

I N T H E A R T S

From Broadway to Hollywood

David Mamet's tale of backstabbing hustlers doesn't translate onto the big screen.

By Linda DeLibero

The opening credit sequence of *American Buffalo* zeroes in on the plump, bejeweled hands of a female poker player, and for a moment audiences familiar with David Mamet's play will be struck by an improbable thought: Has Mamet (who wrote the screenplay) expanded his three-man vehicle to include the off-stage characters? No, it soon emerges, he hasn't, but by 30 minutes into the film you're wishing desperately that he had.

American Buffalo is one of Mamet's most resolutely stagy plays, depending for its drama almost entirely on the nuances of his vitriolic, mannered dialogue and the fine distinctions between the three characters' voices. The plot circles around a heist that never happens—a pretty unpromising premise, but one from which an imaginative and irreverent director might have con-

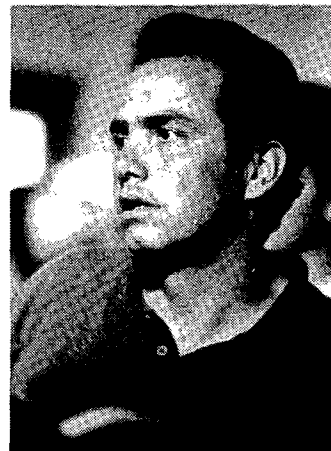
structed a movie with visual dazzle or a richly detailed context. Unfortunately, director Michael Corrente doesn't have the nerve: The meager concessions to film art he makes only underscore the difficulties of translating a theatrical work like this to another medium.

Part of the problem is simply the vastly different expectations we take to movies as opposed to theater. When *American Buffalo* made its Broadway debut in 1977, theater audiences may well have been stunned by the crude vitality of Mamet's lowlife characters. But since their inception, movies have lived off the energy of losers and petty criminals; the shock of peering into the lives of foul-mouthed hustlers doesn't pack the same punch on the screen as it does on stage. In recent years, films like *Goodfellas*, *Reservoir Dogs* and *The Usual Suspects* have mined this territory's chest-beating macho and "fuck you" poetry to near-exhaustion. Mamet's work may have anticipated these dark comedies of male bonding, but the pleasures of his work, if you go for it, are primarily literary. The screen tends to rob his lan-

guage of any subtlety. For example, all the scathing comedy of *Glengarry Glen Ross* was lost in the film version; when that relentless barrage of words comes hurtling at you in close-up for two hours, you lose perspective and hear only the sameness of the dialogue.

Something similar happens here. *American Buffalo* takes place in the resale shop of Donny Dubrow (Dennis Franz), whose young protégé Bobby (Sean Nelson) is about to carry out a robbery under Donny's guidance. Teach Cole (Dustin Hoffman), Donny's longtime poker buddy, discovers the plan and worms his way in on the job by shaking loose the ties of devotion that bind Don to Bobby. Teach ruthlessly pounds away at Donny's notions of loyalty, insinuating his paranoid vision of the world into Donny's consciousness until the very air seems poisoned with greed and treachery.

The role of Teach is an actor's dream, a catalogue of the small-time hustler's rapacity, self-loathing and capacity for self-justification. Teach believes himself to be deeply moral even as he's attempting to con the pants off his friends. Dustin Hoffman, who usually can barely play a role like this without a



American Buffalo
Directed by
Michael Corrente

PHOTOS BY BRIAN HAMILL



Dennis Franz and Dustin Hoffman in
Michael Corrente's *American Buffalo*.

twitching mouth and flailing limbs, performs here with uncharacteristic restraint. His straggly hair and second-hand garb recall a slightly older Ratso Rizzo (Ratso already looked middle-aged), but without the saintliness or the florid self-pity. Still, there's something missing. Hoffman for once is almost too guarded; his understated performance doesn't capture much of the character's humor and pathos. The self-righteous indignation Teach uses to manipulate his victims is meant to be ridiculously transparent, so that when he finally explodes the force of his rage will catch us by surprise. But Hoffman plays Teach solemn and mean from the beginning, foreclosing the possibility of laughter or sympathy; the climactic moment is, consequently, an anti-climax. It doesn't help that Michael Corrente underscores the cadences of Mamet's dialogue (which is already more than rhythmic enough) by cutting away from the actors after each line, making it impossible to really see what Hoffman is doing, much less feel for the character.

You can't help wondering what Al Pacino—who played Teach in several *American Buffalo* revivals during the mid-'80s—would have done with the part. Pacino's face is more expressive than Hoffman's, and he's far more willing—sometimes to his detriment—to let himself look like a buffoon. A clownish Teach would allow us to see that beneath his corrupt maneuverings, he is finally no less a victim than Donny or Bobby, who at least have their friendship for solace.

Teach's skewed philosophy—the individual's right "to embark on any fucking course that he sees fit"—is meant to expose the way the American promise of liberty has been distorted into the ruthless creed of free enterprise. But al-

though Teach uses the logic of acquisitive individualism to justify himself, he didn't invent it. Somehow, *American Buffalo* allows us to forget that; we're merely watching a petty hustler put one over on his pals, and the experience feels uncomfortably like slumming. Viewing the film, listening to the endless verbal riffs, you can't help wondering about the delusional nature of the whole enterprise. It's a bit too cozy watching these sad, seedy creatures from the safety of a darkened theater.

Mamet has said that *American Buffalo* is about the "American ethic of business ... how we excuse all sorts of great and small ethical betrayals called business." But if we regard a loser like Teach as the embodiment of the viciousness of American business, what are we to think about the real thing—say, for example, the studio heads who spend millions to bring a "prestige" vehicle like this to the screen? It's a little like hospital-bed divorcé Newt Gingrich using a pregnant teenager to symbolize the collapse of family values.

Mamet has also claimed that although the play is about thieves, we're meant to see ourselves in their machinations. Fat chance. The film is so proud of its faithfulness to the play, so mired in theatricality, it might as well have been filmed under a proscenium arch. You never lose yourself in the story for a moment, much less identify with its characters. A real filmmaker could have expanded Mamet's vision enough to make us feel that we're all breathing the same fetid air as Donny and Teach. As it is, *American Buffalo* is as sealed off and remote from its audience as a paperweight globe. ◀

IN PRINT

The morning after

By Lawrence Goodwyn

When future historians try to make sense of late 20th-century America, they will confront the long-term impact of "Reaganomics" not only on the economy, but on how Americans talked and thought about the economy. The central emergent fact is that the massive Republican deficits of the '80s created the financial mechanisms for an organic redistribution of income from the working and middle classes to a small and increasingly opulent elite. While politicians and pundits focused on other matters, the Federal Reserve Board attended to the care and feeding of Treasury bonds to float the national debt, ensuring that the tax dollars of the entire society were effectively organized to underwrite the nation's bondholders. The necessities of "the bond market" (understood in a uniquely narrow and partisan way that somehow never became a subject of national debate) took precedence over all other economic considerations and did so structurally—that is, for the long term.

It is important to remember how new this reordering of economic priorities was. For many generations, the basic benchmark of the economy was the nationwide level of employment. Rising employment not only was good for workers but meant an increase in production and in business profits. Participants characterized such pleasant moments in American history as "good times," and rising stock markets routinely seemed to confirm this judgment. In the happy event such trajectories continued for a long period, mild inflation could be expected until an "inevitable downturn" brought a reverse in the domino effect: increasing layoffs, declining demand, reduced profits and a corresponding sag in the Dow. Sustained over time, prolonged high unemployment meant recession or depression—what Americans knew as "hard times."

In all this, there was a commonsense linkage of production in the hinterlands to the well-being of commerce along

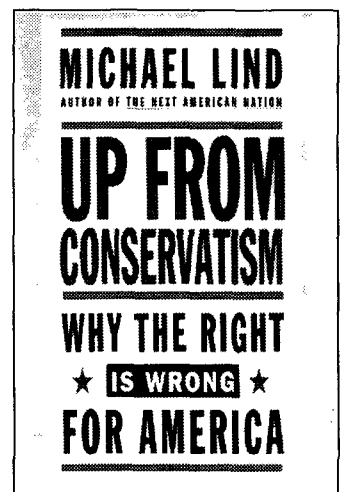
provincial main streets, and a linkage of both to big business and Wall Street. Though economic questions were often the subject of fierce debates, it is important to remember that the debaters shared a common view of what constituted serious evidence about the state of the economy. No one thought high levels of unemployment were a good thing, either for wage earners or for the national well-being. Rather, "full employment" (variously defined) was understood to be a desirable goal of a well-ordered American economy.

But in the era of deficit-inspired income redistribution from wage worker to bondholder, this no longer holds true. Today, news of an economic upsurge capable of rolling back unemployment generates considerable alarm and public handwringing on Wall Street. Business journalists hasten to quote "market analysts" intoning that rising employment will generate "pressure on wages," which will unleash the dreaded specter of inflation. The Fed, therefore, is obliged to raise interest rates to prevent the economy from "overheating." It is eye-opening to discover how the slightest uptick in economic indicators can provoke a cacophony of calls from bond market analysts for precipitate "monetary tightening" by Alan Greenspan. Indeed, the interest rate trigger can sometimes be pulled with such pre-emptory speed that the economy is induced to cool off before it has even warmed up. No matter, the bond market enjoys steady gains as long as wage levels are adequately doused.

In the restructured world that the Reagan presidency has bequeathed to future Americans, low wages are considered a good thing. The other essential feature of the post-conservative state is just as simple: interest rates high enough to entice domestic and foreign funders of the enormous American debt to continue to buy Treasury bonds. Bondholder windfalls can be further embellished by cutting taxes, since any resulting increase in the debt further undergirds the new distribution of income.

The relationship of American capital to American workers has thus undergone a fundamental structural alteration in our time. An essential byproduct is the message that everyone has now had dinned into their consciousness for 15 years or more: Americans need to be taught that they have grown soft on "entitlements" and that the free ride of government handouts is over.

This, then, is the context in which mainstream political discourse takes place.



Up from Conservatism:
Why the Right is Wrong
for America
By Michael Lind
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