Analysis of
the creative project

SHEPARD PLAYS

by
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Thesis Director
Alan English
Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
May 1982
Graduating Spring 1982
In the dramatic works of Sam Shepard there exists an acute understanding of real life in America—the scope of experiences, dreams, differences in thought and expression and the way these facilitate or prevent communication between people. His use of the medium of theatre to display where our solutions to today's problems are leading us is full of the power of vision and realization. His dialogue is of the most natural to reach the stage and each of his character's speech is fitted integrally to that character's role. In other words it is evident that each of his characters thinks differently, holds different values and expresses them in a manner that is a culmination of the experiences of that individual. This variety of thought patterns is one of the factors that makes Shepard a challenge to produce. Still, as stated by Ralph Cook, "Sam Shepard's plays are the most totally realized in original script of any writer... He has an instinctive sense of what is theatrically right for his plays that goes beyond rules and preconceptions."¹

The largest obstacle a director faces when producing a Shepard play is his desire to alter some of the vehicles of expression in the script, to adjust them for his audience. The power of Shepard's works comes from his use of these devices to present the common experiences of our culture,

especially the middle class. He puts everyday events in a new perspective, often a perspective we had not before seen. He displays our life as it truly exists and then slowly transforms or develops it into a logical, possible, or symbolic future. Other times he interrupts the action abruptly, discarding any pretense of realism and leaving the audience suspended in a world they cannot understand yet believe they can. He depicts the death of the American Dream—America coming out of puberty and realizing the myths it held so dearly as ideals and believed in as answers are just the fantasies and theories of another generation who existed in a different world. And from this realization is reborn the need to understand where and why we are.

Shepard Plays consists of three works by Sam Shepard and an introductory exposition compiled from critiques and commentary on Shepard and his plays. Following "Exposition Time" the works, in order of presentation, were Cowboy Mouth, Killer's Head, and Fourteen Hundred Thousand. It was first produced in Carmicheal Hall, February 12 and 13, 1982, with subsequent productions in the Ball State Theatre and The Muncie Museum of Temporary Art.

Objectives of the production were twofold in nature. A first concern was to acquaint the Muncie audiences with the work of one of America's most honored playwrights. Second, and more important, the production attempted to initiate the realization of the need for immediate action designed to direct our national destiny away from the path we have put ourselves on by our lack of comprehension of our own human
characteristics, needs, and drives.

As previously mentioned, the show opened with "Exposition Time." This piece was an audience preparatory. It gave them information about Shepard's theatrical style to form a framework and perspective through which they could better experience the evening's entertainment.

The first play, *Cowboy Mouth*, reflects the world the young have lived through these last two decades. It is a display of the personal needs this era produced and the creation of rock 'n' roll to fulfill these needs. Two people are presented in a quest for some sort of reason for existing—some means of fulfillment. They have had all the dreams, thought about all the explanations, searched for all the experiences and tried to ask all the questions. They are looking for genuine contact with something greater than themselves, something that can give significance to their lives. The old God is too distant. Jesus isn't here to be touched. He is not here to share the pain.

One of the characters is Slim, who is in his mid-20's, powerfully alive, physical, and looking for that something that will provide him with meaning for his existence without breaking his ties to the past. Opposite Slim, his kidnapper/lover, is Cavale. In contradiction to Slim's philosophy, she believes in the need to destroy in order to create, to give up this moment in order to achieve the next. Slim's perception of Cavale's world is narrow. The word Cavale means escape and it is through Cavale and her conception of rock 'n' roll that escape is possible, escape from the isolation of our
own mind. The third character is the Lobsterman. He delivers lobster and looks like a lobster. His appearance is representative of the way he is entrenched in his job. It has become his function, his entire existence. He is able to communicate only through grunts. Cavale, focusing her calls to him through rock 'n' roll, is able to strip his limitations from him. She removes the shell that has enclosed the new rock 'n' roll savior. Playing roulette with a .38, he accepts the need to give up this moment and all it may mean in order to fully experience the next.

**Killer's Head** views a man's existence and accomplishments against the backdrop of the infinite continuum of time. It is a monologue delivered by a cowboy, Mazon, in the electric chair. He talks about what he is going to do today as if he were not about to be executed. He rambles about a pickup truck and horses but never verbally alludes to his situation. His death leaves the audience without an answer as to why his life was taken. Shepard is commenting on man's preoccupation with dying. He makes the audience ask the eternal question and paradox "why?"

The third play, **Fourteen Hundred Thousand**, is a tapestry of symbolism that begins realistically with a young husband and wife, Tom and Donna, giving a "friend", Ed, a guilt complex for not completing a bookcase for them. The only remaining chore is to put in the shelves, which keep falling down, and to paint it. The other characters, Mom and Pop, are ignored by the young couple except for what help they can lend to the project. Ed is the independent individual who wishes to
belong to the group without giving up his freedom of thought and action, his own choice of fate.

Two major themes are presented in this work: The paradox of the individual--to exist alone is to not exist; and our destiny is decided by the movements, opinions, actions and lack of action of the masses--this control has no conscious, no planned direction. These things are expressed through both literary and graphic symbolism. In the first part of the show, the realistic part, and in addition to the ostracism of Ed, there are several visions of action never completed and dreams never realized. The bookshelves and the books that litter the stage are representative of the apathetic and poor way we select and organize our knowledge and experiences; the insensible way we choose our priorities, values, and friends. A dirty, impure white paint covers the back wall suggesting the way technology will paint over rust to give the appearance of an improved environment. In a paint fight Donna and Tom also try to coat each other with white, succeeding to some degree. After this fight they respond simultaneously and in unity for the rest of the play. Ed, unable to communicate with them, has a breakdown.

Shepard employs theatrical devices to underline the themes of the script. As he does this the play leaves realism and acquires some of the characteristics of the genre of Hap­penings, where actors stop presenting roles and begin to simply carry out actions. It begins with Mom and Pop reading from different books the same short story in unison. They are joined by Donna and Tom and, finally, after his collapse, Ed. The
story is about snow falling until it drives them from their homes and even from their valley. The people just turn and walk away, never stopping and never looking back. Symbolically the falling snow is the continuum of time and the way it forces action in some direction whether we are prepared and comprehend it or not. At the end of this story, Tom, Ed, and Donna begin to dismantle and remove the set while Mom and Pop start to read about the lack of planning in the construction of a city. They propose and then enter a sales pitch about a plan for a universal city with ten mile squares of country between one mile wide linear cities. They get caught up in the excitement of planning and cannot stop. They put cities from continent to continent, under water and up in the air until there exists no more free space, just one huge metropolis and enclosing the Earth. The lines get shorter, the pace gets faster and the volume and excitement build right up to the final moment when they fill the last square mile of free space. Then they close their books with the finality of the slam of a coffin lid in the newly discovered silence of the other actors having completed their task.

The production of Shepard Plays was prepared with emphasis on the acting and the audience/actor relationship to aid their understanding of the theatre of Sam Shepard, the actors received excerpts about acting and watching plays by Shepard. "Exposition Time" was compiled from the same material. A copy of these notes is included in the appendix.
The technical aspects were severely hampered because of the limited budget. Thrust staging was employed for its relationship between the audience and the acting area. It allowed the greatest amount of seats to be placed as close to the action as possible. Set requirements prohibited the use of arena staging. These requirements were minimal but complex. Two of the works needed a door and a window. In Fourteen Hundred Thousand the set had to be dismantled and carried off by the actors. This play also had to have a bookcase with shelves that would fall on cue, be replaced and fall again, and have the stability to be hammered upon. The unit also had to be independent of the set walls and simple enough to be set up during a ten minute intermission. For the monologue an electric chair with an electrocution effect that could be controlled by the actor sitting in it had to be constructed. In consideration of the actors of Cowboy Mouth, who spent many moments wrestling on the floor, and to help define the stage from the house in the absence of platforms, a carpet was placed upside-down covering the entire acting area. This carpet was rolled back for the monologue. Set design, lighting design and other technical lists and schedules are in the appendix.

The requirements for lighting could not be met for Cowboy Mouth due to the lack of available equipment. The ideal lighting for this script is the lighting of a rock 'n' roll concert, with many colors, unusual angles and numerous changes in lighting to reflect the changes of mood. The
other two shows needed minimal lighting and were easily accomplished satisfactorily. For *Killer's Head* a single white spot was placed directly over the chair and controlled on its own dimmer. For *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* the script called for a general wash of white light that would change abruptly to a general wash of blue. Four white and five blue flood lights were employed, the whites on a dimmer and the blues controlled by an off/on switch. A combination of the blues on full and the whites from 70 percent to zero was used in *Cowboy Mouth*.

Make-up, costumes and props were incorporated as simplistically as possible and are detailed in the production lists in the appendix. Also included are the production schedule, budget, and a copy of the rehearsal schedule.

Producing any play presents several problems relative to the specific script and, no matter the amount of beforehand study, the performance and post-performance reflection will bring to light new dimensions and dictates of the work. In producing a work by Shepard, the newness of the script is, in itself, a major consideration. The appropriate method of bringing the work to life had to be deduced almost entirely from the script as few previous productions have been reviewed. Director's choices were made to alter many small aspects of the playwright's work, mostly in the area of technical performance. Examples include the costume for the Lobsterman, which should have looked like an actual, huge monster; the set decoration for *Cowboy Mouth*, which did not adequately reflect Cavale's personality; and the costuming and make-up, which
were hastily designed and executed. Had hindsight and funding
been available prior to the production, these changes would
probably have been avoided. Still, Shepard Plays provided both
the actors and the audience with a new and unique dramatic
experience, introducing to them a style of theatre they had
never before encountered and, perhaps, awakening them to the
message the author and the production desired to convey.
APPENDIX

A. REHEARSAL SCHEDULE
B. PRODUCTION SCHEDULE
C. BUDGET
D. PRODUCTION LISTS: SET, PROPS
E. PRODUCTION LISTS: COSTUMES, MAKEUP
F. ABOUT SAM SHEPARD: NOTES TO THE ACTORS
G. FLOOR PLAN AND HANGING PLOT
# Rehearsal Schedule for "Shepard Plays"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JAN</th>
<th>SUN</th>
<th>Cowboy Mouth</th>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Cathy, Greg</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4 Fourteen Hundred Thousand</td>
<td>Block All</td>
<td>All</td>
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<tr>
<td>MON</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cowboy Mouth</td>
<td>Run Lines</td>
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<tr>
<td>THR</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>No Rehearsals</td>
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<td>61-73, 80-85</td>
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<td>Marcia</td>
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<tr>
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<td>All</td>
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<td>Run</td>
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<td>No Rehearsals</td>
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**FEB**

| MON  | 1     | Fourteen Hundred Thousand | Run | All |
| TUE  | 2     | Cowboy Mouth (IF NEEDED)  | Lines | Cathy, Greg, J.A. |
| WED  | 3     | Fourteen Hundred Thousand | Run | All |
| THR  | 4     | Cowboy Mouth              | Run | Cathy, Greg, J.A. |
| FRI  | 5     | No Rehearsals             |    | Please Help!!!!! |
| SAT  | 6     | Build Set                 |    | Everyone Required |
| SUN  | 7     | Build Set                 |    | From Here on out |

**MON  8**

| TUE  | 9     | Full Run                  |    |    |
| WED  | 10    | Full Run (IF NEEDED)      |    |    |
| THR  | 11    | Final Dress               |    |    |
| FRI  | 12    | Show the First            |    |    |
| SAT  | 13    | Show the Second           |    |    |

**Publicity Pictures**

*Please Note--Specific Rehearsal Times, plus information concerning Costumes and Makeup will be announced as we go.*
PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

2-4 wire chair

2-5 gather: flats tarps
carpet curtains
trunk mattress
shelves stool
door electric chair
window

2-6 move to CA115
carpet down
wall up
hang curtains
gather props

2-7 brace wall
set house

2-8 order chairs
program to printers
get crow
make Lobsterman claws and cheeks

2-9 rig shelves
hang tarps

2-10 paint set and chair
hang lights

2-11 pick up programs
build headgear and straps - add to chair

2-12 OPEN
preshow: set props
rig chair flash
prepare set
kill hall lights
set guitar level - tune
check house

postshow: put set up
lock up props
lock up dimmer
sweep
wash paint brushes
wash painted clothes

2-13 pictures
strike
party
** SHEPARD PLAYS **

** BUDGET **

Royalties - reduced  
paid by Carmicheal  

$90.00

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<td>K-Y</td>
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<td>rit dye</td>
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<td>2-13 audience @ 1.00</td>
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$47.72 loss
SET:

16' x 16' carpet
2 4' x 8' flats - white
2 1/2' x 6' window - white
3' x 7' door - white
3 flat jacks
3' x 10' curtain
12' x 10' curtain

PROPS AND SET PIECES:

drum
snare case
amp
electric guitar
guitar case
bookshelves
electric chair
stuffed crow
Sears catalogue
tray
pink telephone
hubcaps - 2
raggedy costumes
ribbons and lace
pictures of cowboys
poster: Crucifixion, Dali
poster: Dylan
books
empty beer bottles
hammers - 2
scarves
switchblade
tennis shoes
stuffed dolls
ashtrays - 1 with roach
gun
candles
light blankets
mattress
pillows - 2
wood scraps
sawdust
3 paint cans - scene paint, no fixative in one, white
2 paint brushes
tool box
tools
8' stack of books
tequila bottle
lobster
4 toasted bialys with cream cheese
scrambled eggs
cream pie
sausage
pepsi
COSTUMES:

Slim: Faded jeans, white western cut shirt, hide vest, cowboy boots

Cavale: Worn-out jeans, black T-shirt, black sleeveless cape

Lobsterman: Orange jumpsuit, claws, lobster cheeks, black hat over sleeveless black capezio jumpsuit, flared

Mazon: White T-shirt, jeans, cowboy boots

Tom: Blue T-shirt, jeans, tennis shoes, glasses

Ed: Short sleeve shirt, sleeveless sweater, cords

Donna: Jeans, sweatshirt, tennis shoes

Mom: Flower print dress

Pop: Cords, white short sleeve shirt, brown sleeveless sweater

MAKEUP:

Slim: None

Cavale: 4b base, heavy lines around eyes

Lobsterman: Grey triangles and eyeshadow

Mazon: None

Tom, Ed, Donna: None

Mom: General age

Pop: General age.
The basic elements of a Shepard production are unlike the elements termed essential in the theatre we know. Shepard is not so interested in plot as he is in the "feel" of the moment. The characters are not bound to a single reaction style or super-objective. They are the way feel at the moment. \textit{Buried Child} is a perfect example of the technique involved. The characters actions and reactions have motivations that change - evolve.

The entire play is a dance and needs to be choreographed as one. Elements of reality leaking through the audience's mind. It is painting in a cut and time, a mosaic of theatrical elements caught eternally in transformation.