

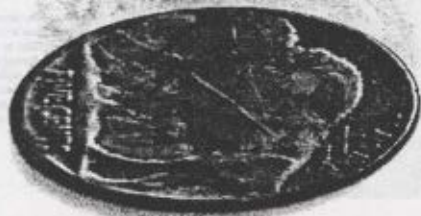
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American
Buffalo

by David Mamet

Illus! Theatre Company

Robert W. Demaree, Jr.
Dean, Division of the Arts





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AMERICAN BUFFALO

by David Mamet



CHICAGO, 1977

The Scene:
Don's Resale Shop. A junkshop.

ACT I: One Friday. Act One takes place in the morning.

ACT II: Act Two starts around 11:00 that night.

CAST

DONNY DUBROW	Rodney Sciba*
BOBBY	Aaron Smithers*
WALTER COLE (TEACHER)	Darin A.J. Dahms
UNDERSTUDIES/THE WINDY CITY PLAYBOYS	
DONNY	Doug Crain
BOBBY	Jonathon Ang
WALTER COLE (TEACHER)	Alper Kul

*Kappa Kappa Kappa Scholarship Recipient

David Mamet (1926-Present)

Author, Playwright, and Director

David Alan Mamet, was born in Chicago on November 30, 1947. He studied at Goddard College in Vermont and at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theater in New York. He has taught at Goddard College, the Yale Drama School, and New York University, and regularly lectures to classes at the Atlantic Theater Company, of which he is a founding member. David Mamet is a leading American playwright whose spare, gritty work reflects the rhythms of Harold Pinter and the tough attitudes of his native Chicago. Noted for his strong male characters and their macho posturing, Mamet's knack for creating low-key yet highly charged verbal confrontations in a male-dominated world has consistently made his work fodder for discussion and deconstruction.

He began his career as an actor and director before achieving acclaim in 1976 for three Off-Off Broadway plays, *The Duck Variations*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, and *American Buffalo*. *The Woods* (1977) and *Hedwig* (1982) were followed by two enormously successful plays, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), a scathing representation of American business practices, and *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), which savagely reveals the sordid underside of the film industry. Describing the attitude of one of its Hollywood anthemes, *Bobby Gould in Hell* (1989) is also an exploration of Mamet's considerable misogyny.

Beginning in the late 1970s, Mamet enjoyed a number of stage successes (see above) before his first produced screenplay *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), adapted from the novel by James M. Cain and directed by Bob Fosse, marked an impressive screen debut. He then turned out three meticulously crafted scripts: *The Verdict* (1982) with Paul Newman as a Boston lawyer on the brink; the less successful screen adaptation of his play *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* expanded and retitled *About Last Night...* (1986), revolving around a couple fleeing the singles scene; and *The Untouchables* (1987), a blockbuster update of the well-remembered TV series. Mamet made his directorial debut with *House of Games* (1987), which he also wrote, a slick, engrossing study of confidence trickery starring his then-wife Lindsay Crouse and Joe Mantegna.

The prolific Mamet also wrote and directed the whimsical comedy *Things Change* (1988) and the uneven but occasionally gripping police thriller *Homicide* (1991), both also starring Mantegna. His Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992), recreating the atmosphere of a gritty Chicago real estate office, was adapted into an acclaimed 1992 film directed by James Foley and starring Al Pacino and Jack Lemmon. Louis Malle used Mamet's translation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* in *Vanya on 42nd Street* (1994), which reunited the *My Dinner With Andre* team, Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn, as members of a company rehearsing the play-within-the-movie. Mamet wrote and directed the screen version of *Oleanna* (1994), based on his stage play of the same title, a two-character confrontation involving charges of sexual harassment between a male professor and one of his female students. The *Cryptogram* (1995) was produced at Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago in 1994. *The Edge* in 1997 and *Wag The Dog* in 1998 are his latest screenplays.

Excerpts from a 1984 Interview with David Mamet, conducted by Matthew C. Roudane.

Roudane: The myth of the American Dream seems central to your artistic vision. In American Buffalo, The Water Engine, Lakeboat, Mr. Happiness, A Life in the Theatre, and Glengarry Glen Ross, a whole cultural as well as a spiritual dimension of the American Dream myth is present. Could you comment on why this myth engages you so much?

Mamet: It interests me because the national culture is founded very much on the idea of strive and succeed. Instead of rising with the masses one should rise from the masses. Your extremity is my opportunity. That's what forms the basis of our economic life, and this is what forms the rest of our lives. That American myth: the idea of something out of nothing. And this also affects the spirit of the individual. It's very divisive. One feels one can only succeed at the cost of someone else. Economic life in America is a lottery. Everyone's got an equal chance, but only one guy is going to get to the top. "The more I have the less you have." So one can only succeed at the cost of the failure of another, which is what a lot of my plays - American Buffalo and Glengarry Glen Ross - are about. That's what Acting President Reagan's whole campaign is about. In Glengarry Glen Ross it's the Cadillac, the steak-knives, or nothing. In this play it's obvious that these fellows are put in fear for their lives and livelihood; for them it's the same thing. They have to succeed at the cost of each other. As Thorstein Veblen in Theory of the Leisure Class says, sharp practice inevitably shades over into fraud. Once someone has no vested interest in behaving in an ethical manner and the only bounds on his behavior are supposedly his innate sense of fair play, then fair play becomes an outdated concept: "But wait a second! Why should I control my sense of fair play when the other person may not control his sense of fair play? So hurray for me and to hell with you."

Roudane: At the close of American Buffalo, I sensed a felt compassion, some sense of understanding between all three men, but especially between Don and Bobby. However, at the close of Glengarry Glen Ross, I sensed little compassion, no resolution, little sense of redemption. Could you talk about these two plays in light of this?

Mamet: Glengarry Glen Ross is structurally a very different play from American Buffalo. Buffalo is a traditionally structured drama based on tragedy, whereas Glengarry, although it has aspects of tragedy in it, is basically a melodrama - or, a drama. Endings in tragedies are resolved. The protagonist undergoes a reversal of the situation, a recognition of the state, and we have a certain amount of cleansing. This is what Don experiences in American Buffalo. But this doesn't happen in Glengarry Glen Ross. So the structure is different, it's not as classical a play as Buffalo, and it's probably not as good a play. But it is the structure of each that affects the characters and the endings.

Roudane: What engages your aesthetic imagination in American Buffalo?

Mamet: I was interested in the idea of honor among thieves; of what is an unassailable moral position and what isn't. What would cause a man to abdicate a moral position he'd espoused? That's what American Buffalo is about. Teach is the antagonist. The play's about Donny Dubrow. His moral position is that one must conduct himself like a man and there are no extenuating circumstances for supporting the betrayal of a friend. That's how the play starts. The rest of the play is about Donny's betrayal of the fellow, Bobby, who he's teaching these things to.

Roudane: I think one of your major contributions to the stage is your "language": clearly you have an ear for the sounds, sense, and rhythms of street language. Could you discuss the role of language in your plays?

Mamet: It's poetic language. It's not an attempt to capture language as much as it is an attempt to create language. We see this in various periods in the evolution of American drama. And when it's good, to the most extent it's called realism. All realism means is that the language strikes a responsive chord. The language in my plays is not realistic but poetic. The words sometimes have a musical quality to them. It's language which is tailor-made for the stage. People don't always talk the way my characters do in real life, although they may use some of the same words. Think of Odetta, Wilder. That stuff is not realistic; it is poetic. Or Philip Barry; you might say some part of his genius was to capture the way a certain class of people spoke. He didn't know how those people spoke, but he was creating a poetic impression, creating that reality. It's not a matter, in Lakeboat or Sexual Perversity

in Chicago or Edmond or my other plays, of these people talk. It is an illusion. It's like a Picasso. "That portrait doesn't look like me." Illusion. Juvenile delinquents acted like Mar! right? It wasn't the other way around. I witness my plays don't mirror w

streets. It's something different. As Oscar Wilde said, ... didn't have those big pea-soup fogs until somebody des...

Roudane: Despite your social exposures of human folly, one could argue that you're a playwright concerned with existentialist themes. That is, you seem fixated on objectifying certain crimes of the heart: the failure to communicate authentically with the self and the other. Possible? What do you think?

Mamet: Concerning ourselves with the individual's soul is certainly the province of drama. I really never understood what existentialism meant. I've tried a whole long time. It has something to do with sleeping with Simone de Beauvoir, but other than that I'm kind of lost. But I suppose my plays are about the individual's inner spirit. I think that's what it's about. The purpose of the theatre, to me, is to examine the paradox between the fact that every one tries to do well but that few, if any, succeed. The theatre concerns metaphysics, our relationship to God; and ethics or our relationships to each other.

Roudane: Whereas many contemporary playwrights create antiheroes, plays you seem to re-work a more classic, Ibsen-esque dramatic form: the well-made play. Could you discuss the dramatic form of your work?

Mamet: I'm sure trying to do the well-made play. It is the hardest thing to do. I like this form because it's the structure imitating human perception. It is not just something made up out of old cloth. This is the way we perceive a play: with a clear beginning, a middle, and an end. So when one wants to best utilize the theatre, one would try to structure a play in a way that is congruent with the way the mind perceives it. Everybody wants to hear a story with a beginning, middle, and end. The only people who don't tell stories that way are playwrights! Finally, that's all the theatre is: story-telling. The theatre's no different from gossip, from dirty jokes, from what Uncle Max did on his fishing trip; it's just telling stories in that particular way in which one tells stories in the theatre. Look at Sexual Perversity in Chicago or The Duck Variations. To me, recognizing the story-telling dimension of playwrighting is a beginning of a mark of maturity. That's why I embrace it. Nobody in the audience wants to hear a joke without the punch line. Nobody wants to hear how feelingly a guy can tell a joke. But I would like to find out what happened to the farmer's daughter. That's what Ibsen did.

Roudane: Has your cinema work helped your playwrighting technique?

Mamet: My work in Hollywood has helped me very much. The good movie has to be written very clearly. The action has to be very clear. You can't talk time out to digress to the highways and the byways of what might happen. You've got to tell the story. And I am trying to do this in my plays. I mean I wrote a lot of plays about feeling slices of interesting life. Nothing wrong with that - I just didn't know any better. I'm talking about my earlier plays, Lakeboat, for example, and others with those episodic glimpses of humanity. Those were fine, but now I am trying to do something different.

Roudane: What's the effect of Hollywood and mass media on the theatre today?

Mamet: It ain't good but it doesn't make any difference. They're flooding the market with trash. The taste and the need for a real theatrical experience, which is an experience in which the audience can come to commune, not so much with the actors but with themselves and what they know to be just increases. Everyone's palate has been dulled to an extraordinary degree by the mass media. But that's just the way it is. Televisions, of course, is an art form. It might be, but nobody's figured out how to make it so. It's an even a question of doing good work on television, which happens once in a while. It's that nobody seems to understand the essential nature of the medium. I certainly don't.

Roudane: Could you elaborate on the actor's relationship with an audience?

Mamet: The young artist has to get better every year or the audience doesn't grow just numerically. It's not even a question of growing spiritually. What happens if the audience doesn't grow is that everything deteriorates. You don't have enough income coming in to support the artists. So you start having to appeal to a larger and larger audience, which means you start getting worse and worse. This is exactly what happened to Broadway. You have to take advantage of people, rather than appeal to a naive constant constituency, you're appealing to people who ain't never going to come back, who don't really have any expectations but know they better get something for their \$45. So we show them a hundred people tap dancing on stage instead of Death of A Salesman.

Roudane: You've said that acting has nothing to do with emotion but with action: "Stick to the action" and "Practical aesthetics." What do you mean?

Mamet: The action is what is the character doing. That's what the actor must do. Acting has absolutely nothing to do with emotion or feeling emotional. It has as little to do with emotion as playing a violin does. You have to study emotion. People don't go to the theatre to hear the emotion; they go to hear the concert. The emotions should take place in the audience. It just doesn't have to be dealt with from the actor's viewpoint.

Roudane: How might you answer the charge that your plays tend always to focus on the negative, cynical side of experience?

Mamet: I've never heard that charge, so I say that's interesting. But it's easy to cheer people up if you lie to them. Very easy. Acting President Reagan says he's not going to raise taxes; of course he's going to raise taxes, he has to raise taxes. Although it's easy to cheer people up by lying to them, in my plays I'm not interested in doing that; I'm not a doctor, I'm a writer.

Roudane: Could you talk about the way in which form and content coalesce to generate the creative process within your plays?

Mamet: My real concern always is with the play as a whole; with writing the play. There's a curious phenomena that happens when you compose a play or movie. The creation very quickly takes on a life of its own. I have no idea why; it's just words on paper. But the art I can compare it to in my experience is carving wood. You start to carve wood and very quickly the thing takes on a life of its own. Part of the wisdom of wood carving is to realize when the wood is telling you where it wants to go. Obviously it's going to be a duck if you start out to make a duck, but the kind of duck it's going to be is largely dictated by the kind of wood. And there is a similar phenomenon in writing drama. You start out with an idea, it becomes something else, and part of the wisdom is learning to listen to the material itself. Much of the material, of course, is in the subconscious.

Roudane: What is your artistic response to what some may call a "Business as Sacrament Ethic" in America?

Mamet: One has to learn something that can't be taken away; you have to learn your craft. As Sherwood Anderson said, a man who has a trade is a man who can tell the rest of the world to go to hell! If you want to become a commodity, which is what most actors and actresses tend to become, then you have to rely on the goodness of others, not only for your bread, but for your happiness. That's not very much fun.

Roudane: As a writer you're confronted with a universe which is largely hostile, even absurd. Flux, struggle, the precariousness of existence itself is the norm. Given this reality, what is your artistic response to such a world?

Mamet: My response is always the same thing; it's never any different. Tolstoy said it's a mistake to think that human nature ever changes. This is the only world that I live in, so a) it would be silly for me to say something else because it isn't something else, and b) I am part of it. So the ability to perceive the problem doesn't necessarily mean that one is not part of that problem. Of course I am part of the problem. It's the same thing as people driving home from the country on Sunday night. Look at all these assholes driving, getting in my way. It's modern life. I am one of those assholes.

Roudane: Do you see yourself, as a writer, as one who shatters illusions or as some kind of truth-teller?

Mamet: No. I am just a storyteller. Keep in mind that playwrights - O'Neill or Albee or myself - know as little about what we do as anyone else. We're just storytellers, that's all. It just so happens that society rewards some of us in extraordinary ways because the society is desperately betting that one of us is going to say something that might offer some comfort. Our job, as writers, is to do our jobs. I was thinking the other day, I have trouble sometimes finishing a lot of plays. But then I always try to remind myself it took Sophocles eighteen years to write Oedipus Rex; that's also because he wasn't trying to write Gigs.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES: David Mamet and the Deceptions of American Myths

Many people in today's society are plagued with feelings of inequity and confusion. Unable to face these feelings, they often choose instead to hide behind a series of lies. These lies soon come to take on the epic proportions of myths and begin to establish themselves in the form of common rituals. When these beautiful myths and rituals have come to be accepted as the truth, they begin to preclude any chance of fulfillment from the lives of their believers. Playwright and essayist David Mamet has devoted his artistic life to the study of these myths which he holds have "a tremendous capacity to destroy our lives."

The myths that establish themselves in the minds of Mamet's characters, often through the influence of the mass media, have turned them into victims of a corrupt society. Mamet has often quoted the French writer Voltaire, saying, "words were invented to hide feelings". Indeed, the language of his characters, often noted for its strong obscenities, is Mamet's most effective device for revealing this victimization, as the characters hide their insecurities behind the prescribed myths of society.

David Mamet has said that his "sex life was ruined by the popular media". In order to illustrate how this could happen, he wrote the play Sexual Perversity in Chicago. The two male characters in the play, Danny and Bernie, think of women purely in sexual terms. Bernie, in particular, has taken on the persona of a swinging womanizer, and teaches his sexist attitudes to his younger friend, Danny. Bernie spends his time frequenting bars, looking for women, and bragging of made-up affairs to Danny. Mamet shows us Bernie at work, trying to pick up a woman named Joan at a bar. Bernie gives a false name and occupation for himself and comes on with a smooth approach. After Joan rejects him, telling him that he is not "sexually attractive", Bernie continues to cling to his fantasy approach, an important part of his act, and begins to insult Joan. Bernie is unable to understand the workings of the female mind. He hides behind his super-stud approach, unable to accept his numerous rejections. His rage at society for ruining his sex life, is instead directed at women, as he formulates his derogatory attitude:

"The main thing, Dan... The main thing about broads... It... is to Treat 'Em Like Shit."

Mamet makes it clear where these damaging stereotypes come from. He pictures Bernie in his apartment, watching T.V. at three o'clock in the morning. Although Bernie is watching a religious ad, supposedly upholding sacred values, the ad speaks of the common goal of "getting laid" and "moistening the old wick".

Danny is surrounded daily by Bernie as the two file together at the office or get drunk at each other's apartments. It is impossible for Danny to avoid falling victim to Bernie's destructive influence. Thus, Mamet shows how easy it is for someone who is lucky enough to enter into a relationship, as Danny does with fellow Chicago-dweller Deborah Solomon, to end up entirely unsatisfied. Danny has little idea how to carry on a successful relationship. As Mamet suggests, he has been brainwashed by myths about male sexuality. He tells Deborah he loves her because it is expected of him; however, it is clear that the two share little love throughout their nine-week relationship. Inevitably the relationship comes to an end, as Danny has nothing more to say to Deborah than, "I love your breasts". After the messy breakup, Danny returns to hanging out with Bernie and dissecting the anatomy of various women. As Mamet later noted, "men will waste their time in pursuit of the utterly useless simply because their peers are all doing it". By the end of the play, Danny has begun further to reflect Bernie's influence, adopting a directly abusive attitude towards all women. The dialogue ends with Danny calling out to an imaginary woman at the beach who has rejected him, "Dead bitch," he yells.

Looking to extend his study of myths to other areas of society, Mamet next turned his social commentary to a study of the fallacies which predominate in the business world. The result, his critically acclaimed play American Buffalo, concerns the exploits of

THE LEARNED LADIES

by Molière,

English translation by Richard Wilbur

OCTOBER 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 19

ANTIGONE

by Jean Anouilh,

Adapted by Lewis Galentiere

DECEMBER 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

THE VELVETEEN RABBIT

Tri Kappa Children's Show

FEBRUARY 1998

AMERICAN BUFFALO

by David Mamet

MARCH 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28

WAITING FOR THE PARADE

by John Murrell

APRIL 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, 26



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