

Portrait of the Artist: Sam Shepard and the Anxiety of Identity

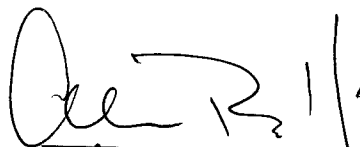
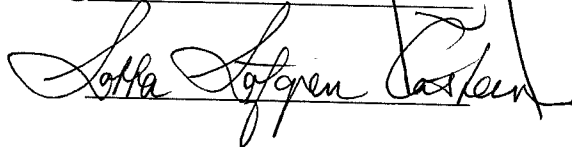
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"I believe in my mask— The man I made up is me
I believe in my dance— And my destiny"

— from "Crow's Song," *Tooth of Crime* by Sam Shepard, 1972

Three True Stories

Sam Shepard has displayed a highly consistent concern for identity, both in his written texts and through his public personae. Following what may be seen as a template, Shepard's characters, and indeed Shepard himself, seem bent on a quest which displays three distinct features: the need to enact a role; the necessity to question and appraise the authenticity of the role and its context; then a struggle with the often dissatisfying results. Dissatisfaction and its consequent ambivalence often lead to rejection of the role, revision of the experience, or to yet another, different role. This never-ending quest for a satisfying identity fuels Shepard's art; it also provides the subtext for the artist's own life-as-dramaturgy, in which the public Sam Shepard appears to be one more creation of the very same authorial mind.

The most recent manifestation of Shepard's quest appeared in the *New Yorker* of March 25th, 1996. In "Three Stories," the protean playwright-actor once again revisits the form of his earlier *Motel Chronicles* (1982) in three thinly-veiled autobiographical accounts of his involvement with the movies.

The first section, called "Winging It," is a first-person narrative of an actor doing a scene for a film in which he must walk into a

shack to discover that an old friend has hanged himself from the rafters, a scene which Shepard himself acted in the film *Voyager* in 1991. The actor is having a problem summoning up an appropriate reaction to the horrific suicide: "I know what my character's reaction should be, but I know if I try to imitate this idea in my head, it will come out exactly what it is— an imitation." (p.80) The actor's solution, then, is to "wing it," to do whatever comes into his head when the director screams, "Action!"

On the third take, the actor walks through the door, discovers the corpse, and impulsively switches on a radio which is sitting nearby. The director is obviously disconcerted, to which the actor responds, "It was just an impulse." The director then exclaims his own appreciation for impulsiveness: "I love impulses. That's the way I love to work myself— instinctually." (Ibid)

Finally, "On the sixth take, I burst in the door; discover the corpse, pause for a second; cross to the radio; pause again; then I smash the radio to the floor with my fist. I just coldcock the son of a bitch." The director immediately crows that the take is "Absolutely perfect!" and that is where this story ends. The actor has become, deeply frustrated with his inability to authentically represent his character's feelings. The frustration— made all the more infuriating, we can assume, by the director's fundamental misunderstanding of the actor's behavior— leads to violence, albeit against a prop. The misinterpretation of the inauthentic— or a misplaced fit of authentic rage— leads the observer to declare that it is the real thing, perfect. (p. 81)

Shepard has, by his own admission, spent much of his career as a playwright and actor "winging it," or relying on instinct rather than on discipline. He has celebrated the spontaneity of his writing and often rebuffed, through the occasional swipe at even his most adoring critics, the praise he has received. Taken as a larger commentary, then, "Winging It" encapsulates Shepard's relationship with his critics but also highlights the most prominent of his concerns as an artist. Shepard does what he does for reasons even he cannot divine. The critics then applaud his authenticity, and Shepard consequently second-guesses the praise and his own authenticity in that role. As the character, Miss Scoons, declares in Shepard's *Angel City*, "I look at the screen and I am the screen. I'm not me. I don't know who I am. I look at the movie and I am the movie. I am the star. I am the star in the movie. For days I am the star and I'm not me. I'm me being the star." (*Fool for Love and Other Plays*, p. 77) Shepard similarly returns to assess his own image on screen and in the public consciousness.

But, as David Wyatt says in his essay "Shepard's Split," "This more than double career [as both writer and actor] allows Shepard to explore what it feels like— rather than means— to project an image." (p.353) And while one might condemn— as Shepard himself has— the film industry for its fakery, one has to give Shepard credit for exploring the enterprise thoroughly, as if hoping that the enactment of the illusory might yet yield a kind of authenticity.

In *Tooth of Crime*, Crow avows his belief in his "mask" and in his "dance." (*Seven Plays*, p. 233) Maybe his identity is just a mask, maybe his dance is just an act, but the all-important component of

belief might yet imbue them with truth. In the same way, this potentiality and the author's ambivalence towards its authenticity seem to keep Shepard's characters in motion, searching. And Shepard certainly keeps showing up on the film set to act.

The second piece, "Gary Cooper or the Landscape," reenacts a conversation between a Swedish woman and, apparently, Shepard himself. The flirtatious exchange begins with the woman gushing, "Why don't you fly? I find that so fascinating." (p. 81) Shepard is well-known for his refusal to get in an airplane (the exception, of course, being his film role as Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff*), and the conversation quickly turns to the meaning of the landscape which he is supposedly so reluctant to leave.

Asked which route he takes in crossing the country, he explains that he takes Highway 40: "It replaced old Route 66. 'Grapes of Wrath.' Henry Fonda. You know— 'Get your kicks on Route 66.'" (Ibid) The woman seems disappointed that he is not interested in the back roads:

"—I mean, the main highway must be so synthetic, isn't it? ,

—They're all made out of asphalt.

—No, but I mean the surrounding areas. The little communities.

—There *are* no communities.

—But there must be some little towns left. Little side roads.

—They're all the same.

—Aren't there some that are more picturesque? More authentic.

—They're *all* authentic." (Ibid)

The woman's concern here for authenticity is, in a sense, set up. It was the male voice who brought up the kitsch myth of old Route 66, only to defy it casually with the assertion that he sees no difference between interstate and blue highway. However, the dichotomy between Route 66 and Route 40 is not simply one of authenticity versus inauthenticity. The legendary Route 66 represents the American ideal of mobility and style, certainly, but the question remains whether that was the reality or merely a construct of television, movies, and even Beat Generation romanticism.

The man's answer here is not the final word, perhaps only one side of the ongoing argument in Shepard's highly ambivalent life and work, for we know that he truly believes in the potential value of commercial detritus, or what he has called "junk magic." (*Action and The Unseen Hand*, p. 44). This answer, though, is a kind of prevarication, an unconvincing sidestep. For we know that Shepard rarely settles problems in his work.

The woman then expounds on her love for the western landscape, which she developed through her appreciation of American movies. He then counters with the possibility that it is not the landscape that she craves but the heroic men she believes inhabit the land. Gary Cooper is her favorite (as well as an actor to whom Shepard himself was compared at the apex of his film career in the mid-1980's). She explains that "He personified something." What that is precisely she cannot say, but he, or the author, seems to have

himself in mind when he needles her for more. She says that Cooper had a "wonderful mixture of shyness— how do you say it?— vulnerability, I suppose, and yet strong at the same time. It's very Western. Women love that." When the male voice presses further, she demurs, "I don't know. You're making me blush." (Ibid)

The seduction continues with the man pressing her to explain whether it is the man or the landscape to which she responds more. He puts it to her as "a question of life or death," and she chooses the landscape. "There you go," says the man, implying that the landscape would be his own choice. (Ibid)

In Shepard's search for authenticity, he has often waxed rhapsodic on the subject of the Western landscape: "There are areas like Wyoming, Texas, Montana, and places like that, where you feel this ancient thing about the land. Ancient. That it's primordial. It has to do with the relationship with the land and the people— between the human being and the ground." (qtd. in Shewey, p. 13) In this Shepard stakes his claim to a kind of prehistoric romanticism, yet it is also clear in "Gary Cooper or the Landscape," that even the painted backdrop of the Western landscape used in a black and white Western movie holds some sway over his imagination. This Swedish woman has, after all, never been to Wyoming or Texas or Montana, but her second- or third- or fiftieth-hand experience of these places through the cinema is still strong enough to inspire her dreams ("I used to have visions about it," she says) (p. 81).

The fake here holds an authentic power; the placebo has a therapeutic effect. Perhaps the fake and the placebo are the only

options readily available to our culture or to the author. But belief, in this case, is good enough to transform even the worthless fake ("junk") into the landscape of the soul ("magic").

In this Shepard is a true romantic: again and again, the power of the imagination is the mechanism by which illusion becomes reality. "They're all authentic," is so strong a statement as to recall Blake, but, through the power of the imagination, anything is possible: if you believe strongly enough in the authenticity of a thing— even a fiction— it becomes authentic. For Shepard as for Blake, Wordsworth, or Shelley, authenticity is a subjective, though problematic, concern.

The final vignette is called "Colorado is not a Coward," and it concerns the filming of a cock fight in a small Mexican village. Again, the question of authenticity takes center stage. At one point in the filming, an old man on a horse stops in the middle of the shot the film crew is trying to set up, and the director to ask him to please move on. After he does so, "The director suddenly changes his mind and wants the charro back. He thinks it might add something authentic to the background, but it's too late. The old man has disappeared, into a mango grove, and the A.D.s can't find him. He's completely vanished." (p. 82) The director, like Shepard himself, is ambivalent over the question of what is authentic and highly impulsive. And by the time he makes up his mind, the elusive opportunity to include the truly "authentic" charro is gone.

Later in the story, the owner of one of the cocks refuses to allow his prized animal to fight unless it is allowed to kill its opponent. His

bird will be ruined, he says, if it is not allowed to kill as it does in reality. "The director apologizes, but the owner won't allow his rooster to continue under these circumstances. He staggers away, weaving down the dirt road with his proud rooster stuck under his armpit. He's turned his back on the movies." (p. 83)

Interestingly, the first and the third of these anecdotes pivot on acts of violence. While the actor smashes the radio in frustration over the portrayal of a fictional character's emotions, the fighting cock owner opts out entirely because of the film's exclusion of authentic violence. "Winging It" ends with the director praising the actor's violence, but the author, Shepard, seems implicitly to praise the cock owner in "Colorado Is Not a Coward." Violence represents a kind of authenticity, and perhaps it is the underlying passion, pride, and universality of such acts which makes it so.

Also, the three sections of this piece roughly correspond to the three defining periods of Shepard's career: the first recalling his early experiments as a playwright without formal training or a goal in mind, the second in which his brush with cinema icon-dom found him walking the same mythic landscape as Gary Cooper, and the last being his most recent period of soul-searching over what it means to be both elder statesman of the American theater and a movie star, longing to give up acting and walk away, to vanish.

After all these years, Shepard is still struggling with what it means to be an artist— or, more precisely, what it means to be Sam Shepard. The difference in his recent musings is that he has been before the camera more than he has been behind the typewriter,

and, apparently, not entirely comfortable with it. In the early 1980's, Shepard said, "I'm a writer. The more I act, the more resistance I have to it. If you accept work in a movie, you accept to be entrapped for a certain part of time, but you know you're getting out. I'm also earning enough to keep my horses, buying some time to write..." (qtd. in Shewey, p. 83) Nearly ten years and over a dozen movies roles later, Shepard is clearly no longer simply "buying time to write." (Ibid) The allure of filmmaking pulls at something deeper than simple concerns for money; it provides Shepard a vitally important arena in which to enact his identity, to try on different masks.

Shepard simply cannot seem to resist Hollywood or the culture of celebrity. Shepard is often called a recluse. He is not (Allen, p.142). He functions as an artist not within the rarefied ether of his own creative universe, but within the very real culture of commerce that is modern American media. He chooses this context because he is genuinely fascinated with the possibility that art— even middle-brow cinema— might yet yield a kind of magical reality, or some authenticity of belief.

In the projection and consequent contemplation of the image, Shepard not only explores inauthenticity but pines that much more deeply— more deeply and knowledgeably than anyone else possibly could— for the security of a true identity.

As Graham Hough writes in *The Last Romantics*, the Symbolist movement— to which Shepard is heir— never yielded a solution to the problem of the artist's identity within modern society: "No English or French writer of this movement can be said to have solved

his problem, or ended in an Olympian calm; and we shall hardly find it possible to record any final messages of ripe wisdom. It is probably because the problem was insoluble that so many of the personal stories of this period end unhappily." (p.xix) Shepard's story may not end as unhappily as most, but his greatest anxiety will most likely never be put to rest. He may never come to realize an identity that will satisfy him, except perhaps the role of the Artist in Perpetual Identity Crisis which he has pioneered.

"Three Stories" distills the identity quest into three components. First, the actor takes up a role and struggles with its authenticity in "Winging It." Then there is deliberation over the authenticity of the projected image and its context in "Gary Cooper or the Landscape." Finally, there is dissatisfaction and abandonment of the entire game in "Colorado is not a Coward." This story, then, follows the progression of the ambivalent artist in search of himself.

And this is perhaps what makes Sam Shepard himself so fascinating to watch.

Portrait of the Artist

Sam Shepard has gained a reputation as one of America's foremost living playwrights. In over forty plays, Shepard has broken down traditional notions of dramaturgy in combining both modernist notions of the absurd and familiar icons from the American cultural landscape with an energy tinged by anarchy and violence. His self-styled rock-and-roll aesthetic has informed not just his writing, but has generated a public persona which looms as large as, or larger

than, his body of written work. Also, in Shepard's comings and goings in film, television, and in the pages of *People* magazine, one sees very clearly the same concern with the issue of identity as expressed and explored in his written and staged work.

He once told an interviewer, "I preferred a character that was constantly unidentifiable, shifting through the actor, so that the actor could almost play anything, and the audience was never expected to identify with the character." (qtd. in Shewey, p. 51)

Inspired by the "transformation" exercises that Joseph Chaikin developed for actors, Shepard's early plays featured characters that would mutate and alternate voices midway through a scene. In Shepard's view, every one of us contains Whitmanesque multitudes and the capacity to try on a wide variety of roles. "The narrative convention that called for consistent, motivated characters to move along an 'arc' dictated by a Dark Secret or a Tragic Flaw was, to Shepard, at odds with the human condition," asserts one critic. (Schiff, p.85)

But for Shepard, there are many highly personal issues associated with identity, and he seems to have replaced the traditional theatrical notion of arc with his own. The particular human condition with which Shepard is most familiar— his own— seems to be the model for his characters' arc of enactment, assessment, and disillusionment fueled by an anxiety that the exercise might prove fruitless and false as well as the hope that it might somehow ring true.

Shepard's identity quest pits the individual against a forest of unstable signs and symbols, the influence of our media-driven society. Shepard's dramatic universe is a complicated and largely unhappy place where characters suffer extraordinary anxiety due to the instability and inauthenticity of the world which surrounds them. In short, they are on guard against lies fed to them by the media. Shepard and many of his characters endeavor to defend themselves against the weight of the past and the anxiety of the present by searching out a deeper, more essential origin (or origins) through which to establish a viable identity.

However, having grown up in the Post-war boom of the entertainment industry, and as he admits, read little (Shewey, p.23), Shepard frequently incorporates signs, symbols, and models from popular culture in his work. The movies, especially westerns, were an early passion of his, and his later exploration of their meaning seems to stem logically from the formative influence that screen icons like Gregory Peck, Gary Cooper, and James Dean must have had on the young Shepard. Similarly, pop music icons appear throughout Shepard's writing as genuinely heroic figures. In this, Shepard seems to admit a deeply-held and sincere belief in the value of such influences as movie westerns and rock stars like Bob Dylan and Mick Jagger. Far from an ironic statement on the commodification of our culture, Shepard's use of pop icons and models can be seen as a kind of return to his origins and to his earliest influences, as if he believes that the lost toys and totems of his youth might still hold some power.

It is not enough for Shepard, however, to simply play a cowboy in a movie or play the drums in a band: he is compelled to do both—and more—in order to stave off the anxiety associated with his identity quest. He refuses to be what people expect, and he consciously trades masks in order to confound us, to throw us off his trail, to keep us—and perhaps himself—at a safe remove. In a 1986 interview, Shepard described a hawk he had once observed in New Mexico trying to outfly bothersome crows. The interviewer, Jonathan Cott, rightly supposed that Shepard identified with the hawk and asked, "So the answer is to outfly them." Shepard responded, "Yeah, outfly them. Avoid situations that are going to take pieces of you. And hide out." (p. 198) As for most male characters in Shepard's plays, the key is not to get pinned down, locked into the strict confines of an identity, be it that of father, son, or rock-and-roll savior. The attainment of an identity is desirable, but it is equally fraught with pitfalls and traps.

The anxiety Shepard feels regarding identity has found voice through all three phases which scholars and critics have generally identified as the shifting and maturing concerns of Shepard's work, but the fundamental pathos is the same throughout. The outlandish "rock and roll" plays of his early career are often written off (by Shepard himself as well) as the untutored ejaculations of a wild youth, while the later "family" plays of the early- to mid-1980's represent the work taken most seriously. The past ten years have seen Shepard's work as a dramatist diminish as he spends more and more time making films; this latest period remains largely undefined

by critics and scholars who seem confused as to why he would stray so far from his artistic homeland. Sam Shepard has not changed terribly much, however. The tone and frequency of Shepard's work surely changed, and he certainly developed a more sophisticated approach to his writing, but the subject of Shepard's work has remained squarely rooted in the problem of identity—the medium has changed, but the message is virtually the same.

It is not, however, a single hard target search for Shepard; his quarry is intangible and he conducts his search in unexpected ways. He is, after all, an artist for whom contradiction has become something of a hallmark— or perhaps a strategy. Shepard is a writer who quests for the authentic, yet who also changed his name. He has been an ardent critic of the movie industry through his plays and other writing, going so far as to swear off film acting in the mid-1980's, yet he has acted in nearly three times as many films in recent years as he has written plays. He claims to be intensely private, yet he has appeared on the covers of *People*, *Newsweek*, and *Esquire*. He claims to prefer the wild Western United States over the East, yet he lived on the long-tamed red clay of Charlottesville, Virginia for ten years and is now reportedly residing in Minnesota. Shepard says that he moved to New York in 1963 in order to flee his troubled home life and his alcoholic father, but the family and a father figure modeled on his own dominate his later plays with an almost obsessive intensity. He is an Obie and Pulitzer-winning playwright and the darling of Off-Off-Broadway theater who appeared

in a television mini-series based on Larry McMurtry's *Streets of Laredo*.

Taking into account not just the written texts but also the actions and interviews of Sam Shepard the man, it is reasonable to say that he is most profoundly and consistently an ambivalent romantic. In Wilcox's words, Shepard may be demonstrating "a desire to return to origins." (p. 1) This seems abundantly true, no matter Shepard's apparent peripheral concerns with other issues (his commentary on contemporary culture, the relationships between men and woman, etc.). He is an artist who chafes against the questions posed from without by theater critics and academics, maintaining a distinct hostility towards the intellectualization of his art, as if the deconstruction of his plays were simply one more meaningless and inauthentic fiction.

There is in this posture the very essence of romanticism. Graham Hough explains that, "There is a general melancholy agreement that art and the sense of beauty have a rougher time in the modern world than they ever had before; and this may well be true; but our acquiescence in the belief has become hereditary." , (p.xiv) So when Shepard dismisses theory as "a crock of shit," (qtd. in Shewey, p. 47) or his characters give voice to a yearning for a new kind of "rock-and-roll saviour," it becomes appropriate first to take him at his word and then to look more closely at what his characters want and how they go about getting it. They want something more direct, profound, and authentic than what is currently offered in our culture, and they will create whatever myths necessary in order to

find it. If a "rock-and-roll Jesus with a cowboy mouth" (*Fool for Love and Other Plays*, p. 157) is needed, Shepard's characters will endeavor to invent, or borrow and re-invent, such a figure through their passionate belief and imagination. If to enact such a role in reality is what the playwright needs, then he will do it, if only to discover that it wasn't real.

Critic Bonnie Marranca says of Shepard: "He substitutes myth for history, experience for theory." (p.13) This constant transformation of what is real (history, family, personal life) into art, or often simply the vaguely unreal, is constant throughout Shepard's career. Through his plays as well as in his various other pursuits, Shepard has shown himself to be a romantic and a master revisionist, mythologizing and reinventing himself and his characters. As Tucker Orbison writes in "Mythic Levels in Shepard's *True West*": "An indication of his dramatic power is his continuing ability to create mythic meanings on several simultaneous levels." (p.506) And the search for mythic meaning in the plays simultaneously resonates on a personal level for Shepard; the playwright shares with his characters their quest for a mythical origin, an ideal context in which identity is fixed, authentic, and comfortable.

"I feel like I've never had a home," Shepard told an interviewer in 1979, "you know? I feel related to the country, to this country, and yet I don't know exactly where I fit in. And the same thing applies to the theater. I don't know exactly how well I fit into the scheme of things. Maybe that's good, you know, that I'm not in a niche. But there's always this kind of nostalgia for a place, a place where you

can reckon with yourself. Now I've found that what's most valuable about that place is not the place itself but the other people; that through other people you can find a recognition of each other. I think that's where the real home is." (qtd. in Shewey, p. 103) In other words, Shepard defines his ideal context not as an actual place in the physical present but as a mode of exploration in relation to others; in a very basic sense, this mode necessarily requires both performance and an audience.

Shepard's characters are not fixed entities; they are experimental masks to be considered and discarded by both actor and observer as a natural matter of course in this process. Likewise, Shepard has taken many and various roles on screen and off, only to discard them and then move on to the next.

In the mouth of one of Shepard's characters, this mode of exploration becomes even more explicit. Shooter, in the play *Action*, says:

Any move is possible. I've seen it. You go outside. The world's quiet. White. Everything resounding. Not a sound of a motor. Not a light. You see into the house. You see the candles. You watch the people. You can see what it's like inside. The candles draw you. You get a cold feeling being outside. Separated. You have an idea that being inside it's cozier. Friendlier. Warmth. People. Conversation. Everyone using a language. Then you go inside. It's a shock. It's not like how you expected. You lose what you had outside. You forget that there even is an outside.

The inside is all you know. You hunt for a way of being with everyone. A way of finding how to behave. You find out what's expected of you. You act yourself out." (p. 21)

Here is the microcosmic enactment of Shepard's quest: first there is dislocation, isolation, and the desire to enact a role; then there is the seduction of a particular, seemingly ideal, place; finally there is dissatisfaction with the inauthenticity of the role demanded by the place.

But Shepard has chosen not only foreign and isolated places (London, a ranch in New Mexico, farms in Virginia and Minnesota) to reckon with himself, but also the very public stage of American celebrity. He exhibits a sincere fascination with celebrity and the self-created images of himself and others, especially that of his first professed candidate for "rock-and-roll Jesus", Bob Dylan. Shepard's career may be read, then, as a dazzling puzzle of various personae created through an equally dazzling and irrepressible need to perform and to act out the most compelling roles in our culture. As Shepard wrote of Dylan, "The point isn't to figure him out but to take him in." (*Rolling Thunder Logbook*, p. 100)

In attempting to "figure out" Sam Shepard, I will first examine the early play *Cowboy Mouth* and Shepard's love affair with Patti Smith, which informed much of the conflict of that play; Smith, in turn, serves not only as Shepard's most empathetic audience, but as our most skilled informant. Second, the figure of Bob Dylan as a model for Shepard's efforts to author his own myth seems to be a

logical place to look for patterns which Shepard would later employ. Shepard's comment on and work in film, both as a screenwriter and as an actor, also bear some scrutiny. Foremost among these are *True West*, in which the notion of the authentic is called into question as two brothers attempt to write a Western for the movies, and the confessionalist work *Motel Chronicles* from 1983, which, like "Three Stories," takes the movie industry as its primary subject. *Fool for Love*, both as a play and as an adapted film, is also significant. In all of these works, one reads Shepard's paradigmatic struggle to come to terms with his own anxiety of identity.

Cowboy Mouth

In the 1971 play *Cowboy Mouth*, written with Patti Smith over the course of several sleepless days and nights, the main character, Slim, struggles with the meaning of art and the role of the artist. The passage in which Cavale (played in the first production by Shepard's then-lover Patti Smith while Shepard himself took the role of Slim, the only time he played one of his own characters) exhorts the young man to be "like a rock-and-roll Jesus with a cowboy mouth" (in *Fool for Love and Other Plays*, p. 157) is particularly telling in the way that it prefigures Shepard's three-step process with regard to identity.

In fact, *Cowboy Mouth* may be seen as Shepard's most thinly-veiled autobiography. Having left his wife of two years, O-Lan, to take up residence in the Chelsea Hotel in Manhattan with Smith, Shepard seems to point directly to this conflict in the text of this play. Midway

through the play, Slim complains to Cavale: "What am I doing here? I don't know who I am anymore. My wife's left me. She's gone to Brooklyn with the kid and left me. And here I am stuck with you." (p. 154)

Shepard's wife was at the time living in Brooklyn with their one-year-old son, Jesse, but Shepard left her. Here Shepard recasts himself as a victim, as Cavale is said to have kidnapped Slim at gun point. One may read this as a reconfiguration of the facts, though the impression is that the character Slim and the playwright Shepard are, in a powerful way, victims not so much of literal kidnapping but of their own irresistible urge to act out their fantasies. Shepard chose to act out this particular fantasy on the stage, despite the facts that his affair with Smith was hot gossip already and his wife was starring as Mae West in his other play, *Back Bog Beast Bait*, which opened as the first of a double-bill with *Cowboy Mouth*.

This was an extraordinary moment in American theater; it was the momentary nexus of Shepard's multiform impulses and perhaps the masterpiece of Shepard's life-as-dramaturgy.

Cowboy Mouth was performed only once with Shepard and Smith in the starring roles. Just before the second night's performance, Shepard abandoned the role, leaving New York City for New England without a word to anyone in the production. What was so disturbing about the experience of playing Slim on stage may be easily deduced. Besides his fear of live audiences, Shepard must have found this convergence of art and reality maddening. Since *Cowboy Mouth*, Shepard has repeatedly attempted to conceal his personal

life, yet he has regularly put himself and his extraordinary ambivalence in the spotlight through his writing because he cannot resist the performance.

The text of *Cowboy Mouth* begins with two thumbnail sketches of the main characters, Cavale and Slim. The physical descriptions here could not more closely resemble those of Smith and Shepard. (p.145) The setting, too, seems to approximate what surely the audience imagined to be the couple's surroundings at the Chelsea Hotel:

A fucked-up bed center stage...Scattered all around on the floor is miscellaneous debris: hubcaps, an old tire, raggedy costumes, a boxful of ribbons, lots of letters, a pink telephone, a bottle of Nescafé, a hot plate. Seedy wallpaper with pictures of cowboys peeling off the wall. Photographs of Hank Williams and Jimmie Rogers. Stuffed dolls, crucifixes...A funky set of drums to one side of the stage. An electric guitar and amplifier on the other side. Rum, beer, white lightning, Sears catalogue. (p.147)

This setting evokes many elements of Shepard's life— much more so, one must imagine, than Smith's—, and each item, precisely noted and cataloged, carries meaning forward from these characters' past. This is a metaphorical setting, from the "fucked-up" nature of the situation to the presence of guitar and drums on the periphery, signifying artistic escape. Hank Williams and Jimmie Rogers and the "pictures of cowboys" provide a poignant reminder that Slim is, by

nature, a cowboy, native to the wide-open spaces, and that he does not want to be here in this cramped squalor, where only an emblematic representation of cowboy life is possible. Slim is part of a supposedly authentic American tradition, but he is displaced. Shepard, likewise, would have us see him— in this context and others— as a displaced cowboy, a reluctant star, or as one persona masquerading as another. For any one aspect of his multiform persona would be only partly true, and it is only in the multiplicity of roles that Shepard is truly unprecedented and original.

The Chelsea Hotel was at that time already famous for its legendary tenants, which included Tennessee Williams and Dylan Thomas (Wilcox, p. 100). It was also known as the one-time residence of Bob Dylan (who changed his name in homage to Dylan Thomas), a fact which was not only known to the audience of this production of *Cowboy Mouth*, but of obvious concern to both Smith and Shepard. In fact, they seem to be borrowing details from the well-known love affair between Dylan and Joan Baez— in essence, borrowing their masks.

Additionally, the phrase "cowboy mouth" first appeared in the Bob Dylan song, "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands." (Wilcox, p. 103) The sad-eyed lady with the cowboy mouth is assumed to be Joan Baez, who in turn sang of Dylan, "Singer or Saviour, it was his to choose." (Ibid) In this, we see Shepard and Smith both quoting from and attempting to elevate themselves to the level of their generation's mythic artists, both in their highly visible affair at the legendary

Chelsea and in their apparently boldly autobiographic enactment of that affair on the stage of the American Place Theatre.

The action is introduced with the revelation that Cavale has kidnapped Slim "with an old .45" and that "She wants to make him into a rock-and-roll star, but they fall in love." (p. 147) In other words, there is coercion involved, yet the captive falls in love with his captor— a kind of Beatnik Stockholm Syndrome— and it is this deeply frustrated ambivalence which charges the play. Similarly, Shepard's own ambivalence towards any one role demanded by his muse (embodied here by Cavale / Smith) is the central theme of his public career from this point on.

Early in the play, Slim expresses absolute defiance of Cavale's dream of making him a star ("My wife! My kid! Kidnapped in the twentieth century!...I ain't no star! Not me! Not me, boy!") (p. 147), but seeks to release his frustration by playing the guitar and singing a song titled "Have No Fear." The song is "loud rock-and-roll with a lot of feedback" (p.151), as if the frustration Slim feels becomes manifest in boisterous lyrics like, "Have no fear / The worst is here / The worst has come / So don't run." (p.152) The fact that Slim even stands up to sing points to his almost irresistible urge to be exactly what Cavale wants him to be, however. Slim chafes against the demands of his muse (armed, as she is), yet expresses his frustration and defiance through the very art he aims to deny.

This would become a central theme in Shepard's work: he would go on to describe his frustration with writing in words and his defiance of fame as a celebrity. Consistently, Shepard enacts and

inhabits the roles which most trouble him, and the fruits of those frustrations are his writing, as seen in the recent "Three Stories." Frustration and ambivalence over role-playing are constants, yet the urge to play the role is paramount.

Even within the characters of Cavale and Slim, there is an urgent need to role-play, to act out a variety of behaviors: Slim "growls like a coyote and howls" (p.149); Cavale and Slim "walk through the room as though it were the city" and pretend to shop for shoes (p.150); and Cavale "plays dead" (p.152). These two characters, as they borrow the myth of Dylan and Baez and derive significance from the real-life Smith and Shepard, enact roles within roles, overlay masks with masks in their compulsion to perform.

Later in the play, Cavale describes more fully the rock-and-roll savior she has in mind: "People want a street angel. They want a saint but with a cowboy mouth. Somebody to get off on when they can't get off on themselves. I think that's what Mick Jagger is trying to do...what Bob Dylan seemed to be for a while. A sort of god in our image." This figure, she contends, will satisfy the needs of modern people who no longer feel a close connection to Jesus. "Any great, motherfucker rock-'n'-roll song can raise me higher than all of Revelations. We created rock-'n'-roll in from our image, it's our child...a child that's gotta burst in the mouth of a saviour." (p. 156)

The optimistic belief that individuals, or even a generation, might create a self-sustaining myth speaks volumes about the play's context, that of Off-Off-Broadway in 1971. Further, the ideal "saviour" Cavale imagines would exist within a complex relationship

between performers and the audience: the "people" need the savior, and salvation will come from the "mouth of a saviour" in a performance not unlike those of Mick Jagger or Bob Dylan. The savior must, however, be responsive to and reflective of his audience— a "god in our image." Only after a reciprocal relationship between performer and audience is established can salvation be achieved.

For his part, Shepard, like the character Slim, demonstrated his frustration with the theater culture of New York by leaving it for England just after his appearance in this play. To be the rock-and-roll savior of American theater, apparently, was not so easy, the problem of identity too vexing. Consequently, Shepard discarded the mask, reunited with O-Lan, and fled to England several months after the performance of *Cowboy Mouth*. Like the characters Slim and Cavale, Shepard seems to have adopted a multiform persona, grown weary of its charm and its responsibilities, then sought to discard it. The play itself, however, leaves behind evidence that Shepard might yet hope that an audience's fervent belief in a myth— even the commodified, synthetic, juvenile, myths of the cowboy and the rock star— represents a kind of realization of that myth.

Patti Smith, Star-Maker

Shepard's relationship with Patti Smith reveals much about the artist as young man. As with the recent revelations about the relationship photographer and self-conscious celebrity, Robert Mapplethorpe, shared with Smith in the Chelsea in the 1970's, one sees a large

degree of artistic posturing in supposedly private acts. Image was of great concern to Smith, Shepard, and Mapplethorpe, and the glamorous squalor of their personal lives quickly began to rival their art in the public consciousness. In a 1971 poem written by Smith titled "Sam Shepard: 9 Random Years (7+2)," there exists an extreme concern with the near-mythical significance of their public image. Indeed Smith may serve as our greatest Shepard informant: having been so close to him at such a crucial time in his career as well as her penchant for confessional art make Smith's work of seminal interest here.

The poem opens with an image of Shepard as a James Dean-like youth as "he plunged off a cliff / the people all gathered / and pointed to him / they said there goes a bad boy." (in Shepard, *Mad Dog Blues and Other Plays*, p.153) Later Smith furthers the myth of the outsider cowboy figure:

He yodelled like a cowboy, rolling and sliding
all over them big dinosaurs.
People stared at him, he didn't care
he was a renegade with nasty habits
he was a screech owl
he was a man playing cowboys. (p. 154)

There is a self-consciousness to the heroic figure Smith portrays, as in "playing cowboys" that seems to prefigure much of Shepard's later

work in film. Also, Smith mythologizes her subject as a kind of super-sexual Pecos Bill:

Sam was till playing with monsters.

he swore to the great waters:

engulf my spirit

give me room

a new rhythm

He lost himself in rivers:

the Snake River

the Colorado River

the North Platte River

the Mississippi River

He drank up the ocean—any ocean.

Ocean...he was lost for days.

He fed on sand and seaweed, squid and the sting
of jelly fish

flying fish

silver fish

There were sun spots in his eyes, his tongue was
thick like fur.

Not a woman in sight he masturbated

and came for hours

like a river. (p.155)

What is especially interesting in this passage is its interplay of real and imagined heroics. In the first line of this passage, we are shown Shepard "playing" with monsters, as if the Herculean tasks he undertook were somehow contrived, self-created, and, in a sense, staged. What follows is a catalog of heroic deeds which seem to draw on Native American and pioneer mythology—exploring the great rivers of the American continent and drinking up the oceans. Sex is not far behind, though, and the culmination of the stanza is not so much a sexual conquest, but an illusory one of masturbation which tends to suggest that the artist's narcissism itself is heroic—God-like, even—in its power to create, or re-create, the very landscape.

The passage suggests that Shepard's greatest gift is his heroic transformation of reality—his own personal reality first and foremost—into myth. Even from Patti Smith, a woman with whom Shepard was presumably intimate, one gets the sense that Shepard is acting out a role that is not entirely sincere, or even human. Smith concludes her poem in the following way, defining her subject through icons of popular culture:

So Sam just looks out on the river.

the badlands keep pulsing through his anatomy

the kind of bad that's open and innocent:

the passion of a forest fire

the beauty of a poisonous flower, scorpion, snake.

Flames: the shot of silver:

James Dean's death car...the silver Porsche

the stiletto...the pushbutton blade
 the sliver of moon carved on his fist
 mad dog dawn foaming at the mouth
 heart like a garage
 car...speeding like a demon. (p.158)

Smith is maybe guilty here of bad poetry, but one must recognize the reliance on props and cultural symbols to evoke who Sam Shepard is, or what he might mean to the reader of this poem. Even though Smith proclaims Shepard's innocence, nowhere in this work do any of the man's emotions come out. Instead, what we read is a celebration of a somewhat two-dimensional bad-boy superhero, who could just as easily be a professional wrestler as a playwright. The mythic status of James Dean is invoked, as are stock images of street violence ("stiletto...the pushbutton blade") as hackneyed as those from *West Side Story*. Finally there is escape; Shepard speeds away from us, or perhaps from his empty heart ("like a garage"), "like a demon." Escape is a recurrent theme in much of Shepard's work and one which this poem suggests is central to the way Shepard defends himself in relation to the world.

Like Slim (who yearns to escape the claustrophobia of *Cowboy Mouth*), or Shepard himself (who joined a traveling theater company to escape his troubled home life and alcoholic father), or even Shepard's real father (who eventually abandoned the family in order to drink himself to death in the desert), one understands that escaping a role's dissatisfying consequences is crucial to an

understanding of this complex psyche, as Smith— Shepard's most enthusiastic audience at the time— surely knew.

The reference to the "sliver of moon carved on his fist" in Smith's poem is to the tattoo which Shepard had done by a Mexican gypsy while he and Smith were together—she got a lightning bolt on her hand. (Allen, p. 141) This, too, suggests the kind of romantic revision of which Smith was prone and Shepard clearly capable. In fact, Shepard once revisited the significance of this tattoo in his writing, in the 1973 collection of short, prose memoirs, *Hawk Moon*:

Hawk Moon month November month my birthday month month
of cold set in month when secrets start whisper on the high
mesa high old ancient sacred land of Hopi month Antelope deer
and antler clan first signs of barren empty need for prayer first
dance snake in mouth dance spirit dance snake mouth painted
hand and lightning bolt month of washing long black hair my
month of birth month—the Hawk Moon month. (p. 11)

Here, in Shepard's own words, we get a fanciful re-creation of the author's mythical birth every bit as pseudo-mystical and bombastic as Smith's. An army base in Illinois, where Shepard was born, is transformed into the high desert of the Hopi. Instead of a deeply troubled American family, we are given hints of a pre-literate, mythical origin in this revision of the writer's beginnings. Note that Smith's complimentary lightning bolt is referenced as the author seeks to mythologize his own birth. Smith seems to have left her

mark on Shepard in more ways than the merely physical. Perhaps Smith helped to teach Shepard the high art of self-mythology and human theater, of which she was already a master and one which would help the young playwright create what has already eclipsed his written and staged pieces— his public image. As Richard Gilman wrote of Shepard in 1981:

[W]e either take our places in a drama and discover ourselves as we act, or we remain unknown (as some indeed choose to do). In the reciprocal glances of the actors we all are, in our cues to dialogue, the perpetual agons and denouements that we participate in with others, identities are found, discarded, altered but above all *seen*. Not to be able to act, to be turned away from the audition, is the true painful condition of anonymity. But to try to act too much, to wish to star, the culmination and hypertrophy of the common desire, is a ripeness for disaster.

(from introduction to *Seven Plays*, pp. xx-xxi)

Applied to Shepard's career, one recognizes his perennial need to perform, or to try on various personae. Even the briefest of glances at the laundry list of roles Shepard has explored (rock drummer, screenwriter, actor, director, etc.) suggests a constant search for public expression and visibility. One may also find in Shepard's career the fear that he will go too far, that he will "try to act too much," especially in his coyness with the press. This ambivalence is

the central struggle of *Cowboy Mouth*, as well as many other of his plays. More importantly, however, Shepard seems to have been struggling with this personally for the last fifteen years. His far-ranging imagination seems unable to resist what his work itself scorns. More than just a reluctant celebrity, Shepard is the author of, and the starring actor in, what has become one of the more curious dramas our culture has seen. It is the drama of an actor who wants fame, but who is too smart not to distrust it.

It's Only Rock-and-Roll

Rock music plays an important part in Shepard's plays as well as in his general sense of aesthetics. In an often-cited passage from *Hawk Moon* called "Rip It Up", there is this proclamation of the primacy of rock music over all other art:

...Rock and Roll made movies theatre books painting and art go
out the window none of it stands a chance against The Who The
Stones and old Yardbirds Credence Traffic The Velvet
Underground Janis and Jimi and on and on..." (p. 55)

This, taken with Shepard's statement that his writing process is very much like working with music, points Shepard's rock-and-roll aesthetics. He is a playwright, but his preferred profession, at least in the early 1970's, was that of "rock and roll star." (Shewey, p.47) Not satisfied with the traditional perception of the dramatist as a

disciplined artist working within one medium, Shepard has infused his work with a rock-and-roll-inspired energy and iconoclasm.

Shepard played drums for the experimental band, the Holy Modal Rounders, in the 1960's. The Rounders took traditional country blues music, such as the work of Charlie Poole, and performed it in an improvisational, often psychedelic manner. This collaboration, in which Shepard had a hand shaping the highly theatrical live performances, proved to be nothing more than a cult phenomenon in Greenwich Village, yet the essential experiment seems to have had an impact on Shepard. What the band attempted to do was to reclaim traditional music and traditional themes and to present them in thoroughly avante-garde ways. This spirit of artistic daring fed much of Shepard's early plays, which frequently made use of rock bands on stage. Indeed, the very act of mixing traditional, rural music with psychedelic, urban rock-and-roll appears to be a kind of template for the playwright's later approach to his career and to his art. Shepard proves to be adept at borrowing and mixing influences, styles, and genres—there is no better expression of this ambitious miscegenation than the phrase "rock-and-roll Jesus with a cowboy mouth." And since the early seventies, Shepard has not only written plays but split his time between acting in, directing, and writing films, as if no one medium could satisfy and contain his far-ranging creativity.

In the Autumn of 1975, Shepard was invited to tour with Bob Dylan and his Rolling Thunder Revue, a large band and entourage that included Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez, Allen Ginsberg, and William

Burroughs, among many others. Shepard's appointed role was to write scenes and dialogue for a film to be made along the way, though the film was never produced. The opportunity provided Shepard, a long-time fan and student of the cult of Dylan, the rare, even bizarre, experience of writing fictional scenes in which the charismatic Dylan was to act. The tour proved to be far too chaotic for the methodical production of a film, but Shepard published, in 1987, a collection of splintered impressions of the experience. This book, titled *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, gives us a clear indication of Shepard's fascination with the rock star and self-made myth of Bob Dylan. Entries such as "Big Stakes" verge on adulation:

Myth is a powerful medium because it talks to the emotions and not to the head. It moves us into an area of mystery. Some myths are poisonous to believe in, but others have the capacity for changing something inside us, even if it's only for a minute or two. Dylan creates a mythic atmosphere out of the land around us. The land we walk on every day and never see until someone shows it to us." (p.62)

This sense of the mythic is not confined to the art, but extends to the artist's role as a public figure. In Shepard's assertion that a figure like Dylan can change his audience, even "move us into an area of mystery," he locates the potential magic of art. Whether it is rock music, movies, or plays, Shepard seems to say, art can achieve the level of myth. And Dylan is living proof; a truly mythical artist has

such power. In this construct, the celebrity and the art support each other and lend a degree of authenticity to the other.

Later in the *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, Shepard reflects on Dylan's meaning as a cultural figure:

Dylan has invented himself. He's made himself up from scratch. That is, from the things he had around him and inside him. Dylan is an invention of his own mind. The point isn't to figure him out but to take him in. He gets into you anyway, so why not just take him in? He's not the first one to have invented himself, but he's the first one to have invented Dylan... (p. 100)

Likewise, Shepard has invented— and continues to reinvent— himself. The man born Samuel Shepard Rogers VII and called "Steve" through his childhood to distinguish him from his father (DeRose, p.2) has created several different personae, however, perhaps with the intention of lending yet greater originality to his creation. The one constant in all of this masking and molting, though, has been Shepard's apparent ambivalence towards what he has created, as if the illusion he has wrought can either never fully sustain him or possibly threaten to suffocate him under its restrictions.

It is the illusion of the artist's mythical persona which most interests Shepard in his description of Dylan's appearance on stage wearing a Bob Dylan mask of his actual face:

Tonight Dylan appears in a rubber Dylan mask he'd picked up on 42nd Street. The crowd is stupefied. A kind of panic-stricken hush falls over the place. "Has he had another accident? Plastic surgery?" Or is this some kind of mammoth hoax? An imposter! The voice sounds the same. If it is a replacement, he's doing a good job. He goes through three or four songs with the thing on, then reaches for the harmonica. He tries to play it through the mask but it won't work, so he rips it off and throws it back into the floodlights. There he is in the flesh and blood! The real thing! A face-lift supreme! It's a frightening act even if it's not calculated for those reasons. The audience is totally bewildered and still wondering if this is actually him or not. (p.114)

Dylan could not have chosen a more empathetic writer for his doomed film project than Shepard: he shares Dylan's narcissistic fascination with image and the self-created myth. In the passage above, Dylan delights in presenting his audience with a false image, one which confounds expectations and has them wondering whether they are seeing something authentic or a dime-store fake. It is a moment of extreme self-consciousness and an act which suggests that Dylan is able to play into and off of his own public persona. And Shepard is watching with rapt attention, taking notes. The larger-than-life mythos of rock music informs Shepard's most passionate compulsions— to act and to be seen—, yet there remains a lingering question of authenticity, as if Shepard knows that it doesn't really matter whether Dylan takes off the mask or not. The human face

itself (of Dylan, James Dean, or even Shepard), reproduced endlessly— as in a Warhol series— is no different from a mask.

1987 saw the publication of another curious Shepard-Dylan encounter: a one-act play, "as it really happened" and based, apparently, on a visit Shepard made to Dylan's home in California. The piece appeared in *Esquire* (July, 1987) and might be mistaken by that magazine's readers for an interview. But it is a play, complete with stage directions. It is as eerie a work as anything Shepard has ever written, unsettling in its struggle to make "SAM," described as "a tall, skinny guy dressed in jeans and a T-shirt," a character to be manipulated by the playwright like any other fiction. (p.59)

Dramaturgy, after all, affords the playwright the God-like power to control actors— real, flesh-and-blood human beings— and to put words in their mouths, to give them life on a stage of the playwright's design. Here, Shepard splits himself into both actor and playwright before our eyes; he is both marionette and omnipotent presence.

The "interview" ranges from topics of mundane personal business to James Dean's death to Hank Williams. It is nonchalant, rambling dialogue, and the reader begins to hear the ring of both men's voices, yet there is something decidedly artificial about it. There is a haunting sense that this is more Beckett than Barbara Walters. Somewhat ironically, the play is titled "True Dylan."

But "True Dylan"— like True West, Cowboy Mouth, or any other of Shepard's works— is more about Shepard than anything else. The entirety of the "play" may be seen as a highly personal fiction. When "BOB" wonders whether he might not be able to answer "SAM"'s

questions, SAM responds, "Make it up." (p. 60) Likewise, when SAM is unable, mysteriously, to find the interview on the tape recorder he brought, BOB reassures him that he, too, can simply "Make it up." (p. 66) It is a self-consciously unstable and coy document, and within it, BOB and SAM discuss other works in which truth and authenticity are the central questions.

There is, for example, an interesting exchange in which SAM quizzes BOB about his fascination with traditional country music:

SAM: At that time were you fishin' around for a form?

BOB: Well, you can't catch fish 'les you trow de line, mon.

SAM: This is true.

BOB: Naw, I've always been real content with the old forms. I know my place by now.

SAM: So you feel you know who you are?

BOB: Well, you always know who you are. I just don't know who I'm gonna become." (p.64)

Taken on one level, this could be seen as an insight into the character of Bob Dylan. As a kind of mentor and precursor, Dylan here observes that you've got to try different styles and modes— or roles and masks— before you understand who you are, to which SAM responds with the absolute certainty of experience, "This is true." The process, is however, unending; the experimentation is not to end and the artist is never to know who he is "gonna become."

Also, early on, BOB mentions that he has recently visited the site of James Dean's fatal car crash, a place he describes as "as powerful as the place where he lived." (p.60) Further, BOB admits that he initially went to New York City only because "James Dean had been there." (p.62) Twice the sound of a car crashing is heard off-stage (pp. 60, 68), underlining the imposing presence of the legendary James Dean, a presence which is mystically potent in that these two men clearly care a great deal for his memory. The crash sound also conjures up recollections of Dylan's near-fatal motorcycle in 1966 as well as Shepard's own memorable vignette about an actor in a motorcycle crash.

BOB and SAM are not uncritical, however; they probe at the question of the authenticity of Dean's mythos. They reminisce about a scene from *Giant* in which James Dean seemed to them a little off:

BOB: Well, I never did like that scene. Always felt like there was somethin' phony about it. Didn't quite ring true. Always bothered me. Like there was a lie hiding in there somewhere, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

SAM: Yeah, I never did either. You mean where he's drunk and alone in the convention hall or whatever it was?

BOB: Yeah. You know why that was? Why it felt phony?

SAM: The makeup. All that gray in his hair?

BOB: NO, no. I wish it was the makeup. Turns out Nick Adams, an actor at that time, who was a friend of James Dean's, he

overdubbed that speech because James Dean had died by that time.

SAM: Is that right?

BOB: Yeah. And that makes perfect sense because that don't ring true. The end of that movie. But that's what I mean— the lie and the truth, like that." (p.68)

Here the two ferret out a lie "hiding in there somewhere," but later they locate the source of Dean's greatness:

BOB: Well, why do you suppose— I mean what was it that he did that was so different? For instance, in that scene with the bullets. What made that scene so incredible?

SAM: It was a pure kind of expression.

BOB: Of what?

SAM: Of an emotion. But it went beyond the emotion into another territory. Like most actors in that scene would express nothing but self-pity, but he put across a true remorse.

BOB: Remorse?

SAM: Yeah. For mankind. A pity for us all. This wasted life. This dumb death of an innocent kid. The death of an innocent."

(p.68)

This is a crucial moment in Shepard's work. He gives us unstable simulacra of himself and Dylan, men whose faces are so well known that they have become icons. But here they talk about themselves, or

Shepard talks about himself, through their apparent concern for James Dean. SAM's assertion is that, despite the inherent danger of artificiality in the movies (i.e., the stand-in for Dean's voice), James Dean was able to do something totally real, or even better than merely real: he was able to imbue the faulty form with a kind of magic that ennobles us all. Dean, argues SAM, was so great because he was able to "put across" truth through a medium which too often lies, and this is perhaps our greatest clue as to Shepard's fascination with the film industry: authenticity exists in the audience's response. Specifically, when the audience sees itself (its pathos, its despair) in a character on screen, it processes the experience as "real."

Make-Believe Cowboy

As further evidence of Shepard's adoption of Hollywood westerns as a model, a vignette from *Motel Chronicles* which stands out is one in which the speaker describes his attempt to imitate Burt Lancaster's smile from the western, *Vera Cruz*:

For days I practiced in the back yard. Weaving through the, tomato plants. Sneering. Grinning that grin. Sliding my upper lip up over my teeth. After a few days of practice I tried it out on the girls at school. They didn't seem to notice. I broadened my interpretation until I started getting strange reactions from the other kids." (p.14)

One can recognize this trouble-making kid, craving attention and reaction from others through the adoption of a role, in much of Shepard's career.

The second entry in *Motel Chronicles*, for example, tells the story of an actor who is deeply troubled by his inability to understand the "character" he is playing in a movie (pp. 10-13), perfectly prefiguring "Three Stories." "He tried to keep his mind on business. Where it fit into the continuity. He was supposed to be riding to kill her? The Star? The Character?" the actor asks himself, only to suddenly crash the motorcycle he is riding. (pp.12-13)

In an instant, just before death, the actor finally sees himself as he really is. He is not the "Character" at all. Seen in the reflection of the camera's lens, he sees himself, the man, and defines himself negatively against the "Character." The piece ends, "Suddenly he appeared to himself. He caught himself in a flash. There was no more doubt who the Character was." (p.13) Note here that the epiphany comes only in relation to the camera: what created anxiety in the actor (how to perform in the role) also provided the means of his catching a glimpse of himself and understanding more fully who he is. Like the actor who smashes the radio in "Winging It," this actor experiences a spark of inspiration and of authenticity, though it is not in the script. The epiphany could only occur in such a setting, however: Shepard suggests that only under the pressure of the synthetic script can one most clearly define, by contrast, what is authentically human.

True West, False West

The play *True West* was first staged at San Francisco's Magic Theatre in the summer of 1980, and can be read as one of Shepard's most poignant inquiries into the ironic process of working both in the film industry (he had recently appeared in the critically acclaimed film, *Days of Heaven*) and as a playwright. Shepard here retreats from the spectacular staging of his earlier works and uses a more naturalistic mode to explore the inner workings of the individual. It's as if Shepard grew out of his rock and roll fantasies and began to pursue the question of identity through the grittier emotional universe of the dysfunctional family. The setting here shifts, but the central question of identity remains the same.

Specifically, *True West* gives us two brothers, Austin and Lee, as they house-sit for their mother. The two brothers seem entirely different— Lee is a desert drifter and sometime thief who arrives at the house uninvited, while Austin is a Hollywood screenwriter. The ferocity with which they war with one another indicates not only a deep-seated conflict between them but also an equally compelling symbiosis. "I wanted to write a play about double nature," Shepard said later, "one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's a real thing, double nature. I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It's not so cute. Not some little thing we can get over. It's something we've got to live with." (qtd. in Shewey, p. 141) Note that this explanation moves from the personal to the collective very quickly: first he implies that

he knows what it feels like to be "two-sided," then he declares that it is a universal condition.

While it is debatable whether all of us suffer from some sort of psychic split, it is certain that Shepard does, and the well-known double life of Sam Shepard looms large over any and all productions of *True West*. As Sheila Rabillard observes, "Certainly Austin and Lee, the opposite and to some extent interchangeable brothers correspond to two sides of the Shepard known to the audience: the photogenic and much described playwright from California ... and the rough-hewn character familiar from the films he had appeared in at this point in his career." (in Wilcox, p.83) In this way the public persona of Sam Shepard is very much present in *True West*, and the fierce battle between the two characters echoes the struggle between Cavale and Slim in its frankly confessionalist subtext. Like *Cowboy Mouth*, *True West* pits characters against one another in exploring the larger issue of the conflicted identity of a single artist.

The setting is "40 miles east of Los Angeles"— in other words, almost precisely where Shepard spent his teens with his family in Duarte, California. (in *Seven Plays*, p.3) In *The Unseen Hand*, Shepard named the setting "Azusa," which he says is also forty miles east of Los Angeles. The playwright's introduction to this play confesses an obsession with the place, described as one that "grew out of nothing and nowhere. ...People who couldn't make it in the big city just drove away from it. They got so far and just quit the road...It was a temporary society that became permanent. Everybody still had the itch to get on to something better for themselves but found

themselves stuck. It was a car culture for the young. For the old it was just a dead end. ...[T]hese Southern California towns have stuck with me not so much as a fond memory but as a jumping off place. They hold a kind of junk magic. (*Action and The Unseen Hand*, pp.43-44) This area "40 miles east of Los Angeles" is not merely an autobiographical font of local color; it is the magic source for the playwright's dramatic tension, his heart's country. It is the real place where Shepard spent his formative years, yet the playwright also condemns its artificiality. It is Shepard's heart's country perhaps because, not in spite, of its dual nature as both authentic and inauthentic.

Clearly present in *True West* is this sort of tension between the surface appearance of a sort of middle-class-America Eden and its inherent emptiness. Austin, the younger of two brothers house-sitting for their mother, says, ironically, "Indoors. Safe. This is a Paradise down here." (p. 39) Lee, on the other hand, recognizes that this place is truly the dead end to which Shepard earlier referred in saying, "Kinda' place that sorta' kills ya' inside," though he sees the surrounding neighborhood a motherlode for stealing televisions. (p.12)

By scene six, Lee is dazzling Austin's producer, Saul, with a screenplay of his own, and Austin takes to petty larceny and begs to be shown how to live in the desert. The process of concocting Lee's screenplay is especially interesting in that it seems to mock the very idea of depicting life with anything even approaching realism or authenticity. Austin's screenplay concerns the nearly universal

experience of love, while Lee's depicts an improbable, and seemingly endless, chase through the panhandle of Texas.

The contentious brothers agree to share with each other their particular gifts. As Austin coaches Lee through the creation of a script, the brothers enact the very conflict dogging Shepard:

LEE: Just help me a little with the characters, all right? You know how to do it, Austin.

AUSTIN: (*on the floor, laughs*) The characters!

LEE: Yeah. You know. The way they talk and stuff. I can hear it in my head but I can't get it down on paper.

AUSTIN: What characters?

LEE: The guys. The guys in the story.

AUSTIN: Those aren't characters.

LEE: Whatever you call 'em then. I need to write somethin' out.

AUSTIN: Those are illusions of characters.

LEE: I don't give a damn what ya' call 'em! You know what I'm talkin' about!

AUSTIN: Those are fantasies of a long lost boyhood. (p.40)

Likewise, the characters and fundamental concerns of Sam Shepard the adult artist often verge on what some might call the "fantasies of a long lost boyhood"—rock-and-roll and cowboys, most conspicuously. But this may provide a clue as to the artist's choices: if Shepard's formative artistic influences were Hollywood westerns then it is perhaps only fitting that he would exhibit an affinity for

those forms even after he was ushered into the pantheon of serious dramatists.

The supposed gift Lee possesses for writing for the screen is what Saul calls "raw talent" (p. 34), and closely resembles Shepard's own often mythologized untutored approach to writing. Furthermore, Lee is portrayed as the meticulous artist, one who is "in touch" (p. 41) with mainstream society and media, as opposed to Lee's "speaking from experience" (Ibid), specifically the experience of a marginalized existence in the desert. Questioning Saul about what he sees in Lee's writing, he leads the dialogue into a discussion of authenticity:

AUSTIN: What do you see in it? I'm curious.

SAUL: It has the ring of truth, Austin.

AUSTIN: (*laughs*) Truth?

LEE: It is true.

SAUL: Something about the real West.

AUSTIN: Why? Because it's got horses? Because it's got grown men acting like boys?

SAUL: Something about the land. Your brother is speaking from experience.

AUSTIN: So am I! (p.34)

Lee has not experienced the bizarre episode he describes in his screenplay, but Saul picks up on the idea that there is a mythical quality to it as it relates to the land, which suggests a primal experience— Lee is a romantic. Austin, on the other hand, asserts his

own authenticity in writing about more common occurrences, like love. And though Saul chooses Lee's work over Austin's, both artists have a point in that they are equally authentic in many ways. The dichotomy between the two brothers then breaks down entirely as the brothers live too closely for several days and become fascinated and involved with the other's life. The result is violence, and the final image on stage is that of Lee blocking Austin's escape from the room, as lights fade to black and a lone coyote calls in the distance (p. 59). Lee has the upper hand, however, and the implication is that the demonic older brother, having served as the catalyst for most of the play's action and brought his unusual insight to the dialogue, has transformed and trapped Austin. Meanwhile, Austin has merely provided his brother with a constructive, yet highly problematic, outlet for his creativity. One can assume that Shepard's own romanticism, perpetually battling with the demands of our highly structured commercial world, is the more forceful component of his psyche.

The authorial imagination seems superficially concerned with the authenticity, or the "True"-ness, of art, and in particular when fed into the commercial machine that is Hollywood. Most deeply, however, the play enacts a profound psychic split. Nowhere does Shepard address the broader concerns of "humanity's" split, let alone offer resolution or hope. *True West* is a drama set within the inner landscape of the author, his characters playing out his most violent and contradictory compulsions. The final is one of claustrophobic

tension, and it is the work of a deeply frustrated and extraordinarily ambivalent artist.

The frustration, though, finds release in the creation of art (as seen earlier as Slim brutalizes the drums and attacks the guitar in *Cowboy Mouth* or later when the actor in "Winging It" knocks the radio to the floor), yet the ambivalence between the purity and passion of the artist (Lee) and the dazzling artificiality of Hollywood, in general (Austin and Saul), is ever-present. The conflict between Lee and Austin finds them returning again and again to the typewriter, their figurative battlefield.

Though the final image of the two brothers locked indefinitely in an insoluble conflict forms the visual conclusion to *True West*, there is another moment, earlier on, which is equally important. At the end of Act One's fourth scene, Lee dictates his "true" western to Austin at the typewriter as the lights fade, and it is a startlingly insightful soliloquy:

So they take off after each other straight into an endless black prairie. The sun is just comin' down and they can feel the night on their backs. What they don't know is that each of 'em is afraid, see. Each one of separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going." (p.27)

The typing then stops as the lights go to black, and the sound of the crickets fades (Ibid). The struggle in this passage is recast as a quest. There is motion forward, but it is a blind chase choreographed by two unwitting collaborators. The final scene echoes this poetic monologue in its implication that the clash of the two characters represents an open-ended struggle towards an unidentifiable goal. However, the mere possibility of conclusion, as the two "fictional" characters race across "tornado country" swapping trucks for horses, questing endlessly, urges them on indefinitely. They, like Lee and Austin and, indeed, like the disparate forces that drive Sam Shepard as an artist and as a man, must remain suspended in eternal pursuit. For the central problem for any romantic, Hough rightly contends, is "insoluble." (xix) The search for identity necessitates, for Shepard, such a journey of continual motion in which roles are taken, then escaped. And the authenticity of such a quest comes from its very impossibility: to reach its destination would not ring true. The quest must continue— if the truck runs out of gas, hop on the horse— through the endless cycle of adoption, critique, and abandonment of roles, because no one role ever seems to get the author where he, wants to go.

In his appraisal of Bob Dylan in *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, Shepard concludes, similarly, in "If a Mystery is Solved":

If a mystery is solved, the case is dropped. In this case, in the case of Dylan, the mystery is never solved, so the case keeps on.

It keeps coming up again. Over and over the years. Who is this character anyway?" (p.73)

Ironically, just three years after the first production of this play, Sam Shepard would become famous beyond his wildest dreams and find himself nominated for Best Supporting Actor for his role as Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff*. Two years after that, in 1985, his face, partially concealed by a large cowboy hat and sunglasses, would appear on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine (Nov. 11, 1985) under the banner headline, "TRUE WEST," begging the question, "Who is this character anyway?"

Fool for Fame

Shepard had thus made the leap to true "star" status, though even the most pedestrian of the mainstream press had to admit that this was no ordinary movie star. The *Newsweek* cover, for example, declares that Shepard is, simply put, a "Leading Man, Playwright, Maverick." (Ibid) The prioritizing of roles there, with the movies listed above his previous claim to fame, writing plays, is an indication, not only of what the popular audience knew of Sam Shepard, but also of where he would begin to prioritize his creative energies after 1985, acting in over fifteen feature films while only two new plays of his were staged.

Also in 1985, Shepard collaborated with Robert Altman to adapt *Fool For Love* to the silver screen. Shepard wrote the screenplay and even took one of its starring roles, that of Eddie,

providing yet another strange and extreme example of his compulsion to inhabit the roles he imagines. The play was first staged in 1983, in San Francisco and New York, to generally positive reviews for its claustrophobic menace and its touchingly bleak portrayal of the star-crossed lives of the two pathetic, incestuous lovers, Eddie and May. May is a dim-witted waitress living in a seedy motel "on the edge of the Mojave Desert" (*Fool for Love and Other Plays*, p. 19), and Eddie is a movie cowboy/stunt man who comes to reestablish this unseemly relationship. May is angry that Eddie has taken up with a rich starlet, and the entire scenario points suggestively to the final break-up of Shepard's marriage to O-Lan and to Shepard's relationship in the early 1980's with actress Jessica Lange.

The first stage productions employed only a dingy room for its set. The Altman-Shepard collaboration, on the other hand, sought to spread the action over a more open setting and, in a sense, to pump up the play. The final product is certainly nothing close to *Terminator II*, yet it is interesting to note the changes which took place in the script, and possibly in the author, by 1985. First, a bona fide starlet, Kim Basinger, was chosen to play May opposite Eddie, a character that one reviewer had already pegged as "one of Shepard's aging egomaniacal studs, a hero consumed by his own myth..." (Denby, p. 45)

The opening sequences of the film show a nervous May washing dishes and preparing herself for the evening, intercut with oblique shots of Eddie (Shepard wearing his signature cowboy hat and sunglasses) in a battered truck pulling a gooseneck horse trailer,

cruising through a magnificent western landscape. Before ever uttering a line, Shepard's character slams through May's motel door. It is a far cry from the quiet beginning of the stage play, which begins with Eddie consoling May (p. 21), and one already begins to feel that this film has elaborated greatly on the play's script.

Later in the stage version, as the lovers argue over what to call the character who is coming over to pick May up for a date— a "guy" or a "man"— , May confronts Eddie with his own slightly insane machismo in saying, "Anybody who doesn't half kill themselves falling off horses or jumping on steers is a twerp in your book." Eddie responds curtly, "That's right." (p. 30)

The film, however, provides Shepard one of his most memorable moments on screen at this point as he adds, "If you ain't a cowboy, you ain't shit," somewhat superfluously. (Altman) Watching *Fool for Love*, one has to wonder whether these moments of bravado are really necessary, or whether they represent an adaptation of Shepard's public persona, rather than the play's script, to the screen.

Throughout the film, there is evidence of a transformation. Not only has this very dark and tightly composed play been wholly converted into a somewhat rambling movie, but the man who once fled New York instead of acting in one of his own plays here takes on the role with gusto and more than a little narcissism. As in *Cowboy Mouth*, the Shepard we see acting in *Fool for Love* resembles our image of him and even enacts a troubled romance that mirrors what most of the audience knew to be the case in his actual life. The difference is, however, that Shepard as Slim is an inarticulate

confession of the artist's deepest conflict, while Shepard as Eddie seems to be a fun, if somehow vacuous, piece of propaganda for his public persona, that of the "Leading Man, Playwright, Maverick." Maybe he simply could not resist.

Eddie, too, is a somewhat dubious cowboy— a stunt man rather than an authentic bunkhouse cowpuncher (p. 26)— and a man who must keep his separate lives separate but who cannot seem to avoid the conflict between fiction and reality. He has, in a sense, returned to the scene of the crime— he rejoins his lover (who is possibly his half-sister) and the Old Man, who may be his father— but their interaction provides no conclusions or solutions, only competing fictions. As he says suggests to Martin, this is essentially a masquerade:

MARTIN: What would we do here?

EDDIE: Well, you could uh— tell each other stories.

MARTIN: Stories?

EDDIE: Yeah.

MARTIN: I don't know any stories.

EDDIE: Make 'em up.

MARTIN: That'd be lying wouldn't it?

EDDIE: No, no. Lying's when you believe it's true. If you already know it's a lie, then it's not lying. (p. 45)

The film also has the appearance of a story that Shepard does not quite believe: both internally and externally it is a comment on the

revision of roles and the substitution of "myth for history" (Marranca p.13). For example, after Eddie recounts his story of the first time he saw May, she challenges his accuracy, in both the text and in the film version:

MAY: I heard every word. I followed it very carefully. He's told me that story a thousand times and it always changes.

EDDIE: I never repeat myself.

MAY: You do nothing but repeat yourself. That's all you do. You just go in a big circle.

MARTIN: (*standing*) Well, maybe I should leave.

EDDIE: NO! You sit down.

(*Silence. MARTIN slowly sits again.*)

EDDIE: (*quietly to MARTIN, leaning toward him*) Did you think that was a story, Martin? Did you think I made that whole thing up?

MARTIN: No. I mean, at the time you were telling it, it seemed real.

EDDIE: But now you're doubting it because she says it's a lie?

MARTIN: Well—

EDDIE: She suggests it's a lie to you and all of a sudden you change your mind? Is that it? You go from true to false like that, in a second?

MARTIN: I don't know.

MAY: Let's go to the movies, Martin. (p.51)

Later Eddie insists that May and Martin stay, declaring, "There's not a movie in this town that can match the story I'm gonna' tell. I'm gonna' finish this story." (Ibid) The story, of course, is never finished definitively, and Eddie leaves forever.

The film adaptation is a revision of the play's internal commentary on revision, truth, and subjectivity, and it is Shepard's enactment of Eddie which, in particular, lends irony and meaning to May's suggestion that she and Martin go to the movies. If the movies, as May conceives of them, are pleasingly stable, if vaguely unreal, fictions in which the audience can believe, then the film, *Fool for Love*, is the anti-movie. And Sam Shepard, the life-long master of revision and self-mythology, is at its center.

It is only temporary, however: Eddie and Shepard as Eddie vanish from the scene, despite proclamations from beginning (his first lines are "May, look. May? I'm not goin' anywhere." p. 21) to end (his last words are "I'm only gonna be a second. I'll just take a look at it and I'll come right back. Okay?" p. 56) that he will not. Eddie realizes that he and May cannot continue their relationship— a "dumb little fantasy," in her words (p.25)— and that his dream of, relocating with her to Wyoming is impossible. Once the fantasy is explored and shattered, Eddie loses interest in fulfilling his promises to May— abruptly, and perhaps inevitably, Eddie leaves her again. With Shepard's enactment of Eddie's adoption, assessment, and abandonment of the role of apologetic lover, the film resonates with external meaning: that of Shepard's own ambivalence over the artistic promises he has made.

If Eddie and May were meant to find themselves through each other in the play, it might also be said that Shepard the playwright and Shepard the movie actor were bent on exploring and clarifying their respective roles within Shepard's dual career. What insights Shepard drew from the experience remain unknown, but he has not acted in any film that he wrote since *Fool for Love*.

Conclusion

Since 1985, Shepard has written and directed two films, *Far North* (1988) and *Silent Tongue* (1993), and staged only two new full-length plays, *States of Shock* (1991) and *Simpatico* (1994). In these projects, Shepard sounds familiar notes of family strife (*Far North* and *States of Shock*), cowboy and Native American romanticism (*Silent Tongue*), and conflict between two superficially different men who are locked in a kind of compulsive symbiosis (*Simpatico*). It is perhaps the familiarity of these themes which generally left audiences and critics cold, wondering whether Shepard has himself run out of gas. Michael Feingold, of the *Village Voice*—the champion of Shepard's early plays—writes that "For all its playfulness, *Simpatico* has a strangely pallid tone; it feels less like a Shepard play than a B-movie script by someone who's read a lot of Shepard. The rhapsodic speeches and fraught, quirky tableaux tend to be offered with an apologetic smile, as if the author knew his material was too familiar but didn't know what to write instead." (p. 77)

Indeed, as I sat through the first production of the previews in the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York, Shepard, who also

directed the play, sat in the back row— just behind me— impassively, maybe even bored. It was a good performance, though, and a good play: the audience chuckled occasionally and often felt a deep current of menace running just beneath the thin veneer of humor (enhanced as it was by the rumble of subway trains from beneath the theater). But it clearly lacked the kind of raw energy which brought Shepard acclaim as a playwright. Gone was the risk-taking that John Lahr hailed in 1973 as an antidote to the "rigor mortis" besetting the American theater (in Marranca, p. 56)

But 1996 promises to be a busy year for Shepard. There is a planned production of a revised *Buried Child* scheduled to open on April 30th, a revised *Tooth of Crime* and a new play opening in the fall, and a collection of vignettes called *Cruising Paradise*— from which "Three Stories" was excerpted— to be published in May. (Schiff, p. 85) If the past is any indicator, however, these Shepard works will not present anything radically different from what we have already seen. Shepard has chosen to revisit his past by recycling two of his plays, but he is also covering familiar ground in the first available glimpses of his book. As with any other sampling of Shepard's work, the questions are the same, though the author is no closer to answering them definitively. The rewrites for *Buried Child* will most likely not include an exhumation, and *Cruising Paradise* will almost certainly not depict any character arriving in paradise. On the contrary, these new works are preordained to resist conclusions.

To Shepard, it seems, all the world's a stage on which to enact a wide array of roles. It is not a matter of mere entertainment,

however: Shepard, like his many characters, feels a need to perform and to fully inhabit these roles. In trying on the mask, however, they seem to notice that the mask is less convincing from the inside, even as they feel first-hand the power that the mask has over others. It produces a split in the psyche. And it is this ambivalence that has, for Shepard, been not only his primary subject, but his personal mode as well, sending the artist on an impossible quest to stave off anxiety with the hope that a redeeming truth might yet come across to the audience. Or that Shepard might yet come across a redeeming truth himself.

And that has perhaps been his greatest contribution to American letters.

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