

American Buffalo: Digital Dramaturgy

By David Mamet
Directed by Liesl Tommy
The Head Theater

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In a cluttered pawn shop, an unlikely trio plot to steal a rare coin. But times are hard, tensions mount, and the need to get ahead turns ruthless. A modern masterpiece, showcasing Mamet's legendary knack for plot twists and his mastery of the profane poetry of capitalism.
(Adult language)

*"The Whole Entire World. There Is No Law. There Is No Right And Wrong.
There Is No Friendship. Every Fucking Thing.
Every Godforsaken thing."* —Teach, *American Buffalo*



American Buffalo has many defining characteristics: its seedy characters with ambiguous morals, the run-down locale, its rough language and irreverent humor, and the con that defines the action of both the characters and the play itself. These elements crop up all over the canon of '70s films, in a collection of works that, upon closer inspection, seem to form a genre of their own. Many of these films share directors (Lumet, Scorsese, Coppola) and actors (Pacino, Cazale, De Niro, Duvall), several of whom later worked with Mamet after he broke into the film business (Duvall even starred in *American Buffalo* when it opened on Broadway in 1977). **Taken together, these works begin to articulate a larger sense of unease, distrust, and disillusionment that also permeates *American Buffalo*.** What follows is a collection of '70s films that participate in this conversation in different ways—that howl at, laugh at, or sink into the malaise of the moment, and provide a frame through which to consider *American Buffalo* as a product of the time.



TEACH: You know what is free enterprise?

DON: No. What?

TEACH: The freedom...

DON: ...yeah?

TEACH: Of the Individual...

DON: ...yeah?

TEACH: To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit.

“Cause there’s
business and there’s
friendship, Bobby...”

The freedom of the Individual To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit. This principle seems to be a driving force for Teach, Don, and Bobby’s actions in American Buffalo. Teach conflates the tenets of the Declaration of Independence with the principles of Capitalism, turning Free Enterprise into an inalienable right, up there with Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. It is an understandable conflation, so embedded in our country’s most powerful myths that it is difficult to keep them separate. After all, the American Dream proposes that the key to happiness is success and ownership, and insists that they are possible for anyone who works hard enough. The case could be made that one has a right to success, and may obtain it by any means necessary. Teach pushes this line of thought to its cynical conclusion: crime is necessary to obtain success. Not only that, but it is acceptable. More than acceptable: it’s business. Says Teach, “the country’s founded on this, Don. You know this...Without this we’re just savage shitheads in the wilderness.”

In fact, according to Teach and Don, in order to be successful one must separate business from friendship. You cannot think of your business partner as a friend, as someone for whom you have empathy. You must negate or ignore their humanity in order to use them however you need to use them. Much like a predatory animal, stalking his prey.

Yet, despite their talk, can these characters actually separate business from friendship? Don treats Bobby, his supposed business partner, like a son, worrying about his well-being and lecturing him on everything from surveillance techniques to dietary needs. Teach proclaims, “Friendship is friendship...but let’s just keep the two apart, and maybe we can deal with each other like some human beings.” But he can’t get through a business planning session without asking Don: “Are you mad at me?” More like a needy lover than a predatory animal.

These moments of affection may endear us to the characters, but they also call to mind a question: are these men ruthless enough to claw their way out of the junk shop? Or will they watch wealthier people with beautiful girlfriends and three-piece suits swarm around their homes; letting their frustration brew until it explodes; blaming each other, themselves, everyone and everything but the real culprit—the systems that are stacked against them? Perhaps more cruel than the permission Teach's principle gives him to behave like an animal is the hope it offers; the hope that by Embarking on Any Fucking Course They See Fit, Teach, Don, and Bobby will end up somewhere other than (at best) right where they began. @#!



The text in *American Buffalo* has the feel of overheard street talk—it would be easy to assume that David Mamet simply pulled phrases from his Chicago wanderings and threw them onto a page, replicating crude city phrases and cadences. But the reality is the opposite: Mamet labors over his plays with an exacting hand. Turns out he can structure shit with the best of 'em.

For an example, here is one of the coarser lines in *American Buffalo*:

**“From the mouth of a Southern bulldyke
asshole ingrate of a vicious nowhere
c— can this trash come.”**

This bears a striking resemblance to another effusive and vicious oath:

**“Thou...art nothing but the composition
of a knave, beggar, coward, pander,
and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch.”**

Recognize the line? It belongs to Kent, from Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

So what makes it possible to relate Mamet's text to Shakespeare's? Mamet employs a wide variety of literary tools in order to heighten the rhythms of his text, to make the mundane and profane poetic. Many of Mamet's sentences are metered, such as “It makes no earthly difference in the world.” This particular line is in *iambic pentameter*, which means there are five *iamb*s in the sentence (*iamb*: an un-stressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable). With the stressed syllables highlighted, it looks like this: It **MAKES** no **EARTH**-ly **DIFF**-erence **IN** the **WORLD**. Someone else is famous for iambic pentameter—Shakespeare.

Another of Mamet's tools is repetition. For instance, Teach's first line in *American Buffalo* is “Fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie.” It too mirrors a

line from *Lear*. While cradling the dead body of his daughter, Cordelia, Lear exclaims “Never, Never, Never, Never, Never.” It is one of the most heartbreaking lines of the play, deepening Lear’s sorrow and emphasizing the finality of death. Despite the disparity of circumstances, this shared technique of repetition intensifies the impact of both lines. Adding to this impact is the fact that both lines are *trochaic* rather than iambic. Because the trochaic meter inverts the standard rhythm of the text, stressing the first syllable instead of the second (FUCK-in RUTH-ie), the effect is disruptive, even jarring. This rhythmic shift calls attention to the lines and correlates with the heightened emotional moment and loss of control. As he does throughout the play, Mamet gives poetic structure and weight to the seemingly prosaic. This helps elevate the everyday to the level of high art, suggesting the junk shop owner’s story can be as tragic as the ancient king’s.

To demonstrate Mamet’s rigor further, let’s look at the text that follows one of the examples above:

“It makes no earthly difference in the world. You know how much nutritive benefits they got in coffee? Zero. Not one thing. The stuff eats you up. You can’t live on coffee, Bobby. (And I’ve told you this before.) You cannot live on cigarettes. You may feel good, you may feel fine, but something’s getting overworked, and you are going to pay for it.”

As I mentioned before, the first sentence is in iambic pentameter. The words “nutritive benefits” each start with a stressed syllable, followed by two un-stressed syllables, (*NUT*-ri-tive *BEN*-e-fits), called a *double dactyl*. There are also two *iambic tetrameters* (a metrical line containing four iambs): “But *SOME*-thing’s *GET*-ting *OV*-er *WORKED*,” and “you *MAY* feel *GOOD*, you *MAY* feel *FINE*.” Mamet indicates that this second phrase should be spoken iambically by italicizing “*good*” and “*fine*” in the script. There is a particular kind of repetition here, structuring the sounds further:

“You can’t live on coffee... You cannot live on cigarettes. You may feel good, you may feel fine.”

This repetition of words at the beginning of a sentence or phrase is a rhetorical gesture called anaphora.

These assorted literary devices demonstrate the playwright’s extensive use of the tools in his toolbox. Among other things, David Mamet is like a carpenter: he constructs a complex system of language to create a sturdy, accomplished structure. Or, to use another simile, he’s like a musician, combining and repeating different rhythms to create his own percussive music. As you listen, see if you can hear his beats. @#!



“I’ve always been fascinated by the picaresque. That’s part of the Chicago tradition: to love our gangsters and con men, the bunko artists and so forth.” —David Mamet

David Mamet was born in Chicago, raised in Chicago, and began his theater career in Chicago. He spent his early years in and around a city known for gangsters and political corruption, but also for its no-nonsense sensibility and blue collar work ethic. Over the course of his youth and young adulthood, Chicago began to shift from a blue to white collar town, as the meatpacking and steel industries moved out and were replaced by finance, tourism, and the service sector. Urban renewal programs built up the Chi-town skyline and turned rundown areas like Lincoln Park into clean, pleasant neighborhoods for the incoming bourgeoisie.

Mamet—born into a middle class, assimilated, secular Jewish family—was in love with the Chicago of old, of literature and myths, and did his best to live there. As a teenager in the ’60s, Mamet would dress up and wander the town until he found an empty ballroom where he could sit in the dark, playing the piano. A Mamet biographer describes the playwright at 25, wearing a long coat and scarf, smoking cigars and playing pool “like a 1930s author.” When he wasn’t making theater with St. Nicholas Theater Company, (named after Nicholas of Myra, Patron Saint of mountebanks and prostitutes) or working one of many odd jobs, Mamet spent his time wandering around the city with a spiral notebook, recording bits of conversation in ramshackle bars, gyms, old Jewish bathhouses, and junk shops. One junk shop on the North Side he frequented almost daily. It was the location for an ongoing poker game, played every day from noon to eight. The players distrusted Mamet at first, and wouldn’t let him join the game until they discovered a mutual connection: the Pontiac Correctional Center, where Mamet taught and many of the men had served time. This earned him a spot at the table and the nickname Teach. The shop and its hardscrabble clientele provided inspiration for *American Buffalo*.

Of all that Mamet took from his Chicago upbringing, one element that stands out is his sense of writing as a blue collar trade. According to him, New York writers ask, “What does life mean?” while Chicago writers answer, “Who the hell cares;” countering with, “What do you do?”. This attitude informs Mamet’s philosophy: playwrights, directors, actors, all are tradesmen, and should learn their craft from the masters of the trade. Competency requires practice, study, and above all discipline. These ideas manifest themselves not only in the work Mamet produces, but the style of acting he teaches and the way he directs. He once made an actress repeat her entrance

30 times in rehearsal, forcing her to eliminate any embellishment or interpretation through repetition.

Mamet's Chicago was a Chicago as it might have been, or as he thought it should be, regardless of what the city was becoming.

As Chicago changed around him, Mamet embodied his idea of it—tailoring the way he dressed, the company he kept, the work he produced, and the way he produced it to this idea of the city. It informed his work, his career, and certainly *American Buffalo*. @#!