



THEATER

Shepard goes against the code

By Joel Schechter

Writing about himself ten years ago, Sam Shepard said, "I don't want to be a playwright. I want to be a rock and roll star." Since then he has won a Pulitzer Prize for playwriting in 1979, and he has become a star not of rock and roll but of films—*Days of Heaven*, *Resurrection* and the forthcoming *Raggedy Man*. In 1980 he was chosen as one of *People* magazine's top 25 personalities, a dubious distinction accorded few other artists and no other playwrights. In short, he has become a media celebrity as well as an accomplished writer. At the age of 37, Shepard is closer than any other American to the "leading playwright" status previously given to Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee.

Shepard has not actively sought this acclaim or the media image of film star who writes plays. He generally avoids the press, and prefers seclusion on his ranch in California when not in a film studio. His plays premiere at the Magic Theatre, a small experimental stage in San Francisco, rather than on Broadway. In fact, he has never had a production on Broadway, unlike most other prominent American playwrights. His works are frequently staged at non-profit regional theaters around the country; the plays can hardly be regarded as lucrative properties, the way that Neil Simon's comedies are.

Born in 1943 on an army base near Chicago, Shepard spent some of his youth on an avocado ranch in Southern California. (The ranch, and the broken family life that went with it, appear in Shepard's semi-autobiographical play, *The Curse of the Starving Class*). At the age of 20, he toured the U.S. as an actor in a small theater group, and ended the tour by moving to New York's Lower East Side. There he wrote plays for Off-Broadway's experimental groups, won a few prizes, and found himself commissioned to write for some of the country's leading regional theaters.

Shepard's avocation as a rock drummer, his friendships with Patti Smith and Bob Dylan, and his past fondness for hallucinogenic drugs might lead one to regard him as a product of or even a spokesperson for the counter-culture of the '60s. But he has never embraced the New Left politics of the '60s. His play

dealing most directly with events of that decade, *Operation Side-winder*, ridicules the rhetoric of black revolutionaries and their white sympathizers, as well as the jargon of Air Force generals and scientists. The play's thin, unimaginative caricatures of hippies, generals and Black revolutionaries reveal more about Shepard than they do about the culture he mocked. Satire is not his forte. Political satire is a genre he ought to avoid, and usually he does.

His best plays, *The Tooth of Crime*, *Geography of a Horse-dreamer*, *Action* and *La Turista*, are replete with surreal fantasy and poetry that function as critiques of, and stage metaphors for America's consumer culture. *The Tooth of Crime* portrays a futuristic society where rock stars use songs as psychic weapons to destroy their rivals. Hoss, a successful rocker challenged by a young punk named Crow, admits: "I'm too old fashioned. That's it. Gotta kick out the scruples. Go against the code. That's what they used to do. The big ones. Dylan, Jagger, Townsend. All them cats broke codes." At the start of their duel, the two combatants "choose an argot. Singles or LP's, 45, 78, 33 1/3." Shepard gives the two singers a fierce poetic language derived from rock and blues patters; their talking blues incorporate diverse styles of American music, and Crow's verbal conquest of Hoss suggests how quickly and brutally new art consigns its antecedents to obsolescence in our disposable culture.

The colorful, cartoon-like language in Shepard's best plays, indebted to blues, jazz, rock, native American rituals and R. Crumb's Zap Comix, have distinguished his style from the introspective, psychological realism that prevailed in mainstream American playwriting (Odets, Williams, Inge, Miller, some of Albee) for decades. Shepard's characters frequently deliver long, lyrical monologues comparable to jazz riffs, and their word arias constitute hallucinatory dreams, incantations in which speech becomes a source of freedom from the oppressive conditions around them. In *Buried Child*, which won for Shepard a Pulitzer Prize, one of these long comic monologues is spoken by Halie, a mother lamenting the death of her son Ansel. In a speech full of bigoted fantasy and self-deception, which allows Halie to escape the dreariness of

everyday life, she claims Ansel would "still be alive today if he hadn't married into the Catholics. The Mob. Catholic women are the Devil Incarnate. He wouldn't listen. He was blind with love. Blind. I knew. Everyone knew. The wedding was more like a funeral. You remember? All those Italians. All that horrible black, greasy hair. The smell of cheap cologne. I think even the priest was wearing a pistol. When he gave her the ring I knew he was a dead man."

Fantasies like this have become less prominent in Shepard's recent plays. The style is closer to psychological realism in *True West*, his newest work, and for this reason the play is less original, if more accessible than his earlier writings. Along with *Buried Child* and *The Curse of the Starving Class*, *True West* concerns the disintegration of a nuclear family. Some critics hint it is Shepard's own family history about which he is writing, and attribute to this influence the more realistic form of his scripts.

In *True West*, two brothers, Lee and Austin, unconsciously exchange personalities. Austin, a Hollywood screenwriter, finds his role usurped when Lee sells the studio a hackneyed script, his first effort, while Austin cannot sell his own writing. Austin in turn adopts his brother's lifestyle as a petty thief and drifter. The play ends with the brothers wrestling in their mother's kitchen. She watches as they try to kill one another—two seemingly inseparable but irreconcilable halves of some large force that may be the spirit of the "true" and vanishing American West: half Hollywood, half desert, with an immense amount of parking lots, highway and human rivalry in between.

Despite the prosaic language and predictable, schematic plot of *True West*, the play reiterates a continuing Shepard theme. His concern with what could be called "transformation" has been evident since the 1960s, when Shepard wrote scenes for the Open Theatre, an experimental

workshop directed by Joseph Chaikin in New York. The Open Theatre's "transformation" exercises inspired such plays as *The Serpent*, in which actors collectively impersonated the tree and serpent in Eden, then turned themselves into John Kennedy and the limousine he rode through Dallas.

The play visually connected the Biblical origins of death to the assassination of JFK, and asked how murder had become so large a part of American consciousness. Instead of portraying single characters, actors were almost interchangeably part of a collective consciousness on stage. The influence of these experiments appears in Shepard's work when characters replace one another and seem to share the same consciousness, as in *True West*.

Sometimes the collective consciousness in which they find their identity is crassly, absurdly commercial, as in Shepard's *La Turista*, where an American tourist named Kent reveals the origin of his name and his companion, Salem's. A visitor from a tobacco factory once told Kent's father, "If you change each one of the stupid names you gave your eight kids, from whatever it is now to one of the eight brand names of our cigarettes, I'll set you up in your own little business and give you all the smokes you need." In lines such as these, Shepard humorously suggests the transforming cultural power of popular mythologies that originate in advertising, the nuclear family, the star system. He parodies and derides the influence of these mythologies, whose priests are hucksters and media men: the Hollywood producers, Madison Avenue advertisers, real estate developers, and disc jockies who populate his plays. The myths perpetrated by these figures can turn nature (worthless real estate in *The Curse of the Starving Class*) or art into a bestselling commodity overnight, as quickly as the penniless vagabond Lee in *True West* is transformed into a wealthy screenwriter.

Shepard's own career may suf-
Continued on facing page

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January 30

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February 1

Eyewitness Report on Polish Workers' Movement. Joel Geier of the International Socialists will speak on his recent trip to Poland. At the NY Marxist School, 151 W. 19th St., 7th fl., 7 p.m. Sponsors: International Socialists and Solidarity: A Socialist-Feminist Network. Donation: \$2.

February 6

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low with Dr. Jonathan House, Adam Veneski and others intimately involved with New York's fiscal crisis. Tickets are \$4.00 in advance and \$5.00 at the door. For more information, call: Jim Gaffney at 620-0877 or Jonathan Miller at 674-3375.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

January 30

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February 1

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February 4

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February 16

There will be a wine and cheese reception with Harry C. Boyte, author of "The Backyard Revolution," at Midwest Academy, 600 W. Fullerton, Ave., from 5-8 p.m. Admission is \$1.50.

Shepard

Continued from facing page
fer from this consumer culture mythology now that he is a film star and media celebrity. He could see the dangers coming, perhaps, when he portrayed art-

istic characters vulnerable to corruption by fame and wealth in plays written years before his own celebrityhood. The rock singers in *The Tooth of Crime*, the tribal shaman in *Operation Sidewinder*, the man who dreams winning racehorse names in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* are celebrated by Shepard not because they reveal a particularly

urgent message through their art, rather because their artistic gifts exist at all under coercive circumstances.

If Shepard himself is not yet a victim of the star syndrome, his newest play, *True West*, may be. The New York production of the play was disowned by the author and his director, Robert Woodruff. They claim that producer

Joseph Papp insisted on casting film stars Peter Boyle and Tommy Lee Jones as the play's two brothers, against the wishes of the director and the playwright. The result of this controversy is that neither acting nor directing are wholly satisfactory in the production.

Perhaps the dangers of stardom are best described by Shep-

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ard in *Geography of a Horse-dreamer*, when one of the gangsters who has kidnapped the horsedreamer to cash in on his prophecy of races, tells his prisoner: "You got the genius, somebody else got the power. That's how it always is, Beethoven."

Joel Schechter teaches at the Yale School of Drama.

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"N O," ANSWERS Germaine Greer, "I'm not an artist—no more than any other woman. I'm a cook and a gardener, if you really want to know. I only write because I enjoy doing so. My writing serves no other function. Other people think it has some social effect. I don't."

In her latest book, *The Obstacle Race*, the feminist author of *The Female Eunuch* deals with the denials and hurdles that have historically hindered women painters, "but that doesn't mean the women were hampered in being creators," she maintains. "I was only talking about painters. Painters are not creators."

"Painting's a very crazy thing to do. Who said that applying color to a two-dimensional surface was equal to converting the heathen or discovering the source of the White Nile?"

Nor, it seems, is it especially important or natural for women to write, either. What is important, Greer claims, is that women talk.

"Women are characteristically the verbal sex," she says. "Women teach children to speak, men don't. Language is our invention."

"The interesting question," she says, "is why women would ever want to write anyway. Especially poetry, which is just gobblets of language surrounded by a sea of white paper."

"I don't write poetry, except in letters, which is typical of many women writers. Women of the 18th century did that all the time. But then, poetry was an extension of daily life, not inimical to it."

Although Germaine Greer denies being an artist and claims she writes only for fun, her writings have nevertheless had a profound impact upon the women's movement and women still seek her out as a leader. Perhaps for this reason she takes her social responsibilities seriously and reveals a passionate commitment to other women, especially, she claims, Third World women.

"I'm more interested in Third World women than American women," she says. "One of the toughest jobs I have is trying to explain to American women why their attitudes are insulting to Third World women and how they oppress Third World women."

"I saw Betty Friedan stand up and talk about TV dinners and being hemmed in the kitchen to women who didn't have kitchens or TVs or frozen dinners. Most women in the world would love to have a kitchen, they don't quite know what it is."

But, even if American women did care about their distant sisters, Greer says she hasn't the faintest idea how to convey that concern.

"I've tried in every way. I thought International Women's Year would be it. I thought, at last, at last! They're going to stand up and say, 'You bastards, you've done this and this and this and we're sick of it.'"

"Instead, all these professional, beautifully coiffed African women with a million tiny pleats and big earrings stood up and said, 'A woman's life in Uganda is not heaven on earth. *The same is true for men.*' And I said, 'Arrrgh!'"

Greer's surprise and frustration at not finding ordinary women participating in international congresses convinced her that "the only way we can communicate with the women on the other side of the water is by assailing the same things in our own country on our own behalf. Our discontent and anger must echo through to them."

What Germaine Greer is most interested in assailing now is "the politics of human fertility," the title of her next book, which is due "whenever I've written it. McGraw-Hill thinks they'll have it in the spring." (She has also written a screenplay that will appear along with eight stories by other women in *Love*, a film produced and directed by women.)

Human fertility is, as for most women, a sensitive issue with Greer. Particularly so since she was raised as a Catholic and educated by nuns. Perhaps this is

Germaine Greer

LOVE &



DEATH

An Interview

The feminist writer talks about women and motherhood.

By Eric Leif Davin

why she is still attracted to Catholicism, although she doesn't believe in God.

"If you're going to have a religion," she says, "you may as well have one that has an intellectual tradition, one that is rigorous and respectable. It must be right to believe that God, if He exists, is susceptible to rational analysis and isn't a strange warm feeling you experience while hanging out the clothes."

"Besides, I'm not interested in a religion that tries to make life painless, because life will not be painless, not now or ever. We are programmed for pain. We are also programmed for struggle, for intellectual effort."

One of the things Greer is personally struggling with is the Fifth Commandment, which instructs, "Thou shalt not kill!"

"Now," states Greer, "it does not say, 'Thou shalt kill only unbelievers, Vietnamese, oxen, ants, cockroaches or bacteria.' It says, 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

"As such, it's not very useful. You think to yourself, 'I've got to kill, Lord. If I don't kill, I will die myself!' Human life is full of killing. We're slashing and slaying in all directions, all the time. All any human can say is, 'Well, Lord, I did my best not to kill today and I think I've only destroyed about 75 different things.'"

"Obviously, we are supposed to interpret the Commandment."

Greer cites a recent study in England to substantiate her assertion that death—abortion—is a natural part of human fertility. According to Greer's account, the "gonadotropic hormone levels" in the bloodstream of sexually active women using no contraception were measured in order to determine whether undetected conceptions occurred before menstruation.

They found, Greer claims, that 43 percent of the women whose hormone levels revealed they were pregnant menstruated normally and were not pregnant after menstruation. In other words, they experienced spontaneous abortions.

"Now," says Greer, "if Saint Thomas Aquinas is right and the soul comes into existence at the moment of conception, we have a human soul looking for the next step to life on earth. If the blastocyst has a soul, we better start worrying about that blastocyst, because in the natural order of things implantation very often doesn't occur and the blastocyst is lost."

Is this normal cycle of conception and spontaneous abortion so very different, Greer asks, from what we may do intentionally?

"Every society known to anthropologists has practiced either abortion or infanticide or both. Every known society has tried to practice contraception. We all take measures to be sterile at will."

Human sexuality is a high risk area, Greer maintains, a minefield through which women have to find their way while respecting the Fifth Commandment.

"Any woman," she says, "as a woman, has behind her a long history of killing. Women have always killed so that others may live. We are told we are the birth-givers, the nurturers. We are told that it's all pink and blue and baby bows. But, we know that the color of Motherhood is red. We know that babies don't slide out already talcum powdered and dressed in their christening robes. And we know that for many a birth, there is an abortion."

"The lives of women are drenched in death. Motherhood is mourning. Historically, women have seen more dead babies than live ones. We are among the first generation to see live babies and none others."

"But, still, we know that Motherhood is not only giving life, Motherhood is giving death, and always has been."

It is an intimidating message. Like a champion of the Grim Reaper, Germaine Greer proclaims that death is a necessary part of human fertility.

So, I ask: "Do you feel you are an intimidating woman?"

"Well," laughs Greer, "I haven't intimidated you and, God damn it, I've tried!"

Eric Leif Davin impersonates Wolfman Jack on a weekly Pittsburgh radio show.