

DRIVER'S ED

By DAVID MAMET

Even though he long ago resettled in the East, dividing his time between Boston and a cabin in rural Vermont, David Mamet is still considered a Chicago playwright. It's not simply that he was born here in 1947 and grew up on the South Side. It was in Chicago theaters that he made the city his trademark turf, with "Sexual Perversity in Chicago," "American Buffalo" and "Glengarry Glen Ross," which won a 1984 Pulitzer Prize. His characters spoke what became known as Mаметese: a clipped, precinct-level argot that is eloquently ungrammatical, arrhythmic, pungent and profane. While he was learning and perfecting his craft here, Mamet held some less-than-glamorous jobs. Among them was driving a cab, an experience that led to the first episode of the following story about two encounters, 20 years apart, with Chicago police.

I was driving a cab. I'd stopped, over by Bughouse Square, to smoke a cigarette. I started to pull out, looked behind me, pulled out in traffic and felt a jolt. I'd been hit by a cop car.

He got me quartering away.

The cop jumped out of his car, all solicitude.

"Jeez," he said, "are you OK? I wasn't looking. I took the corner too fast. Are you OK? I'm sorry . . ." and so on. I allowed I was fine, we looked at the two cars, him apologizing all the while. There was a dent in the rear wheel well of the cab, but it wasn't going to be noticed among the other nicks. And there was a dent in the cruiser's grille.

"Oh, Jeez," he said, and shook his head. "I gotta report that. I got to fill out a report. Would you mind waiting? I've got to have my supervisor look at that."

I agreed to wait, and, very soon, several police vehicles screamed up, my statement was

taken and noted, and I was cited for reckless driving and damage to city property.

I had to go to court, and it didn't look good at all.

It looked like a hefty fine and the suspension of my license, which I was using to drive the cab and make my living.

A friend of my dad's was a criminal lawyer, and he agreed to go with me to court. I asked when we could get together to go over the facts of the case. He said to meet him at court on the assigned day.

He was, as is the way of lawyers, late, and we had no time to discuss the case at all. He charged into court, with me behind him, begging for one moment to describe the events and the justice of the case. He shrugged me off. The clerk called the case and the lawyer strode to the front and said, "Your honor, what we have here is a young law student, top of his class at Northwestern University" (I couldn't find Northwestern University) "who is

struggling to pay his tuition. When he isn't studying, he is driving his cab, and he cut it too thin, he was overtired, he wasn't paying attention, he is extraordinarily sorry, and anything your honor could do . . ."

Well, I got sentenced to remedial driver's education, four Tuesday nights, and my "crime" was forgotten. Next case.

Twenty years later and several blocks away, I was directing a film. We were due to shoot the morning scene on Oak Street Beach and the afternoon scene on Elm Street.

But the wind was blowing hard, and, when we got on the beach at dawn, it was clear we couldn't shoot there till the wind died down. Some clear head suggested we flip the schedule and shoot the beach in the afternoon, and we trudged over to Elm Street.

The plan was good, but for the presence of the passenger cars on the street. We needed that room for our trailers and generator and camera trucks. The street had been posted for days with a sign that read: "Such-and-such-a-date, this street closed from . . ."

So there we were. We needed to shoot, we needed the cars gone. What could we do? "What a dilemma," we said to each other. As we wrung our hands, the head of our police escort took out a Magic Marker, walked to the sign, crossed out the word "NOON" where it appeared, wrote in "DAWN," and towed the cars.



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