



Review: Ana Fernández-Caparrós. 2015. *El teatro de Sam Shepard en el Nueva York de los sesenta*. Valencia: PUV. 228 pp. ISBN: 978-84-370-9867-8.

There is no doubt that the names of Sam Shepard and Ana Fernández-Caparrós form a symbiosis within the field of American drama studies in Spain. In 2011, after having made her first forays into contemporary theatre,¹ Fernández-Caparrós presented a *cum laude* doctoral dissertation entitled *La poética de la imaginación en el teatro de Sam Shepard*. Recently, this formative study, together with other academic publications, has culminated in the monograph *El teatro de Sam Shepard en el Nueva York de los sesenta* (2015), published by the Universitat de València within the renowned collection Biblioteca Javier Coy d'Estudis Nord-americans.

The new monograph seeks to thoroughly analyse the early plays that Sheppard produced for the Off-Off-Broadway scene in the rebellious decade of the 1960s. As she explains in the introductory remarks, Fernández-Caparrós chooses to focus specifically on such plays, for she discovers in them a significant quality that other scholars have overlooked or studied merely in passing:

Aquello que estas obras estaban mostrando con tanta inmediatez y sencillez en escena era la capacidad de imaginar, con todo su potencial y todas sus limitaciones, y que el hecho de que el teatro de Shepard creara desde sus orígenes un encuentro diferente con la audiencia se debe, en gran medida, precisamente, a su interés por la imaginación de sus personajes y su consecuente escenificación. (24)

Fernández-Caparrós divides her study into three broad parts that advance logically from the contextual to the textual. In the first section, composed of three chapters, the focus falls initially on the intimate relation between Shepard's early work and the counterculture movement that revolutionised the 1960s. Young and new to the hyperactive city of New York, the Illinoisan playwright was inevitably permeable to president J. F. Kennedy's ideological legacy, whose most genuine expression crystallised into a non-conformist, youthful rhetoric that called "for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects" (39). In Shepard's early plays, as Fernández-Caparrós argues, it is precisely the need for such a new language that underlies "la creación de unos personajes dramáticos extrañamente infantiles, que juegan y fantasean sobre el escenario, conducidos a menudo por un

¹ She has published work on the underground Off-Off-Broadway dramaturgies, Shepard's *Suicide in B-Flat* (2009), Samuel Beckett's *Come and Go* or John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*, with a special emphasis on the poetics of the imagination in most of her analyses.

insólito impulso erótico, o por el deseo irrefrenable de convertirse en estrellas de rock” (43).

Shepard's first plays were also open and receptive to “la sensibilidad [...] del teatro alternativo que desde la década de los cincuenta se estaba desarrollando en Estados Unidos” (48). The contact with this sensibility was mediated by the influential figure of Joseph Chaikin, who contributed to Shepard's engagement with the burgeoning experimental tradition (the Living Theatre and, more especially, the Open Theatre), as well as with such preeminent authors as Antonin Artaud, Berthold Brecht, Herbert Marcuse, or Simone Weil. However, in addition to introducing him to the rhetoric and praxis of experimentalism, Chaikin galvanised Shepard's interest in the ductility of human identity, the fluidity of the imagination, the permanent quest for aesthetic renewal, and the power of the dramatic word and image to move, seduce, and even transform the audience.

Moreover, the backdrop against which Shepard began to cultivate and practise his interests contributed significantly to the materialisation of his first projects: in touch with the alternative theatrical experiences known collectively as the Off-Off-Broadway movement, Shepard could fuel his spirit of experimentation, reinforce his vision of drama as a transformative genre, and profit from the climate of communal sharing to have his very first plays (*Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden*) staged in 1964 at Theatre Genesis, a popular space associated with St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery which was “uno de los escenarios más emblemáticos del circuito” Off-Off-Broadway (65).

In the second part of her book, composed this time of two brief chapters, Fernández-Caparrós presents the theoretical framework that underpins her study in two consecutive phases: after elucidating the axiology of the visual or the imagistic, she dwells on the epistemologies of the imagination that become useful in casting light on Shepard's early plays and their quixotic characters. This theoretical reflection results initially in the discovery of a hybrid aesthetics of the image made word and the word made image, which is constructed upon different elements:

El juego; la naturaleza de las imágenes evocadas por los personajes dramáticos que conforman ensoñaciones imaginativas como vehículos transmisores de la emoción; el potencial de las imágenes evocadas para abrir un espacio de posibilidad, que es donde podemos situar el lirismo de la obra de Shepard; la capacidad de la imaginación narrativa como estrategia existencial para proporcionar sentido momentáneo en una época [carente de todo referente trascendental]. (76)

With all these components, Shepard's early work proposes a theatre of images that transforms words into “tools of imagery in motion” (78), explores the possibilities of making the invisible visible through such imagistic words, and devises insightful monologues in which it is the dynamism of the imagination that takes centre stage. From a perspective aptly informed by such French thinkers as Gaston Bachelard, Jean Paul Sartre or Paul Ricoeur, Fernández-Caparrós lays special stress upon Shepard's monologues, claiming cogently that they constitute “actos de conciencia, puros estallidos imaginativos, expresión de la subjetividad del

personaje [y] el deseo de construir a través del lenguaje un mundo o un ambiente liberador” (97).

Nonetheless, far from adhering to an abstract and speculative conception of the imagination, Shepard’s monologic scenes seem to favour a pragmatic and intuitive understanding of the imaginative act “como actividad cotidiana” (96), as well as “un modo de re-crear la realidad y transformarla” (103). In this regard, the imaginative power that Sheppard attributes to his characters serves a fundamental existential function: it helps the relativistic postmodern subject to counter his acute sense of precariousness, vulnerability and nihilism in the face of a void world that offers no master narratives—no transcendental referents.

The third and last part of the monograph, formed by six short chapters, reveals how the previous intertexts—both the contextual determinants and the chosen theoretical paradigms—enter into a fruitful dialogue with Shepard’s early plays. In his very first work, entitled *The Rock Garden* and premiered along with *Cowboys* in 1964, Fernández-Caparrós identifies a minimalistic yet engrossing—and even disconcerting—modality of theatre that shapes a nascent monologic consciousness whose power resides wholly in zealous words capable of turning a futile reality into an imaginary orgasmic experience.

The case of *Cowboys* is a particular one in Shepard’s 1960s production: since its primary manuscript never saw the light of publication, it is only its revised version, renamed *Cowboys #2* and first staged in 1967, that yields oblique access to the original text. In her analysis of the revised play, Fernández-Caparrós notes that its most distinctive features are “un infantilismo patente y la intuitiva pero sofisticada subversión de los códigos de representación miméticos,” both of which create “una composición que difumina la línea divisoria entre fantasía y realidad” (131).

In 1965, Shepard presents *Chicago*, a more mature play that exploits further possibilities of imaginative freedom inherent in the monologue by exacerbating the sexual fantasies of the main character, exposing him to a mental loneliness that grows into a profound inward journey, and endowing him with an “irrefrenable estallido logorréico y visionario donde Shepard construye su original dramaturgia de escapismo imaginativo” (145). This interest in the monologist’s interiority, as well as his verbal extravagances, persists adamantly in *Icarus’s Mother* (1965) with the significant difference that, in this play, the monologue becomes considerably more elaborate: it develops into a polyphony of five voices, generates a concert of collective imagination, immerses all the characters in a spectacle/reality, projects the representations of their intimate subjectivities onto the scenography, and allows external images of the object-world to affect and colonise the inner geographies of each monologist.

In *Red Cross* (1966), as Fernández-Caparrós contends, the characters collectivise their imaginative power, share their innermost fantasies, alter the theatrical space with their daydreams, and transform “el espacio escénico en un lugar en el que se puede materializar físicamente lo que en realidad permanecería casi con toda seguridad en el terreno de la posibilidad” (188). The last play Fernández-Caparrós analyses, *The Mad Dog Blues* (1971), also insists on juxtaposing monologues and presenting the imaginative experience as a collaborative project, although it introduces major innovations that range from

socio-political preoccupations and more intricate plots to a varied array of images of American popular culture, and it is this last ingredient that converts the play into a particular “modo de indagar en el imaginario de la nación [americana]” (192).

The chief conclusion that Dr. Ana Fernández-Caparrós reaches in her study is well-encapsulated in these succinct lines:

El teatro de Shepard ofrece una representación de la imaginación que permite entrever que es tanto una fuente de familiaridad como de creatividad; que es radicalmente individual y simultáneamente social y lingüística; que tiene tanto que ver con el conocimiento como con la creación, la acción o la ensoñación; que es psicológica y también mundana, evocativa e ilusoria. (208)

El teatro de Sam Shepard en el Nueva York de los sesenta is undoubtedly the result of a rigorous inquiry that knows how to conflate the discourses of theatre and philosophy perceptively and cogently, offering a thorough analysis of Shepard’s early plays, tracing their process of evolution, showing their intrinsic filiations with the historical and literary landscape of the 1960s, revealing their tacit dialogues with different contemporary theories of the imagination, and approaching the theatrical space as “un lugar idóneo para contemplar fascinados la trepidante apertura hacia lo posible propiciada por la imaginación” (211). With all these achievements, Dr. Ana Fernández-Caparrós not only enriches the prestigious Biblioteca Javier Coy d’estudis nord-americans, but also makes a notable contribution to the ambit of American drama studies wherein she now holds a consolidated position as a Sam Shepard specialist.

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