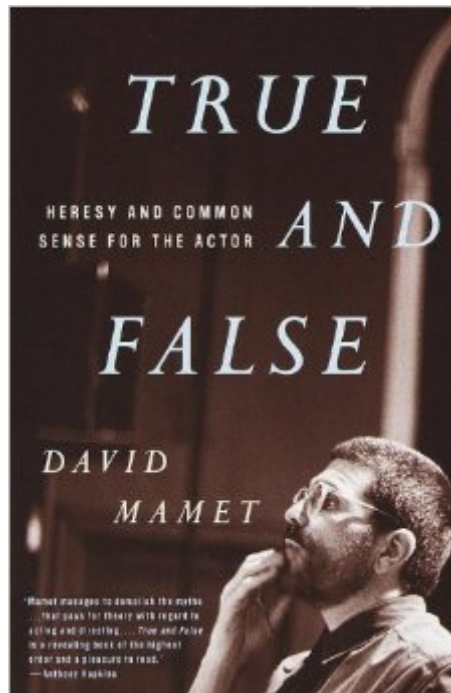


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True And False: Heresy And Common Sense For The Actor



Synopsis

Invent nothing, deny nothing, speak up, stand up, stay out of school. With these words, one of our most brilliantly iconoclastic playwrights takes on the art of profession of acting, in a book that is as shocking as it is practical, as witty as it is instructive, and as irreverent as it is inspiring. Acting schools, the interpretation of sense memory, the Method "David Mamet takes a jackhammer to the idols of contemporary acting, while revealing the true heroism and nobility of the craft. He shows actors how to undertake auditions and rehearsals, deal with agents and directors, engage audiences, and stay faithful to the script, while rejecting the temptations that seduce so many of their colleagues. Bracing in its clarity, exhilarating in its common sense, True and False is invaluable.

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Customer Reviews

This is a short, blunt and controversial monograph on the business of acting, but in assessing its lessons, one should consider two salient points. First, David Mamet tried unsuccessfully to become an actor, and, second, that as a playwright and director, he necessarily has his own ideas about how his works (and the works of other playwrights) should be produced, and his vision undoubtedly conflicts with actors' ideas about how those works should be realized. In the guise of giving acting advice, he is voicing his strong opinion that all actors' work must necessarily be subordinate to that of the playwright or director, and it recalls Alfred Hitchcock's famous dictum that he regarded actors as cattle. That's not necessarily acting advice, but it is a hierarchical view of roles within a production or a theatre company. With those points in mind, much of what Mamet has to say about

acting is very good advice indeed. It is no secret that the Stanislavski and Strasberg systems of acting often produce academic and/or inward looking performances. Mamet also finds nothing at all to praise in acting schools of any stripe or theory. And as readers familiar with Mamet's plays might expect, when Mamet wants to heap scorn upon an object, he is capable of doing so with cold and hilarious fury. His points about working truthfully in the moment (which he calls acting courageously) and focusing honestly on your partner or the other actors are surely solid. Similarly, his simple advice about how a scene should work and how an actor should understand the scene's objective are rock solid. In the end, although Mamet skewers both acting schools and theories, he has really espoused a theory of stage performance, albeit one that takes as its guidepost a highly naturalistic and unadorned style. Similarly, his advice that only by constantly working, and subjecting your craft to the ultimate test of audience acceptance or rejection, will an actor really grow, is beyond dispute. Overall, this is a useful and entertaining analysis. But it's really only partly about how to act, and if you're buying it as a how-to guide, you're going to be disappointed.

Much of this book is taken up with Mamet railing against the Stanislavski System, of which he demonstrates a fundamental lack of understanding. For example, he claims that the Method is not practical because you cannot "force" your emotions (those who have read any of Stanislavski's books will recognize that Stanislavski said this exact thing) and you cannot force yourself to believe something you know to be false (if Mamet had read Stanislavski's sections on the "magic if," he would find that Stanislavski also teaches this and has a solution to the problem). The fact that he calls the Stanislavski System the Stanislavski Method makes me suspect that he is actually thinking of Strasberg's Method, who is often accused of putting too much emphasis on the certain aspects of a System like internal embodiment of the role and many say misunderstood large parts of the Stanislavski system; after Stella Adler studied with Stanislavski and returned to the Group Theatre, she and several other teachers of the 'Method' broke with Strasberg on these issues (including Meisner, who Mamet later studied under, who very strongly disagrees with Strasberg's methods and teaching style and says so very frankly in his book "Sanford Meisner on Acting"). Many of the issues Mamet brings up are fairly common criticisms of Strasberg, especially by Meisner. When he quits ranting against the Stanislavski System and what he thinks actors need to stop doing and gets down to what he thinks actors SHOULD do, many of his principals are (or, at least, should be) either painfully obvious (such as, our job as actors is to entertain the audience) or of little use to serious actors. For example, he spends a whole chapter writing on auditions - only problem is he gives no advice on how to audition well or successfully, he just explains why they are a bad way of casting

(without, I might note, recommending a better way of casting - everyone involved hates auditions, we only do them because no-one has come up with a better system, unless the production team is casting a star or someone whose work they are familiar with enough to skip the audition).

Stanislavski (whose approach was "these are the principals of what must happen "internally," this is how it looks externally, this is how it looks when you're creating a character for the stage), Mamet does not spend much time explaining how his principals work or how they are to be applied on stage, which tends to limit the usefulness of the good principals he has. I will give Mamet credit for a few things, though. His writing is concise and to the point, and touches on a few of the basic principals of acting, and he points out a few mistakes that some actors make. The one thing that this book does a very good job with is reminding us of the basic job of the actor, which actors tend to get away from sometimes, such as the fact that the audience is paying good money to see us perform and our first obligation is to them (although even this can be dangerous in that it can cause you to play what you think the audience should be seeing rather than playing the scene honestly, which can lead to unrealistic and dishonest acting). He makes a few other interesting points (e.g., the primary place we learn to act is on stage, not in the classroom, and the tendency to stay in school forever rather than get practical experience in the theatre won't help you but is rather damaging to your acting). Do not read this book instead of other acting books, but rather in addition to them. The book is fairly short - you should be able to read it quickly. This would be good to read along with Stanislavski or books on the Method, but don't read it as a the first or only acting book you read. I would NOT recommend buying it, although I would recommend reading it once and only once as an alternative perspective on acting - more perspectives is a good thing, and even if I disagree with much of that perspective it makes you think about why you disagree with it which is a good thing.

This book--another fit of didacticism from a writer of highly uneven output--is a bracing experience. Mamet's thoughts are so simplistic, his tone so dogmatic, that he provokes you to define your own thinking more sharply. I therefore recommend the book highly. I'd like to share one observation, out of the many that this book provoked in me: Mamet's own preference, it seems, is the flat, uninflected acting in most of his films. Compare, for instance, Lindsay Crouse's beautifully emotional work in Sidney Lumet's THE VERDICT with her strangely robotic work in Mamet's HOUSE OF GAMES. The disparity between the two performances--one directed by the Actors Studio-trained Lumet, the other directed by the virulently anti-method Mamet--points up a central, yet unacknowledged, truth: Mamet is advocating a particular style of acting. This style results from the action-oriented approach that he and his followers employ, but it is no more or less a style than that produced by the method

techniques he decries. This may seem a minor point, but it is one that he would hotly deny, as he insists that he advocates a technique and not a style. I should add that the book contains a number of incisive thoughts on ethics and professionalism. So valuable were these that I typed them up and put them on my wall. They kept me sane through a difficult summer with a professional theatre company. The book is worth its price for these alone.

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