

SHEPARD DOORGELICHT

Johan Callens. *Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard*. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2007, 276 p. (ISBN 978-90-5201-352-7).

Johan Callens's latest book is the 21st volume in Peter Lang's series "Dramaturgies", a collection devoted to the publication of innovative research work in dramaturgies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The twenty-two books already published in only seven years prove that the purpose to "re-assess the complex relationship between textual studies, cultural and/or performance aspects at the dawn of this new multicultural millennium" has so far been fulfilled, as well as the desire to explore "minority" playwrights and theatrical practices.

Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard reprints in a single volume almost all of the essays on Shepard written by Callens in the last twenty years, with an added introduction and epilogue. With its publication, the author makes a twofold contribution: on the one hand the volume brings about some of the lines of research encouraged by the series, such as the reconsideration of an established playwright in the light of contemporary critical theories; and on the other hand, the book vividly revitalizes the field of Shepardian criticism. Although it is true that these articles had already been published, their availability now in a single volume can only be welcomed, and for several reasons: in this new form they will surely reach a wider audience, and even for scholars or students acquainted with Johan Callens's work, the book makes available his writing on Shepard in a much easier way and with a different perspective. The issue is not so much that the whole is better than its parts but rather that read all together these essays show a continuous and relentless exploration over the years, making these autonomous studies become indisputable evidence that Callens stands among the best experts on Shepard's work. This publication substantiates Callens's critical voice more than previous works.

As it should be clear by now *Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard* is not an attempt to be a comprehensive and chronological approach to the work of one of the most original contemporary American playwrights, which might be a pointless exercise anyway after the publication in 1999 of Stephen J. Bottoms book *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*. And yet, Callens's book manages to go beyond the very specificity under which it was born, gathering independent articles on selected plays, to offer a very accurate and thorough account of Shepard's overall career. The 28 page introduction "Portrait of the artist as an explorer" is an extensive and complete introduction to Sam Shepard's prolific and protean career, as well as to

his particular way of conceiving the theatrical space as a place to create an emotional territory and to explore “the mysterious landscapes of being” (27). It gives detailed information about Shepard’s familial background, his beginnings as an Off-Off Broadway playwright, cultural and musical influences and of course, it surveys with care all the theatrical productions from the first one-act plays produced at Theatre Genesis in 1964, *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden*, to the 2004 premiere of *The God of Hell*, but also Shepard’s work as a screenwriter, short story writer and as a Hollywood actor. The introduction is aimed at those readers who are not familiar with Sam Shepard but, even for those acquainted with his work, it draws a fair portrait of an artist with an extraordinary inventiveness.

The book opens with “Memories of the Sea in Illinois”, an exploration of the mythic-symbolic dimension of *Buried Child*, the play for which Shepard received the Pulitzer Prize in 1979, and which is often regarded as belonging to the playwright’s “realistic family plays”. This article is a reaction against this critical simplification, which overtly underestimates the complexity of the play. It was written more than twenty years ago (1986) and, considering that Callens’s claims are now widely accepted, at least among scholars of American Drama, it could be considered as a pioneer critical work in its exploration of how the water and fertility symbols running through the play are related to the incest and infanticide motifs if seen in the light of the endurance and the simultaneous demise of the American dream. Read today “Memories of the Sea in Illinois” remains an enduring and valuable piece of criticism, an essay that might easily become a classic study to approach *Buried Child* and not just because the line of argument is clearly, neatly and beautifully exposed in a concise way. Callens, starting with an evocative quote from Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, reminds the reader of the rich and ambivalent contents of the Dream, and of a quality of it that is usually forgotten, an organic bond with nature. Using the holistic (feminine) longing which animated the American dream the author weaves a reading that throws new light on the ambivalent significance of the incest in the play, and on the male character’s regression into childish behaviour, a key element in Shepard’s dramatic creations.

Callens reflects in the preface of the book about the role of the critic: “In defacing the playwright” he writes, “the critics also de-face themselves. To use an image integral to Shepard’s work, critic and playwright are splittings of a single writerly figure, alteregos mutually constituted and in collaboration with the larger community of readers and writers” (14). The exercise of dis-figuration of *Buried Child* might be a perfect example of the specific and often neglected role of the critic as a splitting of the writerly figure for, after reading the essay, there seems to be no doubt about the fact that *Buried Child*, in its richness and complexity, is a major work within the American literary tradition.

If chapter 1 opens the book placing Shepard's poetics within the national tradition, chapter 2, "Epistemologies of Loss" immediately changes the tone establishing one of Callens's distinctive commitments as a critic, to supplement the text-based analysis with relevant theatre reviews. Here the author provides a detailed analysis of the 1996 double-bill production of *Buried Child* and Edward Albee's *The American Dream* at the Nederlands Toneel Gent, Belgium, and the subsequent production in the same theatre, a year after, of the Flemish premiere of *A Lie of the Mind*. The essay is interesting because it deals directly with specific (out of the potentially endless) ways of producing the plays, and thus of actually allowing for the emergence of the texts' meanings on stage. If the first production was interesting in the parallels it brought out between Shepard and Albee's plays, Callens's account of the production of *A lie of the Mind* is again another example of the critic's essential role in the reinforcement and reflection upon the actualization of those meanings. Thus, of particular interest are Callens's comments on Victor Löw's decision to include in the setting a two-third scale enlargement of Jake's plastic model airplane, a means, according to the author, of exposing and subverting the expressionistic and melodramatic excesses of the characters' emotions, but also pointing to the implied voluntary and involuntary childishness of the characters, especially the men, and finally, becoming a prop that is an emblem of technological expertise superfluous when it comes to securing emotional well-being, signalling the battered American Dream (67).

The chapters following form a kaleidoscopic body of critical pieces whose great value, within the specific field of Shepardian studies, is that at least five of them deal with Shepard's works that have been, to a great extent, neglected by critical attention. Callens's choices, *what* he has selected to enquire about, bespeak already a rare sensibility; but he shouldn't be praised only for his awareness that Shepard's oeuvre is vast and that there is much more than the family plays and the myth of the west in it: this width of critical perception in a sense heightens the significance of Shepard's dimension as an author, but it also works as reminder that there are still many open lines of research, due to Shepard being such a prolific and inexhaustible experimenter. Chapter 3, "Through the windows of perception" analyzes Robert Altman's film adaptation of *Fool for love*, which has been traditionally regarded as a failed exercise of translation from stage to screen.¹ Callens offers a very detailed analysis, which takes into consideration three interactive levels – the textual, the performative and the cinematographic – and shows as well an ample knowledge of Altman's career. It is a very meticulous analysis which allows Callens to reassess Altman's achievements in adapting a complex play and thus throw light on how the film exploits and debunks conventions of the Western genre.

Chapter 6, "Reciprocity and Transformational Generation" deals with reciprocity in *Savage/Love*, one of the three pieces written in collaboration with Joseph Chaikin, actor, director, former artistic leader of The Open Theatre, and one of Shepard's best friends. Like *Tongues*, *Savage/Love* is a monologue with music, originally performed by Chaikin, as the only actor, and Shepard, Harry Mann and Skip LaPlante playing the musical part; according to the program notes for the San Francisco production, both are "an attempt to find an equal expression between music and the actor"². It might be their acute experimental nature that has probably prevented these "common poems of real and imagined moments in the spell of love" from being critically noticed, except by Eileen Blumenthal, who has researched in depth Chaikin's career. Callens makes an exhaustive and original reading of the "transformations" of love in the piece in thematic, structural, grammatical and rhetorical terms, elegantly juxtaposing them with Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1976) and, most importantly, showing that far from being an oddity within the playwright's body of work, parallels can be established between this and other Shepard plays. Callens finds here as well traces of recurrent concerns in Shepard's oeuvre, like "both the inexhaustibility and the inadequacy of language" (145), and again, he provides a performance analysis, in this case Robert Cordier's French/English stage production which premiered in Paris in 1984.

Chapters 7 and 8 present two different approaches to the play *States of Shock*, composing thus the most obvious example of the author's proposed disfiguration "as an ongoing reconfiguration within the larger artistic field inscribing Shepard and his critics" (15). "Published and Unpublished Wars" (1997) deals with the disruptive dramaturgy of the play in an interdisciplinary way, revealing very interesting parallels between Shepard's work and those of photographer Edward Weston and painter Marsden Hartley. The second critical proposal "Diverting the Integrated Spectacle"(2000) makes use instead of the cultural critique of Guy Debord, Baudrillard, Lyotard and Virilio to reflect upon Shepard's treatment of the mediatized spectacle of war in *States of Shock*, showing that what looks initially like a quite extravagant play evinces nonetheless "the late-capitalist, high-tech conjunction of nation state and global economy, ideology and commodification" (172) and a prolongation of "Shepard's preoccupation with the power of delusive representation" (172).

Chapter 9, "European Textures" is a unique piece of criticism in that it offers a minute analysis of Shepard's (unpublished and unstaged) adaptation of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, which was commissioned to the author by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 1974 although in the end, Shepard's final script *Man Fly: A Play, with Music, in 2 Acts*, was eventually declined. Like the volume *From Middleton and Rowley's "Changeling" to Sam Shepard's "Bodyguard": A contem-*

porary Appropriation of a Renaissance Drama (1997), this article is the outcome of Callens's research of the original scripts held at the Shepard Archive of the Mugar Memorial Library at Boston University. Once more Callens's scholarly rigor and precision must be praised: he builds on the extensive Marlowe scholarship to explore the original play's mythic subtext and Shepard's use of it, especially the Icarean infringements upon parental and social edicts, for an adaptation that is, to a great extent, an exploration of national identity. The article is really interesting in that it offers an outstanding investigation of Shepard's unpublished texts, but its relevance lies not so much in the very restricted availability of the material researched but rather in the researcher's foregrounding of the importance that, especially in thematic terms, these European influences have had in this and in other Shepardian creations. Inasmuch as Callens had already shown that *The Bodyguard* (Shepard's screen adaptation of *The Changeling*) in its central violent passion and Strindbergian love-hate relationship surely paved the way for *Savage/Love*, *Fool for Love*, *Paris, Texas* and *A Lie of the Mind*, probably also helping Shepard to flesh out his female characters (1997: 7), he now points out that Faustian elements can certainly be found in *Angel City*, *Seduced* and *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing his Wife*, to mention just some very clear examples.

The chapters mentioned above show the author's most original choices in his research but, even when he deals with plays that have received more critical attention, Callens still offers excellent and innovative points of view, as he does in "When I Read the Book" (chapter 4), an analysis of *Action* which combines again a performance analysis with a reading that foregrounds the postmodernist features of the play. On the other hand, "The needs and Risks of Revision(ism)" (chapter 5) is the only article published to date offering an account and proper analysis of two published versions of *Operation Sidewinder*. Building on the comparative method that brings to the fore a generally unacknowledged version of the play published in *Esquire* in 1969, the author makes an extensive exploration of it beyond its pop features. He thus examines it within its specific social and historical context, a context that, it is argued, must have certainly influenced Shepard's developing social views and growing utopianism in the second version of the play.

The last chapter in the collection deals with one of the major and more problematic issues emerging in Shepard's oeuvre, nostalgia, and hence the suitability of its placement as a final essay offering a backwards glance on the playwright's career. Yet, this is not the end of the book proper. The author has added a most poetic, personal and suggestive epilogue, which comes as an unexpected and delicious surprise for Shepardian experts, a discussion of Johnny Dark's recently

published photographic memoir *People I May Know*, a private and autobiographical journal which inevitably complements Shepard's memoir *Motel Chronicles*, which already included Dark's photographic collaboration.

The volume here reviewed opens with the reproduction of a photograph by Bruce Weber in which Shepard is covering his face with his hand, a gesture which indicates what has been over the years an ongoing preoccupation for the artist, the need to conform to a certain social image and simultaneously to rebel against it, for it would always be incomplete. Callens is aware of Shepard's insistence to hide, but his exercises of disfiguration and reconfiguration, even in their acknowledgement that they might be only partial and subjective readings, constitute nonetheless one of the most exhaustive discussions of the artist's oeuvre. He is probably, among Shepard scholars, the most rigorous and meticulous in his analysis, which shows an impressive knowledge of both the American and the European literary traditions. Callens is so scrupulous in his commitment as a critic that the book might finally be too demanding for those who are not specialists in the field, and yet this critical rigor should also be applauded because it confirms, once again, that the European readings of Shepard's works have largely contributed to heighten his importance as a contemporary playwright.

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Notes

- ¹ See for instance Bottoms (1998: 215) as an example of the general reception of Altman's adaptation.
- ² Quoted in Blumenthal "Sam Shepard and Joseph Chaikin: Speaking in Tongues" in Marranca, Bonnie (ed.) *American Dreams: The imagination of Sam Shepard*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1981: 145.
See also Blumenthal, Eileen. *Joseph Chaikin: Exploring at the Boundaries of Theatre*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.