

interest is in its introduction of a male double for the female protagonist. An attractive, though hard-edged and forbidding, confidence man, Mike (Joe Mantegna) is, as much as Margaret, an astute student of human nature. The great difference between them as the narrative proceeds is that his motives seem more conscious. The way in which Mike is introduced into the film is intriguing; there is no mistaking how contrived Margaret's involvement with him is, even when it has been fully explained later as the first step in an elaborate scheme designed not only to part her from her money but also to devastate her emotionally. Alertness to aspects other than this undisguised contrivance is important because the exposition will then become rewarding and indicate what kind of attention should be given to the principal relationship between Margaret and Mike.

Single-mindedly, Mamet has one concentrated purpose to pursue in the film, and that is for everything to reflect, in some way, the contradictory and tormented inner being of Margaret. Before Mike ever appears, four characters in a row double her in some way. First, there is the intense young woman, who, by the film's end, seems like Margaret's psychological twin, for they are both outwardly poised and self-composed but inwardly out of control. Then there is a prison-ward patient (Karen Kohlhaas), whom Margaret is earnestly trying to heal. The patient's dream is carried, as if it were Margaret's own, to Margaret's friend and mentor, Dr. Littauer (Lilia Skala), who, as a woman, seems like a role model. Her observation of Margaret's inner distress, however, which the other signals through amazing slips of the tongue which seemingly occur each time the two women get together, never transforms into active protectiveness. Though sensitive and sympathetic, Dr. Littauer is impotent to act in her friend's interest; one presumes that she was Margaret's psychiatrist while the younger woman was in training, which means that she has never helped her to do anything other than put on a mask. The fourth double is the reflection of that mask, patient Billy Hahn (Steve Goldstein), who confesses to Margaret in bitter anguish that his compulsive gambling has destroyed him because Mike, the man to whom he owes money, is going to kill him. Billy, it is finally learned, has been acting (he is working with Mike). It is a performance in a different register from the one Margaret projects to the world—the poised psychiatrist who understands obsession—but hers has no more tangible reality in the final analysis. From female reflections, the film has progressed into darker male ones, and Mike, the true double, is the darkest and most male.

By now, Margaret's own masculine qualities—her short haircut, her dress, the hard lines given her face by her makeup—should be comprehensible; without these attributes she would seem ridiculous in the world she enters, which is so coarsely masculine. As it is, her femininity abruptly becomes very pronounced by contrast with the new atmosphere and new characters. Though no empathy has been solicited for her by Mamet, she elicits

## HOUSE OF GAMES

*Production:* Michael Hausman; released by Orion Pictures

*Direction:* David Mamet

*Screenplay:* David Mamet; based on an original story by Jonathan Katz and Mamet

*Cinematography:* Juan Ruiz-Anchia

*Editing:* Trudy Ship

*Art direction:* Michael Merritt

*Makeup:* Pamela Westmore

*Costume design:* Nan Cibula

*Sound:* Anthony John Ciccolini III

*Music:* Alaric Jans

*MPAA rating:* R

*Running time:* 102 minutes

### *Principal characters:*

Dr. Margaret Ford	Lindsay Crouse
Mike	Joe Mantegna
Joey	Mike Nussbaum
Dr. Littauer	Lilia Skala
Businessman	J. T. Walsh
Young woman with book	Willo Hausman
Prison-ward patient	Karen Kohlhaas
Billy Hahn	Steve Goldstein

A chilly mood informs this dark fable about the absence of knowingness within the too-conscious mind. Compelling interested attention throughout, the film-directorial debut of acclaimed playwright and screenwriter David Mamet resists too much penetration, for it is so profoundly pessimistic that its most persuasive resonances are of emptiness, desolation, and a kind of death. One feels immediately the stillness of the air, the abstract and sculptural sense of an ambiguous, posing humanity, and the subterranean viciousness that quietly waits amid the placid surfaces of contemporary reality. In this atmosphere, a psychiatrist and author, Dr. Margaret Ford (Lindsay Crouse), signs a copy of her book, *Driven*—a study of obsessive behavior—for an intense young woman (Willo Hausman) who edgily proclaims how helpful and transformative its contents have been for her. The compositions, sound track, and playing are cool and neutral, but the image already suggests content other than that being projected—it is like an image of a torrent of tears suddenly frozen and placed behind glass.

Soon, an intricate plot will be devised around the character of the psychiatrist, but while it engages through clever twists and turns, its only real

it anyway because of the unashamed vulnerability with which, in the middle of the narrative, she responds to Mike's assessment of her sexual needs; she directly acknowledges that she wants to be, in effect, enslaved.

Before the sexual interlude there is a tense, rigged card game, which Margaret is intended to expose, and afterward there is a more elaborate con game in which she is set up as an apparent killer and must pay off a "ghost" for Billy, although that was her conscious intention. It was to be discovered—in the sense of being revealed in her psychological nakedness—by her male double. Perhaps, similarly and even more unconsciously, Mike's true mission was not to execute a classic professional con game and the bagful of money it would bring, but to be discovered by Margaret. If he has, as the viewer learns, studied her from a distance, why has he overlooked her powers of perception, not to mention her obsessive drive to concentrate on *anything* without rest until she understands it? She learns what he has done and murders him, then retreats behind her mask once again, now so impenetrable that (in the last scene) she steals a gold cigarette lighter while having lunch with Dr. Littauer and does not make one of her memorable Freudian slips.

Is the action meant to be as puzzling as the House of Games—literally, a cheap gambling parlor, though, vitally, the place where Margaret first meets Mike and feels the lure of his world—which gives the film its title? The confidence games are initially a puzzle but later seem like cheap, seamy tricks, so unpleasant in detail that even their cleverness does not provoke admiration. The characters' lives, or at least the kind of interaction which here exclusively composes their lives, appear no different. With a small amount of effort, Mamet has articulated his metaphor of human existence as a house of games—not a very utopian thought, to say the least. Is he not, however, also suggesting, more despairingly, that the psyche itself is the home of impenetrable contradiction and emotional fragmentation that no amount of outer poise, psychological insight, and evolved intuition will ever bring to light? In effect, is it not a truly eerie, endlessly unsettling, and cruelly mocking house of games which pervades and undermines all attempts at positive human endeavor? It is the explicit thrust of the film to show that Margaret has such a psyche and that, manipulated by others and beyond her control, it ravages her. Yet, beyond this self-destruction, the viewer might find something appealing in her, a thwarted desire for openness and a poignant need to experience the love which she inadvertently acknowledges that her father denied her. By contrast, there is the negative reflection, Mike, seemingly undefined by emotional needs and using his ruthless perceptions to control events until he is physically destroyed. More subtly but just as provocatively, he, too, is the pitiable prisoner of his unexamined inner self. In a conversation that Margaret overhears and that precipitates the

climax, he speaks with deep distaste of the sexual encounter with her which, it appears, was a necessary part of his scheme. At the heart of his seeming impersonality is a pathological misogyny and, by extension, *misanthropy*, for scorn of woman is a scorn of all that makes man creative and vigorous; his real need is not to exercise his cleverness but simply to hurt. It is a sad spectacle to witness how passive his male partner *is* in the face of his sneering adolescent demcanor—the older, softer partner Joey (Mike Nussbaum), the phoney businessman (J. T. Walsh), and the callow Hahn. If these men are representative of maleness, then who can blame Margaret for shooting Mike, less because he has conned her than because of his contempt for her as a woman.

*House of Games* was widely compared to *film noir*, or considered a modern variant, but despite the sense of fatality, doom, and human destructiveness in the *film noir* cycle, there was always, too, some sense of a failed positive alternative, even within a morally lost protagonist (*Night and the City*, 1950; *Kiss Me Deadly*, 1955) or within a male-female relationship in which at least one partner is treacherous (*Double Indemnity*, 1944; *Criss Cross*, 1949). The landscape of Mamet's film is too spiritually arid to suggest such a positive alternative. Dispassionate and reflective, it suggests more readily, and in an impressive way, the modern European cinema (which may partly explain why it met with a mixed critical response and failed to find a wide audience). Nor is Mamet stylistically following *film noir*, with its extreme compositions and intricate black-and-white lighting. Aided by the clear and simple color hues of cinematographer Juan Ruiz-Anchia, Mamet visualizes a world as stable and calm in appearance as his characters are stable and calm in their external demeanor. Everything in his cinematic treatment exists to provide contrast to the disturbing tensions which float beneath the surface, so behavior is opaque and the characters speak in a flat, declamatory manner. It is an imaginative approach, paying off richly in the film's sustained mood and in the offbeat allure of Crouse (Mamet's wife, who has not before been such a provocative cinematic presence), as well as establishing Mamet as a new American director of innate talent and great promise. Given the bracing freshness of this film within the prevailing conformist tendencies of 1980's Hollywood, the highly unsettling nature of Mamet's vision surely warrants some forbearance.

## Reviews

*Commonweal*. CXIV, December 4, 1987, p. 703.

*Los Angeles Times*. October 15, 1987, VI, p. 1.

*Macleans*. C, October 26, 1987, p. 63.

*The New Republic*. CXCVII, November 16, 1987, p. 22.

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