American Buffalo
by David Mamet

Junking the Buffalo
The American buffalo, or bison as we might call it, was once a predominant animal on the United States landscape. As migrant humans tamed the country, they also evicted these wild animals from the newly laid out grid pattern of city streets and the patchwork fields of the lately cultivated farmland. An animal that once wandered without boundaries was banished to wilder terrain that was unprofitable and unusable. Alongside their containment was slaughter. By 1880, where millions of buffalo once roamed, only a few thousand animals remained.

In David Mamet's play, American Buffalo, the image of this beast is on a coin from the past, a symbol of something old and lost, accidentally turning up amidst a handful of loose change in a Chicago junk shop. The junk shop owner, Don, barely acknowledges the coin and his attention is only really focused by someone else's interest that extends to buying it for $90.00. Don later wonders whether he has lost out on the deal. With his gopher, Bobby, he plans a small break and entry job to get it back. However, Don's mate, Teach, subverts this plot by pushing the younger man out of the frame by suggesting that Bobby's youth makes him a naïve candidate for the sophisticated job of a small burglary. Teach argues with Don that he is a better candidate for the task.

Embedded in the symbol of the buffalo is a wonderful and multifaceted metaphor about the contemporary western world. Here is an animal whose past was untamed and powerful but who has been overwhelmed by the history of human greed. Tellingly, in the palm of a hand in the Chicago junk shop, the buffalo is reduced to an image on a coin. Just like his real life forebears, this buffalo has the power to provoke men's avarice, to overrule any sense of morality and, just like the migrant settlers, modern men fail to see any value or meaning in the symbol of the beast beyond what it might mean in ready cash.

Politics, Principles and Priorities
There are many ways of understanding this play. Just as in Harold Pinter's plays, a friend and acknowledged influence of David Mamet, there is a style here that does not entirely reveal the playwright's thinking. As an audience we are asked to work at the gaps and leaps in the dialogue to come to an understanding. The plot of the play, American Buffalo, is relatively straightforward but the moral argument is more demanding. Some suggest that the play, written in the shadow of the Nixon era and the scandal of Watergate, is a political metaphor that shows Nixon and his accomplices as little more than small time gangsters. It is also possible to see the play as a parody of morality where the characters take an ethical high ground in their corruption - a matter of honour and decency amongst thieves. It is very like John Gay's treatment of bourgeois values in his play, The Beggar's Opera, where his characters are scandalised by the idea of adopting conventional respectability. Just as critics have argued about Harold Pinter's play, The Homecoming, there are people who see in American Buffalo, an exploration of Jewish culture and traditions where actions rather than just belief must define the good in people. Mamet himself, in more recent years, has seen this play in terms of family wherein there is a sense of responsibility (and failure) in Don's paternal relationship with Bobby. Don betrays his better self, seduced into corruption by Teach. Bobby has to grow up fast and learn that loyalty and kindness are not to be assumed, even in those he trusts.

Greg Hersov, the director of this production at the Royal Exchange Theatre, finds parts of all these issues in American Buffalo. However, for Greg, the electricity of the play and the playwright comes from the fact that this is a dissenting voice in American theatre and culture. The excitement he finds here is not simply about taking a position in the moment of mounting

Why not?

Look at a selection of British coins and notes. What symbols can you find and what is their relevance? Do you know who the people are who are depicted on the currency? In discussion, consider why you think they were chosen. What other symbols or people would you suggest for future coinage? Why do we often refer to money as grubby, as filthy lucre?

With a partner, improvise a scene around a selected single image from a coin or note. You might employ an irony wherein the exchange of this money somehow betrays the values of the symbol or person depicted. How can you make this contradiction obvious for your audience?
this production, in a fragile instant of history where views are polarised by world events since the 11th of September, but about asking questions and examining some of our western values. As he says “I don’t like melodrama…I call them comfort plays…this play is about the life of soul…it’s an assault course of energy not rationality.”

**Why not?**

- Having seen this production at the Royal Exchange Theatre or read the script, write a review where you focus on the issues, questions or attitudes that you find important. Justify your opinions by quoting aspects of the dialogue or the action as it was staged.

- Write your own scene that explores corruption in every day lives. If you are ambitious, your scene could act as a parallel to things happening in the wider political or social world. You might like to discuss this as a group, to begin with, to help you to get your ideas together.

**Word Play**

The language of Mamet’s plays has always provoked controversy. Where theatre and film critics have always much-admired the playwright’s command of dialogue, early audiences were more conservative. In part this is to do with the terseness of his style where what is not said is as important as what is said. Echoing Pinter, the playwright recognises the shorthand that comes in conversations amongst people who know one another well, and in the games we play in trying not to reveal some of our intentions or feelings. Audiences have also been reserved about the cursing that litters the conversations. Yet there is real wit in the dialogue or the action as it was staged.

**Why not?**

- In a group, think about your own local “street” lives. What is the rhythm and nature of the language? Using this knowledge construct a scene that employs some of the same short cuts of dialogue that typify Mamet’s writing. How much information can you convey to your audience by what is not said?

- Discuss the use of “bad” language as both a social phenomenon and in the dialogue of this play. Why do we swear and how does it shift or colour meaning? Should theatre avoid such a reality in what it offers audiences? Whatever your opinion, be prepared to offer reasons for your point of view.

**Male Preserves**

Women are mere shadows in this play. We hear about Ruth and Grace but they are never seen or heard other than tangentially through a telephone call. They are just commented upon or verbally abused with some ferocity. As Greg Herzov puts it “…this is a male world…ruthless…graceless.” Germaine Greer, the feminist historian and commentator, suggests that this was the play that taught her how men think. The misogyny of the men is unrelenting and unrepentant.

The director and the designer, Di Seymour, have placed the action in the here-and-now of Chicago rather than in the seventies of the writing. The designer has determined strict rules and the set dressing is not just junk; it has to be male junk. Even the posters of the likes of Britney Spears and Lara Croft come from the fantasies of men. As Di observes, it has meant spending a lot of time in the Army and Navy shop surrounded by men “without a hair on their heads”. What she is looking for in this store are the icons of overstated masculinity. The set will be dressed with items that echo the pioneer mentality and will include army items, DIY tools and huntin’, shootin’ and fishin’ gear. This is not just a backdrop - the men’s lives are lived amidst all this. The material leftovers of their business frame their attitudes and values. It is made all the more tangible in the Royal Exchange Theatre by virtue of the fact that the space is in-the-round. There is no escaping the importance of the items that surround the men because the action has to be amidst rather than in front of the goods that they try to sell.

Alongside this setting is a sound track of bluesy Chicago music. The tempo and mood is raw, vigorous and unyielding. Greg Herzov observes that “…this is rock and roll theatre…the play is an assault course of energy…”

**Why not?**

- In pairs, improvise a scene that explores the characters of Ruth and Grace. Who are they? What are their conversations? How do they view the three men? Work from the evidence of the script and not from stereotypes. Remember Ruth’s truck load of pig iron?

- Make a list and accompanying notes of junk that you would use to a setting of your own design. If possible, visualise it in a theatre or drama space that you know. Remember to organise this space so that it accommodates and comments on the action.

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REGISTERED CHARITY NUMBER 255424