

## Not Meeting Mamet: How I Took The Long Way Round to Writing, via Chicago

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If David Mamet, the great American playwright, had written my life story, he might have set it out like one of his plays: Someone wants something. Then they go about not getting it, thwarting themselves and blaming the world. Then the surprising but inevitable end, when the lie they told themselves is revealed. It might feature a salesman, like in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and be set in Chicago. He would certainly not play himself in it. No, David Mamet did not script my life, or have a cameo in it (a source of great disappointment to at least one of us). I'm the only bad actor in this story. Here are some lies I told myself, from Dublin to Chicago, on the rocky road to the truth.

When I was 22, and without a clue, I left Ireland for America. There's the first lie. I did have a clue. In fact, I had a three step plan. 1: Get on a plane to Chicago. 2: Meet David Mamet in his hometown. 3: Somehow become his apprentice, and/or valet if he wished, and through proximity and osmosis, become a great writer (this step was lacking in detail, but Chicago was the home of improv theatre, and it was important to keep some things loose).

Like all well-conceived plans, it didn't come out of nowhere. This journey was in the blood. On my father's side, eleven of his uncles and aunts moved one after the other to St. Louis. My understanding was I had 400 cousins who ran the police and fire department (I've been there. It's not the case. Though they do have a stranglehold on the Bingo parlours). The story on my mother's side: Her grandmother went to Brooklyn and worked as a maid for a businessman, taking care of his children. Her name was Bridget Considine. The businessman was Thomas Edison. This boded well for my future in America. My great-grandmother met the inventor of electric light, so why not believe I could fall in with David Mamet? I had notions, and he was going to help me realise them. Chief among them: I wanted to be a writer. I scribbled to myself in my diary, and in there were the lines and the beginnings of things. But that's where they stayed. No light would come to the surface. And up on the surface, in the Arts block in UCD, I was not helping my own cause. Even though I loved English in school, I was studying commerce, like half of the boys from my class (the other half were in engineering. None of us were in Arts. It just wasn't an option, or at least that's what I told myself. Another lie to add to the pile).

But down below, in the bowels of the Arts block, I was trying to be someone else. I joined the Dramatic Society (as mentioned: notions). The people down there knew what they were doing, or at least did a very good impression of it. It was one of those golden eras in Dramsoc: Conor McPherson, Jim O'Hanlon, Aidan McArdle, Wille White, Camille O'Sullivan, and so many others that went on to make their mark. I was in Conor's first one-man show, *Rum & Vodka*. He turned me onto David Mamet. The urgency of the dialogue, the straight line of want through the writing – McPherson's and Mamet's - it was all I aspired to, and it was completely beyond me. The osmosis effect didn't work for me. I was a bad writer, and a worse actor. I thought you just learned your lines and said them. That's not how it works. If you can't find the feeling, forget about it. I did an MA in Drama, to play a little longer and defer the inevitable beginning of real life. I wrote essays, analysed texts, but it was all from the neck up. I had no feeling, other than shame at how little I had to say for myself, and fear of trying. You'll make a fool of yourself, I wrote. So don't even try. I was very convincing in that role. As Mamet wrote in *Edmond*: 'Every fear hides a wish.' Mine stayed hidden.

I ran away from the circus and went to work in a bank. I spent a year mainly hungover, watching writers and actors from my Dramsoc days rise, and feeling myself sinking. I remember looking at myself in the window of the 44 bus on the way to work, catching a glimpse of a grey-suited, drowning man-child. You could just stay here, keep doing this, I wrote in my diary the time. Nobody will ever ask you to leave. A job for life, if that's the life you want. I couldn't sell myself that lie. The deus ex machina: My name came up in the green card lottery. I had 100 days to use it or lose it. I decided the day the letter arrived. Run away to America. Disappear and become someone else, where nobody can see you try, or fail, or worse: do nothing.

That's how I landed in Chicago, with nothing but a cousin's couch to crash on, and the grand Mamet plan. I had one inroad: A professor at UCD had given me the number of a Theatre professor at a Chicago university. 'There – a lead for you, just like Mamet would say,' he wrote. I called her and I set out my plan, in what I thought sounded like a charmingly self-deprecating way. But mainly so she could help make the introduction I was here for. 'Oh. You know, he moved to Vermont, a few years ago,' she said.

I remember her tone, as if she was delivering some difficult personal news, which in a way she was. Relocate to Vermont? I had my limits. Plan B: get a job, do some writing, since that's what I'd told everyone I was doing. That plan was partially executed. I worked in toy stores, as a truck driver, in coffee shops, in a high school. No writing was happening. I was lonely and miserable. Letters home to were full of fierce and false positivity. I didn't want anyone from home to how far from myself I was drifting. Did I really believe that just being somewhere else would change anything? I don't think I'd be the first. The American dream I sold myself was a lie too, that just by moving there, a light would switch on. I had no ideas, no feeling, no clue what to do. I was more lost than ever. I wanted to come home. But you can't just keep running.

I held on, and got a normal job in IT. And did no writing. And of course I never met Mamet. I knew I wouldn't, I wasn't that clueless. It was a cover story to get out of Ireland. I just wanted to disappear. I met a close proxy though, in my Chicago flatmate. He saw right into me, and set about making some changes. He told me to stop being so shy, so uncertain and

as he put it, so *Goddam Irish*. 'Act like you're in a Mamet play, if you love him that much, and see what happens,' he said.

I took the part. I developed an American accent. My flatmate dared me to do things that were completely against my introverted DNA. Go to a restaurant, and whatever I ordered, I had to send it back and say I didn't like it. Go into work and demand a 20% pay rise or threaten to quit. Ask that girl out and see what happens. I did these unimaginable, un-Irish things, and I wasn't fired, deported, or rejected. This is just a movie, this isn't real, I wrote to myself the time. I embraced the other American national pastime: Ask. Keep asking, until you get what you want. If you're not sure you want, or refuse to admit it to yourself, that's a dangerous way to live. I went into sales. It wasn't my flatmate's fault. I just found that the character fit. In the absence of another plan, I became someone who if you passed in O'Hare airport, 5am on a Monday, you'd say: There goes some sales guy. As Mamet said: 'Nobody going on a business trip would have been missed if he never arrived.'

And I nearly didn't. I stayed in character, and on the road, for 20 years. It's easy to write yourself out of your own life. Learn these lines: I have a job. I am, on paper, successful. That should be enough. I'm too busy to write. Anyway, the world is not crying out for another writer. Are you crazy? You're no good anyway, so why even try. I wrote all that, and worse, over and over. But I was a bad actor in my own life. Other lines, not in the script, kept coming in. I wrote them down, all the hard feelings. I kept them down there as notes on phone to self.

At some point though, the mask has to slip, and reveal the cracked actor within. A few years ago, I caught myself in the window of a plane, and saw a very poor reflection, once again. Still sinking and grey, as if nothing had changed in the 20 years. And in truth, within me, nothing had. I wrote a note in my phone. *Is there still a light within*. I stole that line from myself for a story called *Isho 27*, which is as close to a truth as I dare to get.

That and the other stories in my collection *Shine/Variance*, are about people who are hiding from themselves. They're following scripts, going down the runway, telling themselves they're on the right track. But eventually, you're going to run into yourself, catch your

reflection, and ask yourself a question: is your life more truth or lie? What I realized is that all the time I was writing in my diary about regret, shame and self-doubt, it wasn't just notes to self. I was letting stories come into the light. And there was no way I could have written them when I was 22, or 32, even if Mamet himself had commanded me at gunpoint. I had no fear in any sales pitch. But I was too afraid to try and face myself, as a writer, and a person.

How did I get past that, to here, publishing a book, the very long way around? And why now, at 49? I don't know. One truth I've learned in the past couple of years, since getting off that plane, coming home to Ireland and myself, and starting to actually work at writing: You can't just wait for the light to go on. You have to switch it on yourself. You have to go and find the feeling, and walk into your own life. And be prepared to fail, over and over. This new life, this second act in writing is terrifying, and most of it is failure. But for whatever reason, maybe because I've come into a certain age, I just don't care about failing any more. I was long enough in sales, and Chicago, to learn that you just have to keep pushing, keep asking. As long as you're asking the truth of yourself, and pushing nearer each time.

I can't believe I'm here, finally writing in public. Mamet didn't intervene directly. But his lines helped light the way: 'Always tell the truth. It's the easiest thing to remember.' That's one to guide me. And of course, always be closing. Or at least, getting closer.

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