

## UNIT 7

### SAM SHEPARD (1943- ) & *BURIED CHILD*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Mamet & Shepard = superficial similarities in concerns

Mamet's = taut, precise writing style <--> Shepard's = fragments

+ verbal/visual glut + abrupt juxtapositions + disturbing confrontations

musically inspired use of language rhythms + ideas emerge from plays

new thought exploring hopes and anxieties + ongoing dialogue of author

dialogue = agonized to subtler probing & questioning

crisis, schism & conflict = dramatic action classically <--> Shepard =

experimentalist + ignore such conventions + narrative plots sketchy &

unstable + characters opaque/erratic + confused motivations + goals

unfulfilled + "A resolution isn't an ending: it's a strangulation".

Shepard's plays = collages/patchworks of colors, sounds & confrontations

+ stage in the moment + different crises (relational, identity, existential,

national, cultural, reception, how to respond to Shepard's theatre?)

#### II. CRISES IN SHEPARD'S WRITING

stages: "high" modernist + "late" modernist + reluctant postmodernist

1963-1971 = last American wave of high modernism (existentialism,

absurd <-- Beckett revolutionized theatre -> existential present)

==> figures = victims of inexplicable circumstance + fill voids with

games, confrontations & rhythmic/imagistic language (imprisoned

spatially as well as temporally + claustrophobic stage spaces)

Beckett's = stark austerity <--> Shepard's = yearning for freedom

Beckett's nihilism <--> creativity as liberation & redemptive meaning

image/"voice" in state of daydream --> journey into the unknown

language as music --> music = symbolic of subconscious desire  
 writer = constrained within pre-existent/culturally determined structures  
 Shepard's = theatre of present moment (post-modernity as schizophrenia) +  
 unease contemporary American culture + imagery of myth narratives  
 search for new images of coherence (but doubt, irony, self-ridicule)

### **III. IDENTITY PROBLEMS**

details of Shepard's peculiarly unsettled background are important  
 Air force base, Illinois, 1943, Samuel Shepard Rogers VII + moved to  
 different places -> Los Angeles = "sort of temporary society..."  
 characters seek to create/recreate personal appearances + lack of clear  
 direction or "rounded" identity + terror of "unseen hands"  
 ==> determinism and inventors of our selves

### **IV. THE QUESTION OF MASCULINITY**

depiction of violent machismo (1950s chauvinistic America)  
 "essential maleness" = dangerous + brutality (female victimization) -->  
 ironizes stereotyped masculinity (pop culture parody & inadequacies)  
 he rarely seems able to envisage any kind of serious alternative  
 movie star (1983-1990) --> minor supporting roles & female stars  
 ==> polarized view of gender division (ambiguous & unresolved)

### **V. NOTES ON PERFORMANCE**

outset --> strict degree of control (modernist aesthetics)  
 late 1960s -> variety of elements + large casts + live music + theat. effects  
 traditional frontal staging + clear separation of stage and audience  
 mid-'70s-'80s --> Magic Theatre (apprentice to Robert Woodruff)  
 1980s --> fully directorial control of plays (de-privilege significance)

how to approach production process <--> how to respond to Shepard  
 (neither mindless emotionalism nor reductive intellectualising)  
 relationship audience-stage = dialogic + non-hierarchical  
 fragmentary narratives + borrowing from familiar generic conventions  
 ==> audiences form certain expectations <--> subverted (unexpected) ==>  
 spectator reconsiders perspective ==> sense of crisis + lack of resolution

## **VI. BURIED CHILD (1978)**

Magic Theatre + "serious" American drama? + Pulitzer Prize, 1979  
 subject of family + post-modern drama (pastiche + insoluble tension)  
 why the family is a family at all & what actually a family is  
 realism (no rational explanation + formal techniques + familiar elements)  
 open-ended + "musical" approach (rhythmic speech + mood juxtaposition)  
 family as antidote to contemporary confusion (California)  
 autobiography in prose collection *Motel Chronicles*  
 idealized view of Americans as rural people but land & family = poison  
 fear that there is no understanding to be had --> biological determinism (<-  
 modernist movement) in cycle of self-destruction (Greeks, O'Neill)

### **VI.1. DESTABILIZING TECHNIQUES**

self-conscious quotation of familiar imagery & plot elements from well-  
 known family plays & no pretense at creation of "original" crisis situation  
 Tilden = Biff Loman; Halie = Amanda in *Glass Menagerie*; *Desire Under  
 the Elms*); Dodge = Cabot; Halie <-> Tilden = Abbie <-> Eben  
 rural-gothic novelists (Carson McCullers, T. Capote, Flannery O'Connor)  
 death/decay + damned family + grotesques = pastiche of the gothic genre

### **VI.2. CHARACTERS**

mundane domestic activities + identities = schizoid collage-figures  
 need to belittle & control other inhabitants of stage space (position)  
 characters' avoidance of relations with each other + animal instinct +  
 targets to vent frustrations = collections of isolated individuals  
 Family life = harshly competitive theatre (performance = sole law)  
 reticent to say anything <--> need to speak to avoid vacuum of silence  
 ==> oddly disjointed, conversations <==> naturalistic dramaturgy  
 bewildering ambiguities + past = minefield of possible distortions  
 loss of reference points transplanted into actual experience of spectator  
 expect resolution <--> disorientating struggle for understanding

### **VI.3. AUDIENCE RESPONSE**

unsettling in form + mix of features (farce + drama) ==> disorientation-by-  
 stealth (gothic-style mystery --> promise that truth will be revealed)  
 unease gradually builds up (acts I,II) --> explodes into chaos (III) ==>  
 audience aware that conclusive answers will not be forthcoming  
 family's internal dynamics = play's central subject (isolation/backwardness  
 + family's life unchanged for decades + natural cycle death/rebirth)

### **VI.4. STAGE DESIGN & EFFECTS**

skeletal set (living room with sofa, tv-no image/sound, lamp) + back wall  
 (screen --> perceptions distorted) & rain + stairs with "no landing"  
 ==> ghostly environment + mystery (screen wall + "solid interior door")

### **VI.5. DRAMATIC IMAGERY**

sense of strangeness & uncertainty = vivid, provocative gestures (clues)  
 play warns that whatever significance to assign to incidents = own reading

experience of watching play is subjective ==> spectator to guess family's predicament from contradictory subjective perceptions

## **VI.6. PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE**

All family members have two needs = illusion of own innocence (denying reality of past) & insulate themselves against threat of chaos

Halie & Dodge's denial of past ==> metaphor of America's collective tendency to bury intolerable memories of history of slavery & genocide but only truths available = ones various family members believe in

## **VI.7. MYSTERY & SIN**

Gothic convention --> alleged murder of baby has brought present state but impossible to assemble various references to child coherently (Tilden's, Dodge's, Ansel, Vince, Halie & Tilden, Halie & Vince) Dodge's revelation (incoherence & self-conscious performance) mystery = contradictory possibilities in significance of baby's death

## **VI.8. INCOMPATIBLE MYTH SCHEMES**

*Judeo-Christian pattern of fall and redemption* --> old days Eden & sin  
*Pagan sense of inescapable doom* --> cyclical life of land & no control over own fates + natural world = mysterious, even malevolent force  
 family's blood curse of violent masculinity + fertility of the fields  
 disinterment of buried child + resurrection of Vince's genetic  
 psychological conditioning & Vince's lost himself <--> know who he is

## **VI.9. SUMMARY**

mythic resonances not clearly interpreted (no conclusive causes /explanations) & allusions to death, decay, rootedness, resurrection, family

violence, denial of guilt, confrontation with past, murdered innocence) &  
mystery/contradictions = sense of doom ==>

ancient spirit of tragedy for post-modern world --> uncertainties into the  
viewer's consciousness (rain) + male violence = permanent in America

## QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS (UNIT 7):

- 1.- Try to explain basically the development of the XX century American drama (from 1900 to the 1960s), its principal authors and their common concerns.
- 2.- Which do you think are the main socio-political facts of the sixties in America, as well as the milestones of American Literature in this period?
- 3.- Describe the development of American drama in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.
- 4.- What is meant by Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway theatre?
- 5.- Indicate some authors of this period as well as the most relevant plays.
- 6.- What is the plot of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*?
- 7.- Which are the main ideas reflected in *Buried Child*? Do you think they reflect the socio-political situation at the time of its production?
- 8.- Name the basic literary characteristics of Shepard's *Buried Child*.
- 9.- Which are the main contributions of Shepard's work to the American stage? Did you find any weaknesses in Shepard's work?
- 10.- Give your personal opinion about American drama, especially in the XX century.

## ANSWER TO QUESTIONS (UNIT 7):

1.- Try to explain basically the development of the XX century American drama (from 1900 to the 1960s), its principal authors and their common concerns.

The basic theme of America's major dramatists is the effort to survive in times inimical to man. Virtually all their protagonists cling to human values apparently superseded by material ones. The rhythm of life has changed along with its purpose. Nostalgia is an active but an ironic force. It highlights the disproportion, the sense of loss, the fact of betrayal, which are the dominant moods of Miller's work, as of O'Neill's, Williams's and Albee's. Memory becomes the source of absurdity in that it recalls dreams which failed to be actualized, hopes which were never realized, a youth which has been eroded by time. And yet some final determination survives -a need for the poetic, a desperate urgency to estimate one's personal value at full weight, to make an assessment of oneself apart from the pragmatics of the public world. Hence the need to remake the world, either, as was the case in 1930s and again, briefly, in the 1960s by transforming its social and political priorities or, more often, by constructing pipe dreams, illusions and fantasies which can sustain the self in its battle with the world.

In the 1930s, there was for a while some expectation that those visions could be translated into social fact, that social coercions were just that and were hence susceptible of transformation. But by degrees (1940s & 1950s) that confidence began to disappear. Increasingly these writers began to locate social imperfection in character and then in human nature. The battle with imperfection became internalized, not simply in translating social and political dislocations into pathology but in establishing a model of human behavior which was in some sense Calvinist. Imperfection becomes definitional. Social and political evils are thus seen less as a moral hiatus, a deviation from manifest principles of ethical behavior and human well-being, than inevitable eruptions on a public scale of a corruption designed into individual behavior. Materialism, capitalism, the assertion of the apparent primacy of external world, are no longer seen as the primary causes of moral collapse; they are presented as a consequence of it. At the heart of the public as of the private world is the self's obsessive need to survive and to establish its significance.

2.- Which do you think are the main socio-political facts of the sixties in America, as well as the milestones of American Literature in this period?

The first years of the Sixties decade seemed truly a time when new possibilities and opportunities presented themselves on both public and private levels. The election

of John F. Kennedy to the presidency brought to Washington a glamorous and humorous leader who was thought to be committed both to social justice and to culture -perhaps even bringing in the "new Augustan age of poetry and power" Robert Frost wrote about in his inaugural poem. The agreement with Russia to cease nuclear testing in the atmosphere, the increasing concern for changes in the relationship between whites and blacks; the loosening up of sexual codes and of official censorship, coincident with the marketing of an effective new oral contraceptive -these and other events seemed in the minds of some to promise a more life-affirming, less restrictive era than the preceding one. With particular regard to the matter of censorship, it may be noted that for many years Americans who wished to read Henry Miller's novels had to smuggle in from Paris their copies of *Tropic of Cancer* or *Tropic of Capricorn*, while in the mid-1950s Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* had to be obtained in a similar way. When in 1956, however, *Lolita* was first published in this country, there was no legal prosecution; and in 1959 the successful publication by Grove Press of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* cleared the way for novels of more explicit sexual reference. When Mailer published *The Naked and the Dead* in 1948, a well-known four-letter word had to be spelled "fug", evidently to spare the delicate sensibilities of its readers. By 1959, when he published his comic tour de force *The Time of Her Time*, about a sexual warrior's candidly explicit adventures with women in his Greenwich Village loft, hardly anyone raised an eyebrow.

The 1960s were also to see a corresponding "liberation" from official standards of correctness in the realm of the journalistic essay, or -as everyone who wrote in that mode called it- a "piece". Norman Podhoretz noted that everyone he knew was engaged in writing lively essays instead of laboring over novels and poems, and there were many collections of such pieces on subjects ranging from the Beat Generation phenomenon to the trial of Adolph Eichmann. Mailer's *Advertisement for Myself* (1959), the father of the mode, had shown how unconventional and various a book of essays -which also included stories, newspaper columns, interviews- might be, and he produced two more such books in the first half of the new decade. In the hands of Tom Wolfe, style became something to cultivate and exaggerate; the subject of his "New Journalism" might be the doings of a racing-car star or a New York disco celebrity, but it didn't matter since it was merely there for the style to perform upon. A young critic, Susan Sontag, entitled a group of her essays *Against Interpretation* (1966) and made the case for more playful, aesthetically oriented responses to both life and art. That the title essay was originally published in *Partisan Review*, a serious "high culture" periodical, suggested that the were changing; as did the fact that literary critics like Richard Poirier

or Benjamin DeMott were to be observed writing full-dress "pieces" on listening to the Beatles or on the morals of *Playboy* magazine.

3.- Describe the development of American drama in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

Lean, blue-jeaned, shaggy-haired, they saunter toward unmarked seats -folding-chairs or backless risers. Here and there an issue of *The Village Voice* bristles out of a jacket pocket, but no one scans the headlines; Vietnam is bombed again, Blacks are arrested again, drugs are discovered again. The light discourages reading, but it is adequate for locating seats near friends, with a view of the uncurtained playing area. The program is a mimeographed list of credits on cheap colored paper, easily crumpled to the floor. The same cement floor leads to the playing area on which are arranged -or disarranged- vaguely oval shapes of diverse colors. Desultorily, one by one, actors in leotards approach the ovals, depositing objects behind them. Independently, each actor stretches, twists, gyrates, oblivious of the audience that gradually spreads through the seats. When electronic music sounds faintly, the actors co-ordinate into an arc to perform movements of Tai Chi Chuan. After the closing ceremonial bow, the actors take makeshift costumes behind the ovals -that's what they were carrying- and put them on. In a procession around the audience, they clap, stamp, whistle, slap their bodies rhythmically. When they have circled back to the playing area, the house dim, and the performance begins. So is almost any performance Off-Broadway in the mid 1960s.

In this country without much theater tradition, in this technological country with its monstrous film and television industries, there was a sudden burgeoning of live theater in the 1960s, slowly subsiding during the 1970s, and promising to hold stable during the 1980s. From abroad blew fresh theater breezes murmuring of Artaud and Grotowsky, both of whom were rumored to move performance away from texts and toward the actors, away from developing plots in time and towards filling scenic space. Already in the 1950s the formal dramas of Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter eroded the conception of language as a means of communication; during the 1960s empty political rhetoric further undermined the status of words. In theater the human body began to speak more convincingly than mere words.

Happenings were far less frequent than thoroughly traditional performances. Theater in the streets and parks was outperformed by theater in hundreds of new buildings, especially on college campuses. The fluidity of art/life boundaries was opposed by the artifice of strict style. Proliferation of theater schools contrasted with aggressive amateurs who scorned theater training. The terminology of the theater reached out to other domains -anthropology, politics, psychology, sociology; to sister arts such as dance, music and sculpture. Mixed media experiments of the 1960s were

absorbed my mixed art experiments of the 1970s. Depending on the vantage, one could view the scene as total theater or total anarchy.

Only a small number of plays performed in the United States during the decades of 1960 and 1970 survives. Nevertheless, dozens of contemporary dramatists have produced a substantial body of plays expressing their deep concerns, while earning a livelihood in other ways.

#### 4.- What is meant by Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway theatre?

Off-Broadway was born in the mid-1950s (Obie awards began in 1956). In the main these productions were revivals of drama classics or translations of those recent European plays grouped by Martin Esslin as the Theater of the Absurd. Few American dramatists were welcomed Off-Broadway which was traditional in the sense that a dramatist delivered script to a director, who then cast the play for rehearsals. Revolt seethed Off-Off-Broadway. Sometimes viewed as a further step off Broadway, the second 'off' actually means *against*. Off-Broadway housed low-budget, traditional performances of plays that were intellectually respectable, whether classical or contemporary. Off-Off-Broadway had no tradition but a rebellious spirit. (Joe Cino of Caffe Cino, Ellen Stewart of Caffe LaMama, the Reverend Al Carmines of Judson Memorial Church, and Ralph Cook of St Marks-in-the-Bowrie). These contemporary *Choregi* welcomed playwrights, performers, audiences in a wide variety of energetic, inexpensive productions. The plays did not move uptown. Inconveniently, however, playwrights skip or stumble across critical frontiers, so that it is only by approximation that we can assign certain playwrights -Arthur Kopit, Terrence MacNally, Landford Wilson- to Broadway, and others -Ronald Ribman, David Rabe, John Guare, David Mamet- to Off-Broadway although they have been produced on Broadway. Among these, there were playwrights whose work was shaped by acting ensembles; those whose medium was subservient to a message; those who reflected minority experiences; those with an anchor in other arts; and finally Sam Shepard with his impressive *oeuvre*. Christopher Bigsby, defines Off-Off-Broadway as 'an assault on the notion that art is an artifact produced by a unique sensibility and open to interpretation and evaluation in the conventional sense'.

#### 5.- Indicate some authors of this period as well as the most relevant plays.

Further from Broadway conventions (subject & form)

Ribman's paradoxical characters, Rabe's obscenity-marked realism, Guare's grotesque wit, Mamet's pithy wit (get to Broadway + self-consistency)

RONALD RIBMAN

1932, New York City (doctorate) --> neither traditional nor avant-garde

Verbal & no concessions to Broadway (man's inhumanity to man)

*Harry, Noon and Night*, 1964; *The Journey of the Fifth Horse*, 1966; *The Ceremony of Innocence* 1967; *The Poison Tree*, 1976; *Cold Storage* (1977)

Ribman's penchant for open questions & subtle reversals (-> Broadway?)

Ribman's recent plays (relevance)

#### DAVID RABE

+ Stylistic - thematic consistency (David Rabe & John Guare)

Joe Papp's Public Theatre (-> Broadway)

1940, middle-class Catholic family, university graduate, Vietnam

Rabe's distaste (+ more musical comedy - drama) --> no mere entertainment

*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, 1971; *Sticks and Bones*, 1971; *The Orphan*, 1973; *The Boom Boom Room*, 1974; *Streamers*, 1976-*Knives*, 1970

Seriousness might offend on Broadway --> boundary Papp's Public Theatre

Rabe's reaction against Broadway --> pretentious symbolism or facile satire

#### JOHN GUARE

New York City, 1938, middle-class Catholic education, graduate student, Air Force

*Muzeeka*; *Cop-Out*; *Home Fires*; *The House of Blue Leaves*, 1970; adaptation of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* ( musical)

Rich & famous --> *Rich and Famous*; *Landscape of the Body*, 1977; *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*, 1977; *Bosoms and Neglect*, 1980;

(= Neil Simon) endows characters with wit (no credibility)

Tends to self-indulgence --> recently in control of wit & farce

Happy endings = person-to-person warmth <--> fragile, improbable

Guare's wit & farce --> on Broadway betrays Strindbergian intention

FOUR PLAYWRIGHTS = dire straits of fame & fortune & imperiled

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