



Photograph by Jeff Thomas

**Men Behaving Badly:** Ken Sonkin threatens actor Ben Stowe (Scott Phillips lurks behind) in 'American Buffalo.'

## 'Buffalo' Hunt

The Rep gets real with Mamet's tense and funny 'Buffalo'

By [David Templeton](#)

As part of the patented comedy act performed by Bay Area comedians Debi Durst and Michael Bossier, the well-read duo regularly do a bit in which they act out a short "play" with some simplistic plot-thread--a man tries to buy a pie in bakery, for example--while changing the theatrical style of the scene every few moments based on names of playwrights called out by the audience. Should someone call out "Shakespeare," Deb and Mike

will morph into an iambic pentameter pie discussion. When someone suggests Arthur Miller, the two of them wallow morosely in a depressing, plain-spoken analysis of the ultimate meaning of pie.

Sooner or later, someone always shouts out the name "David Mamet." Their response is always a crowd-pleaser--especially for those familiar with the coarse-spoken plays of Mamet (*Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Speed-the-Plow*, *Oleanna*)--with Deb or Mike instantly shouting something along the lines of "Give me the fucking pie!"

A Pulitzer Prize winner, Mamet is known for the blunt street poetry and fierce vulgarity of his characters, who are frequently lowlife men bullying or scheming their way through life using the most desperate and pathetic tactics. A giddy and judiciously generous employer of the f-word and a modern master of the super-tense buildup, Mamet is also hilarious. As such, his plays are insanely difficult to act and direct, requiring a strict balance of tone that lands somewhere amid slapstick, social satire and vicious slice-of-life melodrama.

Mamet fans and newbies alike will want to take in director Jennifer King's pitch-perfect new production of Mamet's 1977 masterpiece *American Buffalo*, now onstage at the Sonoma County Repertory Theatre in Sebastopol. Featuring a strong cast of three (Ken Sonkin, Scott Phillips and Ben Stowe), *Buffalo* is staged on a '70s-era junk-shop set so authentic and detailed that it could fool a person into thinking they'd been magically transformed into a character from Bruce Springsteen's song "Darkness on the Edge of Town."

The cluttered Chicago junk shop belongs to Donny (Phillips, excellent as always), a small-time used-goods dealer with a struggling "side business" in burglary, home invasion and petty theft. Alternately kind and cruel, Donny is getting older and wants to pass along a bit of so-called hard-won wisdom, but the only person who looks up to him is a not-too-bright junkie named Bobby (sweetly played by Stowe), who hangs out in the shop and

occasionally runs Donny's errands, legal and otherwise. When Donny and Bobby discover that a local resident's coin collection might contain a certain buffalo head nickel, they begin to dream of a big score.

When the plot is sniffed out by Donny's hyperkinetic crook buddy Teach (an electrified Sonkin, all twitches and nervous energy), the chemistry is altered. Teach--the kind of guy whose ultimate put-down is to say, "Guys like that, I like to fuck their wives"--neither respects nor trusts Bobby, and the ensuing strain among the three forms the foundation on which the resulting plot--and all that four-letter wordplay--turns.

All three characters are fully developed lowlifes, the kind of folks who aren't smart enough to realize how little intelligence they have, each one using a different method to cover his own self-doubts. Bobby just wants to please Donny but makes a well-meaning mess of every attempt to do so. Teach, angry at the world and everybody in it, runs a constant stream of high-strung chatter, a laugh-riot of self-deluded, profanity-laden nonsense, as when he suggests bringing a gun along on the impending burglary, just in case, as he puts it, "some crazed lunatic sees you as an invasion of his personal domain."

For Donny, his defense is his belief that he has something worthwhile to share with Bobby, whether it's his insistence that the young man eat a better breakfast or his belief that success is made of three vital things: "Skill and talent and the balls to arrive at your own conclusion." The sad joke, of course, is that Donny possesses none of those things.

It is Mamet's genius, aided by the fluid, focused direction of King, that these fifth-rate losers--whether straining for a better life or resorting to scary, desperate violence--remain funny and human and astonishingly real. Underneath it all, Mamet understands these guys, and likes them. And he clearly speaks their language, f-words and all.

'American Buffalo' plays through June 12.  
Thursday-Saturday at 8pm; special matinee on Sunday, June 12, at 2pm.  
Sonoma County Repertory Theatre, 104 N. Main St., Sebastopol. \$15-\$30;  
Thursday, pay what you can.  
707.823.0177.

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# David Templeton's Top 10 of 2005

A look back at the Top 10 torn tickets of 2005

By [David Templeton](#)

Here then, are my Top 10 torn tickets of 2005.

1. **'American Buffalo'** Jennifer King directed the best show of 2005, Sonoma County Repertory Theater's intensely intimate staging of David Mamet's *American Buffalo*, a tale of low-life crooks in crisis. Starring the unholy trinity of Scott Phillips, Ben Stowe and Ken Sonkin, the pitch-perfect play was one of many strong shows at the Rep in 2005, from Tennessee Williams' *Night of the Iguana* in February to Conrad Bishop and Elizabeth Fuller's original *Drake's Drum* in September. In *American Buffalo*, easily the finest of the lot, something truly remarkable took place, with Sonkin, as the increasingly unstable, ever-twitching burglar Teach, giving one of the most electrifying performances the North Bay has seen in years.