

## Hard Bargain's 'Buffalo' Bold, Absorbing

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The chasm between ambition and meager attainment is meticulously and vibrantly explored in the Hard Bargain Players' production of "American Buffalo," the 1975 play from David Mamet that is a darkly comic indictment of the greed and deception the playwright sees as inherent in the business world.

Director Suzanne L. Fehl and her cast make it look easy, but they have boldly gone where few local theaters dare to tread by tackling this simple, profane and yet profound work.

Fehl has transformed the outdoor amphitheater stage at Hard Bargain Farm in Accokeek into a cluttered Chicago junk shop, where three petty hoods scheme to steal what they expect will be a coin collection owned by a man who lives nearby. Don (David M. Thomas), the shop owner, feels morally entitled to resort to theft because the man spotted an old buffalo nickel among useless items at the shop and bought it for what Don now believes is a fraction of its worth.

Bobby (Michael J. Margelos), a hustling ex-drug addict Don has taken under his wing, has discovered where the man lives. Again adhering to his twisted ethics, Don believes he thus owes Bobby the chance to take part in the break-in. But when Teach (Brian Donohue), a loud-mouthed ex-con, shows up and pushes his way into the conspiracy, the moral code the men claim to live by begins to crumble.

It's not coincidental that the word "American" is in the title. As Mamet would have it, the situation-based ethics of these lowlifes are the same as those of the American business culture, where avarice and deception are just as common in the boardroom as they are in this junk shop. Maybe the manners and the language are more refined, but the operating instincts are just as base, in the playwright's view.

Speaking of language, it is Mamet's intense, profanity-laced dialogue that makes this play compelling and provides the rich character studies. Terse, vivid sentences are flung back and forth like a rapid-fire Ping-Pong match, the cadenced banter likened by some to a form of urban poetry. It takes strong performances and nimble direction to sustain the volleys, and both are found here.

Teach provides the fulcrum for the action, and Donohue is completely entertaining as Teach fulminates and wheedles his way into Don's plans, pushing young Bobby out of the mix without remorse. Speaking in the overly dental consonants and tortured vowels of a working-class Chicago accent, Donohue creates a figure both ridiculous and menacing as Teach justifies a criminal enterprise with what he thinks is the language of business and the American spirit.

"You know what free enterprise is?" Teach asks. "The freedom of the individual to embark on any course that he sees fit in order to secure his honest chance to make a profit. The country's founded on this."

Donohue maintains a bubbling anger just below the surface, keeping the audience off balance and wondering when Teach's insecurity will explode into violence.

Fehl keeps Thomas generally confined behind the shop's counter, aimlessly playing cards or making telephone calls as Bobby and Teach come and go. Speaking mostly in a low-key manner, Thomas allows Don to seem sensible and creates the impression that he feels paternal toward Bobby. But Don is a crook at heart, and when he reveals his true nature, it is just as ugly as Teach's.

Margelos is not as adept with the dialogue as are Donohue and Thomas, but he skillfully conveys the sense, through nervous body language, that Bobby, too, is devious and not to be trusted.

Fehl has set a rapid pace, and the two acts fly by as these losers scheme and conspire, never actually accomplishing anything. Except entertaining the audience.

*"American Buffalo" will be performed through Saturday by the Hard Bargain Players at the Amphitheatre at Hard Bargain Farm, 2001 Bryan Point Rd., Accokeek. Performances on Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$12 for adults and \$10 for students, seniors and Alice Ferguson Foundation members. For reservations, call 301-645-0001. For reservations or information, visit [www.hbplayers.org](http://www.hbplayers.org).*