

Sean Bartley

Program Note: *Speed-the-Plow*

“We Americans have always considered Hollywood, at best, a sinkhole of depraved venality. And, of course, it is.” –David Mamet, *A Playwright in Hollywood*

In early 1986, before writing *Speed-the-Plow*, Mamet offered this terse assessment of the film industry. Having won the Pulitzer Prize for *Glengarry Glen Ross* two years earlier, and still awash in critical praise for *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *American Buffalo*, Mamet was openly courted by major film studios with lucrative screenwriting offers. The success of Mamet’s first two screenplays, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *The Verdict*, only furthered Hollywood’s interest. Though Mamet insisted that his “sojourn in Hollywood” was over, he found himself, much like Bobby Gould at the start of *Speed-the-Plow*, thrust into new wealth, access, and Los Angeles clout. Simultaneously in 1986, he began to write the screenplay for Brian de Palma’s *The Untouchables*, the biggest commercial success of his film career, and *Speed-the-Plow*, a biting satire of Hollywood producers. Twenty-five years later, the play is still Mamet’s most-produced comedy. Star-studded revivals have enjoyed sold-out runs on Broadway and in the West End.

In *Speed-the-Plow* this form of commercial success is all that matters to Mamet’s protagonist, Bobby Gould. In the play’s first scene, he giddily prepares to green-light a new film without actually having read the script. When Karen, a naïve new studio secretary, asks Bobby “Is it a good film?,” he can only reply, “Well, it’s a commodity.” Like the salesmen of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and the swindlers of *American*

*Buffalo*, Bobby lives by a simple, profit-driven credo: “Is there such a thing as a good film which loses money? In general, of course. But, really, not. For *me*.” After they hatch the plan for their new film, Bobby and Charlie Fox, his close friend and coworker, do not begin to plan for production or consider finally picking up the script. Instead, they discuss what they will buy with their commissions: “We’re going to have to hire someone just to figure out the *things* we want to buy...”.

Much has changed for Mamet since *Speed-the-Plow* debuted twenty-five years ago. With the notable exception of *Oleanna* in 1992, his stage plays have never achieved the commercial success of his earlier classics. But Mamet the screenwriter began producing a steady string of highly profitable projects, including *Hoffa* (1992), *Wag the Dog* (1997), *Ronin* (1998), and *State and Main* (2000). Mamet now makes his home in Los Angeles, spending more time with studio executives than theater artists.

The immense power of the five largest film studios (Charlie calls them “The Five Major Food Groups”) is still consolidated, as it was when Mamet wrote *Speed-the-Plow*, within the hands of a tiny group of producers and power brokers. Speaking at the USC film school in June, Steven Spielberg lamented that “even proven talents find it difficult to get movies into theatres,” forced to curtail their ideas to appease a new generation of Bobby Goulds and Charlie Foxes. The dollar figures associated with a blockbuster film may have changed, but the inner workings of Hollywood that Mamet lambastes in *Speed-the-Plow* have stayed the same, making the play ripe for re-examination and study.