
Lyn Sattazahn
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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CLAIMING IDENTITY: THE EFFECT OF THE AMERICAN MYTH ON HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN DAVID MAMET'S AMERICAN BUFFALO, GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, AND SPEED-THE-PLow

by

Lyn Sattazahn

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

Claiming Identity: The Effect of the American Myth on Human Relationships in David Mamet's *American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross, and Speed-the-Plow*

by

Lyn Sattazahn

Dr. Jeffrey Koep, Examination Committee Chair  
Dean of the College of Fine Arts  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

David Mamet’s *American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross, and Speed-the-Plow* explore the damage American business has done to the human spirit. The frontier myth has evolved into exploitative capitalism where competition becomes an obstacle for community and friendship. The characters in these plays try to establish and define their identities by their particular status within the business hierarchy. Unfortunately the nature of competition creates an environment in which the characters use each other’s needs and vulnerabilities for their own gain. To openly express the need for love and community in this climate is to expose weakness. Fear of revealing such vulnerability prohibits Mamet’s characters from accepting their real needs. The conflict between the need for community and the fear of rejection from society because of a weak position within the business structure relegates them to compromised versions of truth and the identities they seek.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 AMERICAN BUFFALO</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 SPEED-THE-PLOW</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In a 1982 interview David Mamet condemns the values of America and describes the vision of the frontier as having evolved into a system of exploitation:

The American dream has gone bad...The idea was that if you got out there, as long as there was something to exploit—whether it was the wild west, the Negroes, the Irish, the Chinese in California, the gold fields, or the timberland—one had the capacity to get rich. This capitalistic dream of wealth turns people against each other (Leahey 3).

Capitalism prescribes free enterprise as the path to individual freedom, but value is determined by price and relationships hinge on potential profitability (Bigsby 201). Personal identity is denied in such a system. Yet, in Mamet’s American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross, and Speed-the-Plow the characters try to establish and define their own identities by their particular status within the business hierarchy. Examining their power struggles, manipulations, betrayals, and shifting alliances reveals characters seeking a notable business status, but their efforts are overwhelmed by competition.

These plays explore the damage business in America has done to the human spirit where the purpose of the soul has been denied by the myths generated in the search for an ideal life (Bigsby 205). Mamet creates characters with a keen awareness of human needs and fears: they shield their own from the world and exploit the same vulnerabilities in others for their own gain. As we shall see, every action in these plays embodies an attempt to define identity. The characters simultaneously strive to harness truth while they bury the profound fear that they may not have essential places within the community. Departing
from the system will only exclude the possibility of community within it. The fear of isolation is so powerful that the characters choose compromised versions of community and love over the prospect of total alienation. Inevitably, resistance to real needs destroys the possibility for discovery of truth and confrontation of fear for these characters. The need for community conflicts with the fear of rejection from society. Their concessions ultimately deny them the identities they seek. However, Mamet's characters commit themselves to the system in the hope it will provide them with a more desirable status than they could create on their own.

Mamet observes that the mass media panders to the lowest in the human experience, and this mindlessness inhibits our quest for truth in art: "Every reiteration of the idea that nothing matters debases the human spirit...It denies what we know to be true...We are destroying ourselves by accepting our own unhappiness" (WR 21). He expresses his observations on the current conditions of society through the theater. People go to the theater to find the answers to the questions of life which are answered by the theatrical artist: "...it is love of the audience--of that which unites the actor and the house: a desire to share something which they know to be true" (20-21). Here theater serves as a metaphor for community in its shared experience between the actors and audience (Bigsby 206).

Mamet is influenced by Thorstein Veblen, an economist and sociologist who wrote at the turn of the century. Veblen was a critic of American capitalism who saw the evolving economic system as a threat to civilization (Dean 92). By exposing the corruptive forces of capitalism dramatically, Mamet condemns American values. Most of his characters subscribe to the rules of society where the goal is to obtain the most materially. Naturally the primary relationship among such characters is rivalry. Claiming one's identity involves eliminating the competition. Succeeding in business supersedes friendship. Commitment to this system subverts any attempt to establish real human intimacy.
Despite contempt for their values, Mamet creates characters for whom he has deep compassion and affection. Much of the strength of his work springs from this sensitivity to his characters who are profoundly vulnerable and in need of love. It is their raw need that makes these characters accessible to an audience which otherwise might scorn them for their immoral behavior. In Mamet’s characters’ struggle for connection we see something of ourselves and are relieved to find our own connection in the shared experience of the theater (Dean 86-87). Our empathy for these characters is facilitated by Mamet’s use of universal elements of human experience in creating roles. Ironically, the truth that the characters deny about themselves through the course of the drama results in the truth that the audience seeks in the experience of the theater. Although the characters are denied the identities they seek by their own actions, the audience witnesses the truth that eludes the characters on stage.

The background of Mamet’s work is a troubled and divided America. *American Buffalo* was written in 1975, certainly influenced by the Watergate fiasco (Dean 87-88) and the disillusionment created by the Vietnam War (Carroll 154-155). Authority figures characterized their actions as taken in the public interest. The “fringe of society” characters plan robberies and use exploitation of others as a means to survive are not surprising given this climate, where those making decisions about public concerns routinely justify their criminal acts. Mamet’s characters often see themselves as outsiders and are desperate to conform to a system that will provide them with a sense of belonging and purpose. However, American business does not allow for individual identity. Self-image is born out of monetary success and status within the system (Dean 87). It is easier for a person to adopt the practices of an unethical society than to fight them. An individual’s acceptance of public myths alleviates and suspends the pressures of adhering to a moral code. The collective consciousness justifies theft and betrayal when it appears everyone else is behaving the same way (32-33). These characters fear the institutions of business because of their far-reaching power over the individual, but accept the
institutional dictates because they can be held responsible for actions the individual would not want to claim as his own (Carroll 20-21).

The impoverished vocabulary of the characters in these plays reflects their need to define their own importance and hide their fears. Their inarticulateness cannot disguise their desire to be heard and understood (Dean 15-16). The use of obscenity is both an effort to create a sense of camaraderie (Hudgins 206) and a defense against a threatening environment. Profane language intimidates an opponent with inferior survival skills. Dexterity with harsh, threatening words sets Mamet's characters apart from their more exploitable targets (Dean 85).

Mamet's settings further illustrate the characters' alienation from society and the effect of an urban culture on its people. The action usually takes place outside the home in places where business is conducted: a junkshop, offices, and even the Chinese restaurant in Glengarry Glen Ross are extensions of business places (Roudane 7). Spiritual dislocation is highlighted through the urban settings. The earlier idea of the frontier produced a story of possibility and promised freedom from existing social boundaries. When that idea failed to materialize people became trapped by the external forces controlling society. Mamet's plays show the distance traveled from the primary myth to the current reality (19-20). His characters inhabit a business world created by the hopes of individual freedom, but powered by the dictates of a jaded society.

In American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross, and Speed-the-Plow, the characters fight to earn a place within an exclusively competitive world while they attempt to define personal, meaningful relationships. Their primary, conscious goal is to achieve business success, while their primary, perhaps unconscious need is to experience community and form a sense of belonging. It is a difficult task and the characters' pervading need for love and truth is often destroyed by their own self-interests and fears (Dean 25-27). Defining identity is the motivating force behind every action. Society denies these characters their desired identities and because they cannot accept such unfavorable
judgments, they create alternate realities by in turn denying the truth. Our own experiences with these common needs for love and acceptance create an intense identification with Mamet’s characters. Recognition that we tend to renounce those needs that make us appear and feel most vulnerable allows us to accept the immoral behavior of characters we would most likely reject in any other than a theatrical forum. Mamet’s characters teach us about our own failings because they are drawn from universal human experiences.
CHAPTER 2

AMERICAN BUFFALO

In 1975 American Buffalo premiered at the Goodman Theatre Stage Two in Chicago, directed by Gregory Mosher. By 1977 the play had won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award after its Broadway run, where it received mixed reviews (Carroll 11-12). John Beaufort wrote in his review: “the playwright’s observations...are too superficial to waste time upon (18) in contrast Jack Kroll said: “Mamet is the first playwright to create a formal and moral shape of out of the undeleted expletives of our foulmouthed language” (79). The 1983 Broadway revival and was more widely accepted as “...the richest, most vital American play of the past decade” (Kissel 120). In short, American Buffalo established Mamet’s reputation as an important playwright who evocatively comments on American business and its social effects (McDonough SM 89).

The trio of characters in American Buffalo plan a robbery that never takes place. Don Dubrow, a junkshop owner, believes he has been taken advantage of by a customer who purchased a buffalo-head nickel in his store. He sets out to get the coin back by getting his young friend Bobby to spy on the customer so that they can break into the yuppie’s apartment when he isn’t home. Don’s “associate” Teach wants to be a part of the scheme and convinces Don to exclude Bobby and add him to the robbery. Their plot disintegrates and the theft is never carried out. Through a series of vicious manipulations created by the nature of competition, all three of Mamet’s characters try to define their individual identities. They justify their immoral actions in the name of business (Carroll 33). As they seek success they also seek the comfort of community and friendship. These pursuits are often in conflict with each other. Much of the play revolves around
each character’s attempt to establish or regain a sense of self-importance and a particular balance of power within each relationship.

Teach interprets free enterprise in America to be: “The freedom...Of the Individual...To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit...In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit...The country’s founded on this...” (AB 72-73). In American Buffalo that course becomes theft and the rules that normally apply to moral behavior are abandoned in favor of achieving success at any cost within the business framework. Teach is ensnared in his version of the American myth of opportunity, believing that everyone has the right to success, irrespective of any moral code of conduct (Schlueter 493-494). Mamet has created in Teach a man consumed by fear of failure and obsessed with his own needs for recognition and accomplishment that he is only able to articulate through paranoid manipulations (498). For example, Teach’s entrance into the junkshop follows the humiliation he felt at the Riverside over Ruthie’s comment, “help yourself” when Teach takes a piece of toast off of her plate. His reaction is both frighteningly and comically overblown: “...only from the mouth of a Southern bullydike asshole ingrate of a vicious nowhere cunt can this trash come” (AB 10-11). The extreme response reveals his insecurity and his perceived exploitation: “I should help myself to half piece of toast...I should have a nickel every time we’re over at the game, I pop for coffee...cigarettes...a sweet roll, never say a word” (10). Teach feels that Ruthie has taken advantage of him, and this outburst is an effort to reassert his threatened identity and hurt ego (McDonough SM 91). By disparaging Ruthie he assuages his feelings of powerlessness and creates a new reality where Ruthie is in a subordinate position, something Teach could not accomplish at the coffee shop or during the previous evening’s poker game. His words establish an imagined position of power.

The fear of being excluded from the impending business transaction causes Teach to undermine nearly every character mentioned in the play. The pervading characterization he seeks to create is that no one but he is trustworthy: Ruthie cheats at
cards, Fletcher stole the pig iron from Ruthie, cheats at cards, and doesn’t show up for the deal, and Bobby is a junkie who tries to use Don’s plan to steal the coin with Fletcher. These are the facts as Teach establishes them to convince Don that he is the only person who can be counted on (King 545). For Teach success and dishonesty are the same (Schlueter 493). His inventions display the anxiety he feels. He longs for friendship and community, but he is so afraid of losing control and appearing weak that he destroys any chance for real connection. The language Teach uses colors everyone around him as an opponent, enemy, or predator: “They treat me like an asshole, they are an asshole...The only way to teach these people is to kill them” (AB 11). Teach’s inability to face his own needs and vulnerabilities consigns him to a life of isolation (Carroll 35).

Teach manufactures a sense of self out of fear not only that Don will choose Bobby over him for the break in, but that Don may deny him friendship. Envying Don’s regard for Bobby, Teach discredits Bobby by mentioning his drug habit, his inexperience and youth. Don defends Bobby against Teach, but is eventually persuaded to cut Bobby out of the plan and to put Teach in his place. Bobby is a real threat to Teach because he sees his relationship with Don as an intrusion. His behavior toward Bobby is aggressive and illogical at times because Teach is confused about his own needs.

Teach’s goal is to participate in the business deal, but he also wants to form a partnership with Don, thereby gaining his respect and approval (Carroll 35-36). Temporarily, Teach regains power and control and this establishes his identity as a businessman and comrade in his mind (McDonough SM 92). In actuality, Teach is neither a real businessman nor true a friend (Schlueter 498). He is straddled between a structure that acknowledges only business success, and his need for community in a society that understands the articulation of a need for love as a sign of weakness. His dilemma results in his constant struggle to gain superiority over the adversary by using survival tactics. In Teach’s world everyone is a competitor. Advantage for one person must be a disadvantage for another (Bigsby 211). This is why Teach cannot be included
in the scheme without ousting Bobby. His feeling of importance has to do with displacing someone who is viewed as an opponent.

Teach's elaboration on the circumstances surrounding the planned break-in illustrates his need for purpose in his life. Although he knows nothing about their mark's life he creates a fiction that becomes very real to him. At Don's suggestion the man may have a safe, Teach launches into a lengthy explanation as to how the safe would pose no problem to his getting the coin collection. His ideas have no basis in fact, every scenario he introduces is pure invention, but within his story Teach creates his own security and self-importance (Bigsby 210-211).

As Teach prepares to rob the man's apartment he loads his revolver. Ironically he explains that he is arming himself against "some crazed lunatic sees you as an invasion of his personal domain" (AB 85). The statement is evidence of his paranoia and mass of contradictions. Teach attempts to identify himself as a reasonable man who must out of necessity protect himself from possible violence. However, he fails to see that he is the intruder and the potential perpetrator of violence. In reference to the police Teach says: "They have the right idea. Armed to the hilt. Stick, Mace, knives...They have the right idea. Social customs break down, next thing everybody's lying in the gutter" (AB 86). Carrying a gun is an act of self-preservation for Teach; he is not capable of seeing himself as a prime example of what he fears in society. Through language Teach identifies himself as a potential victim. He admires the police for protecting themselves, but in his confusion of values he cannot see that he is the law breaker whom they arm themselves against (Dean 95-96).

When Bobby reenters the junkshop as Teach is about to leave for the robbery he announces that Fletch has been mugged and is in the hospital. Teach doesn't believe the news and suspects Bobby of double-crossing Don by stealing the nickel with Fletch. By conflating facts from separate events, Teach creates a new reality and persuades Don to accept his logic. Don questions Bobby about the hospital Fletch is in. Bobby is unsure
and names the wrong hospital. Don’s building distrust of Bobby fuels Teach’s behavior. Assuming Bobby is lying and has taken advantage of them, Teach hits Bobby “viciously” on the head. Moments later Ruthie’s phone call reveals Bobby was telling the truth; Teach’s violent overreaction proves to be self-defeating. He uses physical force to regain power that he thought he had lost, but his impulses cost him any strength he may have had (Dean 100-101).

In his own confusion Teach lashes out and destroys the junkshop. The story he invented has been shattered by the truth. Bobby admits he lied about seeing the man leave his apartment, Fletch really has been mugged, and Don sees the reality of the situation. Out of anger and frustration Teach commits another violent act by trashing Don’s store. The business is called off, but more importantly Don recognizes Teach’s manipulations and half-truths, and he hits Teach. Teach has sought friendship, community, and business success, but his own behavior prevents him from getting anything he needs. His outburst in the junkshop follows Bobby’s admission that he lied about seeing the man leave and Teach pretends to react to Bobby’s dishonesty: “The Whole Entire World. There Is No Law. There Is No Right And Wrong. The World Is Lies. There Is No Friendship...We all live like cavemen (AB 103). Teach is actually angry over his own feeling of powerlessness, but he cannot take any responsibility for his actions. His words reflect his vision of the world, but not his participation in it. He sees himself as a victim because he did not succeed (Dean 100-101).

Teach is a very desperate man who is struggling to survive in a harsh world. He lives a temporary existence at a hotel and slips to reveal he had to pawn his watch to buy the gun, he didn’t break it as he had told Don. Although Teach creates the chaos he lives in, he feels betrayed by Don and by the environment: “I went on a limb for you...I put my dick on the chopping block...I go out there. I’m out there every day...There is nothing out there...I fuck myself” (AB 103-104). In Teach’s eyes he is doing everything that he can to succeed, but his dissatisfaction comes from his futile efforts to establish friendship.
At the end of the play Teach asks Don four consecutive times if he is mad at him. These are his pleas for forgiveness. It is vital to Teach that he retain some connection with Don, but he is unable to apologize. Fear of revealing weakness and vulnerability prohibits him from resolving the tension with words. As he leaves the junkshop his concern with the paper hat he has made emphasizes his struggle with identity, for he worries that he looks like a sissy. Teach feels weak because he has submitted to Don’s will.

Mamet says that *American Buffalo* is really about Don’s decision to betray Bobby (Roudane “Interview” 76). At the beginning of the play Bobby apologizes to Don for failing at a simple business arrangement they had agreed upon. Don advises Bobby about correct business conduct: “...If you want to do business...if we got a business deal, it isn’t good enough” (*AB* 3). Don establishes the precedence business takes over other concerns at the outset: “That’s what business *is*...People taking *care* of themselves...'Cause there’s business and there’s friendship...and what you got to do is keep clear who your friends are, and who treated you like what...”(7). Don’s words foreshadow his eventual betrayal of Bobby. Business supersedes friendship. During the course of the action, though Don acknowledges his mistake, there is redemption in the end.

Don bases his identity both in his self-appointed position as teacher to Bobby and in his role as an established proprietor. But Don’s sale a buffalo-head nickel to a customer who wanders into his resale shop undermines that identification. Before the man picked up the coin it had no value to Don, but after the man buys it for ninety dollars Don feels cheated and exploited (Schlueter 492-493): “He comes in here like I’m his fucking doorman...He takes me off my coin and will I call him if I find another one...Doing me a favor by just coming in my shop” (*AB* 31). By plotting to steal the nickel back, Don regains his sense of control in a business context. His identity as a businessman and possessor of power in the sale is undercut because the man knew the value of the coin and Don did not (Schuelter 492). The business ethic itself justifies
planning the robbery as revenge. Don sees the theft as appropriate because he believes the man has taken advantage of him. Mamet, then, criticizes the American business ethic, pointing out that there is no distinction between petty thieves and “lackeys of business”: “Part of the American myth is that a difference exists, that at a certain point vicious behavior becomes laudable” (Gottlieb 4). The action in the junkshop represents the corrupt practices in American business that are accepted simply because they are done in the course of business.

Don also defines his identity through his relationship to Bobby as teacher and protector. Their relationship clear from the start of the play. Don is in the position of power and the master of authority. It is Bobby who asks for forgiveness and Don who forgives and doles out advice. In business Don does not have much authentic power by way of money or status. His reaction to the sale of the buffalo-head nickel illustrates his business naivete. Revenge is more important to him than finding out the real value of the coin. Assigning himself the role of teacher to Bobby gives him an automatic place of superiority and a sense of purpose. Bobby is a willing student and their affection for each other is sincere in spite of the obvious residuals of the friendship in which each character retains a sense of self-importance. Don is the superior in a power relationship. Counseling Bobby allows him to elevate his own knowledge and experience beyond its own merits. The more Don advises Bobby on the rules of business, the more Don becomes an authority on the subject (Hubert-Leibler 70-72). Don implies that if Bobby follows his advice he too can succeed in business: “...this is why I’m telling you to stand up...That’s all business is...common sense, experience, and talent” (AB 6).

Acting as Bobby’s mentor may be the only way Don can attain a dominant position, but the relationship is also about connection and love. Don assumes a paternal role with Bobby, concerning himself with Bobby’s eating habits: “Breakfast...is the most important meal of the day...You can’t live on coffee...You may feel good, you may feel fine, but something’s getting overworked, and you are going to pay for it” (AB 8).
Simultaneously Don is able to assert authority, impart knowledge, and demonstrate real concern for Bobby's well-being. Their alliance somehow satisfies the need for intimacy and communication. Don has power over Bobby, but for the most part does not abuse his position. Bobby is an eager student and there is a mutual exchange between them, with each of them benefiting from the friendship (Hubert-Leibler 75-76).

But Don's obsessive goal is to get the coin back, and he allows the importance of a so-called business transaction to interfere with his relationship with Bobby. Teach's arguments about Bobby's inadequacy for the job stir doubt in Don's mind. Preying on Don's own self-image as a serious player, Teach questions Don's business sense: "a guy can be too loyal...Don't be dense on this. What are we saying here? Business..." (AB 34). Don does not want to appear too "soft" toward Bobby (Dean 116); Teach's words threaten Don's self-image. The loyalty Don demonstrates for Bobby begins to wane as Teach persuades Don that Bobby may compromise his success. Money is the primary consideration, and Don allows Teach to manipulate him for the sake of money. Their new arrangement offers them the comfort of self-sufficiency in making a business decision. In this context it gives Don license to betray Bobby (Schlueter 494-495). As Teach has implicated everyone around them as liars and cheats, Don comes to accept Teach's unfounded scenarios. Bobby's possession of another buffalo-head nickel seems to confirm the doubt created in Don's mind. He suspects he is losing control and is being deceived by the one person he thought he had control over (McDonough SM 92). Thus, when Bobby returns to the junkshop to tell Don that Fletch was mugged, because he names the wrong hospital and has earlier offered Don a coin like the one he sold, Don believes he has been duped. Naturally using revenge as punishment, Don allows Teach to brutalize Bobby with questions and physical violence (Hubert-Leibler 76). In the moments just after Bobby is injured Don is still assuming a paternal role, this time as a harsh disciplinarian: "You brought this on yourself...Now we don't want to hit you...You know we didn't want to do this to you" (AB 94-95), but his tone is threatening. Once
Don realizes Bobby is innocently acting out of love for him, his paternal role shifts to that of a worried and guilty father, insisting they take Bobby immediately to the hospital. Amid the chaos he created, Teach pleads with Don to keep Bobby out of the deal. The truth revealed, Don turns on Teach: “Shut up...It’s done now...I’m saying this is over...You leave the kid alone” (AB 98). Taking control, Don realizes that Bobby is a genuine friend and that Teach is the one who cannot be trusted. However, Don recognizes his own hypocrisy and as he forgives himself he forgives Teach as well.

The ending of the play is quietly optimistic and hopeful about the future of these men. By discerning his own mistakes Don commands a strength he had not displayed through his earlier self-centered behavior. Both Teach and Bobby appeal to Don for forgiveness, and Don’s position of power is restored as order is restored in his trashed junkshop. The redemptive force of friendship and community is clear: while men have the capacity to do terrible things to each other in the name of business, they also have a tremendous capacity for forgiveness. Forgiveness is a necessary element because men need each other as much as they need to carve out an identity in the system. Don’s betrayal of Bobby is horrifying, not only because we see Bobby’s innocence, but because we see just how self-centered Don’s behavior is—he never considers how important the robbery is to Bobby (Schlueter 497).

Within the teacher-student relationship, Bobby assumes the role of the student to Don’s teacher (Hubert-Leibler 76). Bobby listens and takes to heart Don’s lessons about friendship and to a certain extent his advice on business. He is eager to gain Don’s approval. This is clear from the first moments of the play where Bobby apologizes to Don. Acting as an apprentice in Don’s business world, Bobby gets the opportunity to take on responsibility as he spies on the man who bought the nickel. He fails at this assignment because he took his eyes off of the man’s apartment. Don points out his disappointment and uses Fletcher as an example of someone to emulate: “You take him and you put him down in some strange town with just a nickel in his pocket, and by
nightfall he'll have that town by the balls" (AB 4). Bobby echoes Don by admiring Fletch's card-playing skills and, trying to continue Don's example of Fletch's business prowess, he suggests that Fletch stole the pig iron from Ruthie. Absorbing Don's philosophy like a sponge, Bobby interprets Fletch's dishonest behavior as good business. Of course, Don rephrases for Bobby that Fletch didn't steal the pig iron, that it was business, and that business is people taking care of themselves. Again business justifies immoral behavior.

Bobby bases his identity in his relationship to Don. Here, friendship is a form of identification (McDonough SM 92). Although little is revealed about his past, we know that Bobby is or was a drug addict. Acceptance in Don's world gives him a new place and a sense of purpose. He is given some responsibility, and this in turn gives him some stability. The mutual need for affection is fulfilled through their teacher-student relationship. Often Don behaves like a father toward Bobby, and Bobby depends on Don for nearly everything from breakfast to money to vitamins. Don obviously has the power and uses it to get friendship from Bobby who reciprocates with loyalty and gratitude. Their relationship is a contract of reciprocal affection. Each is able to retain a sense of self and recover a defined identity that escapes them outside the friendship (Hubert-Leibler 76-77).

The events of the play actually hinge on a lie. Bobby lies and tells Don that he saw the man who bought the coin leave his apartment with his suitcase. The lie is perpetuated throughout the play because Bobby desperately needs Don's approval. By apparently succeeding at the job he is given, Bobby will be seen not only as an obedient student, but he will be able to help his friend get back the dignity that eludes him with the loss of the coin. His appearance with the second buffalo-head nickel has nothing to do with betrayal as Teach insists, but is a profound and innocent act of friendship. Bobby wants to give back to Don what he recognizes Don has lost. Ironically, Bobby has learned this lesson of friendship from Don's lectures, the same words that establish Don's
hypocrisy (McDonough SM 92).

Mamet's title is a metaphor for his vision of the American myth as translated into the American business world. The buffalo is a figure symbolic of the exploitation of the Old West, a once powerful presence that was reduced to near extinction. The attainment of the American dream of freedom is transformed merely into money. Money is the object of all business deals, and Don's business is the pursuit of a buffalo-head nickel that he considers worthless until an outsider assigns it value. His prosperity becomes dependent not on hard work, but on the success of a robbery (Schlueter 493). The play's setting suggests that the mythical American West has declined into a junkshop, where Don resells discarded items of the past. The junk, remnants from the “Century of Progress” exhibition at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, represents moral regression as a result of material progress and the eventual, “absurd” fate of the material.

Mamet describes capitalism as an enabling myth rooted in greed (Bigsby 209), and his characters in American Buffalo embody the loss of individual identity and traditional human values that have been swept away and replaced by a maladjusted morality (Schlueter 499). At the end of the play we are left feeling optimistic about the future of these characters, but we have witnessed the journey and the “invisible violence” these men inflict upon each other and themselves (Dean 194).

Don, Bobby, and Teach are capable of forming genuine, intimate friendships, but their self-interests and fears destroy their potential relationships for most of the play. Individual identity has been denied them by “legitimate” business and they attempt to capture it in an alternate fashion. Teach's false statements always attempt to secure an identity separate from what he fears about himself. The teacher-student roles of Don and Bobby are the most important roles in the play. Ironically those roles are reversed at the end of the play where Bobby unknowingly teaches Don that friendship and love are more important than any business success. In Mamet's essay “First Principles” he observes: “theatrical repetition...can and will in time help teach that it is possible and pleasant to
substitute action for inaction, courage for cowardice, humanity for selfishness” (WR 27).

As an audience we see the lesson learned by each character and recognize the time and effort expended to change our own self-defeating behavior. As Mamet suggests, repetition of the lesson, whether it emerges through our witnessing his characters’ struggles or our own battles, confronting the darkness of the human soul can lead to change and ultimately, enlightenment through art.
CHAPTER 3

Glengarry Glen Ross

David Mamet continues to explore the absence of morality in the American business ethic in his Pulitzer Prize winning play Glengarry Glen Ross (Bruster 342). The play observes a society based on business where capitalism creates the incentives and the context that drive the characters (Carroll 32). The men are completely defined by their jobs as salesmen in a real estate office which serves as a microcosm of American business (Worster 375). A sales contest pits the men against each other: the highest grossing salesman wins a Cadillac, the runner-up gets a set of steak knives, and the remainder will be fired. The key is to get the premium sales leads and the efforts to get them are variously through bribery, theft, and actually closing a sale. Pressure in such a system is intense. Only one man can win, therefore only one man secures a successful identity (McDonough 86-87). Fierce competition requires skilled players if they are to stay in the game. Selling undeveloped, worthless land in Florida, the salesmen have learned survival techniques and are the proverbial “confidence men” who rely on the dreams and vulnerabilities of their prospective buyers for closing a sale. They are actors and story-tellers who prey on the needs of hope and reassurance of their unsuspecting clients. Exploitation and duplicity are virtues in a system that only recognizes achievement by assigning it a value—in this case, the highest numbers get the Cadillac (Bigsby 214-215).

The opening scene is a salesman and his boss in a booth at a Chinese restaurant. The salesman is Levene, an aging, unsuccessful man desperately trying to save his job, and therefore, his identity. In order to get access to the premium leads, Levene attempts
to assert power through language. It is obvious in Scene One that despite his minimal responses, Williamson has the power. He “marshals” the leads and Levene has no strength under the circumstances because he can’t close a sale. Levene’s sentences are broken and his thoughts are scattered, signs of a man in a weak position: “...I don’t want to tell you your job. All that I’m saying, things get set...A guy gets a reputation. We know how this...all I’m saying, put a closer on the job...Put a...wait a second...” (GGR 15). These lines reveal Levene’s futile strategies to manipulate Williamson. Clearly Levene spirals out of any control he may have. He says he doesn’t want to tell Williamson how to do his job, when that is exactly what he is doing. The use of “we” is a ploy to align himself with Williamson, the next line identifies Levene as the “closer”, and the unfinished thoughts and Levene’s plea to “wait a second” indicate that Williamson is non-verbally rejecting what Levene says. Persuading with language is Levene’s job and he uses his sales approach to try to convince Williamson of his worth. He bullies his boss with too much talking, afraid that if he stops Williamson will absolutely reject him (Bigsby 216).

The use of self-referential speech emphasizes Levene’s attempt to assert verbal authority over Williamson (Worster 376). His sentences often begin with, “I want to tell you...” and “Let me tell you...” (GGR 15-27). Levene calls attention to his speech in order to establish his identity. By announcing he is speaking, Levene is trying to secure Williamson as the non-speaker. If he can accomplish this, he puts himself in a more strategic position of authority.

Mitch and Murray are the owners and the dictators of the real estate office. They never appear, but it is evident that they are the guiding force behind the sales contest. Both Levene and Williamson use their obvious pervading presence as a reference point. It allows Williamson to remove himself from responsibility with regard to the leads (Cullick 26): “I do what I’m hired to do...I’m hired to watch the leads...I’m given a policy. My job is to do that. What I’m told. That’s it...” (GGR 19). Trying to persuade
Williamson that he is respected by the owners, Levene recalls when he was the top salesman: "...talk to Murray. Talk to Mitch...who paid for his fucking car? You talk to him...He came in, ‘You bought that for me Shelly’" (GGR 18). The lines point out that Williamson is not the ultimate authority and that Levene was once valuable to the company, despite his recent sales performance.

The effort to put Williamson in a weaker position is in vain. Levene resorts to begging: "...don’t look at the board, look at me. Shelly Levene...You know who I am...I NEED A SHOT" (GGR 22). His words reflect his desperation to sell because without a role in the sales contest, Levene is completely lost. Fighting for his life he insists on being acknowledged. There is no distinction between his professional life and his social position, they are one and the same. Likewise it is difficult to separate Levene’s emotional pleas from his sales pitch (Cullick 25).

When Williamson resists Levene’s pleadings, Levene makes an offer to pay for the premium leads. The use of language to obtain power fails and Levene resorts to making a business deal. Psychological manipulations abandoned, Levene realizes that Williamson can only be bought. Ironically Levene “sells” Williamson, but it is Williamson who is accepting money, thus he maintains his position of power within the arrangement (Cullick 26).

The salesmen are committed to a system that denies them the status within it to change the rules. Finding the rules unfair, Moss in Scene Two justifies creating his own rules by robbing the office (Cullick 26): “Someone should stand up and strike back...Somebody...Should do something to them...Something to pay them back...Someone...should hurt them. Murray and Mitch” (GGR 37). There is a striking similarity to the events in American Buffalo: the feeling of being taken advantage of inspires plans for a robbery to reclaim a superior position. In neither play do the characters propose to get out of the system, they simply choose to seek revenge on it. Moss realizes that as a salesman he is at the mercy of the owners, Mitch and Murray, and...
the prospective buyers: “How you goan’a get on the board sell’n a Polack? And I’ll tell you...what else: don’t ever try to sell an Indian...Patel...They like to talk to salesmen...Never bought a fucking thing” (GGR 29-30). Moss is completely defined by being a salesman, by being able to actually sell, and these people affect his ability to do that (Hudgins 212). Being unable to close a sale with the leads he is given and unable to keep his job without a sale, Moss must establish an identity. The robbery is an attempt to recover what he believes he has been denied.

At the beginning of the scene with Aaronow the conversation about a robbery is merely an abstract idea. Moss at first insists that he is only speaking about a hypothetical situation. He uses language to position Aaronow as the listener and possible accessory. The intention is to persuade Aaronow to recognize his self-proclaimed authority to change the rules (Worster 378). Aaronow actually possesses the real power because he determines the value of Moss’ proposal. If Aaronow accepts Moss’s statements as truth, Moss wins the personal struggle. Simply by making the statement, Moss tries to make Aaronow an accessory to his proposed crime. Aaronow’s participation in the seemingly hypothetical discussion is blameless. Asking a lot of questions, Aaronow contributes to Moss’s strategy to implicate him in the plan even though he is innocent. Moss subtly manipulates Aaronow’s words when he asks about Jerry Graff’s price: “What could somebody get for them?” Moss rephrases: “What could we get for them?” (GGR 38). The hypothetical is made personal by the change of a pronoun (Cullick 29). When the scene begins the two men appear to be allies, discussing the difficulty of selling to “Polacks”, but as the action unfolds Moss reveals he is setting Aaronow up to participate in the break in and Moss plans to cheat him in the process (30). As Aaronow asks about the pay off arrangement: “What is the five grand...You said you were going to split five...”, Moss replies: “I lied...My end is my business...In or out...you’re out you take the consequences” (GGR 46). Moss intimidates Aaronow by using adversarial language to gain a dominant position (Cullick 30). The skills of the salesmen are turned
against each other (Bigsby 216). As the play ultimately reveals, Aaronow does not reveal
his prior knowledge of the break in, and Moss recruits Levene for the crime.

Verbal domination is used in a seemingly passive and surprising way in Scene
Three. Roma is talking to another customer in the Chinese restaurant at table next to him.
The conversation resembles the dialogue in Scenes One and Two. However, as a reversal
of Scene One, the power is possessed by the speaker (Bigsby 216). Roma is controlling
the direction of the conversation by overwhelming Lingk with shocking questions and
lengthy monologues. The subject of the conversation appears to be Roma’s philosophical
reflections about life. Roma is actually disarming the prospective client from rejecting
his sales pitch (Cullick 33). The object of Roma’s speech is not revealed as the
introduction to his sales pitch until the last line of the scene: “Listen to what I’m going to
tell you now:” (GGR 51).

Roma commands Lingk to listen to him. The would-be client is deceived and
controlled by Roma’s choice of language, ostensibly this is a man-to man talk. Using
language to bridge the gap between the salesman and consumer, Roma weaves elements
of truth with universal concerns--money, security, and comfort (Cullick 31). Words are
used as a mechanism to deceive (Bigsby 199). Lingk comes to trust Roma on the basis of
their common spiritual needs: “...what is our life?...Where is the moment?...How can I be
secure?...Through amassing wealth beyond all measure? No...that’s a sickness. That’s a
trap...There is no measure. Only greed...God protect me. I am powerless” (GGR 49).
Roma’s feigned concern for Lingk results in a (temporary) business deal (McDonough
201). The scene shows the true skill of the salesman. He is able to create a connection
with a stranger in whom he recognizes the need to believe in something (Bigsby 217).
Using language to create a new reality, Roma is able to serve his own best interests by
making a sale (Cullick 31).

The salesmen are always subject to unseen, outside forces. Roma’s closed deal
with Lingk fails because Lingk’s wife is suspicious of its validity. Consistently Mitch
and Murray are mentioned. They are the controllers of the salesmen’s fate. Mitch and Murray have instituted the “sales contest” that is the obstacle for all of the salesmen (Cullick 32). Only one salesman can win. The contest poses a real threat to the characters whole identity is defined by their ability to succeed as salesmen (Worster 375). They are working in an environment that allows them to exercise free will, but harshly limits the choices available to them (Bruster 337). Their survival depends on their success in “closing” the sale, but they exist in a system they cannot control. Their aggressive, profane language is a reflection of that reality (Cullick 35).

Language often functions as a way to create and control a new, imagined reality (Bruster 337). The characters often make statements based on nothing but the need to invent an identity and this is illustrated through verbal domination of another person. The speech articulates the lack of control the salesmen feel. The language gives “Nothing” shape and sound (Zinman 215).

The word choices illustrate the inability of the characters to articulate their confusion and awareness of their limited situation. Profanity, choppy phrases, and incomplete statements are indicative of the unstable mental process (Bruster 338). Vocabulary choice reveals characters who are assigning identity to each other. Much of the salesmen’s speech emasculates men who are seen as weak and less valuable. Williamson is consistently a target for the salesmen to call names. Within the system he symbolizes its irrational logic. Adding to the salesmen’s frustration, Williamson strictly adheres to the company policy. Homosexual and female gender slurs are consistently used in reference to Williamson. The effect of labeling him as a debased version of the male allows the salesmen to separate their identities from him (Radavich 129). After Williamson interferes with Roma trying to save his closed sale with Lingk, Roma uses abusive language to define Williamson’s status among the salesmen: “You just cost me six thousand dollars...And one Cadillac...You fucking shit. Where did you learn your trade. You stupid fucking cunt. You idiot. Whoever told you you could work with
men?" (GGR 96). Roma establishes his superiority by ridiculing Williamson’s position.

The need to redefine identity indicates the system denies individualism. The characters attempt to overcome the identity crisis by their actions. Their response to society’s expectations about masculinity is to emasculate the person who is an obstacle (McDonough 201). Name-calling is an assertion of power. The salesmen’s economic success depends upon their facility with words. By calling Williamson derogatory names, Roma has created an imaginary reality that the office manager is what they determine him to be by the language that is used to describe him. This is an aggressive act of control. In the salesmen’s eyes, language can assign identity.

Roma’s ideology is presented as attractive by show of his self-confidence, but there is no sense or reason to it. Words are a means to an end (Bruster 338). Roma’s primary appeal comes from the self-assurance he displays. He is smoothly deceptive in his approach to Lingk and never does the audience suspect he won’t succeed.

Identity is defined by the success of the individual salesman. The top salesman is recognized as truly masculine. Because the achievement of success is limited to only a few salesmen who can attain the top salesman position, the majority do not find an identity recognized as truly masculine (McDonough 201). The characters believe that identity is only measured by a man’s ability to do his job. Levene tells Williamson: “You have no idea of your job. A man’s his job...” (GGR 75). Levene’s statement asserts verbal authority, assigns identity by stating Williamson’s inability to do his job and Levene’s belief about his own identity. The implication is that Williamson is a failure, not defined in terms of masculinity, but in weaker, feminine terms (McDonough 202).

When Levene admits to the robbery, his first thought is about reclaiming his identity as a successful salesman. He has just closed a significant sale and the consequences of the robbery are secondary concerns. The money Levene received for the robbery is less important than Levene regaining his status as a successful salesman. In
fact the apparent success of the robbery gives Levene the confidence to close the sale. Recalling the morning’s sale to the Nyborgs, Levene is brimming with joy and strength. He tells Roma how he took control: “I don’t want to go round this, and pussy-foot around the thing, you have to look back on this. I do, too. I came here to do good for you and me. For both of us...The only arrangement I’ll accept is full investment. Period” (GGR 73). Levene’s demeanor is remarkably different from his appearance in Scene One with Williamson.

The relationships between the characters are constantly shifting because of their self-serving purposes. There is a contradiction of community and competition among the salesmen. The setting of Act One is significant. The salesmen conduct business in a Chinese restaurant. The statement is that socializing and business cannot be removed from each other (McDonough 94). The situations in each scene appear different, but each salesman dominating the conversation is trying to make a business deal. In Scene One, Levene is trying to convince Williamson to give him better leads. Ultimately the scene ends with a business transaction—Levene will pay for the leads. Moss tries to make Aaronow an accessory to his future crime in Scene Two. Roma’s dialogue with Lingk appears to be personal, but it is a lead into his sales pitch. These scenes take place in a social setting. The suggestion is that these men are never “not selling” (McDonough 201).

Still, the sense of community is apparent in Levene and Roma’s “partnership” when Lingk comes to the ransacked office to cancel his sale. Levene poses as a wealthy client of Roma’s. Levene and Roma are adversaries who temporarily become partners to exercise control over a client. Levene’s intention is to help Roma keep the sale. The act is one of camaraderie. They are also united in their treatment of Williamson, who interferes with the deception of Lingk. Williamson is seen as an outsider because he does not understand the language of the salesmen. Williamson’s lie is an effort to help Roma, but because he fails all the current partnership between Levene and Roma is dissolved.
because there is no further need for it (Cullick 33-34).

Levene sides with Roma in the attack against Williamson. For a moment the salesmen are a force against the system, but the relationships quickly shift when the sale is canceled. Roma and Levene agree to be sales partners, but as soon as Levene is out of earshot, Roma plans to renege on their supposed agreement: "Williamson...when the leads come in I want my top two off the list. For me...Anything you give Levene...I GET HIS ACTION" (GGR 107). There is a constant shift between a sense of community and competition among the characters (Cullick 34-36).

In Glengarry Glen Ross the characters' aggressive, unethical behavior is the only way they can survive in the given environment. The salesmen choose to commit themselves to a system in which they have no real control. No business deals are ever successfully completed during the course of the play. The obstacle to success is always something from the outside--Lingk's wife, Mitch and Murray, and Bruce and Harriet Nyborg. The garbled language of the salesmen is an attempt to articulate their confusion, frustration, and ineffectiveness. Roma tells Williamson: "Anyone in this office lives on their wits..." (GGR 96). Although they do not succeed as salesmen, the characters learn to survive in spite of the system. They do not establish any real connection to each other. The competition within the sales office stops friendship and loyalty. Any act of selflessness can only weaken one's position in the competition. Survival depends on fulfilling one's own needs of business success and making the needs of community and love secondary.
CHAPTER 4

Speed-the-Plow

*Speed-the-Plow* premiered on Broadway in 1988, directed by Gregory Mosher. The story of two movie executives is no doubt derived from Mamet’s observations and experiences as a screenwriter and film director in Hollywood. His Hollywood is the most jaded and morally aware sector of American business. It is markedly different from *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* in two respects: the men in business are succeeding within the rules of the system and its values and a woman character is included in the stage action who directly impacts the protagonist’s decisions. The presence of a woman heightens the competition between Bobby Gould and Charlie Fox and threatens their professed loyalty to each other and their long-standing business relationship (McDonough, SM 92). Most importantly though, her presence and assertion of her own identity causes Gould to question his direction and purpose in life and he, at least temporarily, considers abandoning materialism for spirituality.

The play begins in the office of Bobby Gould, a recently promoted movie executive, who is planning another formulaic “buddy film” with Charlie Fox, his old friend and associate. Fox brings Gould a proposal for a film with Doug Brown, clearly an important name in Hollywood, that is sure to make money, which is the only business objective for either Fox or Gould. They make plans to see Ross, Gould’s boss, to pitch the idea. In Gould’s words the movie can be summed up as: “a buddy film, a prison film, Douggie Brown, blah, blah, some girl...Action, blood, social theme...” (*STP* 12). Thus, it meets all the criteria for a money-making film.

In their excitement over the dream of making lots of money, both men overly
praise each other’s loyalty and friendship. Gould recognizes that Fox “could have gone Across the Street. Who would have blamed you?” (STP 15). Their friendship is based on business and what each can offer to the other in terms of that success (McDonough, SM 92-93). As a subordinate to Gould, Fox uses manipulation to preserve his dignity and salve his resentment at being in a subservient position to someone he respects only for his professional stature or power. Fox’s detail in recounting Doug Brown’s visit to his home shows his skill at promoting his own importance. He is quick to mention that Doug Brown came to his house to discuss a script Fox had sent to him as he is having coffee. The intimation is that Brown wants to deal personally with Fox, making Fox indispensable to the project. Protestations of loyalty and friendship are actually manipulations to persuade Gould that Fox has an important role in Gould’s own success. Fox is actually proud of the opportunity he has created for himself. Loyalty is an empty proclamation from Fox. Gould is merely his strongest connection, his best avenue to seal the transaction with Doug Brown and his clearest path to success. Fox doesn’t acknowledge Gould’s concerns that he is being exploited for his new position until after Fox gets a commitment from Gould to pitch the idea to Ross. As long as Gould is agreeable, Fox is loyal.

Comically, the attraction Fox has to the plot of the prison film is more than a vehicle to propel him to wealth and power. The hero of the film, faced with the threat of being raped by other prisoners, offers friendship as an alternative to his future retaliation. This is not unlike Fox’s perspective throughout the play. Delirious at the prospect of being rich and getting his due position, Fox plans his own retaliation: “...when you spend twenty years in the barrel...oh maan...I’m gonna settle some fucken’ scores...Ross isn’t going to fuck me out of this...?” (STP 22). Fox’s statements parallel the movie protagonist’s: Fox offers friendship in exchange for doing things his way. He could have “Gone Across the Street”, but Fox uses his relationship with Gould to sell the idea because it is his best chance at success. Feeling he is owed this success for his time and
effort, Fox is ready to abuse whatever power the "buddy film" affords him. His rationale is that because he could have taken the film elsewhere Gould owes him some control over the project. The fear that the unseen, controlling powers (Ross) will take prosperity away from Fox is very real to him. He speaks about the money the film could make in the present tense, as if it had already been made. Every statement about money assures Fox of his projected identity as a force to be reckoned with.

Gould and Fox happily refer to each other as "Old Whores" who allow themselves to be exploited for the sake of money. They do not make decisions on the basis of their more substantive desires, but only for the prospect of making money. Each is acutely aware of his position within the hierarchy: Fox defers to Gould, Gould defers to Ross. Self-image is limited to one's particular status within the business structure (McDonough, SM 92-93). Fox is more attuned to his status than Gould because he is by his own admission always riding Gould's coattails. His investment in this project is complete because he has already claimed its success and redefined his identity in the process. This is ironic given the emptiness of their work: when Fox muses on what he is going to do today, Gould replies: "Go to a movie, get your hair done" (STP 23). Fox's obsession with the film is made more reasonable in view of the unfulfilling nature of their actual work. The job itself denies them purpose beyond generating a profit. We observe them talk about work, but, as in American Buffalo and Glengarry Glen Ross, no work is ever actually accomplished.

At the beginning of the play Gould asks Fox to read from the Radiation book for "fun", because if you're "...too busy to have 'fun' this business...then what are you...if you're just a slave to commerce?" (STP 4). Fox ignores the invitation until the deal is approved by Gould, then he reads it and sarcastically suggests Gould make it into a film. Fox is truly a slave to commerce because he is obsessed with profit and his identity is only established by his role within the system. In this way he is akin to the salesmen in Glengarry Glen Ross, he accepts the rules of the system and plays by the rules, as self-
defeating as they are. Fearing exclusion from the community of the movie-making business, Fox demonstrates loyalty to the business itself, but professes devotion to Gould. Upon Karen’s entrance in Gould’s office, Fox reaffirms his loyalty to Gould, as if trying to convince himself as well as Gould and Karen, who is merely a temporary worker and lacks the status Fox is committed to achieving. Still, Fox recognizes the chaos and decadence surrounding him: “...in this sinkhole of slime and depravity, something is about to work out” (STP 28). The men accept their decayed surroundings because business is their chosen forum where success can be earned and identity defined.

The spirit of competition inspires Fox to challenge Gould to a bet. He bets Gould five hundred dollars Karen won’t deal with him in any other than a professional way. Simply, no one sees Gould for himself. Fox cannot conceive that Gould could have worth separate from his professional role. The bet devalues Gould as a person—no matter what the outcome he loses. If Karen does sleep with Gould he cannot be regarded for anything other than his position, and if she rejects Gould he has been depreciated by a lowly temporary secretary. This is why Fox cannot accept Gould’s decision to greenlight the Radiation film. He points out that Gould will be a laughingstock because the film won’t make any money. However, Fox feels completely powerless because Gould controls his fate and in Fox’s eyes Gould has let a temporary worker destroy his earned future.

When Fox hits Gould, that violence springs from his feeling of powerlessness. Fox feels betrayed, but is more concerned with profiting from the proposed film project than with reclaiming his friendship. Attributing Karen’s ambition to Gould's change of mind, Fox accuses Gould of being lured in by her. Fox cannot imagine anyone being sincere. In his mind Karen must have positioned herself to gain authority. It is impossible for Fox to see that anyone would not try to take advantage of someone who has power. Fox protests forcefully enough to cast doubt in Gould’s newly converted mind. Caught between Fox and Karen, Gould asks Karen if she would have gone to bed
with him if he hadn’t agreed to do the Radiation film. Her answer is “no” and Gould is
lost in confusion. Fox seizes on the opportunity Gould’s vulnerability affords and turns
the situation back in his favor. Fox successfully manipulates Gould into thinking that
Karen is just like them, someone willing to exploit herself for business ends. Her
presence threatens not only the “buddy film” Fox desperately wants to make, but his
security in his own world (McDonough, SM 93-94). Feeling his authority threatened,
Fox in turn threatens Karen: “You ever come on the lot again, I’m going to have you
killed” (STP 80). Despite the harshness of Fox’s language, he reveals his own fears of
losing control. Karen’s ability to control his fate terrifies him and the only way for him
to assuage that fear is to destroy her.

Fox displays a keen awareness of universal desires. He understands Gould’s
needs because he has rejected them himself. Recognizing Gould’s disillusionment he
says: “Well, Bob, you’re human. You think I don’t know? I know. We wish people
would like us, huh? To Share Our Burdens. But it’s not to be...I know what you wanted,
Bob. You wanted to do good” (STP 81). Fox’s insight is surprising given his actions.
Aware of the decadence that surrounds him, he nevertheless chooses to devote his life to
the business. He understands the difficulty of finding connection and abandons that need
in favor of something easier to attain. For him, choosing his job over truth and love is an
acceptable alternative to possible rejection. Dedication to work provides security and
alleviates the fear of isolation. Gould and Fox return to the plan to make the Douggie
Brown picture under the guise of friendship and solidarity, but both men’s identities are
contingent upon the business deals they make together (McDonough, SM 94).

Karen is a more ambiguous character. Mamet here succeeds in creating a female
role that functions as much more than a device to pit the men’s ideologies against each
other. She is an outsider to the establishment and her point of view challenges what
Gould has not been able to question in his own actions. Her presence is powerful
because her outsider’s perspective allows her to bring truth and confrontation of fear to
the forefront of business. At first glance she is a bumbling secretary who does more to aggravate Gould than to assist him. She cannot find Ross's name on the console, make coffee, or even lunch reservations. The bet between the two men targets her as nothing more than a sexual object. When Gould confides in her about the Douggie Brown film, Karen asks him if it is a good film. The question shows her perceptiveness, which is to Gould naive idealism. Gould's response that it is a commodity illustrates how jaded he has let himself become by the business. Up until she poses the question, the men never consider the value of the film beyond monetary worth. By introducing a new perspective, Karen forces the men at least to consider the film's aesthetic merit, separate from any person's association with it.

Karen's function as a sexual object to Gould changes with her recognition of the importance of the book and her ability to talk with him on an equal level. Her interpretation of the novel comes to represent truth to Gould who is fighting his own battle of inconsequence. Believing the subject of nuclear holocaust could be made into an important film, Karen reads excerpts from the book that parallel Gould's own fears: "That the thing which he lacked, he says, was courage... All fears are just one fear. Just the fear of death. And we accept it, then we are at peace" (STP 47). Karen's passionate acceptance of the book's vision is persuasive to Gould. He is forced to admit to himself his own feelings of inadequacy. Acknowledging Karen's "freshness" and enthusiasm, Gould confesses to her that he has made a "connection" and wants to help her. Karen is determined to make Gould see the merits of making the book into a film. Indicating that she wants to work on the Radiation film, she says simply: "I'd do anything" (STP 52). Protecting himself from his fear of being used for what he can give Karen, Gould confesses those feelings to Karen. It is her admission of having the same fears that convinces Gould to make the novel into a film instead of the "buddy film". Gregory Mosher says we are meant to leave the theater asking whether Karen is an angel or a whore (Henry 99). Still, Karen does not manipulate Gould for the sake of getting the
Radiation film made. She is able to articulate all the same fears Gould is having, not to take advantage of his vulnerabilities, but to make a connection. Identity for Karen is defined through harnessing truth and facing fear. The subject of the novel is too frightening to confront directly and Mamet acknowledges this by mocking the language of the book. As an audience we are distanced from the concepts of the book, but consider them through Karen’s conviction and her devotion to truth. The problem is that once Gould returns to the business environment he must question her sincerity all over again. Even truth is suspect in Gould’s office because deception is an element of success. Karen’s position as a temporary worker is emblematic of Gould’s temporary regard for her and her ideas. As she leaves the office Fox throws the novel out after her, subtly implying that truth and real connection are discarded out of fear.

From the beginning of the play, Gould knows he is sought out because of his new position: “This morning the phone won’t stop ringing. Do you know who’s calling? Everybody says they met me in Topeka, 1962, and do I want to make their movie...Give me a breather from all those fine folk suddenly see what a great ‘man’ I am” (STP 6). Despite all his protestations to the contrary, Fox is also in Gould’s office for what Gould can offer him in a business sense. The new promotion makes Gould doubt his adequacy outside a business realm. The appearance of Karen inspires discussion about Gould’s value as a man apart from his position. By accepting Fox’s bet, Gould is hoping to establish an identity separate from his role at the office where he can assuage his fear that no one is interested in him for himself, only for what he can give them by way of business opportunity (McDonough, SM 92-93). As the premise for the seduction, Gould asks Karen to give the Radiation book a “courtesy read”. After she accepts Gould asks her to call Fox, “ and tell him he owes me five hundred bucks” (STP 46). The bet bonds the two men together in the spirit of competition and exploitation (McDonough, SM 93).

Gould’s reaction to Karen is complex. He is drawn to her, but is wary of being used for his position at the same time. Pleading with her out of his own confusion, Gould
asks Karen: “Don’t you care? Every move I make, do you understand? Everyone wants something from me” (STP 56). Gould knows that a movie about the “End of the World” won’t make money and his endorsement would jeopardize his career, but he also recognizes his own fears. Karen is not afraid to accept truth. She reveres the truth of the author, and she is direct and honest enough to admit to him she knew Gould wanted to sleep with her and that’s why he invited her to his apartment. However, Karen translates his invitation not as a manipulation, but as a plea for love. Her articulation of truth is unlike Gould’s own awareness of his exploitation in business. The Radiation film is presented as a way for Gould to wrestle his own fears and live with courage. Karen offers Gould the hope of a meaning and purpose beyond money—the chance to carve out a new identity and become a “maverick” (McDonough, SM 93). It is his fear of striking out on his own and actually becoming a “maverick” that causes the hesitation and vulnerability that Fox uses to persuade him.

The next morning when Gould tells Fox that he isn’t going to do the Douggie Brown film, but has decided to greenlight the Radiation film instead, Fox is in disbelief and questions Gould’s sudden change of heart. Pointing out that Gould has an important position, Fox reminds him a bad decision has the capacity to destroy his life. Gould believes he was called to his new job and has to take responsibility by doing “something which is right”. He has been converted and explains: “I’ve wasted my life, Charlie. My life is a sham, it’s true. But I think I’ve found something” (STP 69). That something is love and purpose beyond making money. In Scene One, Gould concedes he is not an artist and it is the articulation of what his position really is that opens his mind to Karen’s convictions about the novel. Fear is actually controlling Gould’s actions—fear of inconsequence.

Mamet’s vision with *Speed-the-Plow* is different from either *Glengarry Glen Ross* or *American Buffalo* not only because of the elevated position of the characters in business, or the presence of a female character, but because Gould is the only character in
these plays to consider getting out of the “system” and establishing a new identity based solely on his own desires. Gould’s choice is not about art versus commercialism, but about recognizing truth amid chaos and decay, and that is the point of art. The radiation book is written in lofty prose and Gould initially mocks the language. The prison film’s details are very sketchy, but clearly the film is devoid of substance and its success depends on adherence to formula (Bigsby 227). The choice to make the movie based on the novel is the correct one because it would allow Gould to escape the bonds of the system, face his own fears, and act on his need for love and community. Gould is made vulnerable both by his need for love and his willingness to be exploited by the business. Unfortunately, he accepts his exploitation by the system and rejects love. As Bigsby points out, buddy movies are a celebration of the need to believe in friendship and love. Gould will undoubtedly continue to make such films in Hollywood where exploitation of those needs is accepted and perpetuated by potential profit (228).

In his essay “Decay: Some Thoughts For Actors” Mamet’s words underline this conflict: “If you are blessed with intelligence you will find yourself in a constant battle between will and fear...this battle is exposure to the central aspect of drama: the battle between what you are called to do and what you would rather do” (WR 117). The statement describes Gould’s battle. He briefly maintains that he is called to a new job to make important, moral decisions, but he rejects his intuition because he would rather define a secure identity that does not force him to confront his fears. The temporary conversion is still hopeful within the context of the play, although he ultimately makes the wrong decision. Gould is fearful of his own identity outside his professional definitions. He discards his need to be loved for himself over his influence in favor of a more secure existence. Vulnerability frightens him and he allows himself to be dominated by expectations of the system where success is measured by how much money their “buddy film” will make (McDonough, SM 93).

Mamet writes: “We are a kind people living in a cruel time. We don’t know how
to show our love" (WR 102). Gould's uncertainty is his flaw. Doubt distorts his perception of what is really important. He tells Karen that he prayed to be pure and Fox that he just wanted to do good. Revealing his true needs, Gould betrays himself because he does not have the courage to act on those more important needs of love and discovery of truth. His actions mask the needs of his soul, which stand in contrast to his need to define an immediate and tangible identity. The job promotion and attention he receives only seem to satisfy the emptiness of self-doubt. Gould makes the wrong choice, but we are meant to learn from his mistake as we discover truth in art. After all, in Mamet's next play, Bobby Gould is in hell.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Mamet's characters are driven by the need to define identity. Each attempts to capture the sense of self that eludes him by exploiting an opponent seeking the same answers. Identity is only defined in relationship to the competition. In Mamet's plays the rivalry exists in the form of a contest: in American Buffalo Teach and Bobby vie for Don's approval, the sales contest in Glengarry Glen Ross allows for only one winner, and Speed-the-Plow is in many ways a battle between Fox and Karen for Gould's attention. When the contest is over identity has been established for all the participants, whether winners or losers. Individuality is determined by the community. People are valued according to their status. Fear of truth supersedes the need for love, a need which is turned against itself. Mamet observes: "Much of our communal life seems to be a lying contest: the courts, politics, advertising, education, entertainment...If it is our nature, as a society, as human beings...to lie...where does the truth emerge? (Three Uses 78). It is human nature to lie about ourselves in order to hide the fears that limit us. Admission of needs that make us vulnerable creates a greater chance to be exploited. As Mamet suggests since we cannot confront our own nature as individuals we have invented the theater as an alternative: "At the end of drama THE TRUTH--which has been overlooked, disregarded, scorned, and denied--prevails" (79).

Mamet's characters are all searching for love (Bigsby 227-228), but are unable to come to terms with their needs in view of their search for personal identities in the business world. In the end, the need for love is turned against itself. The American myth inspires dreams, but denies the possibility for community. Sincere bonds of friendship cannot be fully realized when the participants are engaged in competition against each
other. Don and Bobby’s relationship in *American Buffalo* seems to have the most potential to be something other than a competitive relationship because of Don’s recognition of his betrayal of Bobby, and Bobby’s actions are mostly selfless and committed to a personal rather than a business end. Teach is unable to recognize his self-defeating behavior and is unable to establish a secure identity either outside or within the structure of his business world. He strives to hide the fear of inadequacy by aggressively displacing Bobby. The reality of Teach’s position terrifies him so much that he is paralyzed and unable to change.

The salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross* recognize that they are being exploited, but they fail to consider an alternative. Each has committed himself to survival within the system. They cannot ever create a sense of community free of hostility because they cannot escape the rules of business—they simply have no control over changing the rules. However, their tenacity and commitment to their work is admirable. Our hope springs from their desire to succeed within a system that fails.

Bobby Gould in *Speed-the-Plow* is the only character in the three plays that considers creating an identity separate from the one he has established in his professional life. His friendship with Charlie Fox is completely dependent upon their current business association. When they can no longer provide for each other in that context the relationship will serve neither of them. Karen’s perspective causes Gould to reexamine his choices, but it is his fear of standing alone for truth that forces him to return to a comfortable position. Ultimately Gould does not want to change anything; he wants to succeed in an already established arena where the rules are defined. The fear is not of work itself, but of making a mistake that would compromise his identity as an important man. In the end, Gould chooses a compromised life.

The characters in Mamet’s plays are contemptible in various ways because of their immoral actions and treatment of each other. Devoting themselves to success requires them to submit to competition on some level because they have failed to seek
another route to success. The characters' hopes lie with the dreams of the culture. They are too committed to their own success and self-interests to find the courage to challenge the empty promises of society and see that their own actions prevent them from achieving what they desire most—love and community.

The environment Mamet's characters inhabit in each of the plays is distinguished by decay and decadence. Society is harsh and unforgiving to the individual who is defined only in relationship to the whole. Mamet's work acknowledges the obstacles in a difficult world that are in conflict with man's own nature. Although the characters do not successfully defeat their fears, they are able to manage them and achieve small victories. As audience members we recognize their mistakes and the possibility of satisfying our own need for love is stronger through the theatrical experience. Repetition of the lesson on stage can lead us into more productive, honest behavior simply because our nature inhibits our ability to examine our own lives honestly. Musing on the power of theater in society, Mamet asks: "Who is going to speak up for the American spirit? For the human spirit?...Only that person who speaks without ulterior motives, without hope of gain...with only the desire to create: The artist" (WR 21). Art gives us as individuals the chance to examine our selfishness and self-defeating actions that we do not typically recognize in our day-to-day living. According to David Mamet in his more optimistic, generous moments, theater gives us a second chance and if we truly learn the lesson, we perhaps can help change the habits of a cruel society.
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VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Lyn Sattazahn

Local Address:
5155 S. Torrey Pines Dr. #1156
Las Vegas, NV 89118

Home Address:
26 Seasound Ave.
Marmora, NJ 08223

Degree:
Bachelor of Arts, Theatre Arts, 1990
Brigham Young University

Thesis Title: Claiming Identity: The Effect of the American Myth on Human Relationships in David Mamet’s American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross, and Speed-the-Plow

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Dr. Jeffrey Koep, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Professor Robert N. Burgan
Committee Member, Professor Davey Marlin-Jones
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Christopher C. Hudgins, Ph.D.