

Behind the SCENES

Jack Nicholson in Mamet's thriller film version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

MAMET *the Maverick*

He's one of the most influential playwrights of his generation – and, with the current revival of *American Buffalo* in the West End and new play *China Doll* coming to Broadway, still one of the most popular. **Miriam Gillinson** explores the essence of 'Mamet speak'

In the 1980s, American playwright David Mamet received a stream of complaints about the bad language used in his plays. The situation got so extreme that Mamet mocked up a template to send to disgruntled members of the public. It read: 'Too bad, you big cry baby.' Mamet has not always been liked but he has been loved, particularly by the critics, and following the premiere of *American Buffalo* in 1975 was already being heralded as 'the voice of contemporary American theatre'.

Mamet was born to a Jewish family in 1947 in Chicago, a city that features prominently throughout his *oeuvre*. By all accounts, it was not a happy childhood. Mamet's troubled upbringing simmers beneath some of his most disturbing works, including *Cryptogram* and *The Old Neighbourhood*. But it is Mamet's distinctive dialogue, muscular and expletive-strewn, that would most keenly reflect his tense childhood. Writing about this early influence on his work, Mamet once commented: 'In my family, in the days prior to television, we liked to while away the evenings by making ourselves miserable, based solely on our ability

to speak the language viciously.'

This bruising dialogue, packed with expletives yet strangely arresting, would go on to be termed 'Mamet speak'. Spare and vicious, Mamet speak was already evident in the trio of plays that made the writer's name in the 1970s: *The Duck Variations*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*



David Mamet

Photographs: Rex Features

and *American Buffalo*. As with so many of Mamet's plays (20-plus and with a new play, *China Doll*, premiering this year), these early works dealt with isolated characters, often working class and almost always angry. Forgotten old men (*Duck Variations*), frustrated office workers (*Sexual Perversity*) and small-time crooks (*American Buffalo*) were being placed centre stage and the underclass of America was finally finding a voice.

Throughout the 1970s Mamet penned over ten plays, kick-starting his career with the kind of ferocious productivity that continues to this day. He picked up a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for *Buffalo*, as well as two Tony nominations, and received dazed but enthusiastic praise for his brutal New York fable *Edmond* ('It is not an easy play to like but it will be a difficult one to forget.')

In 1983 *Glengarry Glen Ross* landed Mamet a Pulitzer Prize and secured his place in the 'pantheon of [America's] greatest dramatists'. Borrowing from Mamet's time working in a Chicago real estate office, *Glengarry* featured a cluster of embittered and embattled estate agents, fighting for survival. It was the American Dream turned nightmarish and drew obvious comparisons with one of Mamet's greatest influences, Arthur Miller. Mamet wrote of his work: 'We are finally reaching the point where there is nothing left to exploit...the dream has nowhere to go so it turns in on itself.'

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Unusually, *Glengarry Glen Ross* premiered not in America but at London's National Theatre. This was largely down to Mamet's mentor, British playwright Harold Pinter, who urged Mamet after reading *Glengarry*: 'It's perfect, stage it.' Pinter would have a profound influence on Mamet's career. He paved the way for a new type of dialogue – 'the stuff you heard on the street' – and, along with Beckett, helped Mamet and his contemporaries re-imagine theatre 'not as the interplays of ideas but the interplay of sounds'.

Mamet also shared with Pinter a passion and talent for screenplay writing. In 1981, Mamet wrote his first screenplay, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, a vicious thriller starring Jack Nicholson. This was followed by a stream of films, including legal thriller *The Verdict*, Robert De Niro vehicle *Ronin* and acerbic satire *Wag the Dog*. These films provided Mamet with real financial security and helped him establish enduring collaborative relationships with big-name actors, including Nicholson, DeNiro, Al Pacino and Dustin Hoffman.

Despite many successful forays into film-making, Mamet has always had an uneasy relationship with Hollywood and its culture of commercialism. Mamet's 1988 satire *Speed-the-Plow* rips the film industry to pieces, as two film executives sell their soul in the quest for a big-bucks hit. The language used by the Hollywood execs – that scorching banter always on the edge of burn-out – is the same language adopted by the perverts in *Chicago*, the con-men in *American Buffalo* or the washed-out estate agents in *Glengarry*. Mamet's characters might herald from wildly different domains



Al Pacino in the 1984 production of *American Buffalo* at the Duke of York's

but they speak the same language and worship the same bottom line: the American dollar.

Mamet's plays have been described as 'the indictment of the American Dream', yet the possibility of success and salvation glimmers – albeit briefly – in most of his work. It is there in Dan and Deb's open affection for each other in *Sexual Perversity*; it hovers beneath Bob's misguided loyalty in Don in *American Buffalo*, the grudging companionship in *Duck Variations* and the possibility of mutual understanding in *Oleanna*. But salvation isn't going to come easy. As George glumly comments in Mamet's very first play, *The Duck Variations*: 'You need a lotta things...and a lot of luck.'

American Buffalo is at Wyndham's Theatre from 16 April (0844 482 5120)