Observer Review: Three Uses Of The Knife By David Mamet Essay, Research Paper

Short, sharp…Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of DramaDavid MametMethuen ?12.99, pp128It is surprising, given his plays’ lack of introspection, how much David Mamet loves to theorise about theatre. But the ferocity of his theorising – that of the ‘possessed, vehement teacher’ – is distinctively Mametian. Three Uses of the Knife is a typically aggressive short (overpriced) treatise on our dramatic instinct. Instinct, because Mamet begins with an account of the ‘dramatic urge’ as an essential biological device by which we make sense of an impersonal world. Creating plots in which we are the hero – desiring some things and coming into conflict with others – is our way of defending ourselves from the meaninglessness of life.Most dramas, both on stage and elsewhere, offer false consolations. (Mamet, writing during the demeaning comedy of Clinton’s second term, makes the fantasies of politicians a key example.) Most commonly they seek to make us feel more powerful than we really are. Problem or issue-based plays give us the illusions of intellectual mastery; romances give us a quasi-religious belief that, after a ‘truncated and formalistic’ period of testing, the strength to triumph over adversity will rise up within us.What we lack is a sense of struggle and an honest acknowledgement of our ‘powerlessness’. This, says Mamet, we will find only in tragedy: ‘Tragedy celebrates the individual’s subjugation and thus his or her release from the burden of repression [of that truth] and its attendant anxiety.’ He draws explicit parallels with religion: we must ‘acknowledge our sinful, weak, impotent state’ and can then find peace.How convincing is this? Readers of Mamet’s previous theoretical work will recognise old themes: the importance of the unconscious; the hostility to didacticism; his insistence, derived from Aristotle and Stanislavsky, on the supremacy of plot and the through-line of the protagonist. ‘That which the hero requires is the play,’ declares Mamet. But his new emphasis on tragedy as almost the only true kind of drama (with echoes of Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy) signals the sharply increasing pessimism of Mamet’s vision of the emptiness and indulgence of contemporary culture. ‘In times of surplus,’ he writes, art ‘disappears.’ The result is highly readable and always interesting. Yet like many aphoristic writers, Mamet relies too often on the provocative half-truth.Do we really think that Shakespearean tragedy is best understood in the neo-Aristotelian terms so beloved of Hollywood script consultants? What of the theatre of the absurd, which often breaks the three-act structure and begins – with a recognition of powerlessness and pointlessness – where tragedy ends? Isn’t the idea that tragedy can be reduced to a ‘cleansing lesson’ itself didactic and utilitarian? Do we still believe in the tragic hero’s accession to wisdom? Does Lear really learn? Does Cleopatra?Perhaps most telling is the interaction between Mamet’s theories and his own work. The emphasis on power and impotence is apt: Mamet’s great dramatic theme is the contradiction between men’s great compulsion to appear strong and their actual weakness. But this is less metaphysical and more related to maleness and the American dream than his theories would suggest.It’s striking that Mamet, a playwright famed for the flinty brilliance of his dialogue, should pay so little attention to language. The languages of salesmen in Glengarry Glen Ross and of small-time crooks in American Buffalo – creating whole worlds of need and evasion – are more than an incidental pleasure. By contrast, when Mamet is preoccupied with generating clever plot reversals, as in Speed-the-Plow or The Spanish Prisoner, his work feels shallow. It’s curious, too, that such a funny writer should have so little to say about comedy.Some writers-turned-critics offer ideas about literature that are really self-analysis (TS Eliot has this tendency). By contrast, Mamet’s theorising seems too compulsive, too belligerent, to match the complexity of his achievement. When Mamet says of Brecht that his theories ‘bear little relationship to his plays, which are extraordinarily charming and beautiful and lyrical and upsetting’, he could almost be writing about himself.