

Capitalism and Morality

THE “WHEELING AND DEALING” OF “CON MEN:” DAVID MAMET’S “GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS”

Danielle Mehlman

Danielle is a 2007 graduate of WJU

Salesmen sell everything from vacuums to life insurance. No matter what they are selling all of their goals are the same. Their goal is to sell and sometimes-immoral behaviors of lying, cheating, and stealing get in the way just so a deal can be closed. In David Mamet’s play, “Glengarry Glen Rose” four salesmen attempt to sell overpriced land to reluctant buyers. They all want to get ahead of the next person and to have success by living the “American Dream.” Levene, Roma, Moss, and Aaronow fulfill the negative stereotypes of salesmen by being “con men” and attempting to “wheel and deal” to hesitant poor buyers.

Each salesman has their own tactic for closing their deal. Roma has been the top seller and is therefore given all the top good leads. While, Levene has not closed a good deal in ages and is stuck with leads (people who cannot afford anything let alone buying land). Roma is a smooth talker. He eases onto his client by hanging out at bars and approaching his client as a friend. He forms a relationship with them by appearing to be their friend. For example, Roam talks about “stocks, bonds, objects of art, real estate;” he claims that they are all part of an “opportunity” (49). He also talks about philosophies; he questions morality by asking “there’s an absolute morality? May be. And then what? If you think there is, then be that thing. Bad people go to hell? I don’t think so. If you think that, act that way. A hell exists on earth? Yes. I won’t live in it. That’s me” (47). He gives insight into how he thinks and he also talks about common experiences like sex. He asks his new friend what he likes about his “great fucks” (48). He says that it is not the orgasms, it’s “some broads, forearms on your neck, something her eyes did. There was a sound she made or, I, lying, in the, I’ll tell you: me lying in bed; the next day she brought me café au lait. She gives me a cigarette. My balls feel like concrete” (48). After he feels that he has formed a bond with the person, he approaches to present the deal. He says, “I’m glad to meet you, James. I want to show you something. It might mean nothing to you... and it might not. I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know anymore. (Pause. He takes out a small map and spreads it on a table.) What is that? Florida. Glengarry Highlands. Florida” (50). He then tells his client “This is a piece of land. Listen to what I’m going to tell you now: “(51). Roma’s smooth talking approach of easing into his client by talking about common experiences and insights helps him establish a relationship with his prospective client. By doing so, he makes his client think that he is his friend.

Yet unlike Roma, Levene attempts to persuade his clients and does so in an annoying fashion by calling them constantly and stopping by at their houses. Instead of building a friend relationship, his clients find him annoying and eventually close the deal just so they don’t have to deal with him anymore. He retold his story of selling land to Roma and says that he told his clients “Now is the time” (74). They signed. He said that it was “great. It was fucking great. It was like they wilted all at once. No gesture... nothing. Like together. They, I swear to God, they both kind of imperceptibly slumped” (74). His clients felt relieved from this “pesty” salesman. Levene noticed that his clients gradually slumped, but did not

understand that the slump, this sigh, was of relief that he would be leaving not because they had signed the deal.

Levene not only attempts to persuade his clients, but also his co-workers. Levene knows that Williamson knows where the top leads are and he tries to make a deal with him. He tells Williamson that he will give him ten percent on what he closes if he can give him good leads in return. But Williamson asks “and what if you don’t close?” (23). He says that if he does not close then he is “fucked” (23). Williamson wheels and deals with Levene by saying that he will give him good leads if he gives him “twenty percent” and “fifty bucks a lead” (24). Levene agrees to something that he cannot do. When Williamson asks for the hundred dollars for the lead, Levene does not give him money and claims that he is a “fucking asshole” (25). Instead of forming a better relationship with his co-workers he makes their relationship worse.

All the salesmen try to out beat their co-worker. Even their motivation for selling and staying with the company is based on out winning their co-workers with prizes. The top seller gets a Cadillac, second runner up gets steak knives, and the other two get fired. This is approach of the winner getting the prize is what the capitalistic society thrives on. The only salesmen who can get the great “Glengarry” premium leads is the one who sells the most. Moss believes the new sales promotion is “medieval... it’s wrong” (32). And then he claims that it is Mich and Murray’s fault because “it doesn’t have to be this way” (33).

The play shows the salesmen working, yet it never brings in the owners, Mich and Murray. Mich and Murray like other owners keep to themselves in their high office never venturing down to where the salesmen work. The other salesmen Aaronow and Moss believe that owning and running one’s own business is the only way to have full success. They believe that it would be better to have their clients come to them instead of going to their clients. They use how Jerry Graff runs his business as a successful business model. Moss claims that Graff is “thinking. Now he’s got the leads, he does in business for himself” (33). Moss says that “he’s got the good leads... what are we, we’re sitting in the shit here. Why. We have to go to them to get them. Huh. Ninety percent our sale, we’re paying to the office for the leads” (34). While Moss and Aaronow whine about how their sales strategy is horrible than others, the other salesmen attempt to sell. They want to fulfill their needs of living the American Dream, yet they are all failing miserably.

Both Roma and Levene believe that they have closed their deals from the night before. Yet there deals are not closed. Roma’s client Lingk claims that his wife wants him to cancel the deal. Roma attempts to find Lingk’s weakness with his wife and tries to smooth things over. He claims that “women always think twice.. it’s also something that women have” (83). Roma also tries to approach the matter like a friend by telling him to “forget the deal. Forget the deal, you’ve got something on your mind, Jim, what is it?” (92). He then claims that “Yes. Now I want to talk to you because your’re obviously upset and that concerns me” (93). Roma also attempts to “con” Lingk by making it appear that he has satisfied clients. Levene pretends and plays the role as the senior vice-president of American Express who also has bought property from Roma. Roma attempts to sliver out of the room away from Lingk by saying that he has to catch his flight and that they will talk on Monday. He assures Lingk that he has not yet filed and closed the deal, but Williamson contradicts what Roma has said and says “your contract went out to the bank” (95). He tells him that “Your check was cashed yesterday afternoon. And we’re completely insured, as you know, in any case” (95). All the trust that Lingk had built with Roma was gone and the deal was lost.

Roma is not the only character who loses his deal, but Williamson suggests to Levene that his clients are insane and that he has not closed his deal either. Williamson asks Levene “Where have you been, Shelley? Bruce and Harriett Nyborg. Do you want to see the memos...? They’re nuts... they used to call in every week” (103). Williamson crushes Levene’s pride of selling by saying that he has called the bank

and that their check is no good (104). Levene began his day with pride by thinking he sold a piece of land and by thinking that his winning streak was back after he played the role of vice-president of American Express. Yet, he ends his day with an even bigger crush than he did not close his lead and that his when he attempts to criticize Williamson.

Levene tries to criticize Williamson for not playing along with the “conning” of Lingk and for turning on Roma like he did. Yet, he makes things worse for himself than they were initially with his conversation with Williamson. While Levene thinks that he is outwitting Lingk and is attempting to belittle him, Lingk finds a flaw in his argument. He asks Levene, how he knew that he did not take the contracts to the bank last night. He claims that “one night in a year I left a contract on my desk. Nobody knew that but you” (99). He accuses him of robbing the office. Levene is a poor persuader. He argues and then attempts to make pleas with Williamson that he will not turn him into the police. This is not the first time that Levene argues and please, he does this with most of his customers and they find him annoying as does Williamson. When Levene asks why he is turning him into the police, he responds with “Because I don’t like you” (104).

“Glengarry Glen Ross” attacks how businessmen conduct their job affairs. Salesmen are already stereotyped as being “con men” and this play really lives out this idea. By having Roma lie to his clients to Levene attempting to wheel and deal with Williamson for a good lead, each character fits the persona of a salesman. Each character is seen has failing at their job and they believe the only way that they can fulfill this vision of them having the American Dream of success is through lying, cheating, stealing, etc. Levene is a prime example, of a bad salesman gone really badly. His desperation of being successful drove him to steal the leads.

As each of the four salesmen attempt to sell overpriced land to reluctant buyers, they all want to get ahead of the next person and to have success by living the “American Dream.” Levene, Roma, Moss, and Aaronow fulfill the negative stereotypes of salesmen by being “con men” and attempting to “wheel and deal” to hesitant poor buyers thus fulfilling the stereotype of the bad salesman.