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Stealing from Pirates Book Proposal

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Chapter Four

David Mamet, the Vulgar Pirate

“You can’t be outraged if you haven’t seen it.”

- Poster for David Mamet’s 2019 play ‘Bitter Wheat’

Captain’s Log

Unlike most well-known playwrights, David Mamet’s still here.

For the most part, though more and more exceptions, writers love him. Actors and directors praise him. Critics hate him; or love him. Old ladies scold him... and season after season, audiences eat him up.

Through the mid-eighties to the late 2010’s, Mamet’s plays have clocked hundreds of regional performances every year, with at least one hitting Broadway or the West End with A-list acting talent¹. And while it earned him scorn from the entertainment elite, emerging as a political conservative in 2008—a stunt that gathered as much publicity as his 2019 flop *Bitter Wheat*, a Harvey Weinstein themed satire with one John Malkovich caterwauling in a fat suit—only bolstered his brand of controversy.

For all his F bombs, David Mamet’s still stacking G’s.

Having earned his *Masterclass*-worthy chops by founding several acting companies, rising from the Chicago theater scene to the Pulitzer Prize in drama—he won it in 1984 for the distinctly salty *Glengarry Glen Ross*—penning popular books about acting and writing, and writing screenplays for feature films like *State and Main*, *Ronin*,

¹ As I’m writing this, *American Buffalo* is slated for another Broadway revival, with Laurence Fishburne, Sam Rockwell and Darren Criss, respectful.

Hoffa, and *Wag the Dog*, his reign as America's theater body boy continues unchallenged.

At first glance, he's hardly a role model. But in the words of Donny Dubrow, the wizened, shifty junk shop owner in the play *American Buffalo*, "Things are not always what they seem to be." Though it's not the saltiest, or the most memorable line from Mamet's lexicon, it helps capture the style, ethos, and surprisingly tragic, Judeo-classical worldview of the theater world's dialogue icon.

He'd probably agree.

In fact, if we boil David Mamet down to one phrase, he'd want it to be sleight-of-hand... that, or one word starting with the letter F.

Chicago

Mamet's claim that his environment shaped his craft and his writing has a lot of truth to it. As a frame of reference, his backstory's worth a quick tour.

He was born in Chicago, in November of 1947 and raised in a middle-class family. His parents, a teacher and a labor lawyer, respectively were the offspring of Polish-Jewish immigrants. They divorced when Mamet was ten, and until college, he spent time living with both of them, working small jobs in Chicago's theaters and movie houses. After leaving Chicagoland for small, eclectic Goddard College, he graduated four years later with, in his own words 'no skills, nor demonstrable talents whatsoever.'

His early brushes with theater lured Mamet back to Chicago. Working whatever jobs he could, he founded small theater companies, writing, producing, and directing his own scripts. Mesmerized by the Windy City's hustle and bluster, Mamet thrust it all onstage—tapping out vulgar speech patterns with a fine-toothed comb. It's clear he drew heavily from the city of Al Capone to craft *American Buffalo*, a play about trust and loyalty among small-time thieves, and his first production to transfer from Chicago to New York City.

If we believe the legend, we can imagine a hip, eager playwright scouring the city and soaking in everything around him, sculpting dialogue from the cant of cab drivers,

dish washers, poker players in storefront backrooms. Onstage, his characters hustle, cheat, placate, seduce, curse, distract, and backstab, mislead the audience and surprising themselves. In the end, and in the Judeo-Christian tradition that runs parallel to ancient Greece, but contrary to Ibsen's self-liberating saints, Mamet's characters slide the mask off human nature. Time and again, when everything's on the line, people show what they're really capable of.

It's also true that profanity made him famous... and thanks to vulgarians like him, it's far less potent than it was in his day. *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet's Pulitzer-winning 'Gang Tragedy' about cutthroat real estate salesmen squaring off with each other in a ransacked office, was dedicated to Harold Pinter—an early mentor, and a master of the poetry and subtext of dramatic language. But while he cites Pinter as an early influence, Mamet loves to quote film director Billy Wilder:

"I never met an audience that wasn't, collectively, smarter than me."

Always the Audience

Like the most successful playwrights, Mamet credits not school, but repeated exchanges with the audience with teaching him what he needed. Sometimes, through humiliation. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Mamet cites the city's blue-collar denizens as the best education a playwright could have:

"But the version in Chicago was people went to the theater just like they went to the ballgame: they wanted to see a show. If it was a drama, it had to be dramatic, and if it was a comedy, it had to be funny—period... and if it was those things, they'd come back."²

To hear him tell it, Mamet cut his teeth producing shows for gruff, *groundlings*—smoking, wisecracking, blue-collar Chicagoans, herded off the street and into some hole-in-the-wall theater beneath the L train.

Not a shy crowd, if we believe him.

² 'Playwrights at Work,' *The Paris Review*. (379).

With the single goal of outsmarting the audience, Mamet absorbed the structures of comedy and tragedy and then used them to frame situations with modern, wise-cracking characters. Mamet recalls laboring through draft after draft to make *American Buffalo*, and later on, the audience-splitting *Oleanna* into classically structured tragedies, with culminating reversals that are both inevitable and astonishing, *per* Aristotle's recipe.

Like Aristotle, who watched dozens of plays each year for the festival of Dionysius, we can imagine the vulgar pirate gauging the audience's reaction time and time again, and honing many of the skills William Shakespeare mastered. Getting a laugh, cutting to the action, using forwards, twists, and misunderstandings to conceal information, revealing identities at just the right time, and blowing away realities that seemed concrete a mere scene ago.

We can fast-forward through Mamet's success in both New York and London to his successful leap to Hollywood, where many of the actors he worked with in Chicago also broke through the L.A. entertainment-mill. William H. Macy, Felicity Huffman, Ricky Jay, Robert Duvall, Joe Mantegna were once his students. But while late sojourns into film, fiction, political commentary, and even Masterclass.com offer even more shades of the bad boy, Mamet's single-minded focus on the audience remains his secret sauce—and the young playwright's plumb line.

Playbook:

At his best, David Mamet starts, and ends, with the audience.

As far as what audiences in New York and London are willing to pay for, he's a household name. Many times over, a proven closer. With this in mind, four of his mid-career plays put decent handles on what it takes to capture, misdirect and above all, keep the interest of a live audience.

- Did they laugh at the well-placed joke?
- Did they gasp at the big reveal? Did they cry? Murmur?
- Did they pay attention or roll their eyes and pick up their phone?

The test's brutal, but rising playwrights should know that's the only one out there.

Yet another Mamet adage puts it bluntly—the only thing the audience cares about is what happens next. To that end, the vulgarian's moves are no great mystery. While they're not easy to pull off, they're perfectly understandable. With enough practice, and with the courage to sit in the back of the house and see some test results in real time, you can probably land them. With nothing more but a warning for a few tasty plot spoilers, here's how David Mamet does it.

1. He arrives late

With Mamet, like most playwrights writing on his heels, there's no prologue. No introduction. The lights darken, brighten. We see a stage, set pieces, and at least two characters—and that's it. When one of them starts talking, he's off, plunging us down the racetrack. Where forerunners like Ibsen and Chekhov start with something akin to a warm-up lap, establishing characters, relationships and the social strata of late 19th century Norway and Russia respectfully, Mamet floors it.

Or rather, he *arrives late*, jumping right to situations that have ripened on the vine. Confrontations, arguments, eleventh-hour deal-making—if it starts the play, then it's already been happening. Whatever's going down is already in motion.

It doesn't take a fiery chase or an opening fight scene.

American Buffalo begins with two hustlers, (*Don* the old timer and his unlucky apprentice *Bob*), bantering in a ramshackle pawn shop. But as we listen in, it's not banter—the apprentice just returned from casing someone with a valuable coin collection, a clueless mark they've already planned to rob. And Bob's made a misstep—he's lost sight of the target. Not impressed, Don's checking details, grilling Bob for details while walking him through a *teachable moment*. It's a minor setback, but Don's got skin in the game; he's making sure the rookie can cover his tracks, cross all 't's as the heist gets closer. Not long after *Teach*, a third hustler, comes in, *he's* figured out when they're up to. A few pages later, Bob's out—and he's in on it.

There's no pontificating, no beating around the bush, just late in the game *action*... and a Drama Critic's award for the *Best American Play* in 1977. All from guys three talking in a junk shop.

When one character's leaning forward, eager, curious, desperate, or otherwise *after something*—there's a good chance the audience is too. By arriving late, Mamet tilts everyone forward from the get go, as soon as he possibly can.

Oleanna begins with Carol, a shy college student on the verge of failing a class. The semester's nearly over and she's in the office of John, her professor. Timid, stuttering, she's terrified, but there nonetheless, pressing him to do something, whatever he can. John of course, is *on the phone*, navigating the finer details of closing on a new house, contingent upon the raise and tenure he's about to receive. He's even late for a surprise celebration on his behalf.

With his realtor insisting *he get down there*, and his student desperate, hanging on him to salvage her grade, John's in a tug a war. Either he cuts Carol a deal—right then and there—or he throw her to the wolves.

Going backwards, we can imagine each story's origins, (not that they actually *happened*, as Mamet likes to remind us... I took some liberty extrapolating backward). Take note of where **Scene One** begins, of what events have fallen like dominos, raising the stakes before the audience has even arrived:

Timeline	<i>American Buffalo</i>	<i>Oleanna</i>
<i>Origins:</i>	<p><i>Don</i> grows up in South Chicago, doing errands for criminals, working odd jobs... he works his way up to owning his own shop, running a poker game and calling shots for small-time crooks in the neighborhood.</p> <p>Years pass.</p> <p><i>Don</i> plays cards with <i>Teach</i>, then does business with him.</p>	<p>1. <i>John</i> grows up on the East Coast, youngest son of an affluent, well-connected family. Despite tutoring and elite private schools, he's a late bloomer... but his struggles in the classroom give him something to overcome.</p> <p>He hustles on to college, then grad school, then academia—a <i>maverick</i> education professor, headed for tenure.</p>

	One day, Don brings <i>Bob</i> * on board, a shy kid who's eager to please. Don figures he'll show Bob the ropes. Don introduces Bob to Teach*	2. <i>Carol</i> grows up in a broken family. They're poor so she works. She struggles in school, gets bullied, but buckles down and <i>makes it to college</i> . She arrives eager to learn, more than motivated to improve her situation.
<i>Set-up:</i>	Don decides to test Bob out on a real job. So they scope out a coin collector, set up the time and place for a robbery. Don tasks Bob with watching the mark. Things go smoothly, until...	Carol struggles in John's class.* He mocks the idea of education, throws the textbooks out, and spouts fluff she doesn't understand. Ashamed, discouraged, and too shy to seek help, she gives up, failing quietly until...
<i>Catalyst:</i>	Bob gets back from watching the mark—and admits he lost sight of him. Don's not impressed. And Scene One starts here...	Semester's ending. Out of options, Carol comes to John's office for help. He's there, but busy—on the phone with someone about buying a house. And Scene One starts here...

*It's no accident that, by **Scene One**, *everyone knows each other*.

Neither is it a coincidence that both plays start with scene one having *already began*, several beats into the conversation. By arriving late, David Mamet compliments his audience, insisting they move closer and listen up. As his own groundlings taught him, every moment, line, action, costs something.

Now more than ever, attention's not free.

So arrive late.

Do it correctly, and a pact is establish—a two way trust that A) the audience will lean forward to keep up with you and B) and that you, *humble playwright*, won't waste a *moment of their time*.

2. He starts with a grease fire

Often, but not always, Mamet begins when someone's *desperate*.

The walls are closing in, the rent's past *past* due, and the situation's already jumped from 8 to 11. Before we look at the superb example of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, it's

worth pointing out that Mamet's alone in using this tactic—not among dramatists, directors, or even novelists.

Russian great Leo Tolstoy began *Anna Karenina*, regarded by some as the greatest novel ever written, right in the middle of a *grease fire*. From the first sentence, he drops us in the chaotic Oblonsky household—right after patriarch Stephan Arkadyevitch's wife discovers he's been cheating on her with their children's French governess. Locked away from his wife and children, Stephan's sleeping on the couch, his life and marriage in shambles. When he first hear him speak, he's racking his brain for a course of action.

It goes without saying that grease fires piques our interest—even more than watching NASCAR, or any day in the *happy village where nothing's happened yet*.

Author Douglas Wilson begins his novel *Evangellyfish*, a deliciously funny roast of American evangelical culture with a similar, after-the-fact snap. John Mitchell, a late middle-aged Calvinist pastor has just punched his rival, the sleazy, mega-church icon Chad Lester, right in the face. *Why did he punch him? Where? How good of a punch was it? Not to mention, how does he, a mild-mannered Pastor, now feel about it?* We've arrived late to *something*. Please tell us more. With the questions percolating, swirling entire around a single incident, Wilson's got us.

Circling back to actors, stages, and the gifted trust of a live audience, we see the benefits of cutting right to action. Like Shakespeare, Arthur Miller, and countless others, Mamet prefers a situation that's already simmering, and just moments from boiling over.

In act one, scene one *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet plops us down in a tawdry Chinese restraint, close enough to overhear two salesman talking in a booth. The older one's leaned over the table, *pleading* with the other one, the boss who's at least twenty years younger.

And already, his boss is sick of listening.

LEVENE: John...John...John. Okay. John. John. Look: (*pause*). The Glengarry Highlands Leads. You're sending Roma out. He's a good man. We know that he is. He's fine. All I'm saying, you look at the *board*...he's throwing...wait, wait, wait, he's throwing them away, he's throwing the leads away. All that I'm saying, that you're wasting leads.

And though his boss isn't having, Levene cuts right to what he needs—a leg up on his situation. The good sales leads. Himself *on the job* and Roma *off of it*. By the time he pivots, we know exactly what he's angling for—just like his boss:

LEVENE: ...all I'm saying, put a closer on the job. There's more than one for the...Put a...put a proven man out...and you watch, now *wait* a second – and you watch your dollar volumes...You start closing them for fifty 'stead of twenty-five...you put a *closer* on the...

WILLIAMSON: Shelly, you blew the last...

LEVENE: No. John. No. Let's wait, let's back up here...I didn't 'blow' them. No. One kicked *out*, one I *closed*...

WILLIAMSON: ...you didn't close...

LEVENE: I, if you'd *listen* to me. Please...

Five lines in, their relationship's established. Along with their history—a slippery one, as deep and satisfying as the bond between rival prisoners locked in a cell together. We wonder rightfully if Levene's watched resentfully as his younger, greener colleague outpace and out-earn him on his way to manager. And judging from Levene's repeated words, 'John. John. John.' And 'Wait. Wait...' he's obviously fighting for attention and respect from someone who has none to give—and probably hasn't for a long time.

As we pan out through the scene and play, we see just how high the flames have climbed. With his dismal record, Levene's dead last in a quarterly sales contest that will see the lowest-earners fired. Williamson won't give him good leads in *this life time*. But unless he can get his hands on a few, and shuffle more tracts of land to gullible chumps, he's out of a job.

Not to mention his daughter's sick.

Though he's not dangling over the abyss like Levene, Williamson's feeling the heat from *Mitch and Murray*, cutthroat owners who are squeezing him for more turnaround. As we meet more characters (which we will in a moment), we see everyone's

sweating in the heat. Though we may not sell undeveloped real estate, or know much about the finer points of hawking something worthless to cash-strapped pawns in mid-eighties Chicago (Mamet himself answered phones at such an operation before his career took off), we know all we need to pay attention.

The whole deal's a grease fire.

3. He answers three questions

Coasting along with the momentum of **arriving late**, and **starting with a grease fire**, (though to some extent, you can start off differently, or to less of a degree than Mamet recommends), it's your job to answer three questions.

Mamet himself cites them, teaches them, swears by them.

It's harder than it looks, and it can take a handful of tries.

But successful playwrights nail it, deliver it, and communicate it to the audience in the clearest terms possible. Taking Levene and Williamson, let's work through the three questions every playwright needs to answer—*and fast*.

- 1. Who wants what from whom?**
- 2. What happens if they don't get it?**
- 3. Why now?**

Or, if you prefer some of those clever, snappy acronyms:

Wwwfw? Whitdgi? and WN?

If it helps to make a table, remember that you've got to include reasonable, interlocked answers for each character:

Glengarry Glen Ross **Scene One:**

	Levene	Williamson
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1. <i>Who wants what from whom?</i>	...wants Williamson to give him a shot at <i>surviving the sales contest</i> , via some of the premium leads he's been giving to Roma.	...wants to avoid getting in trouble because—yet again—Levene <i>screwed things up</i>and a drop of respect / self-honesty / understanding from Levene wouldn't hurt.
2. <i>What happens if they don't get it?</i>	...he loses the contest and <i>gets fired</i> . He's old, so another job / career is unlikely ... he won't be able to care for his sick daughter.	... if Levene screws up one more time, he'll get blamed. ...or worse, he might get fired.
3. <i>Why now?</i>	...the contest is ending—and he's in last place.	...Mitch and Murray expect results with from the sales contest. ...Levene's still his employee; one who's right <i>there</i> badgering him.

From the first line, everything's dialed in. The characters are aimed at each other like rockets, courses set for a sizzling collision. As we grab the popcorn, we're giddy, knowing we're in for fireworks.

Your grade school drama teacher, (not to mention your English teacher, bless her heart) probably talked about *conflict*. Ring a bell? Something about a story pyramid (rising action, climax, falling *something*...). While *yes*, conflict's a real thing, and *yes*, it's what drives all narrative (and especially plays) forward, it's scarcely more than the tabulation of those three questions, planned carefully, set in motion, welded together like bomb parts. From line one, your character should be trying get something from someone who *won't give it up*. And vice versa.

Two characters want the same thing—whether that's the inheritance, a glass of water, (see Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*), or the hand of fair *Bianca*, younger sister of a sharp-tongued powder keg in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Whatever it is, and whoever has it, they should want it more because the store's closing soon. By line five or six, or at the very latest, *scene two*, we should have a sense of **why now**. What's happening soon, or soon enough to make shy, squeamish, procrastinating people *act*?

Answering the three questions fast and hard, (assuming you've done it well) puts you, and your play in the express lane—far ahead of the mass graveyard of plays, characters, and dead essays on character motivation.

Think about how flesh and blood people act, every day.

Most of life is negotiation—people angling to get what they want or need, sizing up opportunities, obstacles, and countless ticking clocks.

With those three questions answered, you (and your characters) leap right to action—using words, tactics, or even wordless movement to get what they want. Forge ahead without answering them and the momentum stops. It's the difference between hitting the gas and letting the engine idle, sputter and die...in the middle of the intersection, with everyone watching.

4. He solves for X

Or rather, like a good detective story, he makes the *audience* solve for x.

While critics and audiences went bananas, over the scalding expletives in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, there's a real draw to the play's setup that goes deeper than language.

Beneath all the snarling desperation, the play's something of a *whodunit*.

Mamet leaves a clear, broad unknown at the start of act two, when the curtain rises and instead of the restaurant, we see a broken, ransacked, completely trashed office. It's been robbed—and we while we've seen potential culprits, narrowed down in the first act, we can't be positive. While Act One introduces us to the milieu of particular, scummy society, we also see three frames of potential culprits, divided by scenes.

All three scenes take place at the restaurant:

Scene One – Levene, a salesman, badgers Williamson for better sales leads.

Scene Two – Moss and Aaronow (two more salesman), complain about the office’s toxic management. Offering a payoff, Moss tries to pressure Aaronow into robbing the office.

Scene Three – Roma (the top salesman), reels in a sucker named James Lingk, who agrees to buy land from him.

While they’re all solid scenes, the one with Moss and Aaronow raises the thermostat—what starts as two salesmen complaining about their job slides into one talking the other into joining him in a robbery. By the time it ends, Aaronow’s squeamishly backpedaling. When he asks Moss why, all of a sudden, he’s now involved, Moss replies:

“Because you listened.”

We note this as the curtain falls, and when it rises for Act Two, we see an office in shambles—robbed, trashed, with all the leads gone for good. As a policemen conducts interviews, and all the salesman scuffle and bit like caged dogs, we’re forced to test, evaluate and retest our hunch as to *who did it*.

The answer (spoiled below) satisfies because it completes the formula.

It’s not who we thought, but it makes perfect sense:

	Act One - Restaurant	Act Two – Office RANSACKED	Resolution
Frame 1	Levene badgers Williamson for better sales leads.	Levene brags about making a sale.	-Williamson discovers Levene, (with Moss) robbed office ; Williamson turns him in to the police. Levene learns the sale he made is worthless.
Frame 2	Moss pressures Aaronow to rob the office with him.	Aaronow nervous; Moss quits in anger after police interrogate him.	Aaronow survives.
Frame 3	Roma reels in Lingk, a sucker.	Lingk arrives, backing out. Roma keeps him on the line until Williamson blows it.	Roma survives; still top dog.

The challenge of solving for x carries our interest through Act Two.

We've been given good, reliable information—three choices, and a *known unknown* when the curtain rises.

It's a tactic Mamet takes even further in plays like *The Cryptogram*, and in mind-bending screenplays like *The Spanish Prisoner* and *House of Games*. Likewise, *American Buffalo* hinges on a revelation that blows our prior conceptions out of the water. Like the other moves in his playbook, having the audience **solve for x** takes multiple tries and careful plotting. But pull it off, and you've got them.

Audiences love solving problems, racing ahead for the answer, and even being misled with a red herring.

If you Steal from Mamet:

Proceed carefully (Philippians 4:8).

To the degree that Mamet's works are coarse, provocative, and clearly intended for adults, handle him carefully. With the exception of his film *The Spanish Prisoner* and four seasons of *The Unit*, Mamet's *not* for families, children, or those seeking something more edifying. Profanity, shock, rage, and betrayal are powerful ingredients. If at all, Christian writers should add them in small, precise doses, like salt or Tabasco. Added carelessly, out from a fear of not sounding real enough, they ruin the recipe.

Practice:

Get there

Using Mamet's three questions as a guide ...

Who wants what from whom?
-What happens if they don't get it?
-Why now?

...and write a short scene with two characters who know each other, (don't make them strangers). Both want something and one of them is desperate, (a **countdown** works well here; your scene should be happening at the 11th hour). The other character is their only way of getting what they want, as well as their obstacle.

To really hit the gas, start several beats into the conversation. No small talk, no introduction—just something at stake and both characters cutting to the chase.

What tactics do they use?

*Don't forget to **aim high**.

Your scene need not be a four-letter tirade or a screaming cage match. Keep the stakes high and the characters on track, but surprise us with what happens. Rather than shocking or devastating, the outcome could be ironic, comedic, or surprising. You can always zig where everyone else zags.

Further Reading

American Buffalo by David Mamet

Oleanna by David Mamet

Three Uses of the Knife by David Mamet

True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor by David Mamet

Theatre by David Mamet