

## The Professional World in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*

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*Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), a play for which Mamet was awarded Pulitzer Prize actually concerns a group of real estate salesman whose company has imposed a ruthless regimen. The most successful will receive a Cadillac, the runner-up a set of steak knives; loser will be fired. It is a neat paradigm of a competitive capitalist society. The key to success lies in securing the addresses of likely buyers. Since priority is given to the successful, this is a world in which success breeds success. Such is the pressure that it encourages unscrupulous methods with respect to the clients and ultimately with respect to the company. Increasingly desperate, one of the salesman, Shelly Levine, breaks into the office and steals the address list of potential clients. The crime is investigated by the police. The salesman's own fraudulent activities, by contrast, in deceiving their customers, is regarded simply as good business, sanctioned by the ethics of a world in which success is a value and closing a deal an achievement. My paper maps a search of a genuine, innocent voice whose consciousness is not terrorized by the consumer society.

The ideological world of Mamet's play is not the legal institution of the Roman law, but rather the economic institution of American capitalism (mythologized as the American Dream), within which Mamet's characters are constituted as salesmen, pivotal figures in the economic world of business. The institution has already predetermined how the salesmen will define themselves, their relationship to each other and to their conditions of existence, and how they will employ language to compose those definitions. Defining America has been both an American and a foreign preoccupation. It is part of a familiar triangulation process by means of which individuals and societies locate themselves, geographically, politically and culturally.

America is for many a fiction rather than a reality. For most societies, it existed as idea before being realized as fact, and fact had then to be pulled into line with myth, a great dream of avarice. Mamet places his own country as an artificial gathering of men from different languages, customs, and traditions whose only common denominator was having been condemned by history to live together without knowing or loving each other. America too, is not America; it is compounded of myths to do with freedom and equality, of yeoman farmers and sturdy individuals, of spirituality and material enterprise. It propounds a dream of increasing wealth and perfectibility; it propounds a singular identity forged out of difference. It talks to itself in the dark for reassurance about its special status.

In *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), Mamet writes about his experiences in a real-estate office. He wrote the play thirty five years after the first performances of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in February 1949. *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983) had its premiere at London's National Theatre in September 1983. Both the dramatists see that archetypal American figure, the drummer or salesman, not only as the representative of a capitalist system which is ruinous to personal decency and to relationships but also as its victim.

Those who thrive in the marketplace are morally, emotionally, spiritually damaged; those who do not continue to thrive fast become disposable. On the other hand, those classified as rejects protest, sometimes invoking the very values they have wilfully or unknowingly subverted but they soon discover they are subject to the same laws that are applied to mechanical objects. They are the disintegrating old bones in the society whose own survival is at risk. In *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), Mamet's four salesmen, Roma, Levene, Moss and Aaranow, are busy beguiling gullible Chicagoans into investing large sums in an

undeveloped Florida land which has been given an exotic Scottish name but is probably fit only for ants or alligators. These salesmen are socially more marginal, their aggressiveness greater, their scruples non-existent and are observed with greater detachment. They are never seen in their domestic environment and have less chance to engage sympathies from their audience. It is difficult to speculate about the home lives of Mamet's salesman. Only a few words from Levene suggest that any of them have any personal relationships at all, but at work they seek only to keep their jobs and make money, largely at each other's expense. Camaraderie is sometimes as sham and often a ruse.

What is stinging in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983) is not just that its salesmen are battling by foul means to offload worthless property. It is that Murray and Mitch, company directors who remain safely offstage yet are frighteningly omnipresent, have introduced a system which means that those salesmen are not merely in competition but effectively at war with each other. The man who sells the most land will win a Cadillac. The runner-up receives a set of steak knives. The other will be fired. At the beginning of the play, it appears that Roma is just one sale away from Moss who is running second, followed at no great distance by Levene, followed by Aaranow, seemingly the least aggressive, dishonest and therefore productive of the sales force.

The first act consists of three short scenes, each set in a booth in the same Chinese restaurant. These demonstrate how a successful salesman, namely Roma, softens up a possible buyer and how the less successful Levene and Moss behave when they feel insecure, threatened and resentful. The second of these scenes also sets the main plot in motion. Moss wants to persuade Aaranow to raid the office, steal the "leads", and give them to him to sell to a rival estate called Jerry Graff.

The burglary occurs in the interval, leaving the play's second act to deal with its aftermath. The office is in chaos, a broken plate glass window boarded up, glass all over the place and the leads are missing along with phones and other equipment presumably taken to suggest to the police that this was not an inside job. But the detective, Baylen is not convinced on the case. He interviews the staff in a side office and he gets his man. Moss persuaded Levene to carry out the burglary. Levene ends up admitting to the office manager, Williamson that he stole and sold the leads. This is the play's least convincing encounter, since it depends on an experienced salesman, adept to every variety of slippery behavior, not merely failing to cover up a small verbal slip but giving way to uncharacteristic weakness and trust. On the other hand, the incident provides yet more evidence of Levene's insecurity and decline.

The subplot involves Richard Roma, who has spent the final part of the first act talking to a solitary fellow-diner called James Lingk. During the interval, he has been to Lingk's home and persuaded him and his wife to sign a contract for Florida land. For him, this is a reason for rejoicing, since it means that he has now won the office contest and the Cadillac. But then Lingk appears at the real-estate office, desperate to renounce an agreement to which his wife now fiercely objects. It looks as if Roma's stratagem will win back his buyer; an inept Williamson makes an interpolation which Roma ensures that sale is lost for now.

The play ends with Levene about to be arrested and Roma returning to the place where he discovered Lingk and presumably hopes to find other prospects. A crime and its solution change nothing. This sleazy operation will continue as before. Salesman will have their triumphs and their failures; ordinary people will be duped and fleeced. This is not the play's only subject. It's great strength is its uniquely detailed account of the language of manipulation. It also has plenty to tell us about the experience of becoming and being. As Gordon W. Allport says, "...life is a hard struggle for existence ...when ...there appears to be

‘no exit’ (Sartre).” (Allport 81). The business ethics of America inspires such ‘hard struggle’ for good economic and social reasons. It is worth re-emphasizing that Mamet’s portrayal of his microcosmic real-estate office embodies his views about the macrocosm outside.

Both Levene and Roma are nostalgic for the old ways of closing a deal which is both risky and daring. They have a particular contempt for Williamson, whom they see as a “secretary” or “white bread” (*GGR* 77). He sits in the office distributing leads while they are out in the real world, in Levene’s words, walking up to the doors of people they do not know and “selling something they don’t even want” (*GGR* 77). Roma goes even further. His myth of himself is of a frontiersman, boldly venturing where others fear to tread.

This is most evident when Williamson inadvertently contradicts a lying Roma by telling the frightened Lingk that the cheque he wrote out at the salesman’s bidding has already been cashed. When Lingk runs out in panic, Roma turns on Williamson, calling him “a fairy”, “a fucking child” and worse. (*GGR* 96). Towards the end of the play, talking to Levene, he makes his view still clearer: “It’s not a world of men ... It’s a world of clock watchers, bureaucrats, office holders... there’s no adventure to it... we are the members of a dying breed” (*GGR* 105)

Through Roma and Levene, Mamet tries to question the pioneer myth which he himself has disowned. It is an ethic that gives Roma and Levene a gratifyingly macho rationale for playing on the greed of, and economically enslaving, the common men and women of modern Chicago. Mamet brings in Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of Leisure Class*: “Sharp practice inevitably shades over into fraud. Once someone has no vested interest in behaving in an ethical manner, and the only bounds on his behavior are supposedly his innate sense of fair play, when fair play becomes an outdated concept” (Bigsby, 95). *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983) makes it clear that such behavior is not purely an individual decision. The code of an institution ratifies us in acting amorally. The play teaches us that we do not exploit the possible opportunities not only are we being silly but also we are being negligent.

The endemic attitude is very evident when Roma berates Williamson for telling a “truth” that is actually a miscalculated professional lie. He adds to the pressure exerted by Murray and Mitch outside the office. Such an action will inexorably lead to men being consigned to the trashcan at a time and in an age when re-employment will be tough to find.

So the play not only exposes an ugly business practice but it also implicates an America that, as Mamet has said, is “a very violent society full of a lot of hate: you can’t put a band-aid on a suppurating wound.” (Bigsby, 96). On the other hand, the play relieves the salesman of some of their responsibility for terrible conduct

Aaranow does not refuse to sell land, he at the same time does not fail to show interest when Levene implies he might get a job with a rival estate agent who is himself corrupt enough to agree to buy stolen leads. At the same time, when Moss suggests that Murray and Mitch are ripping off the salesmen, he defends them by pointing out that they have overheads to pay. When the office he refused to burgle is trashed, he worries about whether it is insured.

Mamet shows that Levene has a good personal reason for panic. In the opening scene, he claims to have left his wallet in his hotel, so cannot pay his share of the restaurant bill, again he comes up with the \$100 bribe Williamson demands for giving him better leads. Two words, “the gas”, suggest that he cannot afford to fill up his car. He has someone he cares for and uses as the basis for his plea for help both here and after the burglary: “my daughter”, (*GGR* 26) he says, with the written text italicizing the noun each time and on the first occasion demanding a long pause before the phrase. There are many pauses and silences in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983) for the actors to fill with emotion or mental calculation or both. Here, we can sense the pain of a divorced man who has lived precariously but takes pride in

having put “the kid through school” (*GGR* 77). Mamet has a mixed feeling about his salesmen when they are operating professionally.

Levene, in the first scene, attempts to persuade Williamson to give him better leads. His argument is that he is a fine salesman who is the victim of “bad luck”, and should be helped through his losing “streak” (*GGR* 16) because he has done excellent work in the past. He has made large profits for Murray and Mitch, once effectively paying for the latter’s car and buying the former a trip to Bermuda: “Those guys lived on the business I brought in” (*GGR* 22). But there is a major flaw in his argument. Levene is invoking triumphs in 1970s, even in the 1960s, and this is a world where history, loyalty and friendship count for nothing. “Not lately it isn’t” (*GGR* 17) is Williamson’s story response to Levene’s claim that his ability is greater than Moss’s.

Levene runs down Roma (“he’s throwing the leads away”) as well as Moss (“he’s an order taker”) in sales pitch for himself that becomes more angry and desperate as it continues. He tries to play on Williamson’s guilt-feelings, his humanity which wants no pity or charity. But subsequent events indicate that Williamson does not feel secure enough in his job to succumb to emotions that he anyway does not appear to possess. He tries to remain cool when the office manger becomes hostile to him as if he is a loser. In the end Levene even fails to offer money as bribe to save himself.

The second scene suggests that Moss is far better as a salesman. He too fails in his aim to manipulate Aaranow into carrying out the burglary of the office. He plays both on the sense of justice, though he retains unease and unhappiness in the job. The pressure created by Mitch and Murray is “too great”. A competition weighted in favour of already successful salesmen is “not right”. Moss even agrees with Aaranow when he adds that “it’s not right to the customers” (*GGR* 31).

Moss is ready to excite Aaranow’s displeasure. The two of them are slaves of people, who instead of building up their sales force, offer them meaningless prizes, treat them like children, and axe them, “fuck them up the ass” (*GGR* 36). “You’re absolutely right”, says Moss, strengthening their consensus by falsely implying that these criticisms were initiated by Aaranow, and moves a crucial step further. Someone should “strike back” to steal the leads. Aaranow can be asked a question, “what could somebody get for them?” (*GGR* 38) which is sufficiently enough to describe his intention.

Since Aaranow knows the inner story, Moss threatens him to perform the break-in and if he refuses, he might have to bear the consequences. When Aaranow enquired of his fault, “Because you listened” (*GGR* 46), comes the brusque brutal answer. Manipulation has become domination, and though later Aaranow opted for “out”, a powerful, plausible threat silenced him. If that scene shows why Moss is ahead of Levene in the Cadillac stakes, the next explains why Roma is at the front. He can pick out a stranger and then prepare him for a “sit” and a sale. At the end of a long day, he relaxes sharing casual thoughts about life in general with a friendly face. Not until the very end, by the time his quarry has been readied for the kill, does he move into salesman mode and then in a way which off handedly suggests that he is not especially interested in making a sale.

It is from Roma’s speeches that we come to know about Lingk’s passive and repressed nature and how he is fundamentally scared of his wife. Roma appeals to a side of him that is not wholly intimidated by conventional morality. He says to Lingk, “When you die you’re going to regret the thing you don’t do” (*GGR* 47). Flatteringly, he implies that the man whose macho self he hopes to discover and exploit is like him a world – weary stud: “The great fucks that you may have had. What do you remember about them?” (*GGR* 48).

Like Moss with Aaranow, Roma is creating a shared sense of values, experience, sophistication and identity. Though Lingk is all but silent, he is being cajoled into “the habit

of saying yes” (GGR 48). Roma now appeals to his conventional, conscientious and perhaps his guilty self. He tries to reconcile the opposite aspects of Lingk’s personality by manoeuvring him towards the paradoxical belief that to take risks is to achieve security, for instance, by investing sight unseen in Florida land. It is Roma’s spiel at Lingk’s home which convinced Mrs. Lingk to have second thoughts about the contract that she and her husband have signed and send him to renege on the deal. Roma is able to entice Lingk back into his clutches by simultaneously acknowledging the good husband and appealing to the suppressed man: “You have certain things you do jointly, you have a bond there ... and there are other things. Those things are yours. You needn’t feel ashamed. You needn’t feel that you’re being untrue ... or that she would abandon you if she knew. This is your life.” (GGR 93). It is not untrue that Lingk defies his wife by preparing to go for a drink with the salesman.

Roma’s psychological insight is awesome. He has an ability to exploit words that captivate, enchant, confuse, tantalize and convince his clients. As Bigsby says, “one sees the similarities between the drummer, who must persuade or perish, and the dramatist, whose own professional survival depends on the wit and skill with which he wins belief for fictional situations and passes off chimerae in Florida or Arizona as plausible realities” (Bigsby, Christopher. *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* (Bigsby 100-101). Mamet’s achievement in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983) is to show a virtuosity of words which enables him to sell his own vision.

Here virtuosity of words means the language in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), which is often brusque and brutal but has a texture which is scarcely found in American or English drama today. Mamet always tries to repeat the trivialities of speech with unfinished sentences, twists, redundancies, emphases and muddles. Thus, Levene exhilarated by an improbable sale says, “And, and, and, and I did it. And I put a kid through school. She ... and cold calling fella. Door to door. But you don’t know. You don’t know. You never heard of a streak” (GGR 77). The speech reflects the vindictive triumph of the moment and also Levene’s impulsive, erratic character and chaotic state of being.

Though the salesmen share jargons, they use language differently. The bullying Moss is candid, punchy; Aaranow more tentative, Roma canny and intricate. Their language leaves us with a feeling that Mamet is the bard of streetwise brutality, the laureate who is an expert in recording everyday speech in urban Illinois. In his business plays, he has described America as “spiritually bankrupt” (Bigsby, 101). He says that the spirit has to be renewed. But such spirit can never be renewed if material wants and needs define and diminish virtually every human contact and where relationships ultimately become hostile.

What I find in this play is that he is in search of a genuine, innocent voice whose consciousness is not terrorized by the consumer society. He wants to regain the status which has been lost in contemporary America. To move along a revolving axis of American cultural histories from an early version of commercial-technological man to his far more complex modern counterpart. American theatre has done much to shape America’s changing sense of the human, which in turn is intimately connected with their relationship to the land. The mythic prototypes that embody the relationship are inseparable from what they are and what they have been and what they can be. As they re-create and relive these prototypes in their understanding of national purpose, the dichotomy illuminated looms as a matter of both being and becoming. Mamet wants his character to stop relying upon these artificially created prototypes in order to escape reality. He exposes violence through language what he considers a corrupt and venal culture – a culture that has exchanged the golden vision made possible by the American Dream for the tinselly ostentation of a society of excess. He exposes the role of capital or money as terroristic, where the relation between an object and a man is dependent on the use of value and a transition to an exchange value. The society

becomes an object and money tries to copy the image of that object. The characters try to choose that object with the help of code called language. This code leads them to a complex pattern. The code, i.e., language generates a fantasy on them and their desire to choose the next. Such fantasy can come into play in the form of a game. It invades their consciousness and when it gives no satisfaction, it creates confusion and misunderstanding in their life. They lose their peace of mind gained from the past and a lust for gaining an object takes over their real. They are caught in the chain of transition when their real self becomes virtual, only by looking at the world; just as one becomes a part of a movie just by looking at it. For them, comfort becomes consumption and capital redefines human relations. They are thrown into a space from where they can never return. This is how Mamet sets out to demonstrate the awful barrenness that exists in American society

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