

REVIEW: Green Candle Burns Bright in Mamet Play

By Brent Hallenbeck • Burlington Free Press Staff Writer •
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Whether in plays such as "Glengarry Glen Ross" or films like "Heist," Goddard College graduate and Pulitzer Prize-winner David Mamet is always fascinated with the great American con job.

His breakout play, 1977's "American Buffalo," is more about three bumbling guys who can only dream of the great American con job. One runs a junk shop, the other two hang out there, and together they manage to make what could be the simple burglary of a customer's rare-coin collection into something much more complicated.



That provides both the humor and the intensity in "American Buffalo," which the Burlington-based Green Candle Theatre Company is staging at the Outer Space Cafe through next weekend. Not much happens for the longest time -- "American Buffalo" is kind of funny and a little heavy for three-quarters of its duration before turning into something much more explosive, thanks especially to the cast that features three of Burlington's best actors.

Donny (played by Dennis McSorley) runs the used-whatever shop that the likable but thuggish loser, Bobby (Aaron Masi), frequents. Donny has a soft spot for Bobby, encouraging the younger man to take vitamins and eat better as if he's a parent and not just a guy who provides him with company for a few hours.

Their friendship is tested by Teach (John Alexander), a high-strung hanger-on who likes to talk a big game but offers little to back it up (His sophisticated plan for breaking into a safe? Find the owner's combination). He comes between Donny and Bobby, encouraging Donny to dump Bobby from the coin-heist scheme they've devised and install Teach as the brains of what quickly reveals itself to be a largely brainless operation.

This isn't an overly deep play; Mamet has a few things to say about bonds and trust, but "American Buffalo" is mostly an exercise in dark entertainment, showing off the playwright's ability to craft a plot with intricate twists and dialogue that's simple, surprising and profane.

Alexander is a treat in any play he's in -- Champlain Theatre productions of "The Cripple of Inishmaan" and "Our Country's Good" quickly come to mind -- and he's the dynamic force in "American Buffalo" from the moment he comes on stage spouting classic Mametian obscenities. And it's not just in the powerful way Alexander delivers his lines; from arching his eyebrows in incredulity to glaring at a stuffed animal head on the wall of Donny's shop ("I am calm, I'm just upset," Teach says in one typically oxymoronic moment), he brings the fuel that fires this production of "American Buffalo."

Masi is perhaps best known for his work off-stage in producing an inventive take on Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose," but he's terrific as the slow-witted but sympathetic Bobby, a guy for whom simply living

day-to-day seems to put him in over his head. Masi's scenes late in the second act are the most riveting in the play, and tear down the false bravado Bobby carries for much of the night.

McSorley is always sharp, and his New York upbringing brings the right urban feel to Mamet's gritty city setting. At times in "American Buffalo" he fails to make sufficient eye contact with his fellow actors, dissipating the focused intensity of a very intense play in an intimate setting. But he understands the flow of Mamet's taut script, and keeps Donny squarely where he should be, at the center of two extreme pressure points.

Director Tara Lee Downs, like Mamet a Goddard alum, keeps the pace of "American Buffalo" on track. She lets the early verbal battles of the play escape in rapid-fire fashion but leaves air in the dialogue as "American Buffalo" draws toward the end, letting the audience hone in clearly on what's happening.

A highlight of the production is the set, with whimsical pieces provided by props master (and frequent Burlington-area performer) G. Richard Ames. His contributions to the 1970s curiosity shop from his own amazingly eclectic collection range from a star-shaped wall clock to tacky vinyl-upholstered kitchen chairs and a used Etch-A-Sketch on a shelf, all of which create kitschy elements of humor as a backdrop to a play that wears a fair dose of that humor on its face.

Like the sadly amusing items that dwell in the background of their lives, the three men who inhabit "American Buffalo" have no real hope of ever elevating themselves beyond the confines of Donny's crummy little shop.