

## In Memoriam: Sam Shepard

Donald E. Morse

*HJEAS*

The late multi-talented Sam Shepard was recognized during his career as an innovative musician, prolific author and letter-writer, powerful actor in over fifty films and numerous plays, award-winning screen writer, and the leading American playwright of his generation as reflected in his receiving the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for *Buried Child*, the American Academy of Arts & Letters' Gold Medal for Drama in 1992, and being inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1994. While most obituaries rightly emphasized his superb acting, especially in *The Right Stuff* (1983), and his film scripts, especially *Paris, Texas* (1984), it may well be that he made his most lasting contribution to English-language culture as a prolific and fierce playwright with more than fifty-five plays.

Peter Brook once said that “[w]hen a performance is over . . . it is the play’s central image that remains” (152). The hallmark of Shepard’s plays remains their powerful central images which are both visual and aural—that is, the words an audience hears trigger an image the audience retains. In *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978), for instance, the concluding aural image of an eagle and cat locked in mortal combat yet unable to disengage sears itself into an audience’s imagination.

A big tom cat jumps up on top of that [shed] roof to sniff around in all the entrails. . . . And that eagle comes down and picks up the cat in his talons and carries him screaming off into the sky . . . they fight like crazy in the middle of the sky. The cat’s tearing his chest out, and the eagle’s trying to drop him, but the cat won’t let go because he knows if he falls he’ll die . . . the eagle’s being torn apart in midair. The eagle’s trying to free himself from the cat, but the cat won’t let go . . . they come crashing down to the earth. Both. (200)

Were the cat to let go, it would plummet to certain death, but holding on and eviscerating the eagle will also bring about its certain death. The eagle would now like to get rid of its prey but cannot, which means its certain death. So trapped, they both continue to fight until the pair “come crashing down.” As Christopher Bigsby contends, such images “cohere in the mind of the observer” (24), and it is this stark image of mutual destruction that stays with an audience.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the concluding violent visual images of confrontation and fighting to the death in *True West* (1980) retain their power long after the curtain descends. Part of that power derives from their being archetypal as echoing the biblical tale of the first murder, Cain killing Abel, as well as being familiar from Hollywood Westerns, such as *High Noon* (1952) and *Gunfight at the OK Corral* (1957). Into this cliché situation Shepard injects fantastic elements, improbable reversals, comic routines, and strange characters, all the while retaining references to Cain and Abel. In the play's last scene, as the brothers confront one another with the intent to murder, the play clearly moves into the archetype:

*They square off to each other, keeping a distance between them . . . lights fade softly into moonlight, the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape, they are very still but watchful for the next move, lights go slowly to black as the after-image of the brothers pulses in the dark . . .* (59)

Fellow playwright Jack Richardson once observed that Shepard “found a way of maintaining a tension between the banal and the strange that gives his plays the quality of lucid dreams” (ii). Like dreams, or—perhaps, better—nightmares, this “after image” of two brothers about to fight to the death coheres “in the mind of the observer.” Similarly, in *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007), the image of the dead horse that refuses to be buried remains with us long after much of the dialogue has faded.

But perhaps the most powerful of Shepard's visual images occurs at the end of his most famous play, *Buried Child* (1978), when Tilden, in his dripping muddy shoes and trousers, ascends the stairs to his mother, carrying in his arms the remains—bones wrapped in shredded rags—of her dead child. This image was anticipated earlier in the play, when Tilden appeared cradling first corn then carrots in his arms, as he now cradles what is left of the buried child's decomposed corpse. “These three images [of the corn, carrots, and child] layered together act-by-act lend power to the play's ambiguous symbols, such as fertility and/or death plucked from a barren field” (Morse 742). Moreover, Tilden cradles the child's corpse, or what is left of it, as either its father or its brother, creating one of what *The New York Times'* critic Ben Brantley called “the strangest, strongest images in American theatre.” *Buried Child's* final image of Tilden carrying death in his arms retains its mystery and power in large part by not being rationally resolvable (cf. Morse 745).

Shepard's late playwriting took place in Ireland, both in the Republic and in the North, and he was proclaimed "our own Irish playwright" while being awarded an honorary doctorate from Trinity College Dublin (Watt 241). Of the several plays produced at the Abbey Theatre, *Ages of the Moon* (2009) has another arresting image of someone carrying death. As in *Starving Class*, this image first occurs aurally in conversation, but then is reinforced visually as at the end of *Buried Child*.

Two American isolatoes, Ames and Byron, in their sixties, argue, sip bourbon, and converse (5-6) swapping stories of their new aloneness. Both men have suffered loss, and both are struggling to cope with it. Once again, Shepard draws on his great mentor, Samuel Beckett, as Ames and Byron acknowledge "[n]othing to be done" (*Godot* 10). Like Gogo and Didi, they try to "go on," even when it appears impossible to go on. Unlike *Buried Child's* concluding horrific image, that of *Ages of the Moon* might be characterized as bizarre but loving embodying loss. The audience is left with the picture of Byron carrying his dead wife, Lacey, on his back visiting "all the places we walked to every day. Every day for months and months. Years" (44): an aural image of love, dedication, and overwhelming loss (39) anticipated earlier in the play by the visual image of Ames attempting to carry Byron, who may or may not have had a mild heart attack, on his back. The two old friends reunited through their individual isolation and suffering, huddle under their shared blanket waiting for an eclipse of the moon, which they will experience together (44).

Brantley called *Ages of the Moon* "a poignant and honest continuation of themes that have always been present [in Shepard's plays] . . . here reconsidered in the light and shadow of time passed." The play ends with the two old friends waiting together for the "once in a lifetime" heavenly show. *Ages of the Moon* demonstrates Shepard's power to continue creating images in his last plays that "scorch . . . on to the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell—a picture" (Brook 152).

Each of these memorable Shepard plays from across his career, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *Ages of the Moon* specifically, illustrate playwright Christopher Shinn's more general observation that Shepard's unique talent lay in creating "a zone of trauma, mystery, and grief" in his plays. This zone remains his legacy for the contemporary and future theatre and theatre audiences.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an extensive analysis of *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *True West*, and their concluding scenes, see Morse. For Shepard as an “Irish playwright,” see Watt.

## Works Cited

- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot. Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber, 1986. 7-87. Print.
- Bigsby, W. E. Christopher. *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- Brantley, Ben. “Sam Shepard, Actor and Pulitzer Prize-winning Playwright, is Dead at 73.” *The New York Times* 31 July 2017. Web. 18 Aug. 2017.
- Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. 1968. London: Penguin, 1972. Print.
- “A hot actor who made his mark as a playwright.” *straitstimes.com*. 2 Aug. 2017. Web. 20 Aug. 2017.
- Morse, Donald E. “Not the Nelsons: The Family Plays of Sam Shepard.” *Twentieth-Century Theatre and Drama in English*. Ed. Jürgen Kamm. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1999. 733-50. Print.
- Richardson, Jack. Introduction. *Buried Child, Seduced and Suicide in B Flat*. New York: Urizen, 1979. i-iii. Print.
- Shepard, Sam. *Ages of the Moon. Fifteen One-Act Plays*. New York: Vintage, 2012. 3-46. Print.
- . *Buried Child. Seven Plays* 61-132. Print.
- . *Curse of the Starving Class. Seven Plays* 133-200. Print.
- . *Seven Plays*. New York: Bantam, 1981. Print.
- . *True West. Seven Plays* 1-59. Print.
- Watt, Stephen. “Sam Shepard, Irish Playwright.” *Irish Theatre in Transition*. Ed. Donald E. Morse. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 241-59. Print.