AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
Carey Perloff, Artistic Director  Heather Kitchen, Managing Director

PRESENTS

WORDS on PLAYS
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

American Buffalo

BY DAVID MAMET
DIRECTED BY RICHARD E. T. WHITE
GEARY THEATER
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WORDS ON PLAYS PREPARED BY
ELIZABETH BRODERSEN
PUBLICATIONS EDITOR
JESSICA WERNER
ASSOCIATE PUBLICATIONS EDITOR
HANNAH KNAPP
LITERARY AND PUBLICATIONS INTERN

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CHARACTERS AND SYNOPSIS OF *AMERICAN BUFFALO*

*American Buffalo* was first performed at the Goodman Theatre Stage Two, Chicago, on October 23, 1975.

**CHARACTERS**

Don Dubrow, a man in his late forties, the owner of Don’s Resale Shop

Often called “Donny,” he is a business-minded man with a warm heart who’s not afraid to claim what he believes is rightfully his.

Walter Cole, called “Teach,” a friend and associate of Don

Hot-headed and bent on action, “Teach” will stop at nothing when pursuing a matter of money—or pride.

Bob, Don’s gofer

Drug addiction and a need for Don’s love and respect dominate “Bobby’s” teenage existence.

**PLACE AND TIME**

*American Buffalo* takes place in a junk shop in a run-down neighborhood in Chicago, on a Friday in the 1970s.

**SYNOPSIS**

ACT I. Donny employs Bobby in his junk shop and treats the boy like a sort of surrogate son. Donny has realized that he sold a valuable buffalo-head nickel to a customer for far less than he suspects it’s worth and is conspiring with Bobby to steal it back. Bobby has been watching the customer’s house to see when he comes and goes. Donny decides that, since they are pulling the heist anyway, Bobby might as well take everything of value that he can.

Teach, Donny’s longtime friend and poker buddy, has other plans. Teach, who the night before lost big to some friends in a poker game, wants to cut Bobby out of the action and do the robbery himself. “Loyalty is fine,” says Teach, “but this is business.” He talks Donny out of letting Bobby do the job, but Donny insists on bringing their friend Fletch along to watch their backs.

ACT II. Late that night, Bobby comes in and tries to sell Donny a buffalo-head nickel, but Teach arrives and aggressively questions Bobby’s unwelcome return. Donny and
Teach gives Bobby $15 for the coin to get rid of him, more concerned about the fact that Fletch hasn’t shown up and isn’t answering his phone. Teach tries to persuade Donny to let him do the job without Fletch, claiming that Fletch cheated Donny during the poker game the night before. While Donny is still deciding whether to go ahead with the robbery, Teach announces that it’s time to move, and he takes out a revolver. Donny insists that he does not want a gun present when they do the job.

Bobby returns with news that Fletch is in the hospital with a broken jaw. Donny is now very suspicious of the kid and attacks his story. Donny calls Bobby’s bluff and telephones the hospital—and Fletch isn’t there. Teach hits Bobby over the head, while Donny does nothing to defend his protégé. When mutual friends call to say that Fletch is at a different hospital, indeed with a broken jaw, Donny feels bad for Bobby and tries to convince the bloodied boy to go to the hospital himself. Bobby is still miserable, however, because, as he finally confesses, he lied about seeing the coin collector leave his house that morning. Had they gone through with the robbery, everyone would have been caught. Teach, enraged and disillusioned, trashes the junk shop. Donny manages to calm him down, and Teach leaves to bring his car around. Bobby apologizes to Donny for screwing things up, Donny forgives him, and the three of them finally leave for the hospital.
A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID MAMET

Born in Flossmore, Illinois, on November 30, 1947, David Mamet had a difficult childhood. His parents divorced when he was ten years old. After the divorce, Mamet lived in various Chicago suburbs with his mother and younger sister, Lyn, until the age of 16, when he moved to the Lincoln Park area to live with his father. There he worked as a busboy at Second City and backstage at Hull House Theater, both young, vibrant theater companies, where he gained early experience of the theatrical life. He attended Goddard College in Vermont, where he earned a bachelor of arts degree in English literature, and spent his “junior year abroad” at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City, where he studied acting under the famed Sanford Meisner.

After writing a revue (Camel) as his senior thesis paper, Mamet graduated from Goddard College in 1969 and worked a variety of theater jobs, including acting with a professional theater company at McGill University in Montreal and stage-managing The Fantastiks off Broadway. In the fall of 1970, he returned to Vermont as an acting instructor at Marlboro College, where he directed students in an early version of his first play, Lakeboat. At Marlboro he formed the St. Nicholas Theater Company with students William H. Macy and Steven Schachter, who performed his one-act plays Duck Variations and Sexual Perversity in Chicago. It wasn’t long, however, before Mamet returned to his native Chicago and began acting and peddling his scripts around town. In the summer of 1974, he reformed the St. Nicholas Theater Company with Macy, Schachter, Patricia Cox, and musician Alaric “Rokko” Jans. They kicked off their company’s career with Mamet’s Squirrels.

It wasn’t until Mamet convinced Gregory Mosher to direct the premiere of American Buffalo at the Goodman Theatre Stage Two in October 1975, however, that his playwriting career truly began to take off. Two months later, Sexual Perversity in Chicago and Duck Variations opened off-off Broadway, the former garnering Mamet an OBIE Award for best play (it had also won the Jefferson Award for best new Chicago play in 1974). The St. Nicholas Theater Company moved into a permanent space, opening with the transfer of American Buffalo from the Goodman Theatre.

In January 1976, American Buffalo opened in New York at the St. Clements Theater, earning Mamet another OBIE and Jefferson. Mamet resigned as artistic director of the St. Nicholas, but kept close ties with the company’s actors, employing them in 1977 for the Goodman Stage Two premiere of A Life in the Theatre and long afterwards in many of his plays and films. In February 1977, after earning various grants and fellowships, American
Buffalo opened on Broadway (starring Robert Duvall, Kenneth McMillan, and John Savage) at the Barrymore Theatre, where it ran for 135 performances and won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. Mamet married actress Lindsay Crouse at the end of the year.

During the next few years, Mamet produced a string of plays in Chicago that later transferred to New York, among them The Water Engine (1977), The Woods (1977), and Edmond (1982). Revivals of several of his plays were produced in New York, Chicago, and New Haven as Mamet began to dabble in screenwriting, beginning with The Postman Always Rings Twice in 1981 and The Verdict in 1982, which earned Mamet an Academy Award nomination for best adaptation.

In 1983, Glengarry Glen Ross premiered at the National Theatre in London, winning the Society of West End Theatre Award for best new play, moving on to Broadway in March 1984, and earning Mamet the Pulitzer Prize. That same year, Mamet and Gregory Mosher, the director of the premiere production of American Buffalo and artistic director of the Goodman Theatre, helped found the New Theater Company in Chicago, which included many of the actors with whom they had worked before, among them Macy and Crouse. This company went on to produce Mamet’s adaptation of Chekov’s The Cherry Orchard and his original plays The Shawl and The Spanish Prisoner in 1985. The following year, Mamet and Macy began holding acting workshops at Mamet’s Vermont home, developing their method, which they called “Practical Aesthetics,” and eventually forming the Atlantic Theater Company in New York.

songs written with actress/singer Rebecca Pidgeon, whom he married in 1991, after divorcing Crouse.

Mamet has continued to write plays. The most notable works of the last decade or so are *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), a scathingly funny dissection of Hollywood cupidity; *Oleanna* (1992), produced to general uproar over its controversial presentation of sexual politics (produced at A.C.T. in 1994); *The Cryptogram* (1995), a dysfunctional family tragedy, which earned Mamet another OBIE; *The Old Neighborhood: Three Plays* (1998), a gentler exploration of the idea that we can never go home; and *Boston Marriage*, a comical depiction of lesbian love in turn-of-the-century upper-class America, which opened in London in 2001 and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in June 2002 before moving to Broadway in November.

Mamet’s work in all three mediums—films, essays, and plays—continues to delight audiences with its sharply honed dialogue and down-to-earth characters, ensuring that, at 55, he is far from ending his prolific career.
AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID MAMET

BY MATTHEW C. ROUDANÉ

The following interview with David Mamet took place December 4, 1984. . . . Over coffee on a clear, cold, and dry day, Mamet voiced his opinions, not only about his dramaturgy, but about the contemporary theater as well. He spoke directly, precisely, looking eye-to-eye across the oak table. Mamet’s Chicago accent, at times, made him sound like many of his characters as he spoke about his work, Havana in hand. Although Mamet occasionally appears in newspapers, magazines, and theater reviews, and his involvement with Hollywood as a screenwriter grows, the present conversation stands as one of the first scholarly interviews with the playwright. After our talk, Mamet suddenly gave me complimentary tickets to see his Pulitzer Prize–winning Glengarry Glen Ross, a play which, with American Buffalo, helped further establish Mamet’s reputation as one of America’s most engaging contemporary writers.

THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM SEEMS CENTRAL TO YOUR ARTISTIC VISION. IN AMERICAN BUFFALO, THE WATER ENGINE, LAKEBOAT, A LIFE IN THE THEATRE, AND GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, A WHOLE CULTURAL AS WELL AS SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM MYTH IS PRESENT. COULD YOU COMMENT ON WHY THIS MYTH ENGAGES YOU SO MUCH?

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. . . . 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 The 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.” . . .

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?

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.

WHAT ENGAGES YOUR AESTHETIC IMAGINATION IN AMERICAN BUFFALO?

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. The same is true to a certain extent of Levene in Glengarry Glen Ross. All throughout the play Levene is espousing the professional doctrine of technique. What he's saying is that I am therefore owed certain support because of what I've done, because of who I am. And at the end of the play, Levene betrays himself.

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?

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 Odets, 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 my “interpretation” of how these people talk. It is an illusion. It’s like when Gertrude Stein said to Picasso, “That portrait doesn’t look like me.” Picasso said, “It will.” It’s an illusion. Juvenile delinquents acted like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, right? It wasn’t the other way around. It was life imitating art! So in this sense my plays don’t mirror what’s going on in the streets. It’s something different. As Oscar Wilde said, life imitates art! We didn’t have those big pea-soup fogs until somebody described them.

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

Concerning ourselves with the individual’s soul is certainly the fit 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 theater, to me, is to examine the paradox between the fact that everyone tries to do well but that few, if any, succeed. The theater concerns metaphysics, our relationship to God; and ethics or our relationships to each other.

Whereas many contemporary playwrights create antimimetic plays, you seem to rework a more classic, Ibsenesque dramatic form: the well-made play. Could you discuss the dramatic form of your work?

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 theater, 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 that theater is: storytelling. The theater’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 theater. Look at Sexual Perversity in Chicago or The Duck Variations. To me, recognizing the storytelling dimension of playwriting 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 we would like to find out what happened to the farmer’s daughter. That’s what Ibsen did.

HAS YOUR CINEMA WORK—THE SCREENPLAYS FOR THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE AND THE VERDICT—HELPED YOUR PLAYWRITING TECHNIQUE?
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 take 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.

WHAT’S THE EFFECT OF HOLLYWOOD AND MASS MEDIA ON THE THEATER TODAY?
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 true, just increases. Everyone’s palate has been dulled to an extraordinary degree by the mass media. But that’s just the way it is. Television, of course, isn’t an art form. It might be, but nobody’s figured out how to make it so. It’s not 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 media. I certainly don’t.

COULD YOU ELABORATE ON THE ACTOR’S RELATIONSHIP WITH AN AUDIENCE?
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 native 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 onstage instead of Death of a Salesman.

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?
The action is what the character is 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 theater to hear the emotion; they go to hear the concerto. The emotions should take place in the audience. It just doesn’t have to be dealt with from the actor’s viewpoint.

HOW MIGHT YOU ANSWER THE CHARGE THAT YOUR PLAYS TEND ALWAYS TO FOCUS ON THE NEGATIVE, CYNICAL SIDE OF EXPERIENCE?
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.

COULD YOU TALK ABOUT THE WAY IN WHICH FORM AND CONTENT COALESCE TO GENERATE THE CREATIVE PROCESS WITHIN YOUR PLAYS?
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.
WHAT IS YOUR ARTISTIC RESPONSE TO WHAT SOME MAY CALL A “BUSINESS AS SACRAMENT ETHIC” IN AMERICA?

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.

AS A WRITER YOU’RE CONFRONTED WITH A UNIVERSE WHICH IS LARGELY HOSTILE, EVEN ABSURD. FLUX, STRUGGLE, THE PRECAIRIOUSNESS OF EXISTENCE ITSELF IS THE NORM. GIVEN THIS REALITY, WHAT IS YOUR ARTISTIC RESPONSE TO SUCH A WORLD?

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.

DO YOU SEE YOURSELF, AS A WRITER, AS ONE WHO SHATTERS ILLUSIONS OR AS SOME KIND OF TRUTH-TELLER?

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 18 years to write *Oedipus Rex*; that’s also because he wasn’t trying to write *Gigi*.
WORD JAZZ
Richard E. T. White Directs David Mamet’s American Buffalo for A.C.T.

BY JESSICA WERNER

When David Mamet’s American Buffalo opened on Broadway in 1977, the then 29-year-old playwright—who had written several one-act plays (Lakeboat, Duck Variations, and Sexual Perversity in Chicago) that had each premiered on a shoestring scale in small theaters in his native Chicago—was just beginning to make the New York theater world stand up and take notice. His sharp, blisteringly realistic dialogue revealed a writer who had found his own unmistakable way with language, a spare and intense dramatic voice honed to express the unexpectedly eloquent longings and moral wavering of the small-time hustler, con artist, and philosophizing everyman struggling to grab a bigger piece of the American pie. In American Buffalo, Mamet crafted a simple story about three crooks in a Chicago junk shop scheming to rip off a rare-coin (“buffalo nickel”) collection, drawing the audience deep inside the lives and minds of society’s castaways, whose rhythmic, streamlined speech seems at the same time inarticulate and expressive, mundane and poetic.

Mamet’s signature mix of jargon, machismo, and broken emotion would soon solidify his reputation as one of the finest linguistic craftsmen in American drama. American Buffalo earned Mamet the 1977 Drama Critics’ Circle Award for the best American play and was hailed as the most exciting Broadway debut of a new American playwright since Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? “Mamet is someone to listen to,” raved Newsweek critic Jack Kroll. “He’s that rare bird, an American playwright who’s a language playwright . . . the first playwright to create a formal and moral shape out of the undeleted expletives of our foul-mouthed time.”

Marking the 25th anniversary of American Buffalo’s Broadway premiere, A.C.T. brings Mamet’s career-making play to the Geary Theater in a production helmed by nationally renowned director Richard E. T. White, who makes his much-anticipated return to the Bay Area, where he has strong professional roots. Acclaimed for the popular productions he has staged at A.C.T. (The Marriage of Figaro, Taking Steps) and other local theaters, White served as resident director at Berkeley Repertory Theatre and artistic director of San Francisco’s Eureka Theatre, and is currently chair of the theater department at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. White spoke with us as he prepared to return to San Francisco to direct a stellar cast—A.C.T. Associate Artist Marco Barricelli as the ex-con Walter “Teach” Cole; another A.C.T. favorite, Chicago native Matt DeCaro (A Streetcar Named Desire, Dark Rapture), as junk store proprietor Donny Dubrow; and recent A.C.T. graduate Damon Seawell as Bobby, Donny’s struggling protégé—in a timely revival of Mamet’s “authentic American masterpiece.”
WHAT INTERESTS YOU PARTICULARLY ABOUT *AMERICAN BUFFALO*?

First of all, it is just a wonderful play, and this is a great opportunity to work with three actors on extremely juicy parts that are very well written. I also think this play is very timely right now. The underclass is increasing again in America, as the disparity widens between the upper class and those on the losing end of the Republican agenda. There was a really interesting long article by Paul Krugman in the *New York Times Magazine* recently [about the disappearance of the middle class in the United States and the widening disparity between the upper and under classes] and, you know, that is the world of the play. As the middle class dwindles, we are faced with the greatest separation between rich and poor in this country since the Great Depression. One thing that is so perfect about doing this play in the Geary is that that class distinction is right there on the street. You are two blocks away from the Tenderloin. The pawnshops of Sixth Street are only a few blocks away. *American Buffalo* is a shout from the underclass, and yet it is a play every bit as powerful as any play about kings or monarchs. It is poetic and eloquent in its own wonderful David Mamet way. Also, personally, I lived in Chicago for five years, and they were very happy years, so this will be a delightful virtual visit for me, since the play is so steeped in the rhythms and energy of that particular city. Finally, one of the last plays I directed in the Bay Area was *Speed-the-Plow* [at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 1992], which is another three-character Mamet play. And I worked on it with [scenic designer] Kent Dorsey and [costume designer] Christine Dougherty, both of whom are designing A.C.T.’s *American Buffalo*, so this is a kind of a homecoming for all three of us.

HAVE YOU FOUND THERE ARE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES TO DIRECTING MAMET’S WORK? ACTORS COMMENT ON HOW RIGOROUS THE LANGUAGE IS, AND HIS RHYTHMS.

It is very much about the rhythms of the language. He writes with incredible specificity and, unlike someone like Sam Shepard who writes in kind of long, looping lines redolent with imagery, Mamet’s writing is jagged and percussive. It’s syncopated in a whole different way, so the challenge is finding that particular word jazz, without it seeming clichéd.

IS THAT THE RISK WITH HIS WORK NOW, WITH SO-CALLED “MAMET SPEAK”? PEOPLE HEAR HIS CADENCES AND ALL THE SWEARING AND THINK, OH, IT’S THAT, THAT MAMET THING?

Absolutely. We’re in a post–David Ives world where Mamet has been so parodied, and to some degree has been so imitated by writers, that you now have to come back to it and find what’s fresh about it. That’s what was great about auditions for this production. They
showed us again and again how eminently original and speakable this language is and how, in fact, it has a kind of integrity that, if you just get to it, transcends itself. It is so much about the subtext and the mystery and the currents going on beneath the surface, and what is not said is so powerful in the play. I don't expect there will be any trouble, if we do our jobs well, in making it seem like we're improv[is]ing, rather than "doing Mamet," because his ear for language is so uncanny.

You know what? I have great faith in this play because I do believe that if we can locate the love in the play, then anyone can watch it and [the rough language] will be tolerable. If we can make all three characters as complex as the writing allows them to be, I think anybody will see themselves in these people. Yeah, there will be some people who will be put off by all the "fuck, fuck, fuckity, fuck, fuck, fuck." But, I think audiences in general are much more used to that now. Our view of language has changed, and the language of Mamet, like the language of Alan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and Charles Bukowski a generation prior to him, has come much more into the mainstream. I don't think it has the same ability to shock, which in a way is really too bad because it is in there in part to shock. It's in there to say, Hey, listen up, this is the way these people talk. And this is how wrought up they are in these circumstances. This is how high the stakes are for them, that they would use this kind of language.

**Have you worked with any of the actors before? With Marco, who did Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross* at A.C.T. a couple of years ago?**

I have never worked with Marco before, and I am delighted to have the opportunity, especially on something like this, which is very different from the classical leading roles I've generally seen him in. Whereas his character in *Glengarry* was very middle class, I think the challenge and the fun of *American Buffalo* is going to be finding the contradictory elements of the character, creating a Teach who is utterly working class, utterly ex-con, yet with his own sort of bizarre intellectual pretensions and nobility. You know, there is a reason they call him “Teach.” He thinks he is an intellectual. He is a self-identified “expert in home invasion,” he is a philosopher. I think he's one of those guys who spent a lot of time in the prison library. Years ago I worked on a play called *In the Belly of the Beast*, which was a stage version of a memoir by Jack Henry Abbott, a guy who is celebrated because he wrote a series of letters from prison to Norman Mailer, which were collected in a book. Abbott had an extraordinary intellect and a great talent for wordsmithing, but his life was constrained by the fact that he was a career criminal and someone who was essentially raised by the prison system in America. So he was a fascinating contradiction. I don't think Teach is anywhere near his intellectual level, but I think he
dreams he is. And so he is not just a thug. He is a dreamer, like all the characters in the play are. I think it is important in a play like this to locate yourself in the dreams of the characters and let the reality take care of itself.

**DO YOU SEE TEACH AND DONNY’S DREAMS AS FAIRLY SIMILAR, AS BOTH VERSIONS OF THE BASIC AMERICAN DREAM?**

I think they both want to get ahead and I think money is very important, and so they do reflect the dark side of the American Dream, what happens to the American Dream when it finally filters down to the underclass. But, the difference is that fundamentally Teach is out for himself. He wants respect, while Donny’s dreams are about relationships. I think Donny wants to be loved, and Teach sees that as weakness. They both see what the other man holds most dear as weakness, and that’s the conflict, as well as something that binds them together. The emotional energy of the play is in the quality of the unstated relationships among those three men. Are they brother–brother relationships? Or father–son relationships? There’s a kind of familial subtext that is never really stated in the play, but that is what it’s fundamentally all about. Mamet’s plays are always on some level about what it means to be a man in this world, about manhood and honor. He asks, What is possible in terms of honor and love in a world that is so constrained?

**THAT SEEMS LIKE THE PLAY’S MOST BITING COMMENTARY, THAT LOVE WOULD HAVE TO BE SEEN AS A WEAKNESS IN A CAPITALISTIC SOCIETY, IF ONE CAN ONLY SUCCEED AND REALLY GET AHEAD AT THE EXPENSE OF ANOTHER PERSON.**

One irony is that, unlike in *Glengarry*, where the characters onstage as well as the audience are basically middle class, I don’t think you’re going to get very many people like Teach and Donny coming to the theater to see *American Buffalo*, so our job is to use this play as a metaphor. We need to create a metaphor for all human relationships. It is not a docudrama about the state of the American underclass. It is about family and love and respect and dreams. Those are things that everybody can see in themselves through these characters. Then they become metaphors. Then they are not possible to hold at a distance and say, Well, it is only poor people who behave this way.

**MAMET’S POINT SEEMS TO BE HOW PERVERSIVE THIS KIND OF BETRAYAL AND UNDERHANDEDNESS IS AT EVERY LEVEL OF THE FOOD CHAIN, FROM THE UPPER ECHELONS OF CORPORATE SCANDAL TO THE UNDERWORLD OF PETTY THIEVES.**
Yes, and part of the emotional substructure of this play is what gets constrained by money. Money can alter our willingness to believe the best of each other. Lack of money makes everybody crazy. But then, having lots of money makes everybody crazy too.

**SO IT'S A LOSE-LOSE?**

Yeah. [Laugh] Bring back the middle class.

**DO YOU SEE THIS PLAY AS A COMEDY?**

Yes, I think it’s tremendously funny, and it’s funny in unexpected ways. I think one thing that’s wonderful about Mamet is that he writes with a kind of gusto that permits a lot of laughter without actually giving you jokes. There is an aspect to Mamet that is just like rock and roll. There is so much energy in his language that once you find the beat it really carries you along.

**I THINK PEOPLE ARE PARTICULARLY FASCINATED WITH THIS PLAY BECAUSE IT’S THE FIRST ONE THAT REALLY PUT MAMET ON THE MAP.**

And it has not gone stale. There is something about really great plays that, when you return to them they still have that kind of energy of discovery about them, that sense that someone is discovering a voice as they write and that the characters are full of an original energy and richness. That is one of the things that makes me feel like it really is an authentic American masterpiece. It won’t ever get dated. Sadly enough, I think people will always relate to each other in the same way. People will still use each other and play on each other’s friendship and want things from each other that we can never deliver. And we will always want the people we love to be different, which is at the heart of this play. Buffalo’s characters all want each other to be something that they are not truly capable of being, and that is very human. Don wants Bobby not to be a junkie, but Bobby is a junkie right now in his life. We are that way with the people we love the most, and if we don’t have the patience to learn to accept those we love for who they truly are, then the results can be devastating. If we don’t have the patience to let our life be what it is, then this kind of rage comes out. ■
A LOT MORE THAN VERNACULAR
Language and Action in American Buffalo

BY HANNAH KNAPP

MAMET: Nobody ever says exactly what they mean. People only speak to bring about a result.

KOCH: Onstage and off, no one ever says what they mean?

MAMET: No. They say what they understand to be best calculated to get what they want, which is a very different thing. I think it’s a fairly broad statement . . . but I think that, coincidentally, it may be true. That’s why people speak. Who did you ever know who spoke to reveal themselves? Anybody who ever does is lying to you. If people said what they mean, we wouldn’t have dreams, we wouldn’t have psychoanalysis, we wouldn’t have anger or sadness or repression. We mean what we mean, but we say what we think is calculated to get what we want.

“The Interview: David Mamet,” by John Koch
(The Boston Globe, November 9, 1997)

Hear the opening lines of any David Mamet play and immediately you find yourself in a world in which the language is astonishingly simple—and yet utterly bewildering. American Buffalo begins:

DON: So?

Pause.

So what, Bob?

Pause.

BOB: I’m sorry, Donny.

Pause.

DON: All right.

BOB: I’m sorry, Donny.

Pause.

DON: Yeah.

You might overhear this conversation as you walk down the street, and it would make no more sense than it does as the opening lines of one of the most famous plays of the American stage. And yet, with a few simple words and latent pauses, the father–son-
like relationship between Donny and Bobby is set up from the very first moments—as is the function language will serve throughout the play.

Just what is that function? We read the dialogue, or listen to it, and there seems to be nothing to hold on to. It only begins to make sense about five minutes into the scene—and even then much of the time the characters are talking about things that are never explained (to us) and that seem impossibly obscure. It’s as if we’re meant to be lost, we’re meant to let the language wash over us, and yet somehow every single word—every single “fuck”—is perfectly placed. Nothing is extraneous. We can’t tune out. We’re held in bewilderment, baffled by dialogue that sounds familiar and yet foreign at the same time, base and yet lyrical. We have no idea what we’re supposed to think.

And yet, by writing in an American, specifically Chicagoan, and altogether male vernacular, Mamet zeroes in on a very particular milieu. He creates a very specific group of iconic characters, representatives of an entire community, an entire class, an entire section of the city. And by making that group so specific, Mamet works the stuff of symbolism. If he were vague about who these people are, the power of the metaphor would be lost. The specificity of his choices makes the ideas at stake—for example, the assertion that business is business, regardless of class—come through without didacticism, but with gut-punching intensity.

At the same time, the discussions that take place among the characters go deeper than they at first appear to. In Act II, Donny and Teach aren’t just arguing about the feasibility of the robbery. They’re also arguing about the nature of language itself, which turns out to be a fundamental question of the play: Does language simply refer to action—as we’re tempted to think as we sit and listen to the characters do nothing but talk—or is language itself action?

In the first scene of American Buffalo, Bobby says that he saw the coin collector leave his house. Because of this statement, Donny and Teach embark on a plot to rob the collector’s house, which leads Donny to betray Bobby, who then gets the coin back, intending to give it to Donny; Bobby later admits that he never saw the man leave at all, which prompts Teach’s rage and his attack on Bobby. Bobby’s simple lie gives us an hour and a half of argument, discussion, destroyed friendship, and violence. In that sense, isn’t language action?

By making Bobby’s lie so central, Mamet seems to be saying that language is far more powerful than we realize. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter what the “facts” may or may not be; what matters, as Donny says, is “what it is best for us to believe.” In a world as uncertain and full of trickery as the one inhabited by Buffalo's characters—and, by extension, the world in which we all live—the search for “facts” leads nowhere. Only the acceptance of whatever presents itself as “fact” is what matters—the acceptance of language as action.

The power of language to change the world is proved as we watch this play, seeing every lie, every half-truth, and every truth twisted so far that we, like the characters, are no longer
able to tell which is which. All we know, as they come to know, is what happens because of those words: the action their language unleashes or pulls up short.

Donny, Teach, and Bobby all use language to manipulate their relationships with each other, to try to get what they want, to the extent that the words they use have meaning only in the context of their relationships with each other. That’s why we’re so lost in the first minutes of the play: without an intimate understanding of the underlying needs and desires of these characters, we can’t understand what they’re saying. As we gradually stop trying to figure out “what’s going on” and begin to understand what each of the characters is fighting for, a play that appears to be about the attempt to pull off a coin heist turns out to be a play about how humans communicate with each other.

For example, Teach and Donny have several run-ins over Fletch’s proposed participation in the job. Donny’s concern with getting the job done clashes with Teach’s wounded pride over losing to Fletch in a poker game the night before. In the first act, we witness the following exchange:

DON: I’m going to have Fletch come with us.
TEACH: Fletch.
DON: Yes.
TEACH: You’re having him come with us.
DON: Yes.
TEACH: Now you’re kidding me.
DON: No.
TEACH: No? Then why do you say this?
DON: With Fletch.
TEACH: Yes.
DON: I want some depth.
TEACH: You want some depth on the team.
DON: Yes, I do.
TEACH: So you bring in Fletch.
DON: Yes.
TEACH: ’Cause I don’t play your games with you.
DON: We just might need him.
TEACH: We won’t.
DON: We might, Teach.
TEACH: We don’t need him, Don. We do not need this guy.

Technically speaking, nothing is “happening” during this back-and-forth. But in fact, as an audience we’re discovering Donny and Teach’s respective priorities, and how they go
about getting what they want. Similarly, when Bobby tries to get money from Donny in the first act of the play, the confrontation unfolds as follows:

BOB: I need fifty, Donny.
DON: Well, I’m giving you forty.
BOB: You said you were giving me twenty.
DON: No, Bob, I did not. I said I was giving you forty, of which you were going to owe me twenty.

Pause.

And you go keep twenty.

BOB: I got to give back twenty.
DON: That’s the deal.
BOB: When?
DON: Soon. When you got it.

Pause.

BOB: If I don’t get it soon?
DON: Well, what do you call “soon”?
BOB: I don’t know.
DON: Could you get it in a . . . day, or a couple of days or so?
BOB: Maybe. I don’t think so. Could you let me have fifty?
DON: And you’ll give me back thirty?
BOB: I could just give back the twenty.
DON: That’s not the deal.
BOB: We could make it the deal.

Pause.

DON: We could make it the deal. Huh?
DON: Bob, lookit. Here it is: I give you fifty, next week you pay me back twenty-five.

Bobby maneuvers Donny into giving him the money he wants, against Donny’s instincts—but it isn’t just that Bobby is persistent. Donny reveals his soft spot for the boy, and his desire to help him, as he gives in to Bobby’s request.

We can thus watch *American Buffalo* as a study of character expressed through language. Mamet’s language—concise, rhythmical, and utterly true-to-life—not only holds his play together, but transforms what might be a simple story of a crime that never happens into a lyrical exploration of the power of the spoken word. ■
HEARING THE NOTES THAT AREN’T PLAYED
BY DAVID MAMET

My piano lessons began 50 years ago, in September 1951. My teacher was an Austrian
martinet—Isadore Buchalter. He told my family that he had hopes for me, that I
was somewhat musical, but that I couldn’t learn to read.

I realized, 40-plus years later, that I wasn’t cursed with indolence, but that I couldn’t see
the notes. I was hopelessly myopic. I got my first eyeglasses when I was eight, but by then
I had quit the piano.

Around 1963 my lessons continued when I had the great fortune to meet Louise Gould.
She sat me down and had me playing triads, and triads with the octave, both hands, up and
down the keyboard. She used this simple exercise to show me the cycle of fifths, and its
additions, subtractions, alterations, inversions, which are the foundations of music theory.
I realized that my toddler piano lessons had taught me to play without reading, to fake it,
to play by ear.

I played four hands one afternoon with Randy Newman. I apologized for rushing. I said
I was such a musical doofus that I almost felt as if I had to “count.” He stopped and looked
at me a bit in incomprehension and said, “Everyone counts.” He also taught me to hear the
passing tone, to listen for it, as it was driving the music.

Joel Silver produced several of my wife’s records, and I got a priceless tip from him:
“Leave out the third—we hear it anyway.”

The passing tone and the excised third opened up a new world to me. I began to get
(timorously) bold, to eschew the first inversion and the keys of F and C major.

The Stoics cautioned us to keep our philosophical precepts few and simple, as we might
have to refer to them at a moment’s notice. These tips became my philosophical principles,
and they forced me to slow down and think.

I remember Bensinger’s pool hall in Chicago, in the ’60s, and the hustler-instructor who
taught: If you can see more, don’t shoot. Same idea.

People say the great genius of Nat Cole was his ability to accompany himself on the
piano, that he understood that most delicate and intricate duet and its demand for
spaciousness, for elegance. “We hear it anyway.”

This is the genius of Bach, and the overwhelming demand of dramaturgy—this
understanding, or its lack, divides those who can write from those who can really write:
how much can one remove, and still have the composition be intelligible?
Chekhov removed the plot. Pinter, elaborating, removed the history, the narration; Beckett, the characterization. We hear it anyway.

It is in our nature to elaborate, estimate, predict—to run before the event. This is the meaning of consciousness; anything else is instinct. Bach allows us to run before, and his resolutions, as per Aristotle, are as inevitable (as they must be, given the strictures of Western compositional form) and surprising as his elaborate genius. We are thus delighted and instructed, as per Freud, in a nonverbal way, as to the varieties of perception, possibility, completion—we are made better. Our consciousness, listening to Bach, has been rewarded, refreshed, chastised, soothed—in Bach and Sophocles both, the burden of consciousness has momentarily been laid down.

Both legitimate modern drama (Pirandello, Ionesco) and the trash of performance art build on the revelation that omission is a form of creation—that we hear the third anyway—that the audience will supply the plot.

But our experience of such can be, at best, a smug joy.

We listen to some concert pianist improvise waterfall arpeggios for an hour, or view puerile performances and, though we may leave the theater smiling, we are left poorer, for we celebrated not the divine but the ability of the uninspired to ape the divine. This is idolatry.

We rejoice both in the familiar and the surprising. Music, drama, circus, the creation of all the performing arts proceeds from researched or intuited understanding of the nature of human perception, thesis-antithesis-synthesis: I can fly from one trapeze to another. But can I do a triple somersault? Yes. No. Yes.

Much Modern art is either a slavish reiteration of the form (musical comedy) or its slavish rejection (action painting). Yes, it is true that life would be better if we were all a little kinder, and it is true that paint spattered in the air will fall to the ground. Both are true, but who would have suspected that they were notable?

The commandments are the same: leave out the third, concentrate on the missing tone. Yes, we know that in the key of G a C chord would like to resolve to G. How does it get there? The ardor to address this question accounts for the genius of Beckett and also of Vernon Duke, Prokofiev, Kurt Weill. The fascinating question of Art: What is between A and B?

**MAMET ON ACTING**

The purpose of any technique, the purpose of any skill which is learned through cognition and repetition in the arts, or in sports for that matter, is to break down the barriers between the conscious and the unconscious mind so that you don't have to think about what you're doing. You can only be free if your unconscious is unfettered. There are a lot of people who don't have technique but whose unconscious is unfettered: children, psychotics, some artists. But for most of us, we need a technique to enable us to get out of our own way.

“It’s Never Easy to Go Back,”
an interview with David Mamet by Arthur Holmberg

Actors are many times afraid of feeling foolish. We should teach each other to feel power rather than fear when faced with the necessity of choice, to seek out and enjoy, to feel the life-giving pleasure of the power of artistic choice.

“Realism,” *Writing in Restaurants* (1986)

The organic actor must have generosity and courage—two attributes which our current national hypochondria render in low supply and even lower esteem. He must have the courage to say to his fellow actors onstage (and so to the audience): “I am not concerned with influencing or manipulating you, I am not concerned with nicety. I am here on a mission and I demand you give me what I want.”

This actor brings to the stage desire rather than completion, will rather than emotion. His performance will be compared not to art, but to life; and when we leave the theater after his performance we will speak of our life rather than his technique. And the difference between this organic actor and the self-concerned performer is the difference between a wood fire and a fluorescent light.

“Acting,” *Writing in Restaurants*

That most of today’s acting is false and mechanical is no coincidence—it is a sign of our society’s demanding that its priests repeat the catechism essential for our tenuous mental health: that nothing is happening, that nothing very bad or very good can befall us, that we are safe. . . . When, once again, actors are cherished and rewarded who bring to the stage or the screen generosity, desire, organic life, actions performed freely—without desire for reward or fear of either
censure or misunderstanding—that will be one of the first signs that the tide of our introverted, unhappy time has turned and that we are once again eager and prepared to look at ourselves.

“Acting,” Writing in Restaurants

The art of the theater is action. It is the study of commitment. The word is an act. To say the word in such a way as to make it heard and understood by all in the theater is commitment—it is the highest art to see a human being out on a stage speaking to a thousand of his or her peers saying, “These words which I am speaking are the truth—they are not an approximation of any kind. They are the God's truth, and I support them with my life,” which is what the actor does onstage.

Without this commitment, acting becomes prostitution and writing becomes advertising.

“Against Amplification,” Writing in Restaurants

Those of you who are called to strive to bring a new theater, the theater of your generation, to the stage, are set down for a very exciting life. . . .

If you are going to work in the true theater, that job is a great job in this time of final decay; that job is to bring your fellows, through the medium of your understanding and skill, the possibility of communion with what is essential in us all: that we are born to die, that we strive and fail, that we live in ignorance of why we were placed here, and that in the midst of this we need to love and be loved, but we are afraid. . . .

Your attempts to answer the question, “What must I do?” may lead you to embrace and study both philosophy and technique; to learn to meditate and to learn to act, so that your personality and your work become one, and you fulfill our true purpose, your highest purpose, as a member of the theater. And that purpose is this and has always been this: to represent culture's need to address the question, How can I live in a world in which I am doomed to die?

“Decay: Some Thoughts for Actors,” Writing in Restaurants

Acting is not a genteel profession. Actors used to be buried at a crossroads with a stake through the heart. Those people's performances so troubled the onlookers that they feared their ghosts. An awesome compliment.

Those players moved the audience not such that they were admitted to a graduate school, or received a complimentary review, but such that the audience feared for their soul. Now that seems to me something to aim for.
It is the writer’s job to make the play interesting. It is the actor’s job to make the performance truthful.

When the performance is made truthful, the work of the writer is made something more than words on the page, not by the inventiveness, but by the courage of the actor. Yes, it might seem like a good, and might seem an attractive idea to embellish—it’s your job to resist that attractive idea; for you cannot both “guide” the performance, and keep your attention and will on accomplishing your objective onstage. The impulse to “help it along,” to add a bit of “emotion” or “behavior” is a good signpost—it means you are being offered—in resisting it—the possibility of greatness. Invent nothing. Deny nothing. Develop that hard habit.

The greatest performances are seldom noticed. Why? Because they do not draw attention to themselves, and do not seek to—like any real heroism, they are simple and unassuming, and seem to be a natural and inevitable outgrowth of the actor. They so fuse with the actor that we accept them as other-than-art.

Here is what I have learned in a lifetime of playwriting: It doesn’t matter how you say the lines. What matters is what you mean. What comes from the heart goes to the heart. The rest is Funny Voices.

The actor does not need to “become” the character. The phrase, in fact, has no meaning. There is no character. There are only lines upon a page. They are lines of dialogue meant to be said by the actor. When he or she says them simply, in an attempt to achieve an object more or less like that suggested by the author, the audience sees an illusion of a character upon the stage. To create this illusion the actor has to undergo nothing whatever. He or she is as free of the necessity of “feeling” as the magician is free of the necessity of actually summoning supernatural powers. The magician creates an illusion in the mind of the audience. So does the actor.

[The actor’s] challenge is not to recapitulate, to pretend to the difficulties of the written character; it is to open the mouth, stand straight, and say the words bravely—adding nothing, denying nothing, and without the intent to manipulate anyone: himself, his fellows, the audience.

To learn to do that is to learn to act.

From True & False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor, by David Mamet (Pantheon Books, 1997).
DIRECTORS, ACTORS, AND CRITICS ON MAMET AND AMERICAN BUFFALO

We asked [Mamet] to direct a play [for the Goodman Theatre Stage Two], the name of which I have mercifully forgotten, and after a few days he came back . . . and said, “Look this is a really terrible play. Why don’t you do one of my plays?” . . . Then in the spring of 1975 he brought in a play called American Buffalo; he just came into my office and said, “Do this play. Just do this play.” Mind you, we still barely knew each other at that point . . . Anyway, it didn’t take long to realize that this was a great, important play.

Gregory Mosher, director of the first production of American Buffalo, in the program for the Goodman Theatre’s 1982 production of Lakeboat

I went to see him one day and he says, “I just wrote this,” and pulls out this huge script: “It’s called American Buffalo.” He’d just disappeared a couple of weeks and hammered this thing out. So I read it and thought, “My God, what a play!” . . . As much as people hated it, people loved it. They really were divided between: “Big deal! Anyone can use lots of profanity,” and the other people who would say: “What are you talking about? This is the most beautiful writing that’s ever come down the pipe!”


I shiver in the theater, listening to this dialogue—the quick alternation between the elevated and the obscene, the mixed-up syntax, the use of cadence as action, the characterization by language—and how Mamet’s extraordinary ear gives us lines at once idiosyncratic and universal. . . . Mamet’s extraordinary promise resides not so much in his insights into money–violence or male–female relationships, or in the tragic and comic manipulations of his understanding, as in the exhilarating perfection of the language with which he expresses it. It’s a rarity in theater to find the insights, the characterizations, the action, so deeply embedded in the dialogue itself, in its vocabulary, its idioms, its rhythms. It’s a terrible burden to place upon a writer, but if Mamet can continue the astonishing advance in achievement from Sexual Perversity (written in 1974) to American Buffalo (written in 1975), I feel confident his next leap forward will give us nothing less than an American masterpiece.

Ross Wetzston, Plays and Players (1977)
Mamet is someone to listen to. He's that rare bird, an American playwright who's a language playwright. In the country of incessant obligatos accompanying all activity—music in offices and elevators, tapes in cars, radios in restaurants—Mamet has heard the ultimate Muzak, the dissonant din of people yammering at one another and not connecting....[L]anguage is a shifty business. Pinter knows this too, but Mamet's ear is tuned to an American frequency, transmitting the calls for help, at once funny and frightening, which much of our speech barely disguises behind its bravado.

Jack Kroll, Newsweek (1977)

I felt I was in the presence of an original voice in the American theater, with a unique vision, intelligence, an extraordinary ear for translating real behavior, who could capture in dialogue what is not being said, and who could do that with a class of people that is never represented in the American theater. I couldn’t believe that he was 28, and not from a lower-class background.


On first reading American Buffalo I recognized an absolutely distinct new voice. . . . In terms of the writing of the dialogue, the half lines, the demotic speech, one was in the presence of an absolutely unique theater voice. I had a suspicion also that it had legs. . . . It wasn't about growing up in Vermont or trouble with professors at university or rites of passage, it was about people who were not the writer. . . . I think the intellectual side of David's talent, which is incredibly subtle in the major plays, is the side that has embraced the great talents that came before him like O'Neill, Miller, Tennessee Williams . . . and these influences were a kind of classical training already finished by the time he was speaking with his own voice.


A lot of the Method, and the revised American version of the Method, is to do with discovering subtext, while we in American Buffalo found very little. . . . After three or four weeks of rehearsal we realized it wasn’t written like that, people said what they meant and there was precious little subtext to it. . . . There are things floating underneath, obviously, but they don’t operate in the same way that they do in a Pinter play of a similar type. . . .
So after you’ve rehearsed it for three or four weeks, trying to play a subtext that isn’t there, you’re really not ready to go on in a week’s time. You’ve realized too late that you have to play in the moment and say exactly what you mean to the person you’re talking to. And that entails playing it at about ten times the speed that you would an equivalent play by Trevor Griffiths or Pinter or any good writer.


Without ever once mentioning politics, Mamet has in fact written a deeply political play in which business and crime are equated and in which profit becomes an alibi for theft. What is especially good about the play, however, is that it makes its points about society through the way people actually behave. The violence at the end is shocking and yet horribly logical.

Michael Billington, reviewing the London production, in *The Guardian* (1978)

It seems that the age of American jazz plays, that mountain of slapdash drug culture improvisation, is on its way out, and that writers who sweat over construction, and treat language with respect, are again finding favor. If so, that is good news; and you would have to be tone deaf to miss the music, irony, and virtuosity with which Mr. Mamet bends the Chicago idiom to his purposes in this piece. Why, then, did I find it an experience of such suffocating tedium? . . . Given Mr. Mamet’s linguistic prowess, it ought to be extremely funny; and it has been admiringly compared to Harold Pinter. That strikes me as a legitimate and damning comparison. There is much in common between this play and Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*, with the all-important difference that, where Pinter’s characters are in motion, Mr. Mamet’s are at a standstill. Bill Bryden’s production is a decidedly somber affair.


There is nothing parodistic in Mamet’s intentions, which aim to reveal character through language; or in his structure, which surges forward with the dense assuredness of a poem; or in his ear, which is tuned with transcriptive accuracy to the linguistic fall-out from generations of immigrant handling of the American tongue. For what I hadn’t realized from the Cottesloe version is that this play is a parable about the United States—not in the journalistic way of British state-of-the-nation dramas, but quietly, stealthily, with all the rich interior organization of a true work of art. . . . These three failed crooks are the
waste products of the American belief in free enterprise. But while Mamet shows them as victims, it is without patronage and with respect and even love for these little people who, as he somehow makes us feel, resemble the little person in all of us. This line of thought descends from Miller, but especially from O'Neill and Tennessee Williams; there is no precedent for it in Britain; and we have failed to establish it here.


His characters speak in a style that I will call heightened naturalism, which is in fact closer to poetry. Yet he takes advantage of what people really do when they talk—interrupting themselves, interrupting each other, and changing their minds mid sentence—and he presents it all in various vernaculars. It’s very complicated to do and a pain in the ass to learn. After Mamet, *Hamlet* is a cakewalk. But once you master Mamet, there’s nothing more pleasurable.


Mamet worked iambic pentameter out of the vernacular of the underclass, he made it sound like people talking, and he made it funny. The language was an immediate sensation, and over the years it’s made a lot of audiences very happy and a lot of actors very crazy. There’s more to the play than the words, of course, because there was more on Mamet’s mind than a linguistic parlor trick. Like some bastard offspring of Oswald Spengler and Elaine May, *American Buffalo* popped out, full grown, as the American drama’s funniest, most vicious attack on the ethos of Big Business and the price that it exacts upon the human soul.

As Dave might say, "Hey, somebody had to do it.”

Gregory Mosher, introduction to *American Buffalo* (Grove Press, 1996)
THE AMERICAN DREAM IN AMERICAN BUFFALO

BY HANNAH KNAPP

DON: That's what business is.
BOB: What?
DON: People taking care of themselves. Huh?
BOB: No.
DON: 'Cause there's business and there's friendship, Bobby . . . there are many things, and when you walk around you hear a lot of things, and what you got to do is keep clear who your friends are, and who treated you like what. Or else the rest is garbage, Bob, because I want to tell you something.
BOB: Okay.
DON: Things are not always what they seem to be.
BOB: I know.

Pause.

DON: There's lotsa people on this street, Bob, they want this and they want that. Do anything to get it. You don't have friends this life.

American Buffalo

David Mamet’s frustration with the American Dream comes through loud and clear in his writing and interviews. “In the United States, it’s our pleasure and joy to consider life as a commercial enterprise. That’s our national character,” he told an interviewer in 1997. His struggle to come to terms with this “national character” inspired Mamet to write Glengarry Glen Ross and American Buffalo (among others), dramatic explorations of just how far men will go in the pursuit of “the goods.” The high-powered real estate brokers of Glengarry Glen Ross, familiar to many A.C.T. patrons from the 2001 production, expose the seamy side of American business with startling candor. But the three working-class Chicago men of American Buffalo offer a less obvious, yet equally condemning, indictment of the underbelly of capitalist America.

More than anything else, Mamet is preoccupied with what he sees as the driving principle of American business and culture: stepping on others to get ahead. He told scholar Matthew Roudané in an interview in 1986:

[T]he 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.

According to Mamet, in this country the success of one individual is defined by another’s failure, a fact of American life that wreaks havoc with professional and personal relationships alike. As Mamet paraphrases social theorist Thorstein Veblen, one of his favorite thinkers: “A lot of business in this country is founded on the idea that, if you don’t exploit the possible opportunity, not only are you being silly, but in many cases you’re being negligent.” Mamet believes Americans consider it their personal duty to seize every chance of getting ahead at the expense of others.

With this critique of American culture as inspiration, Mamet wrote *American Buffalo*, which premiered in Chicago in November 1975. Although the plot centers around three lowlife characters planning to rob a coin collector, Mamet has always insisted that the play is about the broader issue of “the American ethic of business, about how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals called business.”

Mamet isn’t just concerned with the lowest levels of commerce, in the dishonor among thieves portrayed in Donny’s junk shop; the moral of *American Buffalo* applies to every level of the American food chain. “There’s really no difference between the lumpenproletariat [of *American Buffalo*] and the stockbrokers or corporate lawyers who are the lackeys of business,” Mamet told an interviewer a year after the play opened on Broadway in 1977. “Part of the American myth is that a difference exists, that at a certain point vicious behavior becomes laudable”—namely, the point where such betrayal becomes part of “business as usual” in the sanctioned halls of corporate America. Mamet saw that his ideas had hit home when he watched audience members leave after New York performances of *American Buffalo*: “Businessmen left [the show] muttering vehemently about its inadequacies and pointlessness,” he observed. “But they weren’t really mad because the play was pointless—they were angry because the play was about them.”

The title of the play itself hints at Mamet’s condemnation of the American obsession with exploitation for personal gain, and sums up the major forces in the play. Everything hinges on the coin collector buying a buffalo-head nickel from Donny the day before, and the attempt to get it back. The question of value drives the plot—not only in terms of money, but in terms of ideas. What has value and what doesn’t is completely subjective for each of the characters, but each has trouble accepting the fact that his own opinions are not objective facts, which leads to the arguments that make up most of the play. The “buffalo” of the title not only describes the coin in dispute, it also conjures up images of
the nearly extinct animal, and with it the old American West and the pioneers who pursued the American Dream. Like the buffalo, the West has been conquered and destroyed, leaving America with a dream that has lost its meaning. To “buffalo” is to pressure or intimidate a person, with connotations of trickery—which is exactly what each of the characters does, or tries to do, throughout the play. Mamet’s title is an invitation to explore the play on all these levels, even before we hear the first lines.

Once we do hear those lines, however, it’s the relationships among the three characters, and their evolution over the course of the play, that give life to Mamet’s ideas about the way America operates. The lines between friendship and commerce are blurred again and again as the plot thickens. From Teach to Donny to Bobby, we watch deals made and promises broken for the sake of getting “the goods.” Donny’s admonitions to Bobby at the beginning of the play—“Things are not always what they seem to be,” and “You don’t have friends this life”—become a mantra for the play itself.

From here, it’s easy to draw parallels between American Buffalo and Glengarry Glen Ross, which opened on Broadway in 1983. In both plays, the American dream of success supersedes all else; in both, the protagonists betray their supposed values for the sake of doing the deal. The shift to a more “respectable” milieu (a real estate office and a Chinese restaurant, as opposed to a junk shop) and class of people (real estate brokers) in Glengarry Glen Ross may make Mamet’s critique of American business in the later play more obvious to audiences. The underlying issue, however, remains the same: How can we accept such deception and betrayal in the pursuit of profit, when both only cause destruction? Mamet wants us to go to the heart of the matter, even as we enjoy, or hate, or enjoy hating the characters themselves, and to question what he considers the very basis of American culture: exploitation.
What do the early 1970s in America bring to mind? A country in search of a national identity, uncertain of its politicians' ability to lead and its military's honesty, inundated with television series pitting good cops against bad criminals and movies glorifying the Mafia. Watergate, Vietnam, "Hawaii 5-0," The Godfather—lying, cheating, treachery, and violence characterized America's popular culture and Americans' common understanding of the world.

In the late 1960s, only a few years before David Mamet wrote American Buffalo, Studs Terkel, one of the greatest oral historians of the 20th century, interviewed some 70 people living in Chicago. All kinds of Chicagoans, from upper-class socialites to unemployed lowlifes, discussed urban renewal, the Vietnam War, the American Dream, and the meaning of life—among other things—each in their own style, and each with their own ideas of right, wrong, and everything in between. Terkel's collection of interviews became Division Street: America, published in 1967, a heartbreaking examination of the "progress" of the first half of the last century as seen through the eyes of the American people. Following are excerpts from Division Street that resonate with American Buffalo, capturing the voices of people who struggled with many of the issues confronted by the characters in the play.

I realized quite early in this adventure that interviews, conventionally conducted, were meaningless. Conditioned clichés were certain to come. The question-and-answer technique may be of value in determining favored detergents, toothpaste, and deodorants, but not in the discovery of men and women. It was simply a case of making conversation. And listening.

Studs Terkel, "Prefatory Notes"

SAVING FACE
When I was a young boy, my mother managed a hotel on the Near North Side of Chicago. There were a few light-housekeeping rooms for couples, but most of the guests were single men. Many were skilled craftsmen: tool-and-die makers, coppersmiths, chefs, master carpenters. They were a proud and stiff-necked lot. There were occasions when, for no likely reason, a fight would break out, a furious one—a pinochle game, dispute over a nickel. The men earned what was good money in those days. Why, then, the fist and blow over a lousy buffalo nickel? I didn't understand.
Now I understand. It wasn’t the nickel. It was the harsh word, the challenging word, in
the presence of peers: “Liar!” The nickel was not the matter, nor the dollar. Humiliation
was the matter. Unless strong measures were taken. “Let’s sit down and reason together”
had no meaning while one had lost face.

Studs Terkel

THE AMERICAN DREAM
In the poorer classes of homes, frustrations are great, pressures are tremendous. They turn
on the TV set and they have these giveaway programs and someone’s winning thousands
of dollars. Or if they’re watching a play of some kind, everything’s beautiful and lovely.
They watch this and they don’t have any of it and they can’t get any of it. Then when an
argument breaks out, the closest one to ’em, he’s gonna get it. We were taught, you know,
if my mother and father argued, my mother went around shutting the windows and the
doors because they didn’t want the neighbors to hear ’em. But they deliberately open the
doors and open the windows, screaming and hollering, and it’s a release from their
emotions. So when they have an argument, it’s a good argument and it necessitates the
police coming to quiet it down. Naturally, the impression of a young police officer is that
they aren’t really people, you know, get rid of them.

Tom Kearney, 53

For example, my kids and everyone else, they see these people on TV. They got a maid,
they got a two-, three-car garage, they got a butler, and this glamour. I remember my
classmates, some of the young ladies. They took up sewing and basic cooking, they were
gonna marry some of the young fellas graduating. They didn’t know these young fellas
would be making $1.25, if anything at all. They see all this glamour. The babies come. So
these broken homes, these ADCs. He can’t produce what she thought, and things ain’t like
he thought. The reason he leaves is the dreams are shattered.

Lew Gibson, 50

I have an opinion our free enterprise is gonna survive for a long time in some fashion,
shape, and form, because it seems to go on with the unfortunate things that we have in
the world, little, big, grabby, and we all want something to our own little selves. I’ve never seen
a society that’s ever lasted that was really marvelous and based on things in human nature
that would be nice.

Amber Ladeira, 20
THE GOVERNMENT AND PROGRESS

I think this is a real good country. I think most people are on the ball. I think most people love their houses, love their families, love their lawns and their shrubs and their plants and their mode of life, and I think they’d do anything to protect them. There are those, the unsuccessful few, and they hate everything. But the majority of the people like it the way it is, corrupt, maddening, aggravating, horrible, we would fight to keep it that way. We wouldn’t have it any other way because we can still go down and blow off steam to some little minor bureaucrat when something aggravates us. And if nothing comes of it, we don’t get locked up for it. But we still do have our moderately free speech and when they reach a peak like poor old LBJ, there he is, poor, beautiful kid, he’s got to be a pretty good guy, too. Even though I did vote against him.

If we have anyone threatening our way of life, it’s our minor bureaucrats and politicians. And we’re acquiring more of them every day. And what is our way of life is also everybody else’s way of life. Everyone just wants to live their own life. We only want to think about politics a couple of days out of the year. We’re not concerned. We don’t care really. We know that if we need new sewers then we get mad and go down and say, “We need new sewers. Do something.” Then we’re made.

Gladys Pennington, 50

COMMUNITY AND FRIENDSHIP

I think the poor class of people, both Negro and white, as bad as I hate to say this, being a union man, I believe they’ve forgotten a lot of these things. In those days [during the Depression], if you had a car transfer, nobody threw away a transfer. They would put it where somebody else could get it. Nobody threw away a cigarette butt. It was awful hard to find a cigarette, but if a guy had one, he would choke it and give it to the next guy. Everybody was very friendly at that time.

Today, based on the war economy and the unions, some people make a few dollars, and the feeling, the atmosphere is different. Labor’s respectable now, it’s status quo. If you fight against these guys, you’re labeled. Fear . . .

Labor, the poor, in the old days, were closer to reality. The way I visualize it today it is like a guy standing there with his left foot on poverty and his right foot on prosperity, and everybody’s trying to make the big jump. Some feel they can do it through politics, some feel they can do it with the boss, some feel they might win a sweepstake ticket. In those days everybody knew who the common enemy was. (Laughs.) They all had grievances with relief. It’s not as tightly knitted as it was, the feeling.

Lew Gibson
An innocence, that’s what’s lacking in so many supposedly adult human beings today. So many people are ashamed to cry, ashamed to really have feelings. I must include myself in this group, because maybe this is the reason I have not been able to open myself up to accept anyone else in my life. You meet so few people who do have the capacity for it.

Stan Lenard, 35

Because the temperment of the people today, you just can’t describe it. They’re your friend today and they’re your enemy tomorrow. There’s no friendship today. Like I say, it goes right back to the status symbol. If you don’t have a new car or a new home, you don’t belong. You may be invited; if you do show up, why there’s a doubt in your mind whether you should have gone or not. It’s not because you don’t think you’re as good. It’s the idea that you can see they weren’t expecting you. They give you the invitation because you’re supposed to be a friend, but when you do show up, you get the impression you weren’t welcome to begin with.

I have friends. I don’t think any of them would ever let me down. But there are times when it seems like the friendship, it’s not given willingly. It seems like, well, you’re a friend of mine, so I have to do it. It isn’t because I want to do it. I feel like I have to do it because you’re a friend of mine.

If I were God, I would take this feeling of superiority out of people’s minds and make everybody feel they weren’t better than anybody else.

Bob Carter, 38

Everybody’s just really only interested in themselves. I’ve never really needed anything, really desperately, from any of them, but you get the feeling that maybe they would help you if they had to, but then everybody would have to know about it, too.

Do you have a friend you could trust, let’s say, in a crisis?

No, I don’t think so. No, I think they would all be good in a little pinch, like if you needed a ride or something, but no real big crisis, no. Mmmm-hmmm.

Therese Carter, 35

CHICAGO

The city is beautiful, yet it’s ugly. Maybe it’s the ugliness of the city that makes it so beautiful: within the ugliness there’s a beauty. Do I make sense? There are a lot of boosters, Chamber of Commerce men, who use the words “seamy side” as meaning ugly. Its exterior is ugly and the people live in misery, but ever so many of these areas have their own color,
their own life. I don't mean these conditions should exist, but the people here seem to be more lively than the others. That's how it appeared to me, during my long crosstown walks.

Lucky Miller, 19

I really adore [Chicago's] strength. Somebody once said a very disturbing thing: about how Chicagoans love . . . really secretly revel in the vice of their city. They like this wicked aspect of it. I occasionally probe very deeply into my mind: do I really find that kind of exciting? I remember the first contact that I ever had with anything of this sort, when I lived in Grand Rapids. Of course, half the people who live there make furniture, you know, and somebody—a friend of mine—had reported that he was making dining-room chairs for Al Capone and that they had a little slab of steel in between, that the wood was laminated (laughs), bullet-proof steel. I don't know, all these sort of picturesque, dreadful things maybe do add up to a legend that we are secretly half-proud of.

Oh, I find more vitality now. I know the city better. I think the business community is an enormously vital community. I hear that mostly through my husband, of course. They just work their heads off, you know, to improve the city in one way or another, and they really love it. They're not accepted unless they get in there and pitch. It's really part of the job. Plenty of people make a lot more money than the kind of man I'm talking about, but in order to gain prominence in this city—and by prominence, I mean admiration and acceptability—you've got to put a certain number of man-hours into the public till, don't you think?

Mrs. R. Fuqua Davies, age handsomely indeterminate

BEATING THE SYSTEM
Why should I worry about the world? I figure it this way: Who's gonna take care of you? Nobody! And you figure these people that don't wanna take care of you and you ain't got no education, what're you gonna do?

I wasn't learning nothing in this school, nothing at all. Just sit back, watch the teacher say something, and what not. He never asked me to say anything. He never told me to do nothing. Just as soon as the bell rings, go to another class. That was it. I even asked the teacher, “What's this?” You know. And he wouldn't even answer me. It was a drag.

What're you gonna do? You gonna be walkin' the street? So I figure like this: If I can't make money the right way, I'm sure gonna make it the wrong way. I'll be livin' in jail. (Half-laughs.) That's my home, that's my next home. Because look it, if I pull a job, I have it real nice, you know. If I get away with it. If I don't get away with it, I'm in jail.
What can I do in the street? I don't wanna be walkin' the street. Because you walk the street, and you see these young guys, like they wanna go bum-huntin'. Ha. They might just grab you one of these days and beat you up. So I figure like this: Why walk the street and look for your dimes and nickels and pennies on the sidewalk, when you can be robbin'. And if you rob and get away with it, you're lucky. But you can't be robbin' all your life, an' then don't get caught. So ya figure like this: You're gonna spend a couple of times in jail. But you ain't got no education, so that's it. It don't bother me. 'Cause I don't really care about the world, and the world don't care about me.

Frankie Rodriguez, 17

THE FAMED 1933 DOUBLE EAGLE BRINGS $7.6 MILLION AT AUCTION
Making It the Most Valuable Coin in the World

New York, NY—July 30, 2002—Tonight Sotheby’s and Stack’s made auction history with the sale of the most valuable gold coin in the world, the fabled and elusive 1933 Double Eagle 20 dollar gold coin, for the remarkable price of $7,590 million, a record for any coin sold at auction. There was repeated applause as over 500 spectators in Sotheby’s saleroom watched eight bidders battle for over five minutes driving the price from an opening bid of $2.5 million to the final world record, a price which swept away the old record for a coin of $4.1 million paid for an 1804 silver dollar. The successful buyer, who has asked to remain anonymous, bid over the phone through Sotheby’s books and manuscripts specialist Selby Kiffer. The sale, which was conducted on the behalf of the u.s. government, marked the first time that the u.s. government has authorized private ownership of a 1933 Double Eagle. At the conclusion of the auction, Henrietta Holsman Fore, director of the u.s. Mint, signed a Certificate of Monetization turning the coin into legal u.s. tender, the first time the u.s. government has ever monetized a coin in this way. The coin had been estimated to bring $4–6 million.

The 1933 Double Eagle achieved its status as one of the great rarities of world coinage due to the fact that in 1933, President Roosevelt, in one of his first acts as president, took the United States off the gold standard in an effort to help the struggling American economy out of the Great Depression. All of the 1933 Double Eagles were ordered destroyed, but ten specimens are known to have escaped into private hands. However, as they had never been officially “issued” as u.s. coinage, they could not be legally owned. As a result, nine of the ten specimens were seized by, or turned in to, the u.s. Secret Service in the 1940s and ’50s and were subsequently destroyed. The remaining 1933 Double Eagle had surfaced in 1996 and been seized by the u.s. Secret Service. It was returned to the u.s. Mint as a result of the Department of Justice’s settlement of a forfeiture action, and in that landmark legal settlement, this one coin became the only 1933 Double Eagle now or ever authorized for private ownership by the u.s. government.

“With today’s sale, one of the great numismatic rarities of all time enters another stage in its remarkable history, becoming legal tender after having intrigued the world of collectors for more than 70 years,” said Mint Director Henrietta Holsman Fore.
David Redden, vice chairman of Sotheby’s, said: “With today’s record price, the famed 1933 Double Eagle has transcended its position as one of the most sought-after numismatic treasures of all time to become one of the great objects of Americana ever sold at auction. It was an enormous privilege to have been asked by the U.S. government to undertake the sale of the ‘Holy Grail’ of the coin collecting world.”

AN AMERICAN BUFFALO GLOSSARY

“LIKE WHEN HE JEWED RUTHIE OUT THAT PIG IRON.”
To “jew” is an offensive slang term used to suggest that one party in a business negotiation has obtained an unfair advantage over another through shrewd and aggressive bargaining. The term is derived from the supposedly extortionate practices used by Jewish money-lenders during the Middle Ages.

“Pig iron,” a high-carbon form of cast iron produced during the reduction of iron ore in a blast furnace, is used as a raw material in steel processing. The product of the blast furnace became known as “pig iron” from the method of casting, which involved running liquid iron into a main channel connected at right angles to a number of shorter channels. The arrangement resembled a sow suckling her litter, so the lengths of solid iron from the shorter channels became known as “pigs.”

“GET TEACHER A COFFEE. / BOSTON, TEACH?”
A “Boston coffee” is half milk, half coffee—an American café au lait. It’s possible the term comes from the popular association of Boston with an effete way of life. Teach, however, prefers his coffee undiluted.

“They’re from 1933. / FROM THE THING? / YEAH.”
The “thing” to which Teach refers is the 1933 World’s Fair, the Century of Progress Chicago Exposition of 1933. This event, which celebrated science and the modern world, gave Chicago a sense of self-importance. Huge numbers of collectibles bearing the fair’s logo were produced, including personalized enamel ashtrays, cigarette cases, and leather wallets, as well as dagger letter openers and tie clips with the logo sculpted in silver, which can still be found in antique shops and on the Internet.

“They used to joke about it on ‘MY LITTLE MARGIE.’ (WAY BEFORE YOUR TIME.)”
The CBS/NBC sitcom “My Little Margie” ran for 126 episodes, from June 16, 1952, through August 24, 1955, starring Gale Storm as Margie and Charles Farrel as her widower father, Vern. The show takes place in their New York City apartment, where 21-year-old Margie is constantly scheming to keep her father out of relationships with women. Considering that Bobby is a teenager in 1970s, the show would definitely have aired, as Donny says, before his time.
“HE COMES UP WITH THIS BUFFALO-HEAD NICKEL”

In 1911 James Earle Fraser, a prolific artist best known for his monumental “End of the Trail” Indian sculpture, began work on the design for a new coin to replace the Liberty-head nickel that had been in production since 1883. Until that time, except for Bela Lyon Pratt’s quarter and half eagle of 1908, the “Indians” portrayed on U.S. coins had been primarily Caucasian figures wearing Native American headdress. Fraser intended to portray American Indians more accurately, and the obverse portrait of his new nickel was a composite of three chiefs who had posed for him. Keeping with the distinctly American theme, he depicted an American bison on the reverse. The inscriptions “UNITED STATES OF AMERICA” and “E PLURIBUS UNUM” are artfully placed over the buffalo, with the denomination “FIVE CENTS” below. The legend “LIBERTY” and the date are executed on the coin’s obverse.

On March 4, 1913, coins from the first bag of buffalo-head nickels to go into circulation were presented to outgoing President Taft and 33 Indian chiefs at the groundbreaking ceremonies for the National Memorial to the North American Indian at Fort Wadsworth, New York.

More than 1.2 billion buffalo nickels were minted from 1913 through 1938 at three mints: Philadelphia (no mintmark), San Francisco (S), and Denver (D). No buffalo nickels were made in 1922, 1932, or 1933. Collectors of the series have an array of “tough” dates and rarities to pursue. The most difficult coin to obtain is the very rare 1918̅7⁄8-d overdate [worth, according to Numismatica.com, $265,630 in pristine MS65 condition]. Scarce to rare dates in high grade include all the San Francisco coins from 1913 through 1928, with 1918, 1920, and 1924 through 1927 being the rarest. Denver coins are usually weaker strikes than San Francisco pieces and present the collector with challenges like the 1918 through 1920 issues, as well as the 1925 and 1926 coins, along with the famous 1937-d three-legged buffalo. This extremely popular variety (caused by excessive die-polishing to remove clash-marks) was not discovered until most of the coins had reached circulation, making well-struck gem specimens very rare today. Particularly in the case of the “three-legger” or the 1918̅7⁄8-d overdate, authentication by experts is advised, as many counterfeits exist.

The past decade has witnessed renewed collector interest in the buffalo series, no doubt stimulated by the wealth of new research published by nickel specialists. An ever-growing number of numismatists are assembling complete sets of buffalos by date and mintmark, but demand is also strong from type collectors, all of whom seek this design for their 20th century or more comprehensive type sets. Although well-struck, inexpensive type examples such as 1938-d are available, many collectors prefer to pursue one of the scarcer dates.
By the end of 1937, planning for the buffalo nickel’s successor was well underway, as the design’s required 25 years would end the following year. It was to be replaced by the third coin to bear a likeness of one of our presidents, Thomas Jefferson. The Jefferson nickel continues in production to this day.

Buffalo nickels are comprised of 75% copper and 25% nickel.

(Excerpted from “1913–38 Nickel Five Cents Indian Head & Buffalo,” www.geocities.com/RodeoDrive/4044/articles.html, compiled by the Numismatic Guarantee Corporation, the “grading service of choice” of the American Numismatic Association, the largest collector-oriented organization in the United States.)

“YOU THINK I’M GOING TO FUCK WITH CHUMP CHANGE?”
An American slang term for a small amount of money, “chump change” could be a reference to another usage of the word “chump,” for dolt or blockhead. Only an idiot would bother with so little money.

“HE LIVES LIKE ON LAKE SHORE DRIVE.”
Lake Shore Drive runs along the western side of Lake Michigan all the way up to the northern suburb of Evanston. The Near North Side section is known as a well-to-do, desirable, and exclusive neighborhood. Sections of it are characterized by skyscrapers built by famous architects, including Mies van der Rohe, whose glass towers at 860 to 880 Lake Shore Drive were built between 1949 and 1951. By associating the man he has spotted with this area, Bobby is hoping to convince Teach and Donny that their potential prey is wealthy.

“AS WE’RE MOVING THE STUFF TONIGHT, WE CAN GO IN LIKE GANGBUSTERS, HUH?”
The radio program “Gangbusters” came on over the airwaves with sound effects of police sirens and machine-gun fire, inspiring the expressions “come on like ‘Gangbusters’” and “go in like ‘Gangbusters’”—to arrive in an active, sensational, or loud way. Teach wants to go into the house without caring how much noise they make and destruction they cause, since they will be gone very quickly.
“WHAT DO YOU THINK A 1929 S LINCOLN-HEAD PENNY WITH THE WHEAT ON THE BACK IS WORTH?”
Today, a coin of this particular year and series is worth $1. The Lincoln-head replaced the Indian-head penny (which had been in use since 1859) in 1909.

“LET’S EVERYBODY GET A WRIT.”
By suggesting everyone get a legal document requiring the others to take action, Teach is sarcastically saying that things have gone out of the realm of friendship and into that of lawsuits. Everyone has their own agenda to push, so why don’t they just do it in the courts?

“HERE’S A FIN.”
“Fin” is slang for a five-dollar bill, derived from the Yiddish *finf* for five (from Old High German *funf, finf*).

“What the fuck they live in Fort Knox?”
Camp Knox, established in 1918 in northern Kentucky and named for Major General Henry Knox, chief of artillery for the Continental Army during the American Revolution and later the first secretary of war, became Fort Knox by act of Congress in 1932. It has been used since 1918 as a training ground for troops and since 1940 has been the U.S. Army Armor Headquarters. For maximum security the U.S. Bullion Depository, a solid square bomb-proof structure with mechanical protective devices, was built there in 1936 to hold the bulk of the nation’s gold reserves. During World War II, the gold vault was used as a repository for the original copy of the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence, the Magna Carta, and the original draft of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

“(THE WHATCHAMACALLIT IS ALWAYS THE LAST TO KNOW.)”
As Teach searches for the right word, he uses a filler derived from the 17th-century British term “what-d’ye-call’em,” which was melded with “what-you-may-call-it” by 1942 into the more American “whatchamacallit.” Although any victim may be the last to know what their trusted partner has been up to, the most common is the betrayed husband or wife—the person one would expect would know from the first. Donny’s close association with Teach and Fletch should have made him aware of what was going on in the card game; in fact, he was the last one to be enlightened.
“HERE FLETCH IS IN MASONIC HOSPITAL A NEEDLE IN HIS ARM, HUH. / FOR COLUMBUS HOSPITAL, PLEASE.”
Chicago’s Masonic Hospital is just west of Lake Michigan and south of Wrigley Field; Columbus Hospital, where Fletch turns out to be, is about one mile south and east of Masonic. Founded in 1905 by Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini and the Missionary Sisters of Sacred Heart of Jesus, Columbus Hospital remains a Catholic hospital.

“THEY BROKE HIS JAW. / WHO? / SOME SPICS. I DON’T KNOW.”
Although the derogatory term “spics” began as a slang term used to refer to Italians (shortened from “spaghetti” and reinforced by their accent when saying “No spika da English”), by 1915 it began to be applied to anyone of Spanish ancestry. On the East Coast, particularly around New York City, the term became most closely associated with Puerto Ricans, who migrated there en masse around 1940, but it remained a general term for Mexicans and other Latin Americans, as well.

“(SINGING SOFTLY TO HIMSELF) ‘...AND I’M NEVER EVER SICK AT SEA.’”
Teach is quoting (perhaps indirectly) H.M.S. Pinafore, one of Gilbert and Sullivan’s best-known operettas. Written in 1878 by William Schwenck Gilbert, the lyrics sarcastically praise the bravery and goodness of the captain of the ship:

    CAPTAIN: And I’m never, never sick at sea!
    CHORUS: What, never?
    CAPTAIN: No, never!
    CHORUS: What, never?
    CAPTAIN: Hardly ever!
    CHORUS: He’s hardly ever sick at sea!
Then give three cheers, and one cheer more
For the hardy captain of the Pinafore!

“I EAT SHIT.”
Completely humiliated and longing for pardon, Bobby expresses his feelings using a variation of the slang phrase “eat dirt,” which is to take severe criticism, insults, or reprimands meekly, or to grovel.

“SKIN-POP”
To inject (a drug) beneath the skin rather than into a vein.
LET’S PUT ON OUR OWN SHOW!
The Complete David Mamet-in-a-Can Broadway Sets and Players: *American Buffalo*

1. Fold back side and bottom flaps of stage.
2. Cut sets out of magazine page and curve them so that the tabs fit inside the slots.

1. Bend flaps back and join together at slots to form a ring.
2. Slip finished puppet over desired finger.
3. Shake finger to indicate dialogue.
ACT I

A junk shop. Morning.

DON: Bob, you're a young punk.
BOB: Fuckin' right I am.

DON: A small-time thief.
BOB: Fuckin' right I am.
DON: But we never use the word "thief," do we, Bob?
BOB: Fuckin' right we don't.

DON: And do you fence stolen goods through my junk shop?
BOB: We never talk about it.
DON: Fuckin' right we don't.

(Pause.)

BOB: So what do we talk about, Don?
DON: The nature of life. And we say "fuck" a lot.

(Teach enters.)

TEACH: Fuckin' life.
DON: Is it bad, Teach?
TEACH: It's bad.

DON: Go for coffee, Bob. (Bob exits.) Bob's going to steal a very valuable coin collection for me tonight, Teach.

TEACH: Bob's too young.
DON: You're right, Teach. You should steal the coins instead.

TEACH: But let's not tell Bob.

CURTAIN
ACT II

The junk shop. That night.

TEACH: Everything is going wrong, Don. It looks like I can’t do the job after all.

DON: Are you just making excuses, Teach?

TEACH: Don, fuck you and the gene pool you swam in on.

(Aside to audience) I’m being a failure.

(Bob enters.)

BOB: Don, how would you like to buy this rare buffalo-head nickel?

TEACH: Did you steal that from the very valuable coin collection I was supposed to steal, Bob?

BOB: No. (Teach hits him.) Ow! (Bob bleeds.)

DON: Fuck you, Teach.

TEACH: Fuck you, Don.

BOB: Fuck you, Don and Teach. (Pause.) Don—is life good or bad?

DON: Shut up, Bob.

TEACH: Ah, heck.

CURTAIN
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What do you think of Mamet’s dialogue? Is it realistic? Poetic? Banal? How is it different on the page and on the stage? What do those differences suggest about theater as a performance art as opposed to a literary art?

2. How does the rhythm of the dialogue reflect what is happening between the characters onstage? When they interrupt themselves and each other, what do we learn about their state of mind? About their feelings for each other?

3. What is it about Mamet’s dialogue that makes it particularly well suited to the subject matter of the play?

4. With which character in the play do you find yourself sympathizing? Does your sympathy shift at different points from one character to another, or are you consistently rooting for the same person throughout the play? Which character do you like the least? Which is the protagonist? The antagonist? How can you tell?

5. What is the relative hierarchy of the characters? In other words, if you were ranking the characters according to their status, who is the “top dog,” and where do the others fall? Does that status change throughout the play? When? Why? How can you tell? Does your sympathy for the characters change when their status changes?

6. How does each of the characters vie for the respect of the others? Do they all want respect from each other, or does any of them not care what the others think? In your experience, what do people do to gain respect and acceptance? What happens if they lie to get what they want?

7. Why is it so important that Donny, Teach, and Bobby rob the coin collector? What is at stake for each of the characters? How do their different responses to the abandonment of the job reflect aspects of their personalities?

8. How is American Buffalo a play about testing loyalties and the nature of friendship? How are the characters’ ideas of friendship different from your own? How are they similar?
9. How does each of the characters define value? Does one seek higher authority, another personal experience? Or do they have similar sources for defining value, but come to different conclusions? How do you define value?

10. How are the story and the behavior of the characters in *American Buffalo* still relevant in 2002? How might the story be different if it were written in 2002, instead of 1975?
FOR FURTHER READING

ON AND BY DAVID MAMET


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ON CHICAGO AND THE AMERICAN DREAM


WEB SITES OF INTEREST


