Joe Mantegna is the preeminent interpreter of the work of writer/director David Mamet. He is like a crooner, singing the poetic phrasing of Mamet’s stylized language with relaxed composure, endowing the characters with a unique combination of street-smarts and panache. The figures he portrays are Everyman Plus: more aggressive, hip, suave, and savvy than those around him—or so they would like to believe. On stage, he limned the leading roles in Mamet’s *A Life in the Theater* (1976–77 at Chicago’s Goodman Theater), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (at The Goodman, 1983–84, and on Broadway, 1984), and *Speed-the-Plow* (1988 on Broadway). The actor has starred in three films directed by Mamet: *House of Games* (1987), *Things Change* (1988), and *Homicide* (1991). As Mantegna opines, in a typically cool understatement, “Some people have a flair for Shakespeare . . . maybe I have a flair for David’s dialogue . . .”
Mantegna’s career encompasses more than his collaborations with Mamet. Born in Chicago in 1947, he attended Morton Junior College before enrolling in The Goodman School of Drama. He toured with major roles in *Hair* (1969–70) and *Godspell* (1972–73) before becoming a member of the experimental theater group, The Organic Theater, between 1973 and 1978. With the Organic, Mantegna made appearances in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Bloody Bess*, with which he toured Europe, and *Bleacher Bums*. He was director and co-author of the latter play and won the Joseph Jefferson Award, the New York Dramatists Guild Award, and the Emmy Award when *Bleacher Bums* was aired on PBS. Mantegna also won the Antoinette Perry, Drama Desk, and Joseph Jefferson Awards as Feature Actor in 1984 for his portrayal of Richard Roma in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. He has performed for television as well, in a recurring role on *Soap* (1982) and in series such as *Making a Living*, *Bosom Buddies*, *Archie Bunker’s Place*, *Simon and Simon*, and *Magnum, P.I.*. The actor’s first substantial role in films was in 1985, with *Compromising Positions*. He followed with parts in *The Money Pit* (1986); *Three Amigos!* (1986); *Suspect* (1987); *Weeds* (1987); *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1989); *Alice* (1990); *The Godfather III* (1990); *Bugsy* (1991); *Queen’s Logic* (1991); *Family Prayers* (1992); *Body of Evidence* (1992); *Searching for Bobby Fisher* (1993), and *Baby’s Day Out* (1994). Mantegna won the Best Actor Award at the Venice Film Festival in 1988 for his portrayal of a comically misbegotten mobster in *Things Change*.

I met Joe Mantegna near his home in Toluca Lakes, California, a suburb of Los Angeles, in January 1992.

**CZ:** What initially attracted you to acting?

**JM:** My first remembrance of it, which probably got me started, was when I auditioned for a play in high school. I did the audition mainly as a kind of a gag; it was for *West Side Story*. I liked the movie so much; I’d seen it about 11 times, and I thought this would be a kind of a kick. I used to like singing in my house, to myself, to the albums, and all that stuff. So I auditioned for it, and I didn’t get in. I think my problem was physical, I sang the songs for the part of Tony, but I was about 98 pounds. But the audition procedure was so exciting, I think that moment—having an audience, singing, and people clapping—did it. The people there, the