MATTHEW ROUDANÉ

Introduction

Sam Shepard conferred upon the American stage its postmodernity in the 1960s. Of course he was not the *only* one to do so, but he interjected a youthful, exuberant, and experimental voice that extended our appreciation of a postmodern aesthetic. In the 2000s, Shepard continues experimenting with dramatic form and structure. He traverses the borders of faith, logic, and social coherence to reconnoiter a mythic and cultural terrain filled with uncertainty and the near-absence of love. His is a Zolaesque world, a malevolent universe in which a sense of bafflement and loss prevail. As Baylor says in *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), "We're all gonna get clobbered when we least expect it."[1] Contextualized within a narrative history of the American theatre, seeing characters "clobbered" on stage is hardly unique. From Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill to Edward Albee and Adrienne Kennedy, American playwrights have presented a rich, if disturbing, series of physical, psychological, and moral assaults. Still, within the works of many twentieth-century American playwrights – Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* (1977), Tony Kushner's companion plays, *Angels in America* (parts One and Two, 1991, 1992), and Margaret Edson's *Wit* (1999) – there is more often than not an implied sense of recovery, or some epiphanic coming to terms with one's self and culture. Or if it is too late for a John Proctor or Mary Tyrone, perhaps the spark of recognition transpires within the audience. For many American dramatists, confrontation triggers catharsis, catharsis insight, and that insight becomes a still point whose defining moment, itself, is the mechanism for a transcendent awareness, signaling the first step toward a spiritual recovery of the self.

Locating such affirmative textures within Shepard's theatre is difficult. Perhaps impossible. To be sure, there emerge momentary glimpses of hope, and Shepard's works in text and performance can be wildly funny. *True West* (1980), a play whose humor energizes the performance, sparkles during its absurdist, vaudevillian moments: when a baffled Lee discovers that there

are ten Melly Fergusons living in Bakersfield; when Lee finally finds the pen in the trashed-out kitchen; and when their mother returns from Alaska and urges her sons to go see Picasso, whom she thinks will make a personal appearance at a museum in Los Angeles. On the other hand, a sadness pervades *True West* and most of Shepard's other plays, a sadness that dissolves into a sense of menace, then uncertainty. This decline finds its expression in the deeply problematic nature of loving relationships between men and women, as seen in *Fool for Love* (1983) and *Eyes for Consuela* (1998), or between parents and their children, as seen in *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) or *Buried Child* (1979), or between brothers and fathers, as in *The Late Henry Moss* (2000). In Sam Shepard's entropic world, the primal family unit – whose members seem to be on some grand cosmic disconnect – is trapped within its own lies of the mind. Perhaps this explains why, when I asked if there were hints of hope and positive reconnection in such recent work as *When the World Was Green: A Chef's Fable* (1996) and in selected tales from *Cruising Paradise* (1996), Shepard replied, "I think hope and hopelessness are intimately connected, and I don't believe in one or the other. In a way I prefer hopelessness to hope. I think there's more hope in hopelessness."[2] Indeed, Shepard's heroes find themselves caught within a terrible binary of hope and hopelessness, struggling with their own distorted versions of objective reality, and trying to survive in an American landscape warped by its own deflected myths, generational schisms, and wayward sense of Manifest Destiny. Thus his characters typically exist in some ongoing "state of shock."

During the year Shepard saw his first plays staged, 1964, traditional notions of community, global boundaries, and citizenship were, once again, reinventing themselves. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones released their first albums (as they used to be called). The Space Race was on – as was the Cold War. With Kennedy's assassination, the escalating war in Southeast Asia, and the emerging civil rights movement, the objective yielded to the subjective, the once verifiable to the ineffable. Competing narratives were no longer limited to Joseph Heller's novel, *Catch-22* (1961), Edward Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), or Stanley Kubrick's film, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Such narratives animated the streets, as race riots and antiwar protests soon would play counterpoint to a hope for national unity. Apocalypse now was a distinct possibility. American hegemony, in brief, was disappearing. And more than most, it seemed, Shepard was alive to and responsible for much of the theatrical revolution that interwove theatrical text with social context. His was, above all, an intensely voracious and fresh voice. It was, moreover, a voice that defined the private fears of the individual and the public disorders of a nation.

However one wishes to politicize his plays, though, Shepard's characters seem less concerned with social change and more fixed, at best, on discovering some genuine force in a world filled with shattered families and the iconography of popular culture. They are figures propelled by an inchoate inertia and preoccupied with merely surviving. Movie stars, cowboys, rock musicians, Hollywood agents, military personnel, mobsters, and drifters enact their repressed anxieties and depressed lives amidst the alluvia of a postmodernist set and setting. His plays take place in shabby motels and in suburbia, with empty refrigerators, '57 Chevys, rock-and-roll music, nearby shopping malls or deserts defining an arid world devoid of comfort. Within such a world his characters struggle, unsuccessfully, to find some authentic force. It is as if the quest, itself, becomes an all-consuming preoccupation. As Lee says in *True West*, "What I need is somethin' authentic. Somethin' to keep me in touch."[3]

In the summer of 1963, Shepard, a 19-year-old engaged in an on-the-road adventure from his California home, wound up in New York City and quickly immersed himself in, and soon became the unofficial star of, the alternative theatre scene. Thirty-seven years later he recalled,

> Looking back on it [Off-Off-Broadway], it was quite an extraordinary tapestry of atmospheres . . . It was really amazing to be a kid there. It was the most fortunate thing for somebody who wanted to write plays. It was absolute luck that I happened to be there when the whole Off-Off-Broadway movement was starting. I arrived there in '63 and by '64 Off-Off-Broadway was kicking out. It was just a great time for a writer.[4]

He proved to be an energetic new playwright, one sometimes unable to control his creative energies. Later in his career Shepard would carefully rewrite his scripts, but the early plays seem to be products of an imagination on hyper-drive. There was, apparently, little interest in revision. Still, it was soon clear that, as Shepard worked to transform craft into art, there was a singularly original talent emerging. He proved receptive to international innovations in drama, and his earliest plays, from *The Rock Garden* (1964) and *Up to Thursday* (1964) to *The Holy Ghostly* (1970) and *Back Bog Beast Bait* (1971), reflect such receptivity. The earlier plays tend to be brief, nonrealistic pieces, often filled with fantastic twists of narrative and lacking closure. Traditional versions of plot, character, and linearity find little place in the playwright's early works. Echoing Shepard's reaction against the Establishment, his plays were rebellions against traditional notions of dramatic form and structure. From Samuel Beckett, whose *Waiting for Godot* (1952) influenced his aesthetic principles, Shepard imported for his *Cowboys* (1964) and *Chicago* (1965) a sense of the absurd,

an implied futility in any logical connection between words, actions, and deeds.

As his career developed, Shepard, probably unconsciously, benefited from other European absurdists. There is, in the plays he writes, a Pinteresque sense of tragicomedic menace. Like Peter Handke, Shepard is not afraid to call attention to the artificiality of the theatre, allowing him to move more readily from the real to the dream, from the familiar realistic props and settings to a symbolic and even mythic representation. One sees a Pirandellian playfulness that darkens as his own postmodern characters search for their identities. At times it is as if he drew from Antonin Artaud the power of the sacred, the violent, and the myth. Although little evidence exists to suggest that Shepard turned specifically to these international figures for inspiration, as a young, emerging artist living in the Village, his work could hardly help but be imbued with international artistic crosscurrents. Today Shepard also marvels at the aesthetic brilliance of fiction from others, including a Russian, an Irishman, and a Mexican (Anton Chekhov, Frank O'Connor, and Juan Rulfo). Perhaps this explains why Shepard based his *Eyes for Consuela* on Octavio Paz's short story "The Blue Bouquet."

On native ground, Shepard learned from the free associative forms of Beat poetry. He embraced the improvisational aspects of a free language, of a word-play liberated from rigid structures of meter and logical coherence. The poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg appealed to his verbal imagination, as did Jack Kerouac's "oceanic" prose in *On the Road* (1957). A rock musician who would later become a film star, Shepard was also drawn to the improvisational forms of jazz music. From Albee, he saw the incendiary power implicit in heated repartee, and he shared with Albee both a disdain and a distrust of Broadway (though, ironically, both dramatists would ultimately make successful transitions to Broadway). In the later 1960s, Joseph Chaikin recalled recently, Shepard used to drop in on rehearsals at the Open Theatre, watching performers work on their transformational acting techniques.[5] Such experiences opened new creative possibilities for Shepard as he continued with astonishing rapidity to move his instinctive experimentalism from the page to the stage. Although "we really didn't work together until *Tongues* . . . at the Magic Theatre, and that was in the seventies . . . I used to go to rehearsals [at the Open Theatre in the mid-sixties] just to sit there and listen to Joe and watch him. He was so eloquent about what he was looking for in the actor. And what he was looking for was completely different from what was going on at the time . . . Suddenly Joe opened up this whole new territory . . ."[6]

Once gaining entrance into this new territory, Shepard came of age as a writer during the 1970s and mid-1980s with such plays as *The Tooth of*

Crime (1972), *Action* (1974), *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child* (1978), *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind*. While Shepard's nonrealism was in many respects reaching its apex in 1978 with *Seduced* (a nonrealism, of course, that he would never fully abandon), as early as 1974 he voiced an interest in developing a more realistic theatre. "I'd like to try a whole different way of writing now, which is very stark and not so flashy and not full of a lot of mythic figures and everything, and try to scrape it down to the bone as much as possible," he said. For Shepard it was to be a realism, "but not the kind of realism where husbands and wives squabble and that kind of stuff."[7] His remarks slightly mislead. Men and women "squabble" in most of his later plays, with fighting intensifying in *Fool for Love* and reaching a (de)crescendo in *A Lie of the Mind*. Yet his comments do indicate a modified realism that informed the later plays. Beginning in 1977 with *Curse of the Starving Class*, and extending through *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *Fool for Love*, Shepard experimented with a modified realism, a form that also drove his work in the 1990s: *States of Shock* (1991), *Simpatico* (1994), *When the World Was Green*, and *Eyes for Consuela*. In terms of plots, characterizations, and language, these plays were closer to realistic performances than the works of the 1960s and earlier 1970s. A closer correspondence between the spoken word and its intended meaning grew. Action, though richly symbolic, sometimes followed a cause-and-effect pattern. Questions of coherence and believability were no longer unanswerable, but plot resolutions were hardly to be found. The mystery remained, especially in context of the family, but the rendering of the staged realities was less radical than in, say, a production like *Operation Sidewinder* (1970).

Shepard's commitment to dramatic excellence has yielded thus far eleven Obie Awards, a Pulitzer Prize, and numerous other accolades. He is, for many, the preeminent playwright of the postwar American theatre. The distinguishing marks of Shepard's dramas lie in his unique use of language, myth, music, and predatory characters. Although he shows, in the some fifty plays he has written to date, a rich variety of performative styles and cultural concerns, his central subject is often the American family. Victims and victimizers, the pursued and the pursuer vie for a metaphorical, psychological, and spiritual space in his plays. Meanwhile, options slowly diminish. There are no real survivors, no remissions of pain. Spaces open up which prove unbridgeable. Necessity rules. Irony is constantly reborn from the frustrated desires of those who obey compulsions they would wish to resist. And yet there is "a fire in the snow" (*Lie of the Mind* 131), there is a fractured poetry, there is an energy and a passion to the lives of those whose demons he stages. There is an intensity, a resonance, and a power which lift them above their social insignificance, just as the plays and prose fictions

themselves never compromise with the banality of surfaces. He is a myth-maker who deconstructs myths, a storyteller aware of the coercive power of story. He is, finally and incontrovertibly, a poet of the theatre who himself discovers poetry in the broken lives which are the subjects of his plays, and in the broken society which they inhabit. However one wishes to see Shepard – as writer, musician, director, screen star, cowboy, and so on – it is clear that he has inscribed himself and his characters into a larger script, a script that contributes to the rhetoric of nationhood, and to a fuller understanding of what more richly constitutes the "Americanness" of American drama.

NOTES

1 Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 100. Page references in parentheses within the text are to this edition.
2 Matthew Roudané, "Shepard on Shepard: an Interview," 5 May 2000. See chapter 3, 75.
3 Sam Shepard, *True West*, in *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 56.
4 "Shepard on Shepard," chapter 3, 65.
5 Conversations with Joseph Chaikin, 15 March and 28 March 2000.
6 "Shepard on Shepard," chapter 3, 74.
7 Kenneth Chubb, et al., "Metaphors, Mad Dogs, and Old Time Cowboys: Interview with Sam Shepard" (1974), reprinted in Bonnie Marranca (ed.), *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981), 208.

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CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

Born injured: the theatre of Sam Shepard

It is around forty years since Sam Shepard drifted across the continent from California to New York, leaving behind a psychologically damaging family situation, escaping a town that "grew out of nothing and nowhere."[1] Sam Shepard is a drifter by nature. It is in the blood. Like his father (who worked for the military) before him, he has moved from place to place: from California to New York to London, to the Southwest, to Virginia, to Minnesota. He has, in the past, drifted from playwriting to music, to acting, to screenwriting, to directing. He even exchanged one name for another (Rogers for Shepard), refusing to be defined. In his plays, if not his life, it is a losing game. As a character in *Simpatico* remarks, "I've changed my name . . . and nothing came of it. I've moved all over the place. I was in Texas for a while . . . Arizona. Nothing came from any of it. I've just got – further and further – removed."[2] But, then, that sense of removal – from other people, from a rooted surrounding, from the self – is a central concern of a writer whose plays explore the American psyche at a time of failed dreams and lost visions. He himself, meanwhile, is always anxious to move on, to explore new frontiers of experience. Now that impulse is reflected in his desire to try his hand at everything from rodeo riding to movie acting.

When he set out from California in 1963, his vehicle of choice was the theatre, as he joined a drama group performing along the blue highways of a country in which rock-and-roll was reshaping the psyche of a new generation, defining the rhythms of a culture turning its back on the supposed solidities of the Eisenhower years. When he arrived in New York he found himself in the middle of a rapidly transforming social and cultural world, and in a decade in which the performing self (as social construct, radical gesture, personal statement) would become a central metaphor and the theatre, therefore, for a brief while, a crucial arena.

This was not, of course, the theatre of Broadway, encysted, as it seemed to be, in the politics of materialism, compromised, as it was assumed to be, by its bourgeois clientele, and dedicated to supposedly outmoded models of

drama. The new paradigms were Samuel Beckett, such Off-Broadway successes as Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and Jack Gelber's *The Connection*, and, beyond that, the emerging experiments in performance art. Indeed, even Off-Broadway had begun to seem both expensive and over-formal in its use of theatrical space. Now new "theatres" had sprung up in church halls, lofts, basements, and cafés, theatres anxious to allow young writers to experiment. Plays written one day could be performed the next. This was not, at first, a world of opening nights, newspaper reviews, and fashionable audiences, though there was a new coterie and the *Village Voice* became if not a midwife then the supplier of an occasional bunch of flowers. Art was no longer to bear the weight of solemn exegesis. It was to be a vibrant gesture, a surreal epiphany, a communal rite sufficient in and of itself. And it was here, specifically at Theatre Genesis, that Sam Shepard began a career that was to lead to a cascade of Obie Awards and, eventually, to a Pulitzer Prize. Yet, forty years later, it was as if he had acquired classic status almost by stealth. He remains in some sense a part of the counter-culture, even though the counter-culture has long since expired. He is an original, a major force in the theatre without ever notching up the kind of extended run once thought necessary to such status, without ever storming Broadway (except in a revival of *Buried Child* and *True West*), without, indeed, writing the kind of plays that audiences, critics, or readers could readily explain to others or themselves.

His early plays were surreal fragments, brittle images. Slowly these were extended and given a narrative spine, as in *The Tooth of Crime* (1972) and *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974). Later came disturbing family plays (*Curse of the Starving Class*, 1977, *Buried Child*, 1978), in which violence was an ever-present possibility, and others in which the relationship between men and women was seen as profoundly problematic (*Fool for Love*, 1983, *A Lie of the Mind*, 1985). Meanwhile, male relationships were explored for what they could tell us about shifting power systems and the fragile boundaries of identity (*The Tooth of Crime*, *True West*, 1980, *Simpatico*, 1994). And behind such concerns was an engagement with America, with its myths, its failed utopianism, its spiritual attenuation, an engagement which hints at a conservative radicalism as he challenges America with its rhetoric of innocence. But behind that, in turn, lies a deeper concern and a more ancient point of fracture for, as Simms says in *Simpatico*, "It was all decided generations ago . . . Faceless ancestors" (109). Indeed, it is tempting to feel that the real loss, and loss is Shepard's central theme, the loss which broke the connection with nature, which divided men and women, which separated language from truth, occurred at the moment of the fall. As a character says in *States of Shock* (1991), "No way of knowing the original moment. Abraham maybe . . . Judas. Eve."[3] Betrayal is as basic a theme to Shepard as

it is to Arthur Miller. Sam Shepard's myths, in other words, are of greater antiquity than those of the Republic whose decline he laments, the sense of loss more profound than that inspired by the decay of puritanism into pragmatism or the rise of Sodom on the desert plains.

Tennessee Williams thought of himself as a radical rather than the southern Gothicist he was too often assumed to be. He saw his work as a social, moral, and even political critique of an America "sick with neon," in which power and money destroyed the artist, the emotionally vulnerable, the dissenter from national myths of appropriation, enabling materialism and exclusionary politics. Sam Shepard, whose first play was modeled on Williams's drama, is a poet of the Southwest, lamenting the loss of a rural world, but he, too, offers a radical, if oblique, critique of his society, from *Operation Sidewinder* (1970) – which counterposed an out-of-control military machine with Native Americans still in touch with the cosmos – to *States of Shock* and *Silent Tongue* (1992) which, in turn, seem to do much the same. Nuclear war (*Chicago* 1965), the death of the Black Panthers, the Gulf War (*States of Shock*), and, in *When the World Was Green* (1996), Bosnia, all find indirect expression in his work though, with the exception of *States of Shock*, this is not the starting point of his work; however, you could say of him, as Arthur Miller said of Tennessee Williams, "there is a radical politics of the soul as well as of the ballot box and the picket line."[4] In a 1984 interview he explained that "you take two characters and you set them in motion. It's very interesting to follow this thing that they're on . . . it's like getting on a wild horse."[5] His are not, certainly early in his career, heavily plotted plays serving a social or political objective. The metaphor, though, is as interesting as the description of process. The wild horse speaks to a spontaneity and freedom but it also suggests nostalgia for what is increasingly lost.

Indeed, as his career developed it became clear that his is an America that has lost touch with its own visions, in which myths have become fantasies, family units have collapsed, language is broken, metaphors pulled apart, natural rhythms dislocated. In interview he approvingly recalled the title of Bob Dylan's song, "Everything is Broken." His comment, "It's a great tune,"[6] is, in effect, an ironic acknowledgment of one of his own major themes. His is a society in moral free fall, a world in which men and women, apparently programmed to respond to different needs, circle one another warily, no longer sure of their roles, compelled by a passion with the power to destroy.

Implicit in his work is a sense of lost unity, of the severing of that connection between individuals once established through shared values, beliefs, the rhythms of the natural world, "ancient stuff," by which he seems to mean a sense of community deeper than family or nation, transcending the moment. In part that is a product of the modern, slowly obscuring the landscape,

tightening a ligature on the free self and the organic community, though he, himself, could find a haunting beauty equally in the call of a whippoorwill or a '57 Chevy. But it goes a good deal deeper than this. His is a world in which things fall apart. The desire for connection remains, an echo of lost harmonies, but cutting across this is a debilitating violence, a personal and cultural anarchy. Somewhere in the past lies a disruptive trauma, so that his characters all live in a state of shock. At times he is tempted to locate that moment historically. It is World War II, from which men returned no longer able to relate to the women they had left behind ("those midwestern women from the forties suffered an incredible psychological assault, mainly by men who were disappointed in a way they didn't understand. While growing up I saw that assault over and over again, and not only in my own family. These were men who came back from the war, had to settle down, raise a family and send the kids to school – and they just couldn't handle it").[7] That date clearly has biographical force, more especially in the work of a man whose plays repeatedly draw on the details of his own life, his relationship with his father, and even the women in his own life ("when it comes right down to it . . . what you're really listening to in a writer is . . . his ability to face himself").[8] But he offers other dates for the disorienting violence that he dramatizes, the disturbing caesuras in experience, which relate to something more than autobiographical truths or to twentieth-century alienations, the entropic force of the modern.

In talking about *States of Shock*, inspired by an all-too contemporary event – the Gulf War – he recalled his visit to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, as Air Force jets flew overhead, a place where he saw displayed "the most devastated culture in America." Two years later, in his film *Silent Tongue*, he offered a commentary on the fate of a people literally and figuratively raped by a society whose Manifest Destiny seemed to be to expand across a continent without understanding the nature of the land ("Americans have lost compassion for their own country"),[9] the people they encounter ("we're haunted by the Native American religiousness, the true religiousness of a people who were in harmony with their environment, which we're completely out of touch with"),[10] or the fantasies they sell to themselves as a character sells snake oil to the gullible, trading humanity for hard cash ("It says something," he has said of *Silent Tongue*, "about Americans. There's a cure somewhere and the cure resides in some kind of magic potion, a miracle. The gullibility of it is incredible").[11]

His characters are driven less by a sense of genuine destiny, since, to Shepard, "character is . . . destiny. It's like the structure of our bones, the blood that runs through our veins,"[12] than by an unfocused sense of need born out of an awareness of loss: "People who have a profound hunger