

American Buffalo

This week sees the premiere of *American Buffalo*, a film of David Mamet's 1975 play directed by Michael Corrente and scripted by the playwright. The "Buffalo" of the title is a semi-rare nickel which drives the minimal plot: two down-at-the-heels hustlers, one of whom has mistakenly sold the coin for less than it is worth, scheme over a day and a night to break into the house of the buyer to retrieve the nickel--and his other worldly goods. Their intelligence about the robbery, garnered from a young neighborhood kid, is faulty, and the heist never comes off.

But the plot is but a frame for Mr. Mamet's character study of some scrapings from the underclass, junk-shop owner Don (Dennis Franz of *NYPD Blue*) and his tightly-wound poker buddy "Teach" (Dustin Hoffman). These are guys going absolutely nowhere with plans (worst-laid) which are bound to fail. Their conversation--familiar to all Mamet fans--is a staccato, repetitive verbal fencing, replete with minor braggadocio and profane punctuation. The two's relationship is just as testy, with quicksilver shifts in moods depending on which one is or is not trying to screw the other. Adding one more leg to complete this ignoble human triangle is the 15-year-old Bobby (Sean Nelson), Don's protege and hustler-in-training.

The relationship between Don and Teach embodies Mamet's larger point: the ever present tension between business and friendship--or how the desire for gain can kill loyalty and trust. Don uses Bobby to gain information on his robbery but doesn't cut him in on it. Teach is in, but upsets Don when he wants to bring a gun along. Both plotters argue about bringing in another henchman. Bobby, to complete this vicious circle, lies about what he knows... Treachery abounds, but these lowlifes have no clue of where else to go and what else to do; they are "friends" only for reasons of proximity.

As a film, *American Buffalo* is as claustrophobic as its characters and their world (Mamet's play originated in Chicago, but this film version was shot in a bleak neighborhood of Pawtucket, Rhode island). While the grime looks real, the film is really highly stylized: Don's resale store is piled-up production design; no other humans mar the mean streets; the language is only apparently "real" with studied inarticulateness about The Job, The Guy, The Shot, The Thing (to note: the obscenities, while still worthy of an "R" rating, were far more shocking on the stage 20 years ago).

Dennis Franz portrays a true, lower-class schmuck, a rawer version of his ornery Lt. Sipowicz on television. Dustin Hoffman as Teach seems to have morphed into an older version of his Ratso Rizzo figure from *Midnight Cowboy*, complete with stubble and stringy hair. He is a collection of nervous tics, of course, but here the tics seem mostly right in depicting a barren soul. Sean Nelson--wonderful in his first film, the little-seen *Fresh* (1994)--is fine, his placid face belying a grim street future.

With *American Buffalo*, you, as the viewer, may have the feeling you are observing three bugs pinned to a board; you may also feel a little dirty after spending some time with these losers--but I expect such was exactly Mr. Mamet's intention. (*"American Buffalo"* is rated "R" for Mamet's trademark profanity.)

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