

Articles and Studies

The Future of Avant-Garde Theatre and Criticism: The Case of Sam Shepard

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Throughout his nearly three decades of playwriting, Sam Shepard has expanded the frontiers of American drama with an energy and inventiveness to rival even Eugene O'Neill. Considering the degree to which Shepard has expanded these frontiers, critics have frequently applied the term "avant-garde" to him and his works. But what precisely is, or should be, the role of the avant-garde in theatre today? And where does Shepard fit in?

One particularly informative perspective on the American avant-garde derives from Richard Schechner, who creates a framework that embraces and categorizes a large spectrum of recent avant-garde writers and performers. Schechner's framework becomes particularly intriguing when one tries to find a place in it for Shepard, because the effort reveals that Shepard's agenda is fundamentally different from what the bulk of avant-garde criticism advocates. In fact, Shepard's agenda seems even different from what Shepard criticism generally reports. It is an agenda that suggests a more fruitful path for avant-garde theatre (and theatre in general) than is currently being advocated by critics or pursued by practitioners, including Schechner himself.

I.

In his 1982 assessment of American avant-garde theatre and performance entitled *The End of Humanism*, Schechner observes that there are two kinds of avant-garde: the historical avant-garde and the experimental avant-garde.

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The historical avant-garde, he says,

can be seen as wave after wave of anti-bourgeois, mostly left leaning, angry yet visionary artists pouring themselves out onto a hostile shore (a beach-head, to use the obvious military metaphor). (15)

The historical avant-garde strives to present a confrontational, generally political agenda designed to excite revolution, or at least awaken its constituents in a way fresh and immediate to their culture. The experimental avant-garde, on the other hand, strives "to venture into the unknown; to try out new things; to test hypotheses against experience" (17). Schechner suggests that unlike the historical avant-garde, the experimental avant-garde is not politically charged, nor even necessarily thematically charged. Schechner adds:

Most experiments in performance since 1975 have been in terms of form. Performance artists were not so concerned with what they were saying as with the means of communicating, the places where the events took place, the persons employed as performers, the relationship to the audience. (17)

Schechner argues that American theatre of the late 1970s favored very private epistemological and aesthetic enterprises of the experimental avant-garde and abandoned the value-oriented, socially conscious goals of the historical avant-garde. The result of such an emphasis is that although these formalist/aesthetic experimental works are valuable reflections on postmodern thought, they ultimately isolate rather than unify, abandoning theatre's traditional "communal" functions.

Schechner's assessment is generally an accurate one even today. Perhaps most noteworthy among currently active avant-garde artists are Robert Wilson, whose massive spectacles overload the senses; Laurie Anderson, who often literally sings her body electric; Richard Foreman and his Ontological-Hysterical Theatre; and Spalding Gray, who has created several auto-performance pieces and splintered from the Wooster Group (most recently of *L.S.D. . . . or Just the High Points* fame) which is currently under Elizabeth LeCompte's direction after ceasing to be the Performance Group under Schechner's tutelage. With only very rare (and very recent) exception, the products of these creators are aesthetic/formalist and/or epistemological in nature.

Recent theatre criticism reflects this turn toward isolation and introspection as well, highlighting such enterprises and endorsing such approaches, to the virtual exclusion of other efforts. Current Shepard criticism is a good case in point, much of it focusing on the significance of Shepard's methods of presentation. Though such criticism is often solid, it is necessarily limited and

limiting in its approach to Shepard, suggesting--at least by implication--that his work is *exclusively* of a self-reflexive, metatheatrical nature. For example, Toby Silverman Zinman's study of Shepard's metatheatricality observes that Shepard's characters lack identity in the traditional sense and argues that his "characters" are "actors," that is, fictional people who make up their identities as they go along" (510-11). She adds, "It is this need to 'play-write' oneself into temporary existence that burdens Shepard's dramatic creatures" (511). Zinman's article is only a part of a large body of criticism arguing that Shepard's plays dramatize characters who inevitably fail at securing identities in a world where acting has become essence. But where such studies are necessary, they are also incomplete because they implicitly assume such discoveries are Shepard's ultimate message. From a broader perspective, however, these discoveries can be seen as necessary parts to a much larger puzzle.

Another similarly limited approach concentrates on Shepard's verbal virtuosity, a good example being Sheila Rabillard's recent study. She observes quite accurately that Shepard's characters use language as a "power tool" arguing that for Shepard words are "bearers of power, rather than of meaning" (60). As with Zinman's work, Rabillard's article presents a valuable analysis of a crucial Shepard characteristic. Like Harold Pinter, David Mamet and so many post-World War II playwrights, Shepard questions the discursive value of language and instead infuses his language with a power to assault in a manner that confirms and highlights his characters' defensive and isolated existences. After all, Shepard isn't--and today couldn't be--a G.B. Shaw who believed language to be a unifying tool. Shepard's view is clearly much more complex--much less naive?--than that. As with metatheatrical studies, however, a linguistic approach studies essential elements in Shepard's arsenal of means but ignores the ends towards which that approach is directed.

Though the above approaches are valuable, they need to draw clear distinctions between means and ends. But because many critics have not been willing or able to keep these distinctions clear themselves, such criticism has elevated experimental thought to a primary position and influenced performance to the point that theatre has essentially dispensed with its traditional role of searching for context and community. Contemporary theatre has turned instead toward experimentalists' theoretical concerns like metatheatre and linguistic deconstruction, losing sight of theatre's socio/cultural function.

The bulk of Shepard criticism effectively demonstrates this bias, arguing that Shepard's art is very much a part of the experimental avant-garde. Unfortunately, in many ways this criticism has succeeded in showing that Shepard is *exclusively* experimental. But this assertion is more a consequence of the fact that critics *want* to see him under the light of this new, theoretical tradition than to accept the possibility that Shepard's instincts direct him to an historical urge though through experimental means.

II.

I see the experimental avant-garde and the historical avant-garde actually converging in Shepard. In fact, Shepard's very strong historical leanings very nearly ally him with traditional, conventional beliefs ingrained in American culture almost since the idea of "American" culture was formed.

Shepard is quite plainly an observer of American culture, having developed a sense of what America is and was through pop-culture accumulations: rock music, jazz, country western music, westerns and gangster movies, and television. The result of this "low-" and "middle-brow" accumulation of American myths and legends is that Shepard writes on themes common to a whole spectrum of American social strata. Richard Gilman is one observer who has quite accurately summarized Shepard's themes:

the death (or betrayal) of the American dream; the decay of our national myths; the growing mechanization of our lives; the search for roots; the travail of the family. (xi)

Simply enough, Shepard sees decay and impotence in the American scene, visions that easily lend themselves to a brand of rebellion akin to the historical avant-garde, which Schechner describes as essentially anti-bourgeois.

To better understand the material that Shepard molds into his dramas, it is valuable to look at his collection of poems, notes, and short stories entitled *Motel Chronicles*. Looking at this body of material gives us a stable vantage point from which to see Shepard's thoughts more directly, prior to their re-presented, dramatic transformations where voices become less reliable.

One story opens: "On the train that I love so much. The train they named and re-named: first, according to the terrain it crossed, then, later, to jibe with a corporate sense of anonymity" (43). The brief passage is telling in that it senses a tragic lost attachment to the heritage of the land and to any ability to find the self by identifying with the land. The rise of corporate or bourgeois America entails, for Shepard, losing identity by insisting on separation from the land. In a poem from the same collection, Shepard observes:

down on both knees
elbows poking into the night

it's true
this deep connection
it's really true

the earth gives off a message
 it breathes out
 I catch it on the inhale (72)

Shepard sees the earth as a true source of power. Separated from it, Shepard--and modern man in general--loses all power. If it is accurate to call Shepard a shaman, as some have called him, then his magic comes directly from the land, and his cure for the sick is to return them to the land.

Another story opens:

They lost the Navajo radio station about sixty miles east of Gallup on Highway 40. It faded into thin air. The ancient drums began to mix with McDonald's commercials and Tammy Wynette then finally got swallowed whole by White American News. (87)

As these travellers move east, toward civilization, they move further away from life. Shepard's conclusions about this progress is best summed up in two lines of yet another poem from the *Motel Chronicles*:

Men turning themselves into advertisements of Men
 Women turning themselves into advertisements of Women. (81)

The world of the civilized has forsaken its primitive roots, creating superficial caricatures of humanity rather than flesh-and-blood, "authentic" human beings. They are *performing* rather than *being*, self-conscious and self-reflexive rather than intuitive. One final passage records the gap between the worlds of the civilized and the primitive:

What I saw was this: From a distance. Four of them. Moving like snakes. Dragging their legs toward the black herd. Like their legs were dead. Pulling their brown bellies across stone. I didn't even recognize them as human at first. Least of all Sioux. . . . [He recounts an attack on a bull where the felled beast is ripped apart and the tongue eaten while the bull still twitches]. . . . Thin columns of dust rose up and I followed the dust with my eyes. The Tetons loomed behind. All blue. And I watched those mountains glow. And I thought about Boston. And I missed my piano. And I couldn't believe my piano was in the same world, living in the same time and I'd never see Boston again. (115)

Shepard's passage touches something not altogether receptive to rational or discursive explanation. The persona has witnessed raw life and will never see Boston again; he is like the lost soul in Shepard's filmscript *Paris, Texas*

(played by Harry Dean Stanton), who is unable to return to his past life after experiencing the Southwestern wilderness.

This essential incompatibility between these two worlds of existence dominates Shepard's dramas. A mythos of loss seems almost to well up from the land itself--specifically the Southwest American land that Shepard once decided to settle--showing a nearly nostalgic reverence for a native soil destroyed by an unfeeling, alien culture. Civilization's invasion of this terrible, primitive beauty was, of course, inevitable. And because of the irreversible effects of European civilization's intrusion on the land, Shepard's dreams of a return and of an ultimate resolution are basically unattainable but still wished for. Susan Harris Smith, in fact, notes a structural strategy in Shepard's plays that allows for this open-endedness:

Shepard freezes the action at the moment of greatest tension, disallowing either disintegration or resolution, suspending the struggle at a moment of crisis in a tragicomic stasis. (73)

Though most of Shepard's drama does suggest the tragic potential of his characters and their world, Shepard refuses to hide behind a resolution that in any way reflects the escapist nihilism of the experimental avant-garde. Shepard would rather remain open-ended and involved than find comfort in personal withdrawal, though many of his characters do pursue this latter option. In fact, because Shepard presents characters who do withdraw and find some nominal solace in artificial lifestyles, critics regularly see Shepard offering these lifestyles as legitimate alternatives.

However, Shepard does not advocate this isolationist and artificial withdrawal, but rather grasps for a reclamation of what the myth of the land once offered. This reclamation is a highly personalized process that at first glance may appear to be a withdrawal. But it is in actuality a complex process that internalizes the struggle of those forces that were easily but unrealistically captured in pop culture gangster movies and westerns. As Ron Mottram notes, the images that Shepard uses to create his dramas "are like X rays of an inner landscape . . . giving the sharp outlines of a consciousness that examines and reexamines everything and that perpetually puts itself in perspective" (14). Shepard first withdraws to an intensely personal level of introspection that includes self-reflexive exercises in metatheatrical and language analysis. This is the level on which most of the experimental avant-gardists remain, and many critics in turn have failed to see Shepard himself moving beyond the level. But Shepard does move beyond, to the discovery of communal means to reclaim a sense of the primitive, the essential, first for himself (through poetry and other forms of writing) but then by extension in his dramas to others (through performance and production). Shepard moves beyond the experimental avant-garde, but it isn't revolutionary in any agit-prop sense or even as confrontational as Schechner would prefer. Rather Shepard's art has acquired

a more subdued spirit of revolutionizing our psychological mechanisms by which we can understand ourselves both as individuals and as a group.

The method to exact that revolutionary end involves turning to mythic rhythm, specifically to the myth of the American West. This revolution most likely should be labelled a type of historical avant-gardism, though it works to change conditions *below* the political and social surface rather than by confronting issues at that level. After all, politics has failed as have other forms of social reform. In fact, recent history has effectively demonstrated that the traditional, confrontational agenda of the historical avant-garde in America has failed.

Shepard has modified this historical avant-garde approach. He doesn't ask that individuals unite under some ideological flag; he asks, rather, that they recognize in themselves a nearly instinctive, common desire to recultivate community and that they react to this impulse. The central concern no longer involves 1960s-style activism nor the confrontational approaches of the historical avant-garde that Schechner hopes to see revived. However, Shepard's own unique quest for community nevertheless aligns itself more fully with the historical avant-garde than with the aesthetic or abstractly epistemological enterprises of the experimental avant-garde.

III.

One of Shepard's later experimental plays is *Operation Sidewinder* (1970), a landmark product that highlights fundamental qualities of both prior and subsequent Shepard plays and that clearly demonstrates Shepard's historical leanings.

Briefly, *Operation Sidewinder* is a top-secret project, the brain-child of a Doctor Vector who has created a computer that uses the rhythmic movements of a snake to get in-tuned to "an extraterrestrial consciousness" (*Operation Sidewinder* 222). The machine is "triggered from the mind of man, [and] would eventually . . . transcend the barriers of human thought" (222). This product will very nearly be the evolutionary completion of the human chain. But this new-age serpent is lost by the authorities then found by drifters who decapitate it. In the process Shepard parodies both the political left and right and makes a mockery of their opposing goals and ideals. Shepard then replaces on stage the discredited political factions with a Hopi Indian tribe that conducts an elaborately ritualized dance of reunification using the separated parts of the rediscovered sidewinder. Ironically, the sidewinder fulfills its role, though not as the completion of some scientist's experiment. The result is that the religious ritual, as Mottram notes, "completely transcend[s] political confrontation" (83), even defeats the power of a gun, as C.I.A. commandos attack with machine-guns but are overwhelmed by the enraptured participants.

From this summary it is evident that *Operation Sidewinder* qualifies as an experimental avant-garde piece, for at one level at least the play is an

exposé of alienation and dislocated personalities. But it also moves beyond the experimental avant-garde to a level that at least abstractly suggests what can be done to rectify the current dilemma. The play is a response to political events of the 1960s that reached crisis levels in 1968, but it doesn't take sides either with the leftist activist or with the military industrial complex. To Shepard both sides are part of the same problem; they both are rooted in a European tradition that has chosen to ignore true values issued from the earth. Instead, Shepard has chosen to present a mystical alternative, using Hopi Indian ritual to conclude the play and defuse the tension between the two opposing factions.

Operation Sidewinder argues that the land and its delicate spirit has the power to save humankind. Perhaps the almost naive idealism and ultimate unattainability of this resolution has led Shepard to abandon offering resolutions at all in most of his plays, ending instead, as Smith has noted, at the point of highest tension, a point that only an idealist's apocalypse could resolve. That there is a resolution at all is not typical of a Shepard play. In fact, Shepard's resolution is not typical of most recent American drama. But in its strangely mystical twist we see the direction most Shepard dramas would go if they continued beyond the final curtain he generally offers, a deviation from the socially/politically conscious resolutions typical of so much pre-1970 American drama. And it is clearly a deviation from post-1970 experimental escapism.

Perhaps sensing the utopian impracticality of his vision but choosing to avoid an escapist alternative, Shepard has created (before and after *Operation Sidewinder*) a large body of "diagnostic" drama, demonstrating that humankind is lost in the world of high-tech solutions which are no solutions at all but further entanglements. For example, *Cowboys #2*, a 1967 remake of the lost 1964 original, has two actors pretending to be T.V. cowboys. Off-stage city sounds and comments from stage directors signal that the men are not genuine cowboys nor are they set in a world that offers contact with nature: only one distant cricket's chirp is heard throughout the play. A sawhorse serves as their trusty steed, or whatever their imaginations need it to be. The characters continually change roles, shift character, become other characters. Much has been made of the play's "theatricality" and of its debt to Beckett and meta-theatre. Overlooked, however, are the reasons *why* these characters lack consistent or "whole" personalities. In this urban environment they have lost contact with selfhood itself, the result of having lost a soil in which to put down roots. They are nothing but urban cowboys and have nothing to authenticate their identities except "show." And for Shepard, that is not much of a grounding. They are little more than advertisements of their "types." Contrary to the claims of many critics, Shepard's theatricality is not merely a self-conscious examination of the nature of theatre and certainly does not suggest an alternative "theatrical" solution to an authentic life. Shepard aims,

rather, to reveal the superficiality of existence in a culture that offers no substantial means to ground its members.

The central characters of Shepard's first full-length play, *La Turista* (1967), are, in fact, literally two dimensional advertisements: their names are Kent and Salem. Visiting Mexico and poorly equipped to handle the life of that vital culture, they fall victim to "la turista," or, the more popular term, Montezuma's Revenge. Their bodies' inability to cope with the physical sustenance of that world metaphorically parallels their overall inability to absorb the culture's spiritual vitality. They have refined themselves out of contact with the world, have essentially become too rarified to mingle with life. In fact the play goes on to demonstrate their impotence, their sterility. As occurs in *Cowboys #2*, the characters attempt a variety of rhetorical postures and role-playing in their efforts to escape from the horrifying reality of their existence. But such substance-less attempts bear no fruit. Sterility cannot be overcome by equally sterile posturing. Only an actual metamorphosis from *being* a "la turista" to *becoming* a native soul can overcome the physical symptoms of the aptly named malady, which is of course a metaphor for the characters' spiritual malaise as well.

One such native soul is presented in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974). The vitality that gives the horse dreamer his power comes from the land, his American roots. When he is taken to England and used as a gambling prophet, his powers die out.

For Shepard one essential means by which to restore this contact with sources of strength is language. But it must be a language in contact with the earth, with essential reality. Shepard himself notes in mystical, almost alchemical, terms:

Words [should be seen] as living incantations and not as symbols. Taken in this way, the organization of living, breathing words as they hit the air between the actor and the audience actually possess the power to change our chemistry. ("Visualization" 53)

The words, of course, must be properly charged. *The Curse of the Starving Class* (1978), one of Shepard's first family plays, offers excellent examples of both sterile and incantatory language. Take, for example, the legal jargon spouted by Taylor, the emissary of doom sent out by land developers:

I think you are trying to divert the focus of the situation here. The point is that your father's psychologically and emotionally unfit to be responsible for his own actions, and, therefore any legal negotiations issuing from him cannot be held binding. (178)

Contrast this passage to one by the son, Wesley, a passage that Herbert Blau calls "a hip or punk Whitmanianism, incantatory and narcissistic, a manic and updated *Song of Myself*" (48):

I could smell the avocado blossoms. I could hear the coyotes. I could hear the stock cars squealing down the street. . . . I could feel this country like it was part of my bones. . . . Even sleeping people I could feel. Even all the sleeping animals. Dogs. Peacocks. Bulls. Even tractors sitting in the wetness, waiting for the sun to come up. (*Curse* 137-38; Blau 48)

The Whitmanesque incantations, full of substance and mystery, "possess the power to change our chemistry" ("Visualization" 53) because they hold the very essence that the land offers.

What many consider a Shepard classic, *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), demonstrates very clearly what happens to a language that Blau calls "dispossessed of history, savagely, distorting the rituals of liberation by which the sixties were possessed" (49). Many see the play as a demonstration of assault ingeniously orchestrated by rock, influenced by "Road Warrior"-type cinema, where language is a weapon. As noted earlier, several solid studies have focused on this language of assault. But the play's language goes beyond being an assault on our linguistic sensibilities and tangibly demonstrates that flash can and has replaced substance in our culture.

In play after play, Shepard subtly suggests we return to sources of true power and strength, a plea that has not entirely escaped critical attention. For example, Thomas Nash sees a mythic separation as the source of disenfranchisement in *Buried Child* (1978), a pattern similar to the Corn King ritual as described in Fraser's *The Golden Bough*. And Mottram notes that the possibility for resolution exists in virtually all of Shepard's plays, but "there is a greater need for spiritual renewal than for political action" (76). Mottram adds that this more pressing need for spiritual renewal "arises out of a lack of meaningful, humane cultural values, which themselves cannot be restored by the immediate concerns of a narrow ideology" (76-77). Lynda Hart agrees with this assessment, observing that "Shepard's dissenting voice has rebelled against the restrictions of urban existence and defiantly asserted the claims of freedom and adventure embodied in the myth of the West" (88). Though such historically-based criticism exists, too much criticism in general ignores this perspective.

A more recent version of what Shepard is looking for is *True West* (1980) in which he depicts two brothers as archetypes of the primitive and the civilized. They are two halves of one character--and perhaps of a nation--whose qualities are actually interchangeable, implying that the one quality inheres in all of us even if the other is currently dominant. Which half dominates is irrelevant since Shepard suggests that the concept of "true West"

involves an unending struggle to bring the two opposites into ever-dynamic concert. "True West," as opposed to "real West," is a process rather than a place and has become a state of mind in which the struggle must continue. And Shepard is looking to develop an authentic psychological frontier on which to allow the struggle to unfold and bear fruit, given that the physical, real West has virtually disappeared to the corrupting influence of Eastern technology and sterility. Though the land may have been irretrievably damaged, the spirit of the land can still be summoned. And if the mind can keep the dynamic vitality of struggle that epitomizes *true* West while existing in the "*real*" West, or anywhere else for that matter, then an individual's authenticity can be maintained or become genuine.

Language is once again the means of retrieving the spirit of the land, this time through the creation of a film script. The power of authentic language is evident throughout the process of writing the script. Though one brother is a professionally trained writer, he lacks sufficient contact with the spirit of the West--the script's subject--and therefore uses clichés like "I know this prairie like the back a' my hand" (51) to the amazement and disdain of his more "primitive" brother, the creator of the story.

That integration is not fully achieved in *True West* reflects an essentially pessimistic vision of current conditions but also leaves open a hope for future possibilities, as envisioned from the present precipice.

The assertion that Shepard's early works are experimental in form stands without question. That his later works--the family plays--are *less* experimentally avant-garde also goes without question since they follow a conventionally realist pattern. However, virtually every assessment of the later Shepard observes that his "conventionality" is only a surface condition; under the seemingly realist/naturalist facade characters behave out of fashion and plots are anything but linear and rational. So, arguably, even Shepard's later works should be listed among the works of the experimental avant-garde.

What is important here is to see that Shepard does have substance and doesn't just pursue the experimentalist's form or effect. On the other hand, Shepard refuses to confront bourgeois ideals in the traditional historical avant-gardist's socio-political forum. Rather, he is confrontational on another level, a level that exposes far more fundamental social ills but that simultaneously offers hope of a cure. Whether we tag this level as a modified version of the historical avant-garde or choose another label altogether is irrelevant. The fact remains that Shepard has "meaning," more than the experimentalist offers, though not of the traditional historical order nor at the conventional level we're used to searching for in American drama.

IV.

In the late 1970s, Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte split from Schechner's Performance Group and staged an intriguing production entitled

Rumstick Road. Essentially it was a production that dealt with the events surrounding Gray's mother's suicide. Gray performed it, and for him the piece developed into a sort of purgative therapy, which seems to be a common description of the results of such performance pieces. For the audience the performance's particular excitement stemmed from the fact that various illusionist or naturalist facades were shattered and the difference between "play" and "reality" were muddled. Finally, for the audience the work was a formalist exercise produced in the face of an extremely private, autobiographical performance. Such a piece is not atypical of current experimental, performance art. In fact, it has even become something of a sub-genre: autoperformance.

Similar to *Rumstick Road*, Shepard's family plays (*Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *Fool for Love*, *True West*, and *A Lie of the Mind*) have been called a working through of various dilemmas personally confronting Shepard during the time of the plays' creations. As such, this material could have easily been transformed into autoperformance or at least an isolated, therapeutically autobiographical script. But Shepard managed to build a social and cultural relevance around those personal dilemmas and so create work more closely allied to the historical rather than merely the experimental avant-garde. The work of Gray and LeCompte, on the other hand, is simply good experimental avant-garde art (although the recent *Swimming to Cambodia* indicates a shift on Gray's part).

Sam Shepard does not withdraw into his art, nor does he rarify his work to the point of creating merely formal exercises. Rather he works his personal vision into a cultural fabric, an effort that legitimately identifies him as not merely an experimental avant-gardist but allies him with the historical avant-gardists as well. Yet his historical qualities are not draped with political or agit-prop trappings. Shepard replaces this apparently dated agenda with a call for a deeper personal activism, one that frequently but nevertheless erroneously has been perceived as isolationist and therefore in line with the experimental avant-garde.

Shepard's work appears to capture the precise blend that theatre needs if it is to reclaim its spot at or near the cultural center of its community. The revolution Shepard advocates is not an agit-prop, 60s-style movement demanding legislative changes of surface events (the traditional brand of the historical avant-garde); nor does he exclusively indulge in a struggle with his own demons or with formalist/aesthetic enterprises (the traditional experimentalist's agendas). His is a revolution calling for a collective uprising of the individual spirit. Shepard is fresh, offering a message that transcends politics and superficial social legislation to reach down to the roots of the late twentieth-century malaise. Change, if it occurs (and Shepard seems not all that sure it will), will first require an adjustment of spirit.

Schechner points out:

Man is no longer the measure of all things. The cosmos is multicentered, which means it is centered nowhere, or everywhere: everything from holism to narcissism is sanctioned. (109)

Shepard demonstrates all of these positions in his drama: that the center is nowhere and everywhere, that narcissism and holism are options. But where many critics focus on the nowhere/narcissism results in Shepard's drama, Shepard seems clearly to argue that humanity's hope lies in the everywhere/holism perspective on postmodern existence. We must move positively toward an integrating and unifying perception of human possibilities. Shepard demonstrates that to act in such a manner, though no small task, is still within the grasp of the dramatic artist, and, by extension, such behavior is still within the grasp of the community that artist is addressing. There is no need to retreat to comfortable solipsism; rather, more than ever, there is a need to burst out of our shells.

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