

It was meant to pay homage to his Irish-Brooklynese roots. Not a bad idea, as Irishness, its lyrical colorfulness cum physical gesturing, is a time-honored fabric for literary dramas about pugilistic heroism. But Mr. Hamill wanted three prizes at once: to write an honest novel, to get applause from fashionable magazines and the waiters at Elaine's, and to make money. An endeavor that complex must end in a jar with Irish schmalz, strongly flavored with 42nd Street peep show room odor—and it did. Pressed by those three powerful urges, Mr. Hamill penned his youthful *picaro* as an intrepid fighter who sleeps with his mother, and finds twisted pleasures in both fighting and incest. He is an antiracist to boot, which wouldn't hurt him if, by any chance, he wished to switch over to politics. The result is a shifty contrivance plus energetic writing plus doleful flop. □

Kosinski's "Comic Laughter"

Jerzy Kosinski: *Blind Date*;
Houghton Mifflin Co.; Boston, 1977.

Lavish ads in newspapers display a face of someone who obviously covets the style of a Garment District Marquis de Sade. He is clad in hundreds of dollars worth of custom-made casualness. The publisher's blurb says that Mr. Kosinski responds to the modern world's horrors with "cosmic laughter." Hard to know what it means, perhaps Count Dracula's brand of merriment. But Mr. Kosinski's books and success are not from the B-picture league. Mr. Kosinski, thanks to the Liberal Culture's fascination with morbidity, is rated as a serious novelist, once chosen to be a National Book Award laureate. He is a duly acknowledged purveyor of the new demonology, a New York jet-set's pet authority on spying, the liberal concept of anti-totalitarianism, sexual excess, nickel-and-dime catastrophism, on all of which he propounds "philosophical" innuendos. Friendly critics see in him "hallucinatory qualities"

and "demonic powers," and the reviewers at *Time*, *New York Times* and *Publisher's Weekly* liken him to Dostoevski, Kafka, Celine, and still they draw their salaries from their employers. He is *tout court*—a modish writer.

Thus, while learning in *Blind Date* about the protagonist's sexual intimacies with his mother, the thoughtful reader's first impression is that incest must be *in* among publishers and critics in New York, otherwise Mr. Kosinski would have looked for another "stunning shocker! . . ."—as *Publisher's Weekly* describes this *oeuvre* in an accolade. His career in America has demonstrated that neither plausibility, nor moral certainties, nor the nourishing doubts of intellectual torment are welcome on the current literary scene, while abomination, cynicism, sham and cruelty are. There is a special market for "bionic" fantasies about sexuality and violence not only for adolescent bullies and never-grew-up truck drivers, but also for the jaded *Harper's Bazaar* and *Women's Wear Daily* circles—the feeble-minded socialites, the beautiful people for whom hashish has lost its thrill, the elite freaks from Regine's. There is still room for pornography for those who consider themselves above the artistic pleasures distributed by Linda Lovelace and her ilk, but who nevertheless crave bestiality without plebeian smells. Mr. Kosinski has become a master at packaging such merchandise into spurious sophistication—a pity, in point of fact, as he debuted with two innovative novels (*The Painted Bird* and *Steps*; in the latter he acutely described a reality morally disjointed through the electronic impulses of a technologized code of behavior) and he was vested with promise that has evaporated during the ten years of his publicity triumphs. A sense of the complexities and charms of normalcy are prerequisite for a novelist who wants to be taken seriously; they are alien to Mr. Kosinski. He lives in a reality deprived of even the pettiest of moral questions and consequences—a blatant naivete even for a pessimistic sage. He pictures putrefaction as life's *only* substance, and blank stares at pain, blood and hunger as

the *only* humanness. His world is a dingy dump of Park Avenue triplexes. His literary ambition seems to be the highest possible financial revenue that can be gained by discovering new reasons for hatred, a latter-day miner panning gold nuggets in the sewer. □

Sheehy's Kaffee-Klatsch

Gail Sheehy: *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*;

Bantam Books, Inc.; New York, 1977.

Passages is a durable best-seller, now in paperback. Everything that you could find out from an intelligent and well-seasoned grandfather, if you had one, or from a good kaffee-klatsch 50 years ago, is in that book.

Anyone who treasures his uniqueness has another thought coming when he reads it. It offers a staggeringly simple explanation of all our problems, turmoils and misbehavior. Confronted with the obnoxious conduct of their six year olds, concerned mothers could always console themselves with the thought that it's just a stage which the kids will outgrow. According to Gail Sheehy, nothing much changes as we go from 6 to 46. Growing older—one hesitates, in her context, to speak of growing up, much less of maturing—involves a myriad of such stages: the self at one age is transformed into a newer self with other predictable, although not avoidable, crises. It is exactly these stages—or passages, as she terms them—which occur when bored husbands philander, frustrated wives run away after 25 years of marriage and 48 year old executives drop dead. Sheehy comes up with abysmally profound answers to such puzzlers as why people marry (need for security and fear of being alone), why men fear turning 40 (intimations of their own mortality), and why women are unhappy (they live vicariously through husbands and progeny). She gives the *raison d'être* for her book: "It

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Stage

Mamet's Toying with Realism

David Mamet: *The Woods*; St. Nicholas Theatre, Chicago

by Neil Thackaberry

"Psychology, which works relentlessly to reduce the unknown to the known, to the quotidian and the ordinary, is the cause of the theatre's abasement and its fearful loss of energy."

—Antonin Artaud

David Mamet, a Chicago playwright of talent, young, upcoming and already a focus of attention, seems to build his works on a tacit acceptance of Artaud's premise. He is perceptive enough, though, to recognize the danger of violating audiences' expectations. In spite of the absurdists and those who came after, psychological realism is still the style of choice for would-be playwrights who wish to succeed. Mamet's task is therefore to present something far more complicated than realism while maintaining the essential external elements of that style. This is precisely what he accomplishes in his most recent play, "The Woods."

Two persons are cast into an apparently realistic situation. A young man, Nicholas, has invited his current female companion, Ruth, up to his family cottage in the woods for a weekend of isolation, conversation, and assorted intimacies. A conflict arises from a misunderstanding of intentions, Nick asks Ruth to leave, then changes his mind and she ends up staying. There is nothing in this series of events which breaks with accepted standards of reality.

The excursion beyond those criteria begins when we notice that in spite of the psychological realism which conditions the incidents, the play is charged

with tensions which can't be explained away with habitual logic. The source for most of these tensions lies in the characters' desperate attempts to understand one another. Understanding becomes a need and the latter is made evident in a number of ways. Storytelling, direct appeal for communication, and demonstration of the consequences of misunderstanding—they all determine the importance of intelligibility as a *conditio sine que non* of humanness.

At this point Mamet makes it clear their communication conflicts are pronounced not by immediate circumstances, but by the essential difference between the mind-sets of the two people on stage. However, instead of individualizing it, the playwright grounds this difference in the attitudes of culture and current mores—a familiar dramatic device. If a weekend of sexual activities between consenting adults is a currently acceptable recreation, Ruth's seeing in such a weekend a commitment by Nick to a long term relationship becomes a display of her bad manners. Nonetheless, throughout the first act and portions of the second, Ruth speaks eloquently of the benefits of commitment, using as her primary example the relationship between her grandparents. Nick reads nothing into these references, failing to perceive the preparation which Ruth is attempting. He certainly is entitled to a lot of confusion: Ruth uses frank sexual language and in principle is not averse to premarital sexual activity. But she is searching for a relationship characterized by virtues of an earlier time, a quite incredible endeavor, taking into consideration our epoch and the very situation created by Mamet. When she presents her lover with a bracelet inscribed with a promise of lasting love, no one either on stage or in the audience knows what to do with the incongruousness of both the gift and its symbolism. What actually happens at that moment is Mamet's

inversion of the ideas of conformity and non-conformity. He exercises the time-honored privilege of theatricality for his generation's sake. Nick, whose posture would have been termed libertine only two decades ago, is now a representative of an official morality, thus a realist, although his stance would have previously been a challenge to the realities of the society and its routine conduct. Ruth, a conformist from a not too remote past, suddenly becomes a challenger of the established realism of human rapport: she desires erstwhile fixtures of love—bracelets, promises, vows, commitments—which now have become symbols and seem to grate against the very texture of regular life.

So effectively is Ruth's angle presented and interpreted that Nick's rejection of her and her gift becomes another surprise. It should not. He is reacting with appropriate shock, a tremor generated in the inner depths of his new socio-moral formation. She has violated the cultural code of behavior under which he had invited her. She has actually asked him to commit himself, to restrict his future flexibility, an action which offends his sense of propriety. Mamet balances the conventionalities with precision, endows them with dialectical weights that exceed the comedy of manners, making out of the crisis of the second act an exercise in moral sophistry, or impartiality, whichever comes first to a predisposed mind.

The essential weakness of Nick's position escapes the audience until later. Instead of the smooth, bittersweet resolution of a relationship gone sour which might have been expected, in the final act Mamet presents a searing, nearly fatal breakdown on the part of Nick. It becomes apparent that Ruth is the healthier human being. In spite of her seemingly old-fashioned notions, in spite of Nick's blistering attack on her for her lack of

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