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The Politics of Rereading



**Rosen Carol, Sam Shepard: A 'Poetic Rodeo.';  
Callens Johan, Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard**

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**Rosen, Carol. *Sam Shepard: A 'Poetic Rodeo.'* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Pp. 282, illustrated.**

**Callens, Johan. *Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard.* Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2007. Pp. 276, illustrated.**

Published within a time distance of two years and a half, these valuable additions to Shepard criticism come from two scholars who have contributed decisively to fashioning this particular discourse ever since its emergence. In their respective efforts to account for and do justice to the nature of Shepard's explorations, Carol Rosen and Johan Callens employ a variety of critical methods and often propose opposed approaches. Reading the two books comparatively reveals an implied dialogue between them, as often, the one critic seems to be pursuing an argument from where the other leaves off.

In *Sam Shepard: A 'Poetic Rodeo,'* Rosen directs her efforts towards a comprehensive review of Shepard's multisided artistic activities and constructs a critical language attuned to Shepard's idiosyncratic dramatic idiom. The critic resorts to a series of descriptive devices that appear to have been conceived solely for Shepard's work. Thus, Rosen traces the particulars in the playwright's life that drove him to start "drumming out plays" (3), and moves on to "early, free-wheeling plays" (1) that, as she puts it, often "explode (and sometimes fizzle) like fire-crackers in a summer sky" (27). She discusses the output of "a writer with the imagination the size of a drive-in screen" (4) and looks closely into pieces of dramatic art that "yield terrific sure-fire speeches for actors" (205). Consciously departing from standardized and recognizable types of "conventional literary analysis" (204), Rosen states her intention to study these plays "on their own terms [addressing] their essential nature as theatrical vehicles" (204). Yet, instead of offering extensive analysis of specific productions, she proposes a critical reading that allows room for the consideration of numerous possibilities for performance.

Rather than drawing on a specific theoretical framework, Rosen turns to areas of Shepard's own artistic creativity and builds a network of associations among different spheres, as Shepard has long been productive not only as a playwright but also as a prose writer, screenwriter, film as well as theater director and actor, and musician. This "weaving [of] associative patterns" that Callens characterizes "easy enough" (35), Rosen pursues not merely by exploring the links between Shepard's involvement in film projects and his plays but crosscutting and examining in conjunction all of his works. She thus comes up with her own hybrid critical language, an intertextual network of references that provides intriguing insights into the texts. Elements and traits from one play are closely studied in an effort to account for those in another. Similarly, nuances in film parts, details from the playwright's personal life, remarks by Shepard himself as well as his collaborators, features from short stories, individual reactions to moments of artistic evolution are all employed. Once acquainted with Rosen's idiom, it comes as no surprise that direct links are offered between different instances of the artist's oeuvre. For example, the film *Far North* (1988) is recognized as a "companion piece" (168) to the play *A Lie of the Mind* (1985). For the most part, Rosen handles her material admirably and her critical idiom is insightful and engaging.

Rosen charts five major phases in the playwright's development. Once she defines the categories in which characters, line of action, language, and use of music fall in each phase, she proceeds with her reading, which indeed serves in many respects as the most competent account of Shepard's plays, especially of how effective they prove on stage. With the single rule-affirming exception of a brief borrowing from Hélène Cixous in her analysis of Shepard's handling of the female characters in *A Lie of the Mind* (165), Rosen attempts to ground her analysis on critical terms offered by Shepard's works. Yet, several statements seem indebted to poststructuralist thought: "Shepard strove to find organic stage images to express the desire to break out of a fixed identity" (31); her remark that his dramatic personae often constitute "dissipated effigies of heroes" (84), or that the line of action is centered around "a showdown of identities" (138), or that characters are ultimately defined by a pressing "need to reinvent the self through a new language" (159). All are resonant with critical discourses that have addressed the crisis of subjectivity in postmodernity.

At this point, two observations have to be made. On the one hand, Rosen's reading serves, to a certain extent, as an alternative to often saturated, pedantic and heavy handed uses of theoretical material

and philosophical shortcuts. In a slightly mocking fashion, the scholar herself notes that a particular scene in *The Late Henry Moss* (2000) is "drenched in nostalgia both for those who fondly remember Shepard's *Chicago* and for those who fondly remember Freud" (202). On the other hand, it would have proven challenging in this case not to impose a critical outlook from without but rather to comment on the very factors that led Shepard to explore areas and grapple with issues that thinkers of the same historical moment also addressed. In her network of associations and references, this parameter would constitute an added and consequential dimension. An omission of a different type that also demands attention concerns the critic's reluctance to critically engage with the exceptional qualities of the intense theatricality of the early plays that are mostly approached as incomplete, rather "gawky" (27), initial attempts of an artist who, according to Rosen, found his full force gradually from the third stage of "the family plays" (7) onwards to his "magnum opus" (154) of the mid-eighties, *A Lie of the Mind*, and in the fifth phase of the so-called "bold plays" (15) of the 1990s and the early 2000s.

Despite these omissions, Rosen's voice often proves one of the most insightful on Shepard's investigations and experimentation. The critic focuses on the artist's evolution towards the establishment of a "synaesthetic mode of performance, a way of making visual music and a way of inventing a concrete, physical language for the stage" (91). Furthermore, the book is thematically centered around the course of Shepard's uninterrupted efforts to break into "a world behind the form" (31), and the impact of this effort on his treatment of characters and language. Rosen also pays attention to the playwright's centralizing emphasis on myth, from the early instances of "pack[ing] myth upon myth" (32) to a stage where "myth is connected to an expansive view of characters and archetypal emotions" (123) and ultimately to instances where myth is deconstructed, "literally smash[ed]" (133). Reading how this sense of myth acquires different dimensions in plays such as *Operation Sidewinder* (1970)—Shepard's political sci-fi allegory of the late 1960s and early 1970s—and *States of Shock* (1991)—his reaction to the state of apathy and inertia in which the public consumed the high-tech panorama of the Gulf War in the early 1990s—Rosen elicits the very essence of these theatrical vehicles in an often bare, unhampered manner. In a similarly open, direct fashion the critic approaches the playwright in the important and extensively quoted 1991 interview, included in this book, and invites Shepard to elaborate, among other things, on the fact that listening, a sense of myth, connectedness, and compassion for one's own country are all tragically missing in today's America ((*The Village Voice*, 4 August 1992).

In *Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard*, Callens tests different modes of literary as well as performance analysis and in this way offers specific examples of Rosen's observation that Shepard's plays invite a variety of critical discourses (204). Similar to Rosen, in an effort to exhaustively cover Shepard's development, Callens comes up with a highly informative introductory piece, which veers often into brief descriptive accounts of the plays. However, the articles collected here, spanning a productive period from 1986 all the way up to 2003, provide innovative insights into a substantial number of Shepard's plays, alongside a series of careful and detailed discussions of a number of their European productions. Early on, the reader becomes aware of the standpoint Callens occupies, as he comments on his intention to study challenging as well as revealing instances of Shepard's career as a contemporary American artist, "beginning with [Shepard's] early Off-Off-Broadway days during the counter-cultural 1960s and the Civil Rights movement and extending into the post-Iron Curtain globalized era" (12). Shifting from one area of interest to the next, Callens proves sensitive and responsive not just to the particulars of the socio-political and cultural context enveloping the works in question but equally so to different literary and cultural theories that emerged in the course of the same period.

Callens aptly handles a variety of critical modes and explores diverse fields of artistic production. He opens his discussion with a reading of the "mythic-symbolic dimension" (57) of *Buried Child* (1978), which he supplements by an equally intriguing analysis of Guy Cassiers 1995 joint production of this play with Edward Albee's *The American Dream* (1961) in Nederlands Toneel Gent theater. In an equally insightful account of the production of *A Lie of the Mind*, a year later by the same theater company, Callens assesses the attempt of staging the play as an "immensely funny and densely reverberating emotional outcry" (68) that succeeded in foregrounding Shepard's outlook on an America that had lost touch with itself (68). Proving that his interests are by no means restricted to stage productions, in the third chapter, Callens attempts an insight into *Fool for Love* (1983) by

reading the play together with Robert Altman's 1985 film version. He succeeds in bringing to the surface shades and significances pertaining to the play, thanks to a thorough analysis of both dramatic and cinematic text. Instead of crosscutting between these two different types of texts, he studies the one via the other. Thus, in one sense Callens's mode contradicts and disfigures Rosen's tactics, while in another it may be seen as an extension of it, an act of refiguring the latter's strategy.

The discussions developed around plays such as *Action* (1974) and the unpublished and unproduced *Man Fly* (1973) serve as exemplary cases of how the two scholarly works interrelate. In one of the most engaging moments of Rosen's analysis, *Action*—set in a post-apocalyptic moment, noted for the minimalist's touch in the areas of action, dialogue construction, characterization, as well as its emphasis on the very basics of survival—is approached as a crucial point in the playwright's development. The scholar accurately explains how and why this instance anticipates further developments in Shepard's dramaturgy: "this state of deep animation into which Jeep moves at the end of *Action* is the destination of Shepard's next heroes, his post-heroes, his sons who journey homeward, backward in time, and inward to a level of deep consciousness" (88). Callens also looks into characterization and carefully studies the fact that despite the eloquence of the characters in question often no escape is envisioned. At the same moment, he recognizes the play as a chance for experimentation in criticism, coming up with a piece of writing outlined as "neither literary criticism pure nor expanded review but both, [thus] challeng[ing] the arbitrary and groundless separation of these two genres" (92). Furthermore, the 1988 Dutch production of *Action* offers the scholar an opportunity to examine certain postmodernist features of the play such as, "the deconstruction of some traditional means of signification...and the erosion of the boundary between high and low art" (93). Similarly, *Man Fly*, Shepard's adaptation of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, is handled differently in the two works, the one approach supplementing the other, while both offer interesting and valuable insights. Rosen finds in the play Shepard's desire to look critically upon his own work and his tendencies as a writer. Callens along with this process of self-reflection pays attention to Shepard's interest on the "gender problematic" (214), as well as the mythic subtext of the play.

Callens's tactics of combining textual analysis with the discussion of specific performances lead to particularly successful moments such as his reading of *Savage/ Love* (1978). In this exceptional Shepard text, a "tone poem" (150) on which Shepard collaborated with Joe Chaikin, his mentor and life-long source of inspiration, Callens studies the playwright's effort to "interpret reciprocity in many ways: structurally, grammatically, rhetorically, sensorially; from honest affection to recollection and projection, obsession, narcissism, hate, deception and collusion" (127). Callens resorts to Robert Cordier's 1984 bilingual production of *Savage/ Love* and chases down the "ever elusive and mobile Other" (148), by appropriately incorporating sections from Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977). Equally important is Callens's careful re-consideration and re-casting of *States of Shock* in the Shepard canon. Participating in a discussion initiated by Guy Debord and pursued by thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, the critic examines "the power of delusive representations" (172), and reads the play as "a spectacular critique of spectacularization, a hyperreal meta-spectacle" (177), concluding with the conviction that its strength is "bound to grow with subsequent productions and interpretations" (195). Despite the fact that only some areas of Shepard's output are covered in this collection of essays and although the effect of an actual live staging is not easily translatable on page, Callens achieves particularly insightful accounts of the plays. Finally, although he focuses on European receptions of Shepard's work, noting that the Dutch theater group, De Zaak, share with Shepard a "distaste for manifestos, trends and dogmas" (91), the critic does not thoroughly examine how this unmistakably and quintessentially American voice proves alluring for European audiences and the specific modes in which his problematics finds application in a considerably different terrain.

All in all, these two authors pursue different paths, yet they reach more or less the same destination. Both Rosen's comprehensive and distinctive overview and Callens' multileveled and in-depth

analysis foreground the complexity and the expansive character of these plays, proving indispensable tools to those interested in Shepard's oeuvre.

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