

American Buffalo suffers from quirky characterization

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OF CONTRIBUTOR

American Buffalo
Havana Theatre
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C-me Productions presented *American Buffalo* by David Mamet last week at the Havana Theatre, which is located inside the restaurant of the same name on Commercial Drive. The theatre itself is a small black-box space that seats about 60 people. It is a very intimate setting with the stage beginning where the audience ends. As soon as the play starts a major flaw is immediately revealed—there is no sound barrier between the restaurant and the theatre. Every conversation, phone ring, and dropped tray is audible to the audience, making it hard to concentrate on the stage. The size of the space also provides a challenge for the actors in finding the perfect speaking volume. Too low and they can't be heard over the hum of the restaurant, too loud and they are just shouting at the audience.

American Buffalo shows a day in the life of Junk Store owner Donny Dubrow (Marko Hohlbein). He and his young lackey, Bobby (Donovan Cerminara), have devised a plan to rob a local coin collector. When Walter, better known as 'Teach' (Peter Abrams), discovers the plot, he tries to convince Donny to cut Bobby loose and let him in on the deal.

The main focus on stage is a rickety card table strewn with crushed beer cans, old playing cards and candy wrappers. Paint cans, a plastic parrot, an Elvis portrait, broken vacuums, a porcelain bull, dirty toys and other assorted bric-a-brac line the back and side walls of the stage. All this mixes with the dim lighting and generic soft jazz that plays in the background to create the perfect atmosphere of a lowbrow junk shop.

The play begins with Donny throwing Bobby into the store. They argue briefly, on some sub-

After quickly making amends, they clean up the shop while talking about last night's card game. The story really starts when Teach enters, swearing his head off and ranting about Ruthie, whom they all know. Since this is the first time all actors are on stage it is an important scene in establishing the character's relationships. Teach's entrance destroys the chance for honest communication.

Abrams plays up the physicality of Teach. He is consumed with a nervous energy that keeps him buzzing about the stage. It's great characterization, but there is no heart in it. His first speech sounds more like an audition piece than part of an actual conversation. Cerminara also has this problem with Donny. His characterization of the nervous, simple-minded lackey is physically well orchestrated, but doesn't make him believable as a real person. He also had a tendency to put his head down and talk into his chest, making him very hard to understand. Abrams' and Cerminara's impersonal performances create a wall between the actors that prevent them from really listening to each other and responding sincerely. Hohlbein is the only one who seems genuinely relaxed on stage. He focuses less on physicality and more on the language. He works on developing the relationships between Donny and Bobby, and Donny and Teach. Unfortunately his efforts are one-sided, and not enough. In a play with only three actors, honest interaction is a crucial element, and it was seriously overlooked.

It is obvious a lot of hard work went into *American Buffalo*, but their energy was focused on the wrong area. Mamet isn't about action, he's about words. He creates real people and puts them in average situations to see what they'll do. His plays need to be approached as explorations of human nature, not vehicles for quirky characterization. C-me productions came close to discovering this distinction, but they

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