

Director Notes

Professional skeptic and an inspired word jockey, David Mamet can lay claim to the same connoisseurship of human folly as H. L. Mencken, who once observed that, in America, “only the man who was born with a petrified diaphragm can fail to laugh himself to sleep every night.” Mamet’s hysterical Oval Office satire, “November” is a hilarious demonstration of the fact that we live in an age of equality: *all classes are criminal*.

As the curtain rises on “November,” the President of the United States, Charles H. P. Smith (Ira David Wood III), who is on the eve of losing his bid for a second term (his numbers are “lower than Gandhi’s cholesterol”), asks his trusted aide Archer Brown (Jesse R. Gephart) what has happened to his public support. “Why, why?” he moans. “You’ve screwed the country into a cocked hat,” Archer replies. For farcical purposes, Mamet is quick to add financial desperation to Smith’s woes. In the last days of his election campaign, Smith has no money for TV ads. He has no money for a Presidential library or to guarantee his own future; even his security guards have gone walkabout.

At once a barbarian, a bully, and an idiot (“I always *felt* that I’d do something memorable—I just assumed it’d be getting impeached,” he says), Smith brings oxygen to Mamet’s rhetorical brilliance — so much that Mamet seems almost giddy with pleasure as he makes his cretinous creation squirm.

In a telephone conversation with the hulking chief of the Native American Micmac Nation (Scotty Cherryholmes)—“His wife died hunting a walrus, and it’s not on the card,” Smith says, looking up from the phone and his blue prompt card—he manages to offend the chief to the point where he threatens to come to Washington to exact revenge for Smith’s “hate crime.”

"I can't say I care," Smith brays down the line. "You know why? Because I can't be *convicted* of crimes. I can resign tomorrow and my Vice-President . . . what's his name? . . . will pardon me for crimes yet uninvented. Yes, while *you*, 'Tonto,' are on a plane to nowhere. And I hope your second wife gets eaten by a walrus." He adds:

"I'll tell the Secret Service to come by and put you on the piggyplane to Prybschych *frickin'* Bulgaria with a priceless view of the Bumfrickin' Mountains, 'cept you will not see 'em, being encased in sixteen cubic feet of concrete, 'til the flesh molts on your body and falls in a tidy pile around your "terrorist" backside. Now *you* talk. "

The poetry of Mamet’s pugnacity—with all its half notes of contempt, rage, and terror — really swings. “Pee frickin’ ess,” Smith blurts out, on learning that his loyal lesbian speechwriter, Clarice Bernstein (Cameron West), has spent her vacation in China, adopting a baby. “What in the world do you think all these cute lil’ Chinese baby girls are gonna do when they grow up, having eaten our food, learned to play the cello, bested all the white children at math, and slurped up all the jobs, under affirmative action? ””

“You can straighten a worm,” Mark Twain joked, “but the crook is in him and only waiting.” So it proves with Mamet’s President. Before the annual White House pardoning of the Thanksgiving turkey, Smith hits on the idea of shaking down the National Association of Turkey and Turkey Products Manufacturers (Larry Evans) for some much needed moolah. (The association has already agreed to pay him fifty thousand dollars, but Smith wants to jack the bid up to two hundred million.) “I pardon your turkeys, what does that imply?” he says to a turkey wrangler. “That the birds I *haven’t* pardoned, the turkeys each American actually eats on Thanksgiving, are criminals?” He adds, “I want a number so high even dogs can’t hear it. Are you cogitating?” The turkey representative sweetens the deal but doesn’t come anywhere near Smith’s demand, so, wrapping himself in the robes of his authority, the President sets out to change the story of the Thanksgiving feast. First, he contemplates pork, then he seizes on the notion of the Thanksgiving Day tuna. When Brown reminds him that tuna come from the Pacific, Smith, undaunted, spitballs the idea for Bernstein to finesse. “O.K., O.K. The Pilgrims. They did not eat ‘tuna,’ ” he says. “They ate some species of ‘codfish,’ which the Indians . . . in their *ignorance*, called *toohnah*, which in the blahblah *language* means ‘great abundance from the sea.’ ” The chief of the Micmac Nation is happy to sign on to Smith’s canard: in return, he demands, for openers, the entire island of Nantucket, on which to build a casino. And so it goes ...

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