

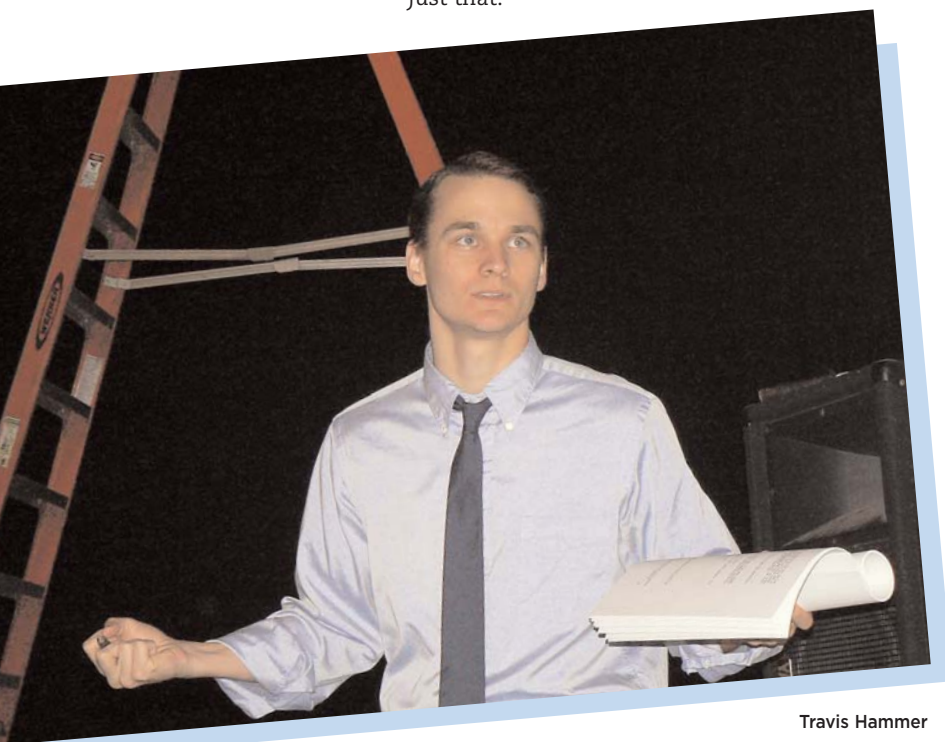
# Travis Hammer Directs Mamet's *Squirrels*

By Julio Martinez

**D**IRECTOR TRAVIS HAMMER'S PRODUCTION of David Mamet's early stage work *Squirrels*, which premieres March 23 at the Miles Playhouse, immediately follows the Geffen Playhouse offering of Mamet's better known *Speed-the-Plow*, closing March 25.

"This work was written in 1974 and has been seen by almost no one," says Hammer. "I think it is a wonderful primer into the evolution of a stage genius. He wrote it when he was around 26, after he had written *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* but before *American Buffalo*."

Hammer has never staged a Mamet play but feels particularly drawn to this work because of its dissection of the creative ethic. He chuckles, "You might say I have devoted my career to doing just that."



Travis Hammer

Hammer, founding director of Criterion Theatre, a founding member of the Blue House Theatre Company, a literary associate at the Evidence Room and part time lecturer in The School of Theatre at USC, has worked in Southern California, London, Prague and Edinburgh and was a co-director of the 2005 Edge of the World Theatre Festival in LA.

"The play addresses the mystifying layers of the writer's process," says Hammer, whose directing credits include Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* which he feels has much in common with *Squirrels*. "It bravely explores the structure and discipline needed to put word to paper, something for which Mamet is justifiably famous.

*Squirrels* delves into the creative science, the horror of lost talent, the pain of loneliness and finally the inevitable process of passing tradition down from one generation to the next."

*Squirrels* shares one parallel to Mamet's later two-person play, *A Life in the Theatre* (1977) which insinuates itself around the shifting dynamics in the relationship between an older character actor and the upstart juvenile thespian who has just joined the company.

Reading *Squirrels* is an excursion through a much different side of this honored playwright, void of the epithet-studded male underworld of his later works. What connects *Squirrels* to Mamet is its focus on language and the verbal acrobatics of high and low diction.

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Written three years earlier, it explores the twisting, elusive essence of creativity filtered through the relationship of two writers: middle-aged Arthur, a self-deluded hack, blocked and lonely, who has been working on the same paragraph for 15 years, and Edmond, the fledgling writer he has hired as a secretary and ego booster to help get the juices flowing.

Together they form a satire of bad writing everywhere, with Arthur's flamboyant redundancy clashing with Edmond's mediocre melodrama.

Insinuating herself in the mix is the relentless presence of a lovable but vicious cleaning woman who interrupts them regularly to deliver her own concepts of creativity and truth.

The play offers a tantalizing 90 minute surge of tongue-twisters and status games. "I have no concerns at all how this Mamet play will stand with his more well-known works," says Hammer. "It is so performable. I have seen other plays of his that seem to highlight the playwright's much-publicized 'Mametspeak' but that is not the way I approach this work. There is a dramatic through-line that needs to be underscored. The focus needs to be on the story-telling. I believe in all of

## SQUIRRELS

Opens March 23; plays  
Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 3 pm  
Closes April 29  
Tickets: \$25-\$37.50  
Preview, Thurs., March 22  
Tickets: \$10  
Miles Playhouse  
1130 Lincoln Blvd.,  
Santa Monica  
866.219.4944 or  
www.SquirrelsbyMamet.com

Mamet's plays, the dialogue, no matter how colorful, is not meant to be an actor's showcase. It is there to serve the plot, the playwright's intent."

Hammer's own "life in the theatre" was nurtured growing up in Alton Illinois. "I started doing plays in high school," he recalls. "I don't think I really thought about doing anything else. I had no other skills. After high school, I just ventured forth, fully expecting to be doing this my whole life."

After studying drama at USC, Hammer's venturing forth has since taken him to Theatre 503, one of London's leading new-writing venues. He also served as Exhibit Manager for the US entry in the 2003 Prague Quadrennial.

"I find I ally myself with creative people who take seriously the practice of being dedicated to artistic excellence in all its forms," explains Hammer. "I am co-producer of The Blue House Group, a place where artists of all disciplines may pursue and develop their crafts. We firmly believe in the power of art."

Past Blue House Theatre Group productions include Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, *Two Quick Ones While She's Away* by Drew Howerton (EdgeFest 2005), Sam Shepard's *Angel City*, the West Coast premiere of *Scab* by Sheila Callaghan, Tom Stoppard's *Dogg's Hamlet*, Cahoot's *MacBeth*, the West Coast premiere of *Need* by Arik Martin (EdgeFest 2002, with a short revival in EdgeFest 2004), *Scooter Thomas Makes It to the Top of the World* by Peter Parnell and Shepard's *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*.

Hammer adds, "As a production entity, I also founded the Criterion Theatre [co-producer] with the belief that higher standards should continually be striven for in theatre and that quality is to be the goal and process of every aspect therein."

Hammer feels his creative ideals are put forth quite succinctly in *Squirrels*. "The two writers in the play are attempting to bridge this enormous gulf between them because, if they don't, their lives will be invalidated. They are their creativity."

This is a play that definitely deserves to be seen." ■

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