

*A living room. Late Evening.*

*A lamp lights an overstuffed easy chair in the corner of the living room. On the right side of the chair, there is a large pile of papers, face up. On the left side of the chair, there is a small file of papers, face down.*

*The professor enters the room and sets his coffee down on a small stand next to the chair. He sits down in the chair, and grabs a paper from the pile on the right. He begins reading...*

NARRATOR: The language of Mamet is like no other play. It's packed with slang, profanity and clichés. The sentences are short. Choppy. Overlapping and strung together. The actor's cadence must be perfectly timed. Like the beat of a metronome. Phrases like:

*timing:*

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. . . You want some breakfast?

*short:*

BOB: I'm not hungry.

*Pause.*

*cliché:*

DON: Breakfast. . . is the most important meal of the day.

*timing:*

LEVENE: You bet your ass. Who wants to go to lunch? Who wants to go to lunch? I'm buying. (*Slaps contract down on Williamson's desk.*) Eight-two fucking grand. And twelve grand in commission. John. (*Pause.*) On fucking deadbeat magazine subscription leads.

*overlapping:*

AARONOW: . . . Come in here . . . I *work* here, I don't come in here to be *mistreated*.

*timing:*

WILLIAMSON: Go to *lunch*, will you. . .

*profanity:*

TEACH: My Whole Cocksucking Life.

*overlapping:*

WILLIAMSON: The leads come in, I'll let. . .

*timing:*

TEACH: The Whole Entire World.

WILLIAMSON: Just go to lunch.

*timing:*

TEACH: There Is No Law.

WILLIAMSON: Go to lunch Teach.

*overlapping:*

AARONOW: where does he get off to talk that way to a working man? It's not. . .

*timing:*

WILLIAMSON: (*Buttonholes him*) Will you take it outside, we have people trying to do *business* here...

*timing:*

TEACH: There Is No Right And Wrong.

WILLIAMSON: (*Going back into his office*) Excuse me...

*timing, short & profanity:*

TEACH:       The World Is Lies.  
              There Is No Friendship.  
              Every Fucking Thing.

*Pause.*

              Every God-forsaken Thing.

*timing:*

WILLIAMSON: (*Bursting out of his office*): Will you get out of here? Will you get *out* of here? Will you. I'm trying to run an *office* here. Will you go to lunch? Go to lunch. Will you go to lunch? (*Retreats into office*)

NARRATOR: But what does this language mean? What is the goal of all this profanity and perfectly timed sentences? Is their a larger plot at hand? Find out in today's very important final paper. . . .

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### **lowlifes, thieves and salesmen**

*The language of David Mamet*

David Mamet doesn't write Rockwellian fantasies about America like Thornton Wilder, the author of *Our Town*. When Mamet writes he's not distracted by fantasy or myth, he goes right to the heart of the "American Dream" and questions its validity. He jabs his hand into the ribcage of America and rips its heart out when he chooses his topics. This fearless attitude is what led him use salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross* and small time crooks in *American Buffalo* to delve into the class struggle in the United States.

Salesmen, as shown by Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* were the backbone of America and living examples of the "American Dream". Door to door they traveled daily to bring the American people the encyclopedias, vacuum cleaners, and subscriptions to the Saturday Evening Post that they most desperately needed. To be a salesmen was to

live the "American Dream". It was a job that could take a person from rags to riches, if that person just had guts, and the strength to go ten rounds with the American Consumer. Salesmen represent the heart and soul of America, and this is why Mamet chose to write about them in *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

*Glengarry Glen Ross* is a play designed to expose the greed and corruption of Capitalism. In the play we see four men, not just men, but salesmen, struggling for their lives. They work hard, and are well trained, but they are being eviscerated by the system. Their bosses, Mitch and Murray are their oppressors. The salesmen represent the proletariat. The proletariat have truly lost all touch with the means of production. Mitch and Murray control "the leads". They are only giving out the premium leads to salesmen who are on the board to better "marshal their sales force". The oppressors are forcing the proletariat to compete against each other in a dog eat dog competition. The system is profoundly unjust, the lesser salesmen (Levine, Aaronow, and Moss) can't make any sales with the terrible leads they have. They can't get on the board. Thus they can't get any decent leads. Thus they cannot sell. They are trapped in what Joseph Heller would call a Catch-22.

The hopelessness of the salesmen is exemplified by character of Shelly Levine. In the beginning, you are led to believe that that Levine is a good salesmen and you hope that he will break his losing streak and get back on top. Back when they were selling "Glengarry Farms" he was a top salesman, he was Shelly "The Machine" Levine. However, because of the unjust system, Levine will never again reach this pinnacle of glory. Society will force him to attempt to get ahead, not by hard work, but by stealing. In the end, Levine is left a broken man. He is no longer a salesman, he is just a thief and a lousy one at that. Because of his stupidity he is caught and will not pass go, will not collect anything and will go directly to jail. His family will lose their provider and be left to welfare and poverty.

Mamet has trapped his salesmen in suffering to illustrate the truth about capitalism. In a capitalist society you must "always be closing". As Moss says, "I got to close this fucker, or I don't eat lunch." (Glengarry 30) Being a salesmen is a metaphor for being a human being under the capitalist system. It is stacked against you from the beginning. If you don't have the good leads you can't sell. If you don't have good connections, you can't become chair of the department. If you aren't on good

relations with the unit commander, good luck at becoming squad leader. The dice are fixed and the wheel is just for suckers. In capitalism, as is true in Vegas, the house always wins.

In *American Buffalo*, Mamet chose to show a different part of America, the part you never see in picture postcards; the part that is used up and discarded like trash on the sidewalks, the poor. The characters in *American Buffalo* are truly the scum of the Earth. Teach is nothing more than a shameless con artist. Don is the only minor success of the group, because he owns a junk shop, despite the fact that the shop is clearly not profitable. Bobby is a recovering heroin addict, and a liar. Together they form a family, of sorts. But despite their family structure, they have no idea of what "friendship" truly is. They even discuss it in length and yet still act more like enemies than friends. Their value system rotates around the almighty dollar like planets around the sun. These characters are not exaggerations. These are the facts of life for the working poor. They never had a chance in the first place and they ain't never gonna get a chance.

In *American Buffalo* the poor have one big shot to rise up against the rich. Don has found a rich schmuck who

conned him out of a valuable coin and has enlisted Teach and Bobby to help him get revenge. They're going to get him for playing Don like a sucker. Their revenge is the dual revenge of class revenge and the revenge of Don's injured pride. The rich man insulted Don's pride by asking him to keep a look out for any more rare coins, with the implications that he would con Don again. He also reminded them of their low status by flaunting his wealth, his nice apartment and his girlfriend with the great ass. Teach and Don, with their superior thieving ability, are finally going to get some revenge on the rich. However, in the end the tide that seemed to be going out forever, made its inevitable return. The poor are simply small time con artists. They've never done a robbery like this before and they have no idea what they're doing. They spend most of their time fighting amongst one another for a share of money they haven't even stolen yet. They act big and put on airs, but they are paper tigers. Even Bobby, who had the simple job of surveillance, fails. He didn't really see the mark leave, he just made it up. The team is only as strong as its weakest link, and this team could be crushed like a coke can.

The weaknesses of Teach, Don and Bobby are the weaknesses of the working class. Some are addled by drugs,

others by greed, and the rest are left wondering who to trust. It is trust that is the key. Without trust the workers will never unite, for if they cannot band together with their brothers to take down the rich, they are doomed.

For Mamet, language is the opiate of the masses. His language is the language of the street. Mamet plays are not censored in anyway. If the man on the street would say "Fuck your mother", Mamet's characters would say that. He is not afraid of profanity, slang or regional dialects. Mamet is also not afraid to have his characters mouthing cliché after cliché. Mamet uses these clichés to further show the ignorance of the American people. The people are taught things like "Breakfast. . .is the most important meal of the day." (Buffalo 8), "Bad people go to hell" (Glengarry 47), and "Safety in Numbers" (Buffalo 53). But few actually take them to heart. In Mamet's plays the characters frequently quote these clichés as if they were the "New American Version of the Bible". Mamet's plays have a language and a rhythm all their own. After reading or attending a Mamet play most would agree that nobody talks like that and yet the strangeness of the rhythm doesn't not make the play unrealistic. Mamet's stylistic and rhythmic choices seem to make the play musical and thus memorable.

Act I, Scene 2 of *Glengarry Glen Ross* is like a symphony. Two characters, Moss and Aaronow babble back and forth about the details of a robbery. It is the running of the violins in the Adagio.

Moss (cont): We fuckin' work too hard. You work too hard. We all, I remember when we were at Platt. . .huh? Glen Ross Farms. . . didn't we sell a bunch of that?

Aaronow: They came in and they, you know . . .

Moss: Well, they fucked it up.

Aaronow: They did.

Moss: They killed the goose.

Aaronow: They did.

Then suddenly, Moss stops playing around and goes in for the kill. Like a good salesman, he started this conversation for a reason, and now he will follow his maxim, and begin closing. The tone becomes darker and more sinister as his plan unfolds.

Moss: I want to tell you what somebody should do.

Aaronow: What?

Moss: Someone should stand up and strike *back*.

Aaronow: What do you mean?

...

Moss: Someone should rob the office.

Aaronow is tempted by the offer. Who wouldn't? Times are hard, working for Jerry Graft would be better than working for Mitch and Murray. Graft, after all is a former salesman and theoretically would be sympathetic to him.

But in the distance the sound of an honest man can be heard.

Aaronow: Yes. I mean are you actually *talking* about this, or are we just. . .

Moss: We're just *speaking* about it. (*Pause.*) As an *idea*.

Aaronow: As an idea.

Moss: Yes.

. . .

Aaronow: You're, you're saying so you have to go in there tonight and . . .

Moss: *You*. . .

Aaronow: I'm sorry?

Moss: *You*. (*Pause.*)

Aaronow: You want me to break into the office tonight and steal the leads?

Moss: *Yes*. (*Pause.*)

Aaronow: No.

The horn of truth sounds! Aaronow has found his strength in his moral code. Moss must retreat, but unfortunately evil has foreseen the coming of good, and is prepared to cover his tracks.

Moss: Well, to the law, you're an accessory. Before the fact.

. . .

Aaronow: Why are you doing this to me, Dave. Why are you talking this way to me? I don't understand. Why are you doing this at *all*. . .?

Moss: That's none of your fucking business. . .

Aaronow: Well, well, well, *talk* to me, we sat down to eat *dinner*, and here I'm a *criminal*. . .

In the end, good and evil must fight hand to hand. There is no resolution of this immortal conflict. This small movement of the symphony is concluded, but there is clearly much more to come.

The lives of the salesmen and thieves in *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *American Buffalo* may just be characters on a page, but the messages contained within those pages are serious and very real. Mamet is an original playwright who is often compared to William Shakespeare. Whether his work will outlast the Bard cannot be seen. It is also unclear if his message of class struggle is reaching the people. But what is clear is that Mamet writes with a purpose and is unafraid.

## Works Cited

Mamet, David. *American Buffalo*. New York: Grove Press, 1976.

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