



# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

WEDNESDAY

MAY 17, 2017

7:00PM • WHITNEY  
HUMANITIES CENTER

PRESENTED WITH  
SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW  
'70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.

# HOUSE OF GAMES



Mike (Joe Mantegna) to Margaret (Lindsay Crouse): "It's called a confidence game. Why? Because you give me your confidence? No. Because I give you mine."

Actually, it works both ways. The con man does give the mark his confidence, but it is a confidence that the mark will believe the con man (i.e. that she will in fact give him her confidence). As he often does, David Mamet uses language in a circuitously deceptive way. Mike's definition of a confidence game is itself part of his con.



Similarly, although the "House of Games" is a specific location (where a poker game may be more than a poker game), it could also refer to the film itself. And the supreme gamemaster is David Mamet, who gives us his confidence that we will believe in the reality of what he is presenting. But what is "reality?" In fact, narrative cinema is a form of artifice, a spectacular sleight of hand, which Mamet delights in exploiting here, as in his subsequent work (THE SPANISH PRISONER, STATE AND MAIN, his script for WAG THE DOG).

Mamet, born in 1947, had already established a considerable reputation as a playwright (including AMERICAN BUFFALO and the Pulitzer Prize-winning GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS) and screenwriter (THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE, THE VERDICT). With HOUSE OF GAMES he joined the ranks of world-class filmmakers. Start with the script: as one would expect, it is intricately constructed, and features dialogue that is so distinctive it has been called "Mamet speak." As Roger Ebert observed, it is "an almost musical rhythm of stopping, backing up, starting again, repeating, emphasizing, all of the time with the hint of deeper meanings below the surfaces of the words."

DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY **DAVID MAMET**  
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **JUAN RUIZ ANCHIA**

(1987) 104 MINS.

STARRING **JOE MANTEGNA, LINDSAY  
CROUSE, LILIA SKALA, J.T. WALSH,  
WILLIAM H. MACY, AND RICKY JAY**

The hint of deeper meanings extends to the visuals as well. The film opens on a camera movement along a granite surface. At first it seems to be a path because of the footsteps we hear, but it turns out to be a low wall, the camera rising to reveal a plaza in the background. As the camera starts to move into the plaza, a woman abruptly appears in focus in the foreground. This gives her a deceptive prominence: after a brief dialogue exchange, she never appears again in the film. In the meantime the central character, Margaret, is almost indecipherable in the distance. Mamet continually invites us to look past the surface, to discern what may (or may not) be significant.

Margaret, a respectable psychiatrist and celebrated author (of the book *Driven: Obsession and Compulsion in Everyday Life*), is searching below her own surface. She wonders whether her profession is a form of confidence game, and in order to prove that she can do more than listen and advise, she leaves her comfortable "everyday life" and plunges into the nighttime realm of the House of Games. When she first looks at the seedy, neon-lit building on a glistening street where steam rises from a manhole, we know that we've entered the world of film noir. And so does Margaret, who adopts a tough gangster pose and method of talking ("Mamet speak"). But how tough is she, and can she perceive what lies below the surface of *this* world?

To reveal much more would be to give away surprises and ruin your experience. Perhaps it is sufficient to say that just when you think you have your bearings, you may be mistaken. You are in David Mamet's House of Games, where he has placed a bet—not that you will fold, but that you will stay in the game. Raise his bet and find out if he is bluffing.

**DID YOU KNOW:** RICKY JAY, WHO APPEARS AS THE ANGRY POKER PLAYER, IS A RENOWNED MAGICIAN. JOURNALIST MARK SINGER HAS CALLED JAY (A MAMET REGULAR) "PERHAPS THE MOST GIFTED SLEIGHT OF HAND ARTIST ALIVE."

**NEXT UP:** "GET OFF MY PLANE!" AND GET TO THE WHITNEY HUMANITIES CENTER TO SEE HARRISON FORD AS PRESIDENT JAMES MARSHALL IN WOLFGANG PETERSEN'S **AIR FORCE ONE** IN HONOR OF ITS TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY **MONDAY, JUNE 12 AT 7:00 PM.**