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CRITIQUE

Film Title:	House of Games
Director:	David Mamet
Scriptwriter:	David Mamet (based on an original story by Jonathan Katz and David Mamet)
Cinematographer:	Juan Ruiz-Anchia
Country:	USA
Year of Release:	1987
Main members of cast:	Lindsay Crouse, Joe Mantegna, Mike Nussbaum, Lilia Skala, J. T. Walsh, Willo Hausman, Karen Kohlhaas, Steve Goldstein

In this formalist film, one character speaks the line "… everyone has two sides and each must speak". I believe this aptly describes the plot that moves between the world inhabited by ultra-composed psychiatrist and author, Dr. Margaret Ford, and her colleagues who study obsessive-compulsive disorders, and the other world inhabited by Mike, the consummate gambler and con artist, and his slimy cohorts. Most of the film focuses on three days during which Margaret decides to enter Mike's world, seemingly to study him and his obsession. She embarks on this mission with the mistaken notion that none of Mike's unseemliness will rub off on her. Drawn "like a moth to a flame", she decides to join in Mike's "con" games, thinking she will not get burned. Ultimately, she learns that she was wrong.

Margaret, plain, chiseled, having everything and yet lacking joy in her life, is obviously suffering from her own inner demons. In the beginning of the film, we see her lighting her cigarettes either with cheap matches or a borrowed cigarette lighter. Now why doesn't this successful woman own her own lighter? Could it be that Margaret believes that she is not deserving of a nice lighter? This "undeserving" characteristic is, itself, at the core of many obsessive-compulsive behaviors. When she meets Mike, she thinks the fact that she is smarter and has a legitimate reason for spending time with him, will protect her from corruption. In the beginning, she's able to spot his low-level poker

"con" directed at her, and accepts it seemingly without anger. Although it takes Margaret another day to come to terms with the depths of Mike's depravity, when she finally decides to act on her anger, she goes beyond all bounds of civil behavior and proves that given the right circumstances, anyone is capable of doing anything.

Mike is also a consummate misogynist. Not only does he play with Margaret's emotions, going so far as to seduce her, but then he subjects her to the ultimate humiliation by "conning" her out of $80,000 and discarding her by the side of road, as he pretends to head for the airport to get out of town and avoid being killed by the mob.

I liked the director's use of the symbolism of doorways clueing us to the fact that Margaret is about to leave one world and enter the other. This is used several times in the film, sometimes when she enters the card rooms/bars where Mike hangs out, but also once at her office when patients try to get in to see her. I find this latter doorway episode more revealing about Margaret. She has just returned to her office after Mike has conned her out of $80,000. She feels like the ultimate victim and doesn't want anyone to see her. After one patient pleads with her, she reluctantly lets him in. This may signify that Margaret has lost her protective coating and become vulnerable to anything and anyone.

I found some of the cinematography to be mesmerizing. The use of the light from a street lamp to cast a halo effect around Mike suggested something "spiritual" about him. Perhaps this was meant to convey that, in Margaret's mind, he had become god-like.

In the last scene of the movie, and seemingly after Margaret has gotten away with her own crime, she steals a lighter from the handbag of a woman sitting next to her in a restaurant. While on its surface, this could be taken to mean that Margaret has succumbed to kleptomania, I believe it signifies something deeper. Margaret has become the flame and is on the prowl for her next moth.

Perhaps the only disconcerting thing about the film, was the dialogue. As William Van Wert pointed out in his article, Psychoanalysis and Con Games, "… [the] characters speak precisely, but at each other, not to each other."

I give this film a rating of 3-1/2 stars. It made me think and that is a good thing.