

AMERICAN BUFFALO

STUDY GUIDE



GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

AMERICAN BUFFALO

GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

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SPECIAL THANKS TO

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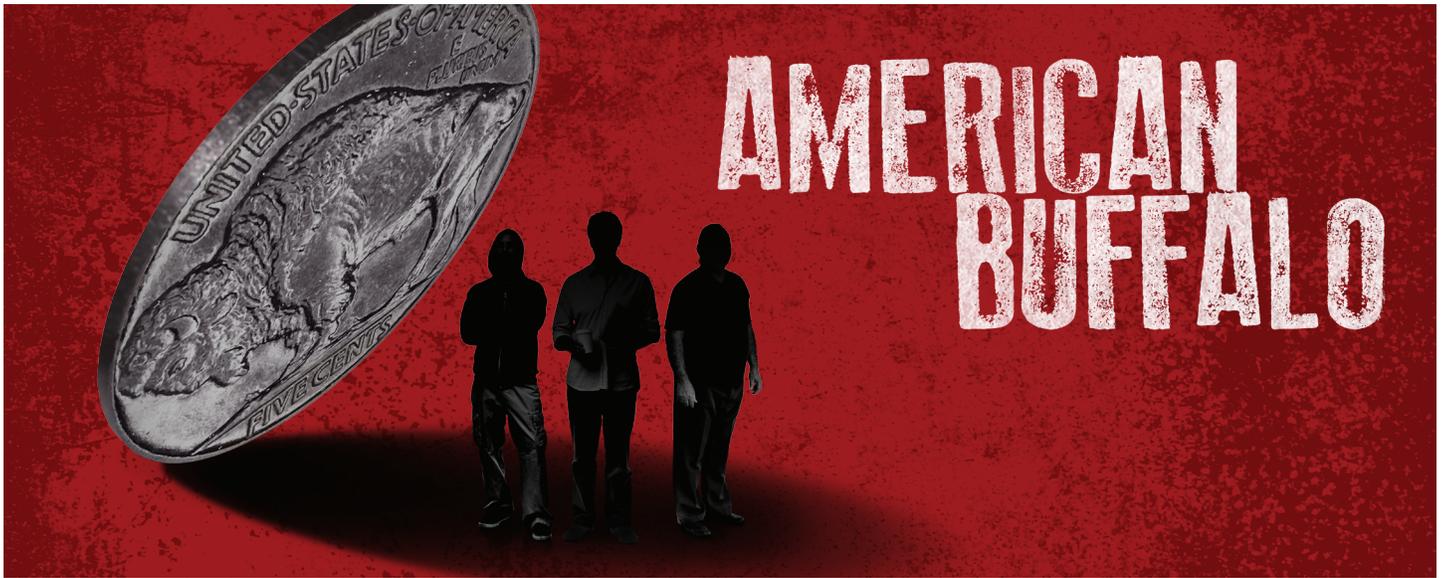
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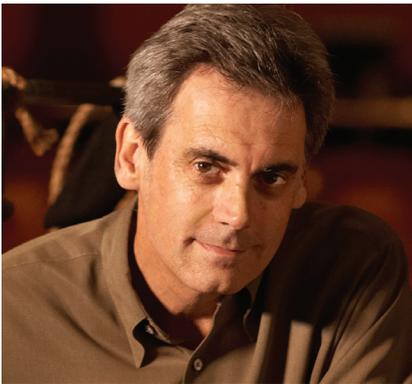
SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



Welcome to *American Buffalo*, the fifth of David Mamet's plays produced at the Geffen Playhouse.

American Buffalo launched David onto the national stage when it premiered 38 years ago in Chicago. Exploding onto the American consciousness in the mid-1970s, the play was hailed for its gritty exploration of the American dream through the eyes of the socially marginalized misfits at its center. Fueled by the raw intensity of its language – a profane, sometimes hilarious and oddly eloquent poetry of the street – the play was received as an anthem to the ruthlessness of American capitalism and the uneasy relationship between friendship and business.

Re-visiting *American Buffalo* a generation later, we might marvel at how the world has changed since 1975. Yet we find ourselves in the wake of a different financial crisis and an ever-expanding wealth gap. With the middle class dwindling, the American dream can seem more a pipe dream than a possibility. And are there costs to pursuing this dream? And is anyone left behind?

With this fine cast and artful design team, I am pleased to bring to life once again these denizens of Don's Resale Shop. Coarse, profane and unpredictable as they are, their humanity is unmistakable and recognizable in us all.

PLAY SYNOPSIS & SETTING

SYNOPSIS

Set in a Chicago junkshop in 1975, *American Buffalo* tells the story of three misfits who, in an effort to cash in and change their luck, hatch a scheme to steal a valuable coin. Young Bobby, in hopes of proving his talents in thievery to Don, tries to partner up for the scheme, but Teach has other plans and they include shutting Bobby out. As they struggle to pull off the heist and get to the coin, Don and Teach begin to question the other's motives. When Bobby returns with a coin in hand, all hell breaks loose in the junkshop. As always, Mamet has created a high stakes game in which everyone has something to lose.

TIME/SETTING

One Friday. Act One takes place in the morning; Act Two starts around 11:00 that night.

Don's Resale Shop. A junkshop.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

RANDALL ARNEY (Director)

Randall Arney has been a theater professional for over 30 years, and has served as Artistic Director of the Geffen Playhouse since 1999. In addition to his artistic programming and oversight at the Geffen, Arney has helmed more than 10 productions for the theater, most recently *Superior Donuts*, *The Female of the Species*, *The Seafarer*, *Speed-the-Plow* and *All My Sons*. Arney is an ensemble member and former Artistic Director of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre where his directing credits include: *The Seafarer*, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *Death and the Maiden*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Killers* and *The Geography of Luck*, among others. Arney also directed Steppenwolf's world premiere of Steve Martin's *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, as well as the subsequent national and international acclaimed productions. Mr. Arney's acting credits with Steppenwolf include *Born Yesterday*, *Ghost in the Machine*, *The Homecoming*, *Frank's Wild Years*, *You Can't Take it with You*, *Fool for Love*, *True West*, *Balm in Gilead* and *Coyote Ugly*. As the Artistic Director for Steppenwolf from 1987 to 1995, he oversaw the creation of a new state-of-the-art theater which is Steppenwolf's current home. Broadway transfers under his leadership include *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*, *The Song of Jacob Zulu* (six Tony Award nominations) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1990 Tony Award, Best Play). Mr. Arney has an MFA degree in Acting from Illinois State University and has taught master classes and workshops at UCLA, Steppenwolf, around the U.S. and in Tokyo.

DAVID MAMET (Playwright)

David Mamet is the author of the plays *November*, *Boston Marriage*, *Faustus*, *Oleanna*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984 Pulitzer Prize and New York Drama Critics Circle Award), *American Buffalo*, *The Old Neighborhood*, *A Life in the Theatre*, *Speed-the-Plow*, *Edmond*, *Lakeboat*, *The Water Engine*, *The Woods*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, *Reunion* and *The Cryptogram* (1995 Obie Award). His translations and adaptations include *Faustus*, *Red River* by Pierre Laville and *The Cherry Orchard*, *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya* by Anton Chekov. His films include *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *The Verdict*, *The Untouchables*, *House of Games* (writer/director) *Oleanna* (writer/director), *Homicide* (writer/director), *The Spanish Prisoner* (writer/director), *Heist* (writer/director), *Spartan* (writer/director) and *Redbelt* (writer/director). Mr. Mamet is also the author of *Warm and Cold*, a book for children with drawings by Donald Sultan, and two other children's books, *Passover* and *The Duck and the Goat*; *Writing in Restaurants*, *Some Freaks*, and *Make-Believe Town*, three volumes of essays; *The Hero Pony* and *The China Man*; a book of poems; *Three Children's Plays*, *On Directing Film*, *The Cabin*, and the novels *The Village*, *The Old Religion*, and *Wilson*. His most recent books include *True and False*, *Three Uses of the Knife*, *The Wicked Son*, and *Bambi Vs. Godzilla*.

SECTION 2

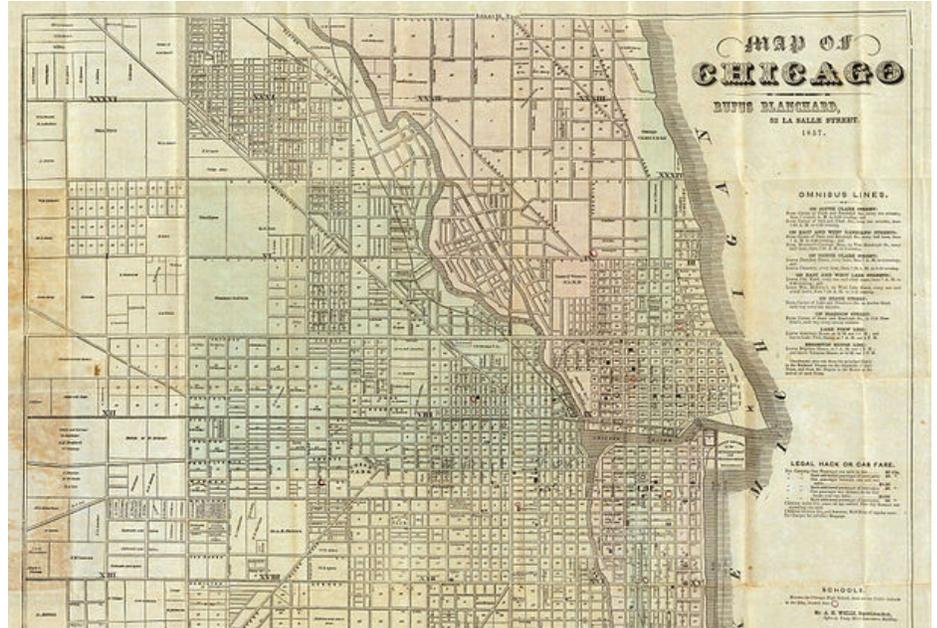
THEMES & TOPICS

DISLOCATION

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/Steppenwolf-Article

tinyurl.com/Chicago-History



The setting in *American Buffalo* is a junkshop. As the play unfolds, references to objects and places reveal the shop is in Chicago, and it's a time of change. A piece of "pig-iron" and a "strange object" used in slaughterhouses evoke the steel and stockyard industries that powered Chicago's economy for over a century and waned in the 1970s – when the play takes place. "Masonic," a hospital mentioned at the end of the play, locates the resale shop in the Near North Side of the city, where gentrification that started in the 1960s ultimately pushed out working class residents. As Don, his helper Bob and his associate Teach plan a robbery, it's not hard to imagine that they are struggling to survive – without scruples, to be sure – in dislocating times.

DISCUSSION POINT

What in our neighborhoods, towns or cities can make us feel located – or not?

How do changes in economic fortunes affect the identity of communities and individuals?

BUSINESS & BETRAYAL

SOURCE

“Betrayal and friendship:
David Mamet’s *American Buffalo*”
by Matthew Roudané,
*The Cambridge Companion
to David Mamet* (Cambridge
University Press, 2004)

Much of the irony and humor of the play come from how Don, Bob and Teach see themselves as ambitious businessmen yet behave like incompetent hustlers. By paying ninety dollars for a Buffalo Nickel and returning to seek more like it, a customer has flagged its value. Don, the owner of the junkshop, wants it back and has decided to send Bob and Teach into the man’s home to steal it. Even though he has a book with going rates, Don never quite gets around to establishing the coin’s value. Teach isn’t clear about how he is going to pull off the break-in, and at the appointed hour he is late.

The treachery of business – the underside of the American Dream – also courses powerfully through the play. At the time he wrote *American Buffalo*, Mamet saw our national culture as being based on striving at the expense of others. As he stated,

“Instead of rising with the masses one should rise from the masses. Your extremity is my opportunity. That’s what forms the basis of our economic life, and this is what forms the rest of our lives. That American Myth: the idea of something out of nothing. And this also affects the individual. It’s very divisive. One feels one can succeed only at the cost of someone else.”

Such striving poisons the relationships among the three characters. Early on, Don acts in a fatherly way toward young Bobby by urging him to eat healthily and instructing him in the ways of the world. As he cautions,

DON: ‘Cause there’s business and there’s friendship, Bobby...there are many things, and when you walk around you hear a lot of things, and what you got to do is keep clear who your friends are, and who treated you like what.

Bobby is loyal to Don, but his vagueness about his outside activities causes misgivings in his boss. Propelled by self-interest, which he claims is a given in doing business, Teach constantly seeds doubt in Don’s mind, which leads to his betrayal of Bobby.

DISCUSSION POINT

What attitudes and actions accepted in business might conflict with how we relate to people close to us? How might business partners being family members make them more vulnerable to exploiting each other?

What are some recent examples of businesses attempting to achieve prosperity at any cost to others?

POETIC DIALOGUE

SOURCE

“Betrayal and friendship:
David Mamet’s *American Buffalo*”
by Matthew Roudané,
*The Cambridge Companion
to David Mamet* (Cambridge
University Press, 2004)

Because the exchanges among the characters in *American Buffalo* are often terse and awkward, it is easy to assume that Mamet attempted to capture how those living on the margins of society might really speak. In fact, he crafted the dialogue quite deliberately: “The language in my plays is not realistic but poetic. The words sometimes have a musical quality to them. It’s language tailor made for the stage.”

To experience the rhythms of Mamet’s distinctive dialogue, read the following excerpt, from the beginning of the play, aloud with a partner.

BOB: I’m sorry, Donny.
Pause.

DON: Yeah.

BOB: Maybe he’s still in there.

DON: If you think that, Bob, how come you’re here?

BOB: I came in.
Pause.

DON: You don’t come in, Bob. You don’t come in until you do a thing.

BOB: He didn’t come out.

DON: What do I care, Bob, if he came out or not?
You’re s’posed to watch the guy, you watch him.
Am I wrong?

BOB: I just went to the back.

DON: Why?
Pause.
Why did you do that?

BOB: ‘Cause he wasn’t coming out the front.

DON: Well, Bob, I’m sorry but this isn’t good enough.
If you want to do business...if we got a business deal, it isn’t good enough. I want you to remember this.

DISCUSSION
POINT

How was speaking the dialogue different from reading it on the page?
What did you learn about the characters by saying their lines?

PROFANITY

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-Profanity

tinyurl.com/NYTimes-Cursing

“Betrayal and friendship:
David Mamet’s *American Buffalo*”
by Matthew Roudané,
*The Cambridge Companion
to David Mamet* (Cambridge
University Press, 2004)



The profanity-laced dialogue in *American Buffalo* was shocking when it premiered in 1975. Since today’s audiences are more used to coarse language in popular culture offerings, such as films and cable television shows, it would be easy for first-time audience members to judge the play’s vulgar language as simply gratuitous. Yet the dialogue in *American Buffalo* was an artistic choice, reflecting the gritty existence of its male characters, and, perhaps, tapping into something deeper.

Profanity has existed throughout time and in all languages. Research has suggested it has psychological uses in both expressing and containing anger. Teach, the play’s antagonist, uses obscene, racist and misogynistic remarks and rants to blame and bludgeon, as he manipulates others to serve his interests and, perhaps, assuage his sense of powerlessness. As essayist Matthew Roudané suggests, “The audience hears, in the fractured syntax, the twisted logic, and in the inadequate words summoned by the men, some larger primal void in their very existences.”

DISCUSSION POINT

How do you respond to hearing profanity? Under which circumstances might you use it?

How can profanity serve human beings emotionally and hinder them socially and professionally?

BUFFALO NICKEL

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/Nickel-Buffalo

tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-Nickel

Buffalo Nickel Image courtesy of
CCF Numismatics



The coin at the center of the play is a Buffalo Nickel. Designed by artist James Earle Fraser, who sought to make it “totally American,” the copper-nickel coin has an American bison on one side and a male Native American on the other. Fraser used a bison residing in the Bronx Zoo as a model, and developed a composite of several Native Americans to create the true-to-life portrait.

Over a billion Buffalo Nickels were minted from 1913-1938. Subject to rapid wear, the coin is assessed for value, in part, by determining the rounded relief of its features, such as the bison’s hip and horn.

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICH GILLES



What is your official title at the Geffen Playhouse?

I am the Properties Master.

How long have you been at the Geffen and where else have you worked?

I've been at the Geffen for two years. I've also worked at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, the Williamstown Theatre Festival, the Acting Group in New York City and the Studio Arena Theater in Buffalo. Before joining the Geffen, I was with the Dallas Theater Center for fourteen years.

What are your primary responsibilities as Properties Master?

I work with the director and set designer to execute the physical design of the production. I come up with everything within the walls and floor – furniture, appliances, functional and decorative objects, anything that hangs on the walls, greenery, food and drink and most of what the actors hold and touch.

How did you get into this line of work?

I got my undergraduate degree at UCLA. Originally I wanted to be a lighting designer. When it turned out the general assistantship in lighting was held by another student, they put me in the prop shop. My mentor, Thurston James, was considered one of the best prop masters in the nation, and I got jobs because I'd apprenticed with him. I'm glad things worked out the way they did. These days most lighting designers have an itinerant life, but I've been able to be a part of resident production teams. I am also an extremely curious person and love the research, problem solving and discovery that are involved.

How do you collaborate with the director and set designer?

The designer usually brings in preliminary designs that I respond to. With *American Buffalo*, Takeshi Kata showed me the model of the set and images of junkshops, which gave me an idea of the types of objects to look for, as well as their

arrangement. We are creating a disordered look, with lots of things – tools, toys, kitchen stuff, suitcases, games, sporting goods – piled haphazardly.

Asking the director questions about the characters' history and class helps me select furniture and objects that tell the audience who the characters think they are, as well as who they really are. I also provide photo research on special items in the script and get key props into the rehearsal process as early as possible.

Do you make as well as buy props?

I find and, if necessary, alter the props. For instance, I might find a chair that's just the right style but the color isn't part of the design palette. So I will dye the fabric or re-upholster it. For *American Buffalo* I am distressing furniture and objects to make them look worn.

Where do you find props for period pieces?

I travel to salvage yards and thrift shops all over the county. I also go to online sites like eBay and Etsy.

What are you trying to achieve with the props you assemble for a play?

I want audiences to be able to understand something about the characters the minute they see the set.

What do you find most satisfying about your work?

I love the point in the process when I believe I've contributed as much as I can to making the story clear. ■

SECTION 4

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and members' interests, guide your group to respond to the questions suggested below. Encourage everyone to participate, while having respect for differing opinions. Individuals can share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Then, ask for a volunteer to share their group's answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching the play? Engaged? Provoked? Intrigued? Put off? Moved? What made you feel this way?
- Did you identify with any of the characters? If so, with whom and why?
- What was the arc of Don's character? How did he start out and end up in relation to young Bobby?
- How did Teach serve as an antagonist? What did he do and say to create conflicts with and among the other characters?
- What did you appreciate about the performances? Share the details.
- How did the set, props, costumes, and lighting contribute to the impact of the play?
- What was the most memorable moment in the production? Describe it in detail.
- How would you describe in 2-3 sentences what the play is about to someone who has never seen it?

NOTES



SECTION 5

RESOURCES

LEARN ABOUT David Mamet and responses to his work in *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* edited by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

WATCH AND LISTEN TO David Mamet discuss his work on the Charlie Rose Show at tinyurl.com/Mamet-Rose.

LEARN ABOUT Chicago in The History Files provided by the Chicago Historical Society at tinyurl.com/Chicago-History.

LEARN ABOUT the development of money, including coins, at the Smithsonian's National Numismatic Collection at tinyurl.com/Smithsonian-Coin.

VISIT the Rose Bowl Flea Market in Pasadena, California. Shop for vintage furniture, clothing and objects at one of the most famous flea markets in the world.

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