE Lesbian speechwriter Clarice Bernstein (René Augesen) and President Charles H. P. Smith (Andrew Polk) in A.C.T.'s 2009 production of *November*. Photo by Kevin Berne.

SOURCES "Bill Moyers Talks with Shelby Steele," *Bill Moyers Journal*, www.pbs.org (January 11, 2008); Julie Bissinger, "Playwright Returns to University amid Controversy," *The Daily Texan* (March 9, 2010); Andrew Ferguson, "Converting Mamet: A Playwright's Progress," *The Weekly Standard* (May 23, 2011); Andrew Goldman, "David Mamet Explains His Shift to the Right," *The New York Times* (May 27, 2011); Diana Grisanti, "David Mamet at UT Austin: The Backlash," *The Deportee's Wife* (March 5, 2010), <http://thedeporteeswife.wordpress.com/2010/03/05/david-mamet-at-ut-austin-the-backlash/>; John Lahr, "Fortress Mamet," *The New Yorker* (November 17, 1997); David Mamet, "Community Theater: The High Drama of Tall Shrubbery (Home Edition)," *Los Angeles Times* (May 8, 2005); *ibid.*, "The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture" (New York: Sentinel, 2011); *ibid.*, "We Can't Stop Talking about Race in America," *The New York Times* (September 13, 2009); *ibid.*, "Why I Am No Longer a 'Brain-Dead Liberal': An Election-Season Essay," *The Village Voice* (March 11, 2008); Elizabeth S., "David Mamet Archives Now at Ransom Center," *Austinist* (April 18, 2007); Shelby Steele, *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006).

“Fifty Years Ago. You’re White? Same Case. Same Facts. You’re Innocent.”

Interracial Rape from Recy Taylor to Dominique Strauss-Kahn

By Emily Hoffman

On May 14, 2011, a year and a half after *Race* premiered on Broadway, a story made headlines that convinced Mamet aficionados that life really does imitate art: Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund and a front-runner for the 2012 French presidential election, was taken off a plane at JFK and arrested on the accusation that he had forced a Guinean chambermaid to perform oral sex on him in his room at Manhattan’s Sofitel Hotel. Two days later he was indicted, denied bail, and sent to Rikers Island.

The French—or, at least, vocal members of the French political and cultural elite—were outraged. Their response revealed an old-world attachment to aristocracy and its trappings: “Why all the fuss?” mused Jean-François Kahn, editor of the left-wing Paris-based news magazine *Marianne*. “It’s merely a bit of hanky-panky with the help.” Others took the situation more seriously; photos of Strauss-Kahn’s “perp walk” were a particular sticking point (How could a great man of politics be made to look like a common criminal?). “Nothing in the world,” wrote French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, “can justify a man being thus thrown to the dogs.” French feminists, by contrast, responded with exposés of the entrenched sexism of the ruling class; other women came forward with stories of Strauss-Kahn’s lasciviousness and past aggression.

Americans, for their part, were smugly satisfied with Lady Liberty’s blind justice. Four days after the arrest, Maureen Dowd wrote in her *New York Times* column:

While the French excoriated the American system of justice—discouraging pictures of Strauss-Kahn handcuffed, which are illegal in France—Americans could pride themselves on the sound of the ‘bum-bum’ *Law & Order*: *svu* gong sounding, the noise that heralds that justice will be done without regard to wealth, class, or privilege. It’s an inspiring story about America, where even a maid can have dignity and be listened to when she accuses one of the most powerful men in the world of being a predator.

Such was not the case 60 years ago, as the lawyers in David Mamet's *Race* could tell you. Behind Dowd's chipper self-congratulation—and the back-patting of countless other commentators in the days after the Strauss-Kahn case broke—is a history Americans are more than eager to relegate to the distant past.

On September 3, 1944, Recy Taylor, a 24-year-old black sharecropper, was kidnapped by seven armed white men in a green Chevrolet as she walked home with two friends. On the pretense that she was “the one that cut that white boy in Clopton this evening” (in fact, she had been at a party at the Rock Hill Holiness Church in Abbeville, Alabama), they forced her at gunpoint into the car, drove a few miles out of town, turned down a dirt road, and six of the seven men raped her. When they were finished, they blindfolded Taylor and left her on the side of the highway to find her way home. She was found not long after by the former chief of police—who had been notified by her friends—and her father, who had told the chief that the place to look for a missing black woman was in the woods.

None of the seven men—including Hugo Wilson, the driver of the only green Chevrolet in Abbeville—were arrested. That night Wilson was called for questioning to the Henry County jail, where he freely admitted to having sex with Taylor, claimed he'd paid her for it, and was promptly released. A grand jury was convened on October 3, but none of the accused were present, and the jury refused to indict. Rosa Parks, in an important precursor to the Montgomery bus boycott campaign she would lead with such success 11 years later, organized the ad hoc Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor. The committee helped spread news of the injustice to northern black papers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, which carried outraged stories, and to black servicemen, who sent impassioned letters to the governor of Alabama, Chauncey Sparks. The pressure of growing national attention forced Governor Sparks to reconvene the all-white, all-male grand jury, which on February 14, 1945, again refused to indict the seven men, despite an admission of coercion by one of them. The investigation ended there.

Though extreme, neither the attack on Recy Taylor nor the legal system's indifference to it were anomalous in 1940s Alabama; in fact, such events were extraordinarily commonplace. White men raping black women with impunity had been the order of the day in the South since the slave era, when white-on-black rape was not prohibited by law. In the Reconstruction South, whites continued to use sexualized violence to terrorize newly freed blacks. In one of history's painful ironies, angry white mobs exploited myths of sexual predation of white women by black men to incite and excuse lynchings, even as white men routinely assaulted black women who had no recourse against their attackers. In this period of individual racial violence—which extended through the Jim Crow era and flared up again at the dawn of the civil rights movement—the all-white jury (a given until the 1960s when the U.S. Supreme Court adopted the “fair cross-section rule”) stood as the final and absolute protection for white perpetrators, in the rare instances when cases were brought to trial.

The court case that stands as the emblem of the civil rights movement is, without question, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. In 1954, the Earl Warren-led U.S.

\$600 To Rape Wife? Ala. Whites Make Offer To Recy Taylor Mate

By FRED ATWATER
(Defender Staff Correspondent)
MONTGOMERY, Ala. —
"Nigger—ain't \$600 enough
or raping your wife?"
Stocky Willie Lee Taylor
considered it.
He talked to white Marvin
White, who wanted him to forget
prosecuting the six white men who
raped and ruptured Recy, his 24-
year-old wife.
White spoke for his clients, all
whites from prominent Abbeville
families who had been identified by
Recy. They were Hugo Wilson,
Sam Hastings, Sam Skippy,
Willie Hilder, Dillard York and
Willie Lee.
"They were willing to pay \$100
each if Recy Taylor would forget
White said.
After the rape of Recy, mother
of a two-year-old daughter, had
become known in every town in
Alabama and every Negro com-
munity in the nation. The Grand
jury was to meet within a week
and upon one of the few cases
to be brought to court of white
men raping a Negro woman.
White repeated his offer of \$100
to each man as a "settlement."
Willie blurted out "No." But that
didn't end it. White came back
again after more pressure and
his had been leveled at the
others and Willie said, "Come
back later and I'll tell you." He
came back later and Willie an-
swered "Yes."

VICTIM OF WHITE ALABAMA RAPISTS



"\$600 To Rape Wife? Ala. Whites Make Offer To Recy Taylor Mate!" *The Chicago Defender* (January 27, 1945). Courtesy Danielle L. McGuire, atthedarkendofthestreet.com.

Supreme Court ruled that separate (i.e., racially segregated) educational facilities were inherently unequal, overturning the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, declaring segregation a violation of the 14th Amendment, and bringing an end to Jim Crow. The history of the civil rights movement can also be told through another set of cases, as Danielle L. McGuire demonstrates in her groundbreaking 2010 *At the End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. As black women continued to prosecute their white rapists despite a history of legal indifference and violent retaliation, verdicts began to change. Both the cause and the result of wider victories in the movement, the shifting decisions in white-on-black rape cases throw into particular relief the slow disintegration of white supremacy in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s—and the part black women played in that disintegration.

A landmark case came in 1959, McGuire argues, five years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, when Betty Jean Owens, a black student at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, was abducted at gunpoint from a parked car after a school dance and raped repeatedly by four white men. She was found bound and gagged in the back of



ABOVE Protestors in the Free Joan Little campaign. Courtesy *The News & Observer*.
OPPOSITE Joan Little. Courtesy *The News & Observer*.

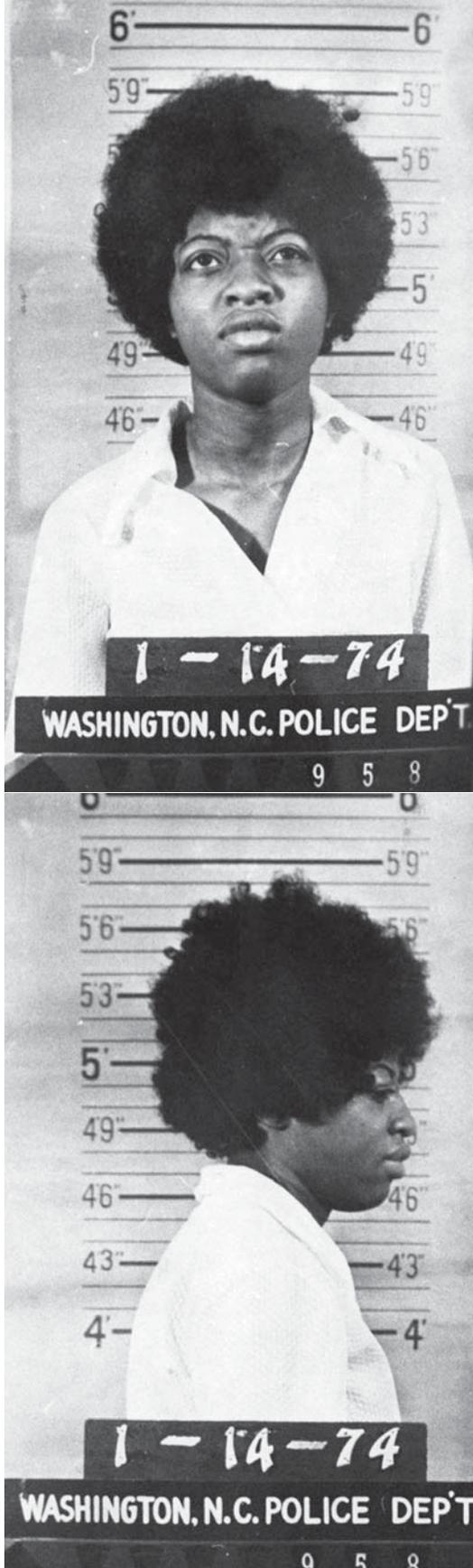
their car after a high-speed chase with that night's officer on duty—a 19-year-old intern from Florida State who agreed to follow up when Owens's friends rushed in to report the kidnapping. The four men were taken to the police station, where they cracked jokes and openly admitted to the rape—one even did so in writing.

The men underestimated the headway the civil rights movement had already made. Three years earlier, the Montgomery boycott had convinced the Supreme Court to rule the segregation of buses unconstitutional. A year later, President Eisenhower called in the 101st Airborne to protect the nine black students chosen to desegregate Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas. The same year of the attack on Owens, Lorraine Hansberry debuted her groundbreaking *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play by a black woman to premiere on Broadway.

The defense's attempts to portray Owens as a jezebel and the men as nice boys incapable of rape fell mostly on deaf ears: the jury returned a verdict of guilty with a recommendation for mercy. For many in the black community the decision was a triumph; for some black activists it was a slap in the face. The recommendation for mercy meant the men would not be executed—a fate that had awaited an overwhelming majority of black men legally convicted (and extralegally accused) of raping white women for centuries. Instead, Owens's assailants were sentenced to life with parole; at least one was released within six years.

One of the first outright victories came in 1974. It is always difficult to pinpoint a sea change, but the United States in which Recy Taylor's assailants were never called to account hardly resembles the country that, 30 years later, witnessed the acquittal of Joan Little for the murder of her white jailor. Little stood trial in Washington, North Carolina, accused of first-degree murder after Clarence Allgood was found dead in her deserted cell, slumped on the floor, stab wounds all over his body, his pants around his ankles, and a line of semen stretching down his thigh. Twenty years earlier, Little's race alone would have been enough to convict her. Ten years earlier, Little's criminal record (at the time of the murder, she was serving a three-to-seven-year sentence for robbery), her high-school dropout status, and her history of running away from home would have made her highly suspect in the eyes of the jury. But this was a new day and a new jury: six of the twelve jurors were black, nine were women, and seven were under the age of 40. At the same time, civil rights and feminist activists built a national Free Joan Little campaign, bringing a woman's right to defend herself from sexual attack front and center in the case. With the support of a white southern lawyer named Henry Paul and of Karen Galloway, the first black woman to graduate from Duke University School of Law, Little was acquitted after 74 minutes of deliberation. The verdict was lauded as a victory of self-determination for black women. There have been few such cases since.

The chambermaid in the Dominique Strauss-Kahn case shares little with the Afro-wearing, ice-pick-wielding Little. Strauss-Kahn's accuser was the perfect victim: pure, unworldly, wounded. At least she appeared that way in a subgenre of the "DSK article," which became something of an art form in the



summer of 2011: the “innocent African immigrant” piece. The maid was presented as simple and guileless, her sole pleasures in life planning for a better future and cooking Guinean food. A photo accompanying an early *New York Times* article about her featured two thatched huts.

Just as Dowd’s “inspiring story about America” sounded a bit too sunny, so too did the perfect-victim articles hint at an unspoken truth about rape cases: victim blaming is incredibly common, and convictions extremely difficult to secure. Though Lévy complained bitterly of “the sacralisation of the victim’s word” in his defense of Strauss-Kahn, in truth, only 1 out of 16 accused rapists will spend time in prison (according to the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network). The poor treatment and incredulity with which rape victims are often met are the primary reason that only 36 percent of rapes are reported to the police (according to U.S. Department of Justice statistics).

Evidence soon began to emerge in the Strauss-Kahn case that called into question the credibility of Nafissatou Diallo, the Sofitel chambermaid: Diallo lied on her application for asylum in the United States, had ties to individuals with criminal backgrounds, changed the account of the encounter she had given to investigators, and was recorded telling a friend that Strauss-Kahn had a lot of money: “I know what to do,” she told the friend. Strauss-Kahn’s DNA did match the DNA of semen found on Diallo’s uniform. Strauss-Kahn’s lawyers claimed, however, that any sexual conduct had been consensual (implying that Diallo had invited the contact either as a pawn in a political plot or as grounds for extorting money from Strauss-Kahn later). The case would have come down to a battle of he-said, she-said between one of the most powerful men in the world and a no-longer-flawless chambermaid.

In deciding whether or not to continue with the prosecution, New York District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance, Jr., must have thought about Mike Nifong, the Durham County district attorney who was disbarred for his conduct in the infamous 2006 Duke lacrosse case.

On March 14, 2006, Crystal Gail Magnum, a black stripper hired to dance at a party held at the Duke lacrosse team house, accused three white team members of raping her. District Attorney Nifong, activists, liberals, feminists, and northern journalists immediately rallied around Magnum, familiar as they were with Duke’s old-boys-club reputation of sexism and white privilege. (Case in point: later that night, team member Ryan McFayden sent an email describing a plan to have some strippers over and to kill and skin them while wearing his lacrosse spandex and ejaculating. The email was meant as a humorous homage to the character Patrick Bateman in the novel *American Psycho*.) To the chagrin of her supporters, however, Magnum was revealed to have lied about the attack: there was no match between the five DNA samples found in the rape kit and the DNA collected from the lacrosse players, and when questioned a second time about her report, Magnum recanted, saying she was not sure she had been raped. Charges were dropped, Nifong was charged with withholding evidence and misleading the court, and public sympathy turned in favor of the wrongly accused boys, whose records had been indelibly stained for no good reason. The case came to be seen by many as “a morality

play of justice run off the rails by political correctness and the political ambitions of Mr. Nifong,” according to the *New York Times*. A case that set out to tell a story about white male privilege, the abuse of black women, and the end of impunity instead became a cautionary tale about white male victimhood in the age of affirmative action.

Vance might also have remembered the Tawana Brawley media circus of 1987, when a 15-year-old girl from New York accused six white men (some of whom were police officers) of abducting, raping, and covering her with racial slurs scrawled in feces, only to be found by the grand jury to have faked her own kidnapping—possibly to avoid punishment at the hands of her mother and stepfather for sneaking out. The case was dropped and replaced with a defamation suit brought against the Reverend Al Sharpton (Brawley’s most vocal supporter) by one of the wrongly accused police officers.

The Brawley and the Duke lacrosse cases loom large in the American psyche and have given the figure of the lying black rape victim disproportionate air time. On the basis of a handful of such cases, social conservatives and white liberal commentators alike have advanced the question, Have we taken political correctness too far? Few keep sight of the statistics that prove atypical the cases that capture the nation’s attention. In the early days of the Strauss-Kahn affair, before things turned against Diallo, the *Nation* editor Betsy Reed was one of the only writers to remark, “that a black female immigrant claiming to be the victim of a sex crime would fare so well in the U.S. criminal justice system is one thing that Dominique Strauss-Kahn, a smart man, was perhaps not counting on.” She went on to quote a recent study of 150 immigrant women working in the food industry conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center, titled “Injustice on Our Plates”: “Every single one—yes, that is 100 percent—reported some kind of workplace sexual harassment, and for the majority, this involved a sexual assault. According to SPLC Senior Staff Attorney Mónica Ramirez, most did not know they had any legal recourse. Only a few reported it.”

In prosecuting Strauss-Kahn, Vance found himself trapped between two powerful public fictions: one, that America is a country where even a black maid can bring a world leader to justice; the other, that black maids working the system have pulled the wool over our eyes for long enough. On August 22, 2011, Vance asked a New York State Supreme Court judge to drop the case against Strauss-Kahn, which he did the following day. Strauss-Kahn has returned to France, and though he stepped down as the head of the IMF, he is likely to return to politics.

Strauss-Kahn’s supporters have been vindicated; feminists are disappointed, if not surprised. “It’s no news to the feminist community that this case has turned into a trial against Diallo,” Vanessa Valenti of Feministing.com wrote, “and now she may not only not get justice, but will not even get a chance to fight for it.”

The lawyers in *Race* are well aware of the history of interracial rape in America—and the ramifications for public opinion today. “I’m guilty,” Strickland (the accused) ventures incredulously, “Because I’m white.” Henry (the firm’s black partner) corrects him, “No. Because of the calendar. Fifty years ago. You’re white? Same case. Same facts. You’re innocent.” Jack (the white attorney), worries that in this day and age they will not be



IMF Director General Dominique Strauss-Kahn (second from right) walks out of a New York City Police station after being arrested for allegedly sexually attacking a hotel maid in New York on May 15, 2011. © Andrew Gombert/epa/Corbis.

able to find a single white person to put on the jury who “is not afraid. Of being thought prejudiced. By letting him off.” Are Jack and Henry right? Has the pendulum of race prejudice swung so far since the early 20th century? Aspects of recent cases suggest it has; others suggest it has not; still others suggest that if it ever did, it has since swung back again.

We cannot know what a jury would have decided had the Strauss-Kahn case gone to trial, just as Mamet does not satisfy us with a verdict in *Race*. We are the jury, left to arbitrate between the competing fictions onstage and the fictions—or, as Mamet would have it, the lies—we tell ourselves about race.

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“Here On a Pass”

A Brief History of Affirmative Action Law

By *Emily Hoffman*

“While her privileged, Affirmative Action self is here on a pass, Jack, on a mother-fucking pass. Which you gave her. *However* smart she is.”

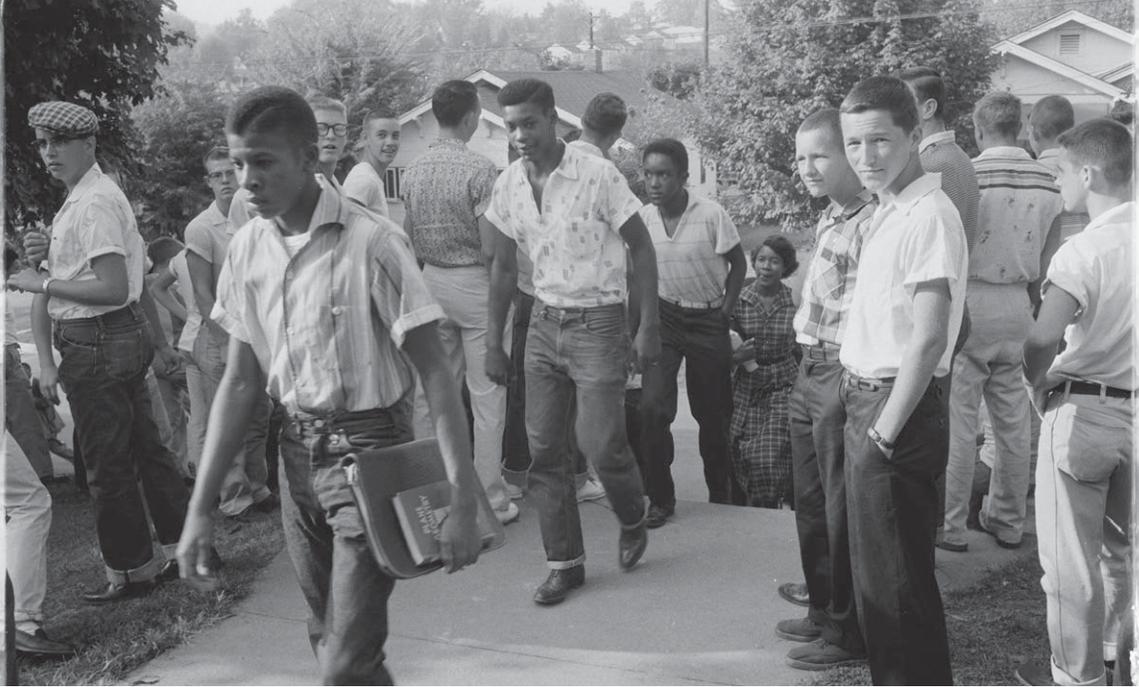
—Henry Brown, *Race*

Susan may be the only character without a last name in David Mamet’s *Race*, but her actions—or her *alleged* actions—play perhaps the most pivotal role in the plot. To understand Susan and the power she wields over her employers, it is crucial to understand her status as a minority employee.

Affirmative action law was born in the early 1960s as the u.s. Supreme Court attempted to deal with the desegregation of public schools in the decade after the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision. The landmark 1954 ruling found segregation to violate the 14th Amendment and ruled that admittance to public educational facilities could not be determined by race. The ruling alone would have done nothing, however, and de facto segregation would have continued in the South, had the courts not also recognized an “affirmative duty” to integrate the schools. In a number of subsequent decisions, local counties were mandated to actively desegregate through massive busing campaigns that radically altered the racial demographics of schools all over the country.

The first official piece of affirmative action law was an executive order, issued by President Kennedy in 1961, that created the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity and mandated that projects financed with federal funds “take affirmative action” to ensure that hiring and employment practices were free of racial bias. Taking affirmative action meant it was not enough for employers to simply say, “But, no African Americans applied for the job.” The mandate meant the difficult task of creating equality fell to ordinary individuals and business owners.

The most important piece of legislation came in 1964, when Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law. Title VI of the act addresses discrimination in federal programs and was immediately interpreted as a mandate for affirmative action policies in colleges and universities. Title VII addresses employment and pertains to both public and private employers with more than 15 workers. While it does not call for affirmative action as strongly as Title VI, Title VII does legalize affirmative action in employment and allows the court to mandate that employers take on affirmative



Clinton, Tennessee, School Integration Conflicts (December 4, 1956), by Thomas J. O'Halloran. *U.S. News & World Report* Magazine Photograph Collection. Library of Congress.

action policies in certain situations. Title VII also establishes two categories under which employees can sue their employers for discrimination: disparate treatment and disparate impact. Disparate treatment is obvious enough: employers cannot treat employees differently on the basis of a protected class (such as race or gender). Disparate impact reaches further: employees can sue when an employer's policy, while not explicitly discriminatory, still affects members of protected classes differently. In other words, the road to hell is paved with good intentions: you do not have to be a racist to have racially discriminatory practices.

Affirmative action has played out in case law in complicated and often contradictory ways, ways that have revealed the judiciary's deep ambivalence about the constitutionality of affirmative action. In 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the UC Davis School of Medicine admissions policy—in which a quota of 16 out of 100 seats were set aside for minority students—violated Title VI because it adversely affected *white* applicants without just cause. The U.S. Supreme Court has consistently ruled against quotas, so much so that “quota” has become a dirty word in the affirmative action debate. In an illustrative 2003 case, the Supreme Court ruled *for* the admissions policy of the University of Michigan Law School, which counted “minority race” as a “positive attribute” in an applicant, but only in a subjective way, and *against* the admissions policy of the University of Michigan college, which assigned nonwhite applicants a blanket 20-point advantage in their applicant rating system. The 20-point system, it was argued, violated the 14th Amendment rights of the white students who brought the case after they were denied admission—they were being treated differently on the basis of a protected class.

Employment rulings have cut both ways, as well, and employers have found themselves in a double bind: if they favor white employees, they are at risk of being sued by minority employees or applicants. However, if they attempt to instate policies to benefit minority employees and applicants, they run the risk of being sued by white employees for “reverse racism.”

The 2009 *Ricci v. DeStefano* case illustrates: the New Haven fire department threw out the results of a promotion test after they discovered that no black firefighters received grades that would lead to promotion, fearing that the black firefighters could sue under disparate impact. In fact, the 17 white firefighters and 2 Hispanic firefighters who were due the promotion banded together and sued under disparate treatment. The Supreme Court ruled in the complainants’ favor, arguing that throwing out the test simply on the basis of the race of those who passed and failed was in violation of Title VII. The dissenting opinion, written by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, expressed concern that the decision evaded assessment of the test’s fairness, noting that multiple flaws of the test were revealed during the course of the trial. The decision was a blow for affirmative action, which has been steadily chipped away at by court decisions in the last decade.

Some cannot wait for it to be chipped away entirely. Mamet is among affirmative action’s staunch opponents. In his new conservative polemic, *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture*, he explains: “It is self-evident that a racist view of the world must result in injustice. That that injustice may be calculated to benefit the members of a group which may have been previously oppressed may stand as an explanation for immoral behavior, but it does not excuse it.” Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., a professor at Harvard Law School and a beneficiary of affirmative action, has written in its favor: “Affirmative action admissions policies seek to realign the balance of power and opportunity by doing what is, at heart, quite simple: affirmatively including the formerly excluded.”

Not all beneficiaries of affirmative action are supporters of it, however. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas argued passionately against the constitutionality of affirmative action and made a case for its discontinuation. In his dissenting opinion for the 2003 University of Michigan Law School case (*Grutter v. Bollinger*), he quoted Frederick Douglass’s plea:

Do nothing with us! If the apples will not remain on the tree of their own strength, if they are worm-eaten at the core, if they are early ripe and disposed to fall, let them fall! . . . And if the negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone!

“Like Douglass,” Thomas continued, “I believe blacks can achieve in every avenue of American life without the meddling of university administrators.” In his autobiography, *My Grandfather’s Son*, Thomas even blames Yale’s affirmative action program for his difficulties securing a job after graduation, writing that his degree “bore the taint of racial preference.”

On the other hand, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, who was the swing vote on the 5-to-4 ruling and delivered the opinion of the court, argued that affirmative action



Pro-affirmative action protesters at a 2007 rally on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in 2007 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Courtesy *City Pulse*.

helped not only groups who suffered racial inequality and are “less likely to be admitted in meaningful numbers,” but *all* students, who benefit from a cultural diversity on campus that “better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society.” She acknowledged, however, “that there are serious problems of justice connected with the idea of preference itself,” and she suggested that “race-conscious admissions policies must be limited in time”: “We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today.”

In *Race*, Henry (the firm’s black lawyer) takes Justice Thomas’s position: “I would be mortified,” he says, “to go through life, thinking that I’d received a dispensation because of my race.” Though Susan does not explicitly speak about affirmative action, the title of her senior thesis, “Structural Survivals of Racism in Supposedly Bias-free Transactions,” suggests that she is unlikely to agree: America has a long way to go before past wrongs are righted.

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“Being Honest Won’t Kill Us”

An Interview with Scholar Shelby Steele on Mamet and Race in America

By Dan Rubin

Early in playwright David Mamet’s conversion from the political Left to the political Right, his rabbi, Mordecai Finley, introduced him to the work of Shelby Steele—a prolific author, frequent contributor to the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, contributing editor at *Harper’s Magazine*, and senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, where he has specialized in the study of race relations, multiculturalism, and affirmative action since 1994. “Dave’s rabbi gave him a copy of *White Guilt*,” remembers Steele, who published *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* in 2006. “He read it, and he wrote me a letter. That’s how it started.”

That initial contact was not about Mamet’s budding interest in conservative philosophies, nor was it about Steele’s theories as a “black conservative” on the complex relationship between black and white America. “The first letter was about the fact that we grew up pretty

much in the same sort of neighborhood in South Chicago. I think I’m probably a year or two older than Dave, but we grew up around the same time. And so, he was curious as to whether we had actually met or not. And so was I,” Steele recounts with a chuckle.

Steele, who received his doctorate in English, had long been an admirer of Mamet’s plays. He responded to the letter, which led to a string of correspondence as the two became friends. “Do we agree on absolutely everything? I wouldn’t think so. Dave is a man of his own mind, as I am. I think that’s what’s fun about it. I’m always interested to hear what he has to say. That’s what I think makes it fascinating for both of us.”

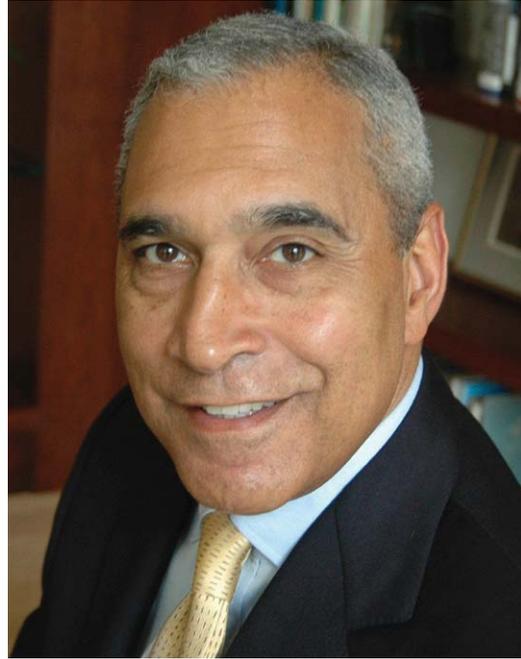


Photo of Shelby Steele by Rita Steele

Steele attended the opening night of *Race*—which Mamet dedicated to him—when it debuted on Broadway in 2009. While A.C.T.'s production was starting rehearsals in September 2011, Steele was kind enough to answer some questions about his relationship with Mamet, his thoughts on his friend's play, and the status of race relations in America.

Did you know about *Race* while Mamet was working on the play?

I knew he was writing something, and I can remember being at his house one day when he was getting into it, but we didn't talk specifically about the play as he was writing it. When he finished it—or finished a first draft, I guess—he sent it to me and we talked about it.

Has it changed a lot from that first draft?

Well, he's always changing things. [*Laughter*] He likes to play around until the last minute with the dialogue and so forth—to find his way through it.

Why I liked the play, why it was exciting for me, was that he opened up such a great, such a profound, dramatic conflict. It's almost immaterial how he finally resolves it. He opened up these questions that ask the viewer to really rethink everything: all of their feelings about race. To me that's the great power of the play. Whether, in the end, he comes out against affirmative action or some public policy just seems irrelevant. It's that he opens people up in an area where people are generally very closed down.

In 1997, John Lahr described Mamet's plays as parables. I was thinking about the parable of *Race* as I was reading your work and Mamet's new book, and I thought, of these four characters, there seems to be a Shelby Steele (Henry) and a David Mamet (Jack), as well as a stand-in for white America (Charles) and a stand-in for black America (Susan). Four distinct voices that represent four different perspectives.

I wouldn't disagree with that.

What was the opening night of *Race* in New York like?

It was a packed house. It was quite an experience. There were many moments when you could hear that infamous pin drop. It was a dramatic, impactful performance all the way to the end. It's just riveting.

There were these hushes that would come over the audience at moments, when the characters said things that we just don't ever say in America. We have a mutual agreement not to say them. Here's David saying it *all*, and what can you do at that point but be jarred and at the same time be opened up? You realize that you have to reconsider, you have to think.

Repression is so much a part of race relations, "good" race relations, in America. We mutually agree not to say, not to announce, some of the things we see, even though they trouble us. That's been the case for the last 30, 40 years. That's the way the races have agreed to get along.

I can remember growing up and seeing *A Raisin in the Sun*. In its time, it opened people up: it said things that no one ever said then about race. I think Mamet's play is a contemporary version of that. It's every bit as powerful.

Your critique of that silence is reminiscent of your critique of liberalism in *White Guilt*, that it's interested in creating an immediate, temporary stopgap to address the problems we face, but it ignores the fact that we actually do have to come up with real solutions. Your book says we have to start talking or there will be no progress.

I feel that very strongly. For whites, it is the inability to risk the stigma of being seen as racist, and so the wiser move is always saying nothing. For blacks, the wiser move—to avoid being seen as an Uncle Tom—is to do exactly the same thing. So there's no honest dialogue at this point. I'm happy for David's play. I hope it has a big, long run everywhere because it makes the point that being honest won't kill us. *Race* is the first play I've seen that really goes there.

I read in your 2008 interview with Bill Moyers, before the presidential election, that you thought Obama helped relieve some of the anxiety of white America. I'm curious if, after having him in office for three years, you think that's still true.

I think he fulfilled that mission the first day he stepped into office. America could henceforth say, "We are such a profoundly democratic society that we could elect a black man to be our president—a man from the race that we once enslaved. Aren't we wonderful?" Then, of course, this man has to actually become a president. At that point, he almost immediately began to have problems.

My point [in 2008] was that I knew he would have a popularity, an appeal, far beyond his talents, because he is what I called him in the book I wrote about him [*A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win* (2007)]: a bargainer. He basically made a bargain with white America: "If you won't hold my race against me, I won't hold your race against you." And whites, who live under this cloud of the accusation of being racist, were enormously grateful to be seen by a black person as innocent. I talk about Oprah Winfrey being a bargainer; Bill Cosby was a bargainer in the '80s. Obama took that formula into politics. I think that explains why he was elected: I don't think that any white man with Obama's credentials, with so little experience, would have been elected president, but he was such an opportunity for white America to redeem itself—to document the fact that we're not a racist society. No one was willing to pass that by.

I think some of that thinking lingers. There are still many people who cling to the dream, who don't want to feel the reversal kick in: they don't want to feel that they voted for him just because he was a nice, smooth-talking black guy. They want to believe there was something there. And so he may win again. I don't know.

I wrote a piece not long ago that talks about a certain racial exceptionalism at work. When a white candidate, like John McCain for example, stands next to Barack Obama, all of this longing, deep in the American soul, attaches to Obama. His charisma.



McCain, on the other hand, looks like a redundancy: another old white man who wants to be president.

And if Rick Perry, a Texas governor, wins the Republican nomination for the 2012 election, let's talk about redundancy.

Right, he's going to have a hard time standing up next to a black president. What's exceptional about Rick Perry?

You think Obama is an example of American exceptionalism, and yet you wrote in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article that he positions himself against American exceptionalism.

He represents a specific exceptionalism in the sense that he proves that we have social mobility in this society to a greater degree than anywhere else on the planet. On the other hand, his policies indicate that he really is an adversary of classical American exceptionalism, which is the exceptionalism of military and economic power. He is nervous about these things. He is hesitant abroad. He is uncomfortable with Wall Street, with our wealth. So, when you're talking about our true, bedrock exceptionalism—that



Cleveland Moving America Forward 10.31.10 from Barack Obama's flickr photostream

we are the wealthiest and the most powerful nation in the world—these things bother him.

I think Americans are beginning to realize that about him more and more. He feels the way to be a good nation, a virtuous nation, is to diminish that exceptionalism. As he did in Libya, when he hid behind multilateralism abroad, or when he chastises and regulates Wall Street at home, even though we're in a recession. I think, in the long run, it will really diminish him as a president. We still have the glamour of having a black president, but we've got a president who doesn't really like our greatness—he doesn't want to rely on it, he wants to diminish it.

In *White Guilt* you suggest that this mentality is shared by many of the baby boomer generation.

Yes, certainly. I come from that generation. I know it well. I was that way. I think David Mamet was that way.

I was raised during the civil rights movement and was ferociously liberal, and part of being liberal meant that you thought there was this big, mean, wealthy country that

raped and pillaged its way to great power. There was some of that, but the initiative and the character of this nation's people made its greatness almost inevitable. I would like my ethnic group to identify with that. Rather than to fight it and condemn it. It would save us.

That's what bothers me about Barack Obama, this man who's had every opportunity and blessing: he should be able to identify with [American exceptionalism], rather than see it as a bad thing that has to be diminished.

Obama was really effective at rallying the younger generation (my generation) last election. You have written a lot about the baby boomer generation, but I haven't read a lot about what you feel about the millennials and their views on race relations and American exceptionalism. Do you have thoughts on that?

The millennials interest me in the sense that one of their pretensions (I think every generation has a pretension, ours certainly did. They're just different pretensions.) is that they want to pose as though they're above and beyond all the things that the previous generations struggled with—like race and feminism, and the sexual revolution. It's all passé. They're sort of *post* everything. It's almost a sort of cheap claim of innocence, a kind of innocence without having earned it, without having done anything.

I don't know that you're *post* anything. The irony is that that generation voted for Barack Obama and celebrated him out of a racial motive. It wasn't out of some *post* racial motive: they didn't even know the man, but they voted for him precisely as a way to prove that they were beyond race. So race was still calling the shots. This was something that came to you very easily: you can vote for Barack Obama and say you're *post* racial. I'm sorry, that makes you racial.

Do you think the younger generation is any better at communicating about race?

I think it's still extremely difficult to have an open and honest discussion of race in America. Very, very, very difficult. That's why I'm so happy with Mamet's play. I've never seen anything remotely that courageous—that just goes right in there and looks at this sort of nexus, even between *sex* and race.

But that's rare. That's the exception. The [Broadway run of the] play should have been bigger than it was, but I think most of the media simply had no way to handle it. They didn't know how to talk about it. They didn't know how to see what kind of courage was there. Where else have they seen that, in all of American theater? And so, I can't say I was surprised. People are so profoundly determined to be innocent where race is concerned that it almost blocks out everything—any other curiosity, any other concern. That sadly still prevails.

A Race Glossary

By Emily Hoffman

Arrest report

An arrest report, prepared by the arresting police officer, describes the circumstances that led to the arrest. All incident reports and arrest reports are open records, whereas investigative reports are closed records until the investigation becomes inactive. If any person is arrested and not charged with an offense against the law within 30 days of the person's arrest, the arrest report will be closed.

Attorneys of record

The attorney of record is the attorney who first appears in court or signs forms on behalf of the client. The attorney remains the attorney of record until dismissed by the client or the court, or when the case is closed.

Directed verdict

A directed verdict is mandated by a judge. The judge may tell the jury what verdict to give when one of the parties has not proved its case as a matter of law (i.e., one side failed to present credible testimony on some key element). A judge in a criminal case may direct a verdict of acquittal if the prosecution has not proved its case, but the judge may not direct a verdict of guilty if the defense fails to make its

case, as mandating such a verdict would deprive the accused of the constitutional right to a jury trial.

District attorney

The district attorney represents the government in the prosecution of criminal offenses. When an arrest is made, the police department sends the district attorney a charging request; the office reviews the arrest and determines whether the person should be charged with a crime and, if so, what crime. The next step is an arraignment, during which the suspect is told what the charges are. If he or she is charged with a misdemeanor, the defendant is given the opportunity to enter a plea. If the crime is a felony, the plea occurs at a separate arraignment at the circuit court level.

First responding officer

The first responding officer is the first police officer to arrive at the scene of a crime. This officer directs the crime scene investigation and files the arrest report.

Indictment

An indictment is a formal charge issued by a grand jury stating that there is enough evidence that a defendant committed a

crime to justify having a trial. The Fifth Amendment to the u.s. Constitution states in part: “No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia when in actual service in time of War or public danger.”

“Malcolm X was noble when he renounced violence. Prior to that he was misguided.”

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*, Haley recounts civil rights activist Malcolm X’s 1964 tour of Africa and the Middle East, during which he became an Orthodox Sunni Muslim and disavowed racial separatism—which had been a hallmark of his

years as a member of the Nation of Islam (an African American religious movement founded in Detroit in 1930).

And yet, at a speech given mere days before his assassination on February 25, 1965, Malcolm X refused to disavow his former position on violence: “The time for you and me to allow ourselves to be brutalized nonviolently is passé. Be nonviolent only with those who are non-violent to you. And when you can bring me a nonviolent racist, bring me a non-violent segregationist, then I’ll get non-violent.”

“la migra”

The border police, formally u.s. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, are a federal law enforcement agency responsible for securing the nation’s borders.



Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X meet before a press conference in Washington, D.C., on March 26, 1964. Both men had come to hear the Senate debate on the Civil Rights Act. This was the only time the two men ever met; their meeting lasted only one minute. *U.S. News & World Report* Magazine Photograph Collection Library of Congress.

Miscegenation

Miscegenation—marriage between people of different races—was made illegal in most states in the early 19th century. In the years directly leading up to and following the Civil War, 11 states repealed their antimiscegenation laws. The next state to repeal was California in 1948. Between 1948 and 1967, an additional 13 states repealed. Not until 1967, however, did the Supreme Court rule in *Loving v. Virginia* that prohibiting interracial marriage was in violation of the 14th Amendment.

Plea bargain

In a plea bargain, the prosecutor offers the defendant, in exchange for a guilty plea, a lesser charge or a lower penalty than he or she might receive if convicted by a jury. Once the guilty plea is entered, the defendant is sentenced without trial. Plea bargains occur in all but a small minority of criminal cases in the U.S. justice system: according to statistics from 2003, 95 percent of federal cases were pled guilty or “no contest,” which is tantamount to guilty. The prevalence of plea bargains is a much-contested issue among legal scholars, as it is seen, by some, to evade the right to due process.

Retainer

A retainer fee is a down payment on legal services; it ensures that a lawyer will represent the client and that the client will pay for such services. Accepting a retainer contractually obligates a lawyer to represent a client. The lawyer can only be released of said obligation by the client or the court.

Rodney King

On March 2, 1991, an inebriated Rodney King, a black man, was involved in a high-speed chase with the Los Angeles Police Department that ended in a minute-and-a-half-long beating by white and Hispanic officers that left King with a fractured facial bone, a broken ankle, and multiple cuts and bruises. The beating was captured on film by bystander George Holliday, and the incident quickly incited national outrage. The officers were tried, and when the jury acquitted, Los Angeles erupted in a five-day riot.

Simon Legree and Topsy

Simon Legree and Topsy are characters from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Legree is the novel’s primary antagonist: a relentlessly cruel slave master who spends the novel trying to break the slave Tom’s faith. Legree also sexually exploits two slaves.

Topsy is a relatively minor character in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but during the 19th and 20th centuries many doll manufacturers made Topsy and Topsy-like dolls. Topsy is the “ragamuffin,” a wild and uncivilized slave girl who is taught Christian love and respect by Eva (a perfect white child and one of the text’s Christ figures) and Miss Ophelia (a northerner who rejects slavery in the abstract, but must learn, through her relationship with Topsy, to care for slaves in reality).

Questions to Consider

1. When was the last time you heard a racist comment or witnessed a racist act? When was the last time you had a racist thought? How do you know these thoughts and acts were racist?
2. How has *Race* made you think differently about race?
3. How is each character “blind” to what is and has been going on around them? What does race have to do with these blind spots? How have these blind spots affected each character’s actions?
4. Which character(s) do you feel most inclined to believe? Which character(s) do you distrust? Why?
5. Does Susan sell her colleagues out? If so, how and why does she do this?
6. What does this play, and your response to it, reveal about the racial climate of contemporary America?
7. Is Charles guilty? Of what? When he confesses at the end, what is he confessing to?

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