

## HOUSE OF GAMES (1987)

"Of course you gave me your trust; that's what I do for a living."

### Credits:

director: David Mamet  
screenplay: David Mamet  
cinematography: Juan Ruiz Anchia  
cast: Lindsay Crouse (Dr. Margaret Ford [Maggie]), Joe Mantegna (Mike), Lilia Skala (Dr. Littauer)

### Background:

Mamet, a distinguished American playwright (**Glengarry Glen Ross**, **American Buffalo**), makes his directorial debut with this film, having written the screenplays for such films as **The Verdict**, **The Untouchables**, and **The Postman Always Rings Twice**. Like Alfred Hitchcock, Mamet is an expressionist director who meticulously prepared his film by working out detailed storyboards for every shot. He also enjoys working with a familiar cast: Crouse is his wife, Mantegna has appeared in several of his plays, and some of the card players are his real-life poker-playing cronies from Vermont.

### Cinematic Aspects:

1. Dialogue: As one might expect, the content of lines is especially resonant while the delivery is deliberately theatrical. "Characters speak precisely," William Van Wert has written, "but **at** each other, not **to** each other." Mamet achieves both a hypnotic quality and a sense of underlying meaning through expressive dialogue. That the performances are stylized seems in retrospect a crucial part of the confidence game played by the film and the audience.

2. Lighting: Cinematographer Juan Ruiz Anchia employs low-key lighting with atmospheric pools of light to evoke the tradition of film noir and also to suggest the hidden drives that lurk beneath human consciousness.

### Topics for Discussion:

1. Compare this film with other successful movies centering around confidence games, **The Sting** and **The Grifters**. What is the source of the particular appeal of these works for film audiences? What elements can be found in all examples of this sub-genre?

2. **House of Games** might also be usefully compared with Bergman's **Persona**. Consider how the psychiatrist's role parallels that of nurse Alma and how the con man resembles the actress Elisabet. Compare the two works as self-reflexive films.

3. If interpreted entirely on a mimetic level, as realistic fiction, what does the film have to tell us about psychiatry and compulsive drives, about gender relationships, and about the nature of good and evil, free will and fate?