

The difference
between talking and
communicating in
mamet's glengarry
glen ross



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With regard to his own work, David Mamet admits that “ What I write about is what I think is missing from our society. And that’s communication on a basic level.” In his play *Glengarry Glen Ross* , Mamet uses an ironic technique to illustrate his beliefs about communication: in a play consisting almost entirely of salesmen, we are forced to listen to characters who fail to listen to themselves. Mamet’s use of dialogue functions on two levels. First, it serves as the only action in the play; other than the conversations among the men, nothing else happens. The script contains few stage descriptions and directions. Everything is centered on the dialogue. The second function of the dialogue is to show the lack of meaning that words can hold. The men’s conversations, the pace of their speaking, and the interruptions make up the entire play — but these factors are ultimately made pointless by the conclusion in the second act. Because many of the main conflicts of the play happen offstage, the audience must depend upon the characters’ words for an explanation of what has occurred. That dependency forces the audience to figure out which words are important to communicating the message of the play and which words have no real meaning at all. Act One begins with a small description of Williamson and Levene seated at “ a booth at a Chinese restaurant” (15). The only other information offered about the characters is that Williamson is a man in his forties and Levene in a man in his fifties. With his lack of characterization, Mamet forces the reader to enter immediately into the conversations between the characters in order to discover who they are. Each scene revolves around what the men are talking about doing — but not anything they are actually doing. For example, in a conversation between Moss and Aaronow, they discuss the relationship between talk and

action:

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Throughout the play, all of the characters are just “ talking” but never doing. The talk that serves as the action of the play is also the most obvious source of inaction in the characters’ lives. If the only action in the play is talking, and if the words themselves have no true consequence, then the characters ultimately have little real purpose; since their whole lives revolve around unimportant and trivial issues, the men inadvertently demonstrate how often communication is obscured and misused. Mamet’s use of realistic dialogue makes the conversations more believable. The text’s use of italics, exclamation points, and constant breaks in dialogue are much more effective in setting the tone of the play than any description Mamet could have provided. For example, in Act One, Scene One, Levene attempts to convince Williamson of his abilities as a salesman: “ Those guys *lived* on the business I brought in. They *lived* on it... and so did Murray, John” (22). The emphasis placed on Levene’s words communicates both his desperation to prove himself to Williamson as well as the fact that the characters “ lived” on business generated by fabricated property. Another technique Mamet employs is the continual use of interruptions to pace the dialogue. In the context of a performance, the interruptions might have a more immediate impact on the viewer, but they are often exhausting to the reader. To the reader, the interruptions are visible, and though readers have the ability to pace the interactions between the characters to suit individual reading styles, it sometimes becomes overwhelming to keep up with the ever-changing speakers and broken dialogue. That rushed feeling continues throughout the play, emphasizing the pace of the characters’ lives. Perhaps the most noticeable instance of that occurs when Mr. Lingk comes to the office in an attempt to cancel his contract. Roma and Levene use Lingk’s

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confusion with the details of the contract to blur the reality of how many days he has to cancel the deal. Levene continuously interrupts Roma and Lingk to distract from the main point; their entire conversation is ambiguous and broken. Initially, Lingk is barely able to get a full sentence out: " She called the consumer attorney, I don't know. The attorney gen... they said we have three days..." (84). As they continue to lie, Roma responds, " Listen to me, the statute, it's for your protection. I have no complaints with that, in fact, I was a member of the board when we drafted it, so quite the opposite. It says that you can change your mind three working days from the time the deal is closed" (84). Throughout his visit to the office, Lingk is too mild-mannered to interrupt Roma and Levene. The difficulty of overcoming the intimidation techniques used by the salesmen is clear from Lingk's broken and interrupted dialogue. Readers and audience members of *Glengarry Glen Ross* must focus on what is being said because the dialogue is the only thing given by Mamet. Each of the characters has plenty to say, but nonetheless they communicate little, and their words have but little impact: Moss doesn't convince Aaronow to break into the office, Roma still loses his sale, and Levene cannot talk his way out of his crime. Through Mamet's manipulations of dialogue, the audience learns to understand the futility and powerlessness of the spoken word as well as its capability to convey deeper meaning to appropriately receptive listeners.