

# Putting out fire with gasoline

## Ira Nadel on David Mamet's explosive relationship with Hollywood

Hollywood and David Mamet go together like oil and water. Light a match and everything goes up in flames. *Speed-the-Plow* fans those flames in his takedown of Hollywood producers and their obsession with greed and power. Who's to blame, who's the hero? Who needs a hero? These are some of the questions Mamet's 1988 work asks in his signature, crackling dialogue. It's a play about aggression, competition, survival -- standard Mamet themes. It's also a play with a small cast, allowing the antagonism to simmer and then boil over. He's favoured this structure since his first hit, *American Buffalo*, and repeats it in *Oleanna*, *Boston Marriage* and, most recently, *The Anarchist*. The smaller the cast, the bigger the explosion.

Mamet's own battles with producers fuelled *Speed-the-Plow*, the title originating in a medieval expression meaning "work well and you will be rewarded." His script for *The Verdict* with Paul Newman was first rejected, his efforts with *The Postman Always Rings Twice* were greeted with derision, and his script for *The Untouchables* was first thought unusable by the producers at Paramount -- until another producer convinced them it was the best they would get.

Mamet had just finished shooting his forgettable send-up of a crime movie, *Things Change*, about a shoe-shine man mistaken for a mafia hit man, when he decided to write *Speed-the-Plow*. He had also recently lost a fight with producers over *About Last Night*. This was a re-titled adaptation of his first hit for the stage, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. The film script he prepared of his own play was bounced. Movies, he quickly learned, had nothing to do with the writer or the actor or the director. Only the producer. Producers for Mamet were "parasites," their cunning only matched by their cruelty -- so he retaliated with *Speed*. Hollywood, he knew, always strangles its writers -- and when producers don't understand something, or it's not

"bad" enough for them, they exclaim "too theatrical, too theatrical." "Playwrights make lousy screenwriters. They want character, drama, setting. They need to learn to drop those distractions," argue producers.

In *Speed*, deception fights with loyalty in a world where everyone is out for themselves. And it makes no difference if you're a producer or a temporary secretary. The problem, as Mamet once explained, is that we all know "we should stay away from Hollywood, but we don't." Mamet and his wife, the actress Rebecca Pidgeon, moved to Los Angeles in August 2002, where his commitment to filmmaking has taken off.

Early on, Mamet realized that movies are only plots; structure hardly mattered. The viewer's only interest is what happens next. Ironically, what will likely happen next for Mamet may be a film of *Speed*. Reports emerged this summer that he's preparing an adaptation of the play to be shot, of course, in Hollywood - but the producers have yet to choose a director or the stars. Let's hope they don't find it "too theatrical."

*Speed-the-Plow* is a hurricane of competing voices with little relief. But after being tossed about in the rough waters of this satire, survivors will certainly have a more accurate - or perhaps sordid - sense of movie-making.

Ira Nadel is the author of *David Mamet, A Life in the Theatre* (2012).