

The influence of jazz and the reconstruction of the imagination in Sam Shepard's *Suicide in B-Flat*: creating "a new dimension" in form and perception

Ana FERNÁNDEZ-CAPARRÓS TURINA

Departamento de Filología Inglesa II
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
anafcaparros@filol.ucm.es

Recibido: 20 de enero, 2007
Aceptado: 23 de mayo, 2008

ABSTRACT

The influence of music in the work of American playwright Sam Shepard has often been acknowledged but seldom granted the necessary critical attention, except for the highly original use of rock in *The Tooth of Crime* (1972). This article explores the experimentation inspired by jazz music in *Suicide in B-Flat* (1976). The freedom granted by jazz improvisation is connected in the play with the liberty of imagination and translated into a playful and decentered stage event. This sense of freedom with which jazz musicians rework previous material seem to have acted as the catalyst for an equal procedure in the dramatic realm, an exhortation to imaginatively search and conceive "new possibilities", both in structural and conceptual terms. The use of jazz as a source of inspiration and as a principle of composition goes much further than merely having musicians actually improvising on stage; the article explores how certain rhythmic experiments could be translated into devices for the alteration of dramatic structure or how the character's discourse on jazz improvisation was used as metonymy for creation.

Key words: jazz improvisation, imagination, Sam Shepard, decentered dramatic structure, postmodernism

La influencia del jazz y la reconstrucción de la imaginación en *Suicide in B_b* de Sam Shepard: hacia "una nueva dimensión" formal y perceptiva

RESUMEN

La música ha sido a menudo reconocida como una de las grandes influencias en la obra del dramaturgo norteamericano Sam Shepard y, sin embargo, apenas se ha profundizado en la enorme importancia de este influjo, excepto en el caso del original uso del rock en *The Tooth of Crime* (1972). Este artículo explora y analiza la experimentación musical inspirada por el jazz en *Suicide in B-Flat*, estrenada en 1976. El sentido de holgura que la improvisación garantiza está ligado en la obra a la libertad de la imaginación, lo cual crea, en su traslación a un evento escénico, una obra con un carácter marcadamente lúdico y descentralizado. Así, la libertad con la que los músicos de jazz recuperan y transforman material previo parece haberse convertido en el catalizador para aplicar en el

ámbito dramático un mismo procedimiento, una exhortación a una búsqueda imaginativa de “nuevas posibilidades” tanto en términos estructurales como conceptuales.

El uso de ciertas características del jazz como fuente de inspiración y como principio de composición va, por lo tanto, mucho más allá de la simple disposición en escena de músicos improvisando; el artículo ahonda en cómo ciertos experimentos rítmicos pudieron ser usados como un recurso para la alteración de la estructura dramática o cómo el discurso de los personajes sobre la improvisación jazzística se convierte en metonimia del proceso creativo.

Palabras clave: improvisación de jazz, imaginación, Sam Shepard, estructura dramática descentralizada, posmodernismo

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction; 2. The turn towards jazz improvisation; 3. Trying to reconstruct the imagination; 4. Winding through un-heard-of-before symphonies; 5. Playing out dead and alive; 6. Poetics of the possible.

1. INTRODUCTION

“A play is like music – ephemeral, elusive, appearing and disappearing all the time. You never reach a final point with it”¹

The plays of Sam Shepard have for more than forty years elicited strong response and wide critical attention. More than fifteen full-length critical works have been published in the last twenty years, some of them of profound and illuminating insight, such as David DeRose’s *Sam Shepard* (1993) or Stephen J. Bottoms’ *The Theatre of Sam Shepard* (1998), and yet it is still felt that the playwright’s oeuvre has not been completely freed from superficial assessment, which is probably related to the fact that his plays are challenging and ambiguous, but also to the iconic and mythical status given to the playwright’s persona. As DeRose points out “as an artist amasses a body of work and acquires a lasting artistic identity, critics and the public may view him in an increasingly narrow light” (2002: 227); and in the case of Shepard

there arises an alternate route through that career which has all but disappeared from critical perceptions of Shepard’s work as a playwright. That route includes an accomplished body of music plays and musical experimentation which, for many other dramatists, might have been a satisfying life’s work (DeRose 2002: 227).

DeRose’s article “Sam Shepard as musical experimenter”, included in *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* (2002) is the only real attempt to foreground the extraordinary importance of music throughout the playwright’s career. This alternate musical route has played indeed an essential role in a

¹ Sam Shepard in Lippman, p. 12

dramatic oeuvre whose challenging degree of experimentation is often underestimated. Shepard's work was born Off-Off Broadway and is experimental by nature. But having been accepted as raw, violent, surrealist, subjective etc., one feels that it ultimately remains opaque in that underlying agreement on its presupposed grounds and the consequent lack of a thorough analytical study. At other times, experimentation is simply ignored as an essential drive of Shepard's creations because theatregoers and critics alike insist on *seeing* a limited set of topics that are still regarded in very recent publications as "the core concerns of his career: masculinity, Western identity, and the individual stance towards communal relations" (Wade 2005: 293). Although these topics do certainly play an important role in Shepard's plays, and particularly, in those that are staged more often, as *True West* (1980), *Buried Child* (1978) and *Fool for Love* (1983), the body of stage works is as eclectic as it is abundant; critical judgement should pay as much attention to such neglected issues of his work as the powerful influence of music.

The present article considers and analyzes the musical experimentation of *Suicide in B-Flat*, which was first produced at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven in 1976. The play could be described as a play *about* music, about jazz music, but in its unrestrained development, goes beyond those limits to take a powerful stance on the act of creation and self-creation. What is explored here goes beyond the emotional impact of music. Shepard's turn to jazz as a source for inspiration and model for playwriting becomes a bizarre reverie that deals also with poetic imagination, making the play, as Steven Putzel asserts, "intensely personal and intensely meta-theatrical" (1987: 154). Shepard called it "A mysterious overture"² and indeed it could be regarded as the imaginative prelude to "a new dimension" in theatrical forms, their perception, and the experience of truth in the work of art. This work confirms the suspicion that music was, once again, the essential tool for innovative theatrical writing, and particularly for those formal and conceptual innovations and for the subversion of reality that would characterize too some of Shepard's following and highly celebrated plays like *Buried Child* and *Fool for Love*.

2. THE TURN TOWARDS JAZZ IMPROVISATION

A skilful drummer and a passionate lover of music, Shepard had already been exploring for years the impact of rock culture and the uses of music on stage in plays such as *Melodrama Play* (1967), *Operation Sidewinder* (1970), *Cowboy Mouth* (1971), written together with poet/ singer Patti Smith, and of course *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), which many people still regard today as the playwright's

² This is the subtitle of the play. *Suicide in B-Flat in Fool for love and other plays*. New York: Bantam, 1988, p. 191. Page references within the text are to this edition.

greatest achievement. The latter transformed the emotional impact of rock music into the most sophisticated manipulation of rock language: Hoss and Crow were speaking in “an unheard-of tongue” on a stage. *The Tooth of Crime*’s overdevelopment of language and excess of signifiers made so much noise that the influence of rock transformed into a formal device, taken here to its uttermost consequences, was inevitably depleted.

In the fall of 1975, with less than a week’ notice, Shepard was invited to join Bob Dylan’s tour ‘The Rolling Thunder Revue’, ostensibly to write the script for a movie that would come out of the tour (although the result was instead a prose book, *The Rolling Thunder Logbook*, published in 1977). Shepard abandoned his family plans to travel through New England for three months with Dylan and his crew: Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, Ramblin’ Jack Elliot, Allen Ginsberg, Roger McGuinn, Bobby Neuwirth, Arlo Guthrie... The tour brought self-discoveries but also disappointments and the initial charm inevitably wore off. Even if it was a valuable experience, there was something that bothered Shepard “and cured him forever of his fascination with rock stars as the contemporary manifestation of Wild West heroes, the sheer arrogance that travels with celebrities, encasing them in an artificial world and holding them up automatically superior to regular people” (Shewey 1997: 103). Whether it was disappointment or exhaustion that made Shepard abandon the mythic world of rock stars, the fact is that back in California he sought new stimuli that would become new sources of inspiration. There Shepard began studying musical theory and piano with local jazz composer Catherine Stone, who in the summer of 1976 finished the score for his one-act ‘western opera’ *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing His Wife*, commissioned for the bicentennial national celebration, and with whom he would collaborate closely for the ensemble work-in-progress of *Inacoma*, performed at The Magic Theater in 1977.

‘Freedom meaning flexibility’ seems indeed to be the unruly energy animating the stage world of *Suicide in B-Flat*, a liberty that is intimately related to the embracing of new possibilities. Yet, as Charles Hartman clarifies, “no word in the rhetoric of the arts delivers a lower ratio of information to argument as ‘free’” (1991: 70), so it might be necessary to consider its implications. Hartman, in his discussion on Ornette Coleman, first quotes a remark by Cecil Taylor, an avant-garde pianist sometimes associated with Coleman: “it is not a question of ‘freedom’ as opposed to ‘nonfreedom’ but rather a question of *recognizing different ideas and expressions of order*” (1991: 70)³. He further explains:

The playwright’s association with jazz musicians would have an extraordinary influence on his work of this period, and thus, we need to understand why it was so important and *how* it could shape a play like *Suicide in B-Flat*. As David DeRose suggests, “perhaps the most important result of Shepard’s association with jazz

³ My emphasis

collaborators was their philosophical reaffirmation and artistic expression of a life view that Shepard himself held and had struggled to explain in his early plays” (1993: 77). When he was involved in the jazz scene of San Francisco, local musicians were mainly influenced by musicians like Ornette Coleman, Charlie Mingus, or John Coltrane, who “played out”, that is, they stepped out of the normal structured boundaries of music; and what is more, they “viewed improvisation as more than a way of art: it was a way of perceiving and expressing life” (DeRose 1993: 78). According to Shepard’s teacher Catherine Stone, the key word is freedom: “The freedom that you can’t experience in your life, so you can create an art form that you can experience it in... *freedom meaning flexibility* – not afraid of stepping into territories and really enjoying them when you are there”⁴.

“Freedom” suggests the restraint overcome but tells us little about the order that replaces it. [...] The issue centers not on escape, but on the liberation of certain aspects of the music from rule-governed regularity, so as to make them variable, and so potentially expressive. What can be significantly varied can make meaning (1991: 70).

The sense of freedom in terms of flexibility is first translated in *Suicide* through the use of a loose and decentered structure that, as Steven Putzel reminds us, borrowing a concept from Jauss, is constantly forcing us, as spectators, to change our “expectation horizon” (1987: 148).

3. TRYING TO RECONSTRUCT THE IMAGINATION

Suicide in B-Flat starts – despite the presence of an old piano and the arrival of a piano player who rushes on from stage right and sits with his back to the audience – not as a music play but as a more or less conventional murder mystery play, as we find detectives Pablo and Louis investigating jazz composer Niles’s death. The chalk “outline of a man’s body sprawled out in an awkward position of death” (193) that we see on the stage floor, and the detectives’ outfits inspired by classic *film noir* murder mysteries, immediately create certain expectations in an audience that will expect to be given the necessary clues to solve a case. According to Putzel, this “demonstrates Shepard’s awareness of the strength of our popular cultural codes” (1987: 151). Yet, from the very beginning, these codes are subverted. As Bottoms points out “Pablo and Louis’s ability to solve the crime, it should be noted, is in doubt from the very outset: they are incompetents, a Chandleresque variation on Shepard’s penchant for Laurel and Hardy duos” (1998: 130). The nature of Niles’s death is, on the other hand, obscure and incongruous: “his body is found but his face is blown off” (197). What kind of occurrence is

⁴ Quoted in DeRose (1993: 78); my emphasis.

this? The detectives' clumsy efforts to deal with a case with no proof whatsoever make their gestures extremely funny: they are clueless and nonetheless they blindly try to do their job, that is, to make sense out of a non-sensical situation, even without any facts. From the start, then, there is a subversion of what Shepard regards as an event that has "to be narrowed down to ingredients like plot, character, set, costume, lights, etc. in order to fit into our idea of what we know" (1993: 212), because we do recognize the characters but, in fact, they do not fit exactly into "*our idea* of what we know".

The first lines of the play will turn out, however, to be revealing because they define exactly the detectives' endeavour and should also guide the audience's response:

PABLO: (*Catching his breath*) Trying to reconstruct the imagination of it.

LOUIS: (*Still on his back*) What?

PABLO: The imagination. (*between breaths*) The imagination of it. How we suppose it might have been. It's useless. All we come up with is "supposes" (194).

As Richard Kearney reminds us, both imagination and perception share the common cause of investing the world with meaning (1998: 132). Thus, it is only natural that in the absence of perceived facts, the only tool left to turn to in order to understand reality should be imaginative consciousness. What is problematic, though, is our shared agreement about the value of imagination *in this particular situation*, which is different from the value of imagination *in itself*. The detectives should look for *facts*, for empirical proof, in order to find the truth of an event: that is what they expect to discover in doing their job, and that is what we expect from them, as detectives, in solving a mystery. Yet to foreground "the reconstruction of the imagination" is to reconsider its epistemological value. What Shepard is doing from the very beginning of the play, without us noticing it at first, is to manipulate our assumptions about reality and about *our knowledge of reality*, forcing us to consider the role that imagination plays in the search for meaning. Are facts the only way to reach meaning? This is the question that is surreptitiously posed from the start and that will become Louis and Pablo's ordeal.

The lack of evidence is what prompts the first real attempt "to see into the possibilities" (196) as we listen to Louis's "theory" about Niles's life and death. Here we find again another instance of the playwright's "obsession with highly charged theatrical *language*, in the form of what may already be known as 'Shepardian' monologue" (Geis 1993: 46). Louis long monologue – accompanied by the piano player who, seated with his back to the audience, accompanies with his improvisations all the actors' speeches throughout the performance – is an extraordinary immersion in the sounds of life itself, which are minutely described starting from the sounds the foetus hears in the womb, to the sounds involved in the process of growing up, until the boy hears "what they call music":

He hears what they call ‘music’ in the same way he hears what they call ‘noise’. In the same stream. Music as an extension of sound. An organization. Another way of putting it. He’s disappointed. He’s disappointed and exhilarated at the same time. Exhilarated because he sees an opening. An adventure. A way inside. He sees that putting any two things together produces sound. Any two things. Striking, plucking, blowing, rubbing, dropping, kicking, kissing. Any two things. He has a revelation. Or rather, a revelation presents itself. Stabs at him. Enters into him and becomes part of his physiology. His physiognomy. His psychology. His paraphernalia. His make up. He puts it to use. He’s driven toward it in a way most men consider dangerous and suicidal. His production is abundant. Nonstop. Endlessly winding through un-heard-of-before symphonies (197).

Louis’s imagining of Niles’s experience is a first exercise of *intuition* that in reaching out beyond the confines of immediate presentness becomes an encounter with something *other than the self*, but, above all, it provides, both for him as for the audience, a heightened *awareness* of a specific experience, a new consciousness that re-creates reality. Imagining has suddenly extended the daily perception of the surrounding world: Louis’s narrative creativity, his “ability to break with the everyday ‘facts’ of *homo faber*” has momentarily transmuted him into a “*homo aleator* – someone able to explore those imaginary possibles which emerge into existence at the intersection between self and world” (Kearney 1998: 97). ‘The content’ of his monologue is important because its insight and semantic innovation defamiliarize, to use Shklovskii’s term, our everyday perceptions of sound by becoming a piece of poetic language with the power of changing and enriching our life view; but the ‘function’ of the monologue has even more importance as a way of opening up possibilities, and thus new worlds, or ways of being-in-the-world.

This imaginative reverie is precisely what leads Louis to consider the possibility that Niles might have “fooled them all” (197), a conjecture that Pablo considers just “crazy”; Louis’s reply though, “But possible” (198), is important because it confers *value* to the imaginative process itself and, specifically, to *his* imaginative abilities. Events having been imagined and expressed, in being spoken out, have become in a sense emerging realities. What might seem indeed a remote possibility acquires an unsuspected relevance with the appearance on stage of skinny spaced-out saxophonist Petrone, who blows soundless music into his horn and is waiting for Niles to arrive at any moment.

Pablo, driven by his overplayed desire to be a responsible, tight and serious professional detective, unsuccessfully interrogates Petrone. It is soon clear that he will not find any useful evidence from a guy that instead of playing just “bites down on the mouthpiece and mimes blowing it”, according to stage directions (200). But his awkward presence and his insistence that Niles is not dead lead Pablo, as Louis before, to imagine new possibilities, to express his conjecture that the musician might not have killed himself but was instead “under the influence of

macabre overtones” (203). Pablo’s long monologue is again an imaginative reverie that, this time, explores and turns into a narration the fall of the possessed artist, whose “voracious hunger for sound became like a demon” (203) and having collapsed, was rescued by self-proclaimed “healers” who rescued him but never set him free again, until they finally killed him. Pablo’s imagining of Niles as a victim of “odious events that spiralled down toward his eventual downfall” (203) is, according to Petrone, “not the way it happened at all” (204) but is interesting in its excess. It is as if Pablo, accompanied by the improvisation of the piano player behind him and in spite of being unaware of his presence, had, like Louis, been madly driven by his own re-creation of another reality, possessed by the freedom of his own imagination. Throughout his speech we see Louis struggling against his own hand holding a knife, as if he too had been possessed by invisible forces or unheard “overtones” he could not control, as if in a mysterious way, both detectives were slowly entering an “unknown territory”.



Stephen Mellor, Peter Jay Fernandez, Raul Aranas and Sheila Dabney in the “Shepardsets” production of *Suicide in B-Flat*, directed by George Ferencz. New York, December 1984.

4. WINDING THROUGH UN-HEARD-OF-BEFORE SYMPHONIES: THE THREAT OF IMPROVISATION

The initial emphasis placed on *imagining* is soon replaced by the detectives' growing awareness of an ominous threat when actually dealing with jazz musicians. Ironically, they are suddenly scared of what Louis had described in his long monologue as "un-heard-of before symphonies. Concertos beyond belief. [...] Totally new chord progressions and scales" (197). Pablo is right in his intuition that the whole deal, that is, what they actually fear, has to do with improvisation:

How does it relate to breaking with tradition! To breaking off with the past! To throwing the diligent efforts of our forefathers and their forefathers before them to the winds! To turning the classics to garbage before our very eyes! To distorting the very foundations of our cherished values! (*piano breaks in with loud atonal chords at random intervals*) To making mincemeat out of brilliance! To rubbing up against the very grain of sanity and driving us all to complete and utter destruction! To changing the shape of American morality! That's where it's at. That's where it's at isn't it! You've snuck up on us through the back door. You're not strong enough to take us over by direct political action so you've chosen to drive us all crazy (205).

Although extremely exaggerated in his emotional evaluation of an activity that he does not even take the pains to enquire into, Pablo's words are important as they confer a particular significance on the relationship between improvisation and tradition, an issue the play itself will highlight in its creation of innovative writing and its dialogue with the previous dramatic tradition.

With the albums *Free Jazz* (1960) and *Ascension* (1961), Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane brought improvisation to its uttermost extreme thus far, reducing the given material almost to nothing:

A group of players is assembled; an order of soloing – or at least of stepping forward – is assigned; a signal is given to begin; thirty or forty minutes, the music stops. Passive voice seems appropriate in this description. The leader has reduced his role to that of master of ceremonies and there is no composer at all. The musical given is, by now simply a block of time (Hartman 1991: 20).

The total break with tradition though, was actually impossible because nothing comes out of nothing⁵. In spite of being generally understood as the expression of raw emotion, jazz is more intellectual than those of us lacking musical literacy

⁵ As Hartman explains, in Coltrane's album, for instance, there is also another given in the home-pitch (or rather, home-key) B-Flat, to which players may return, and which is, by the way, the note to which jazz brass and woodwind players typically tune their instruments, rather than the A of the orchestra, as well as the classic key in blues (1991: 20).

might think; and its innovations might be less apocalyptic than Pablo and Louis believe them to be by focussing only on tradition rather than on conventions or technique. “Making mincemeat out of brilliance” might be just a reversal of conventionally accepted hierarchies. In jazz improvisation as it evolved during the sixties, by reducing the importance of a prearranged order before a performance – like the basic structure of ‘melody/ solos/ melody’, or the agreement on a ‘tune’ etc. – other features were highlighted, namely, performance, so that the tension between improvisation and prior composition was dissolved into absolute presence and *presentness*⁶.

If *Suicide in B-Flat* is neither, despite its eccentricity, an improvised play nor a play based on randomness, we should ask of it why it places such emphasis on improvisation. Presentness might be the key to understanding an essential connection between the musical and the theatrical realm that the play establishes. The lack of prior composition stresses in improvisation the demand of music to be performed and to be heard in order become something meaningful and, by foregrounding presence and presentness, what is highlighted is the *dialogic engagement* of the musical performance. That theatrical plays, like music, are written to be performed, and thus demand an audience, is something we have long been critically aware of. So what Shepard probably found so fascinating about jazz improvisation must have been its conceptual component, that is, this demand of a dialogic engagement with something unfamiliar or unexplored. How is this concept used and developed in the play? Shepard seems to do what he usually does: play with it, playing with the characters in order to make them fear the unknown. It is important to note, however, that these ideas about improvisation are mainly explored in an indirect way: through their reversal, that is, the detectives’ *denial* of any sort of engagement. And even this, is shown in purely theatrical terms, away from abstractions, from the statement of ideas or moral indications. The playwright focuses instead on their *effects* on the characters, on stripping it down to pure action, to the “‘body language’ of actual experience which is theatrical”⁷. Their physical reaction is actually overemphasized: Louis, for instance, exhausted after his desperate fight with the knife, falls to the floor and remains there for a long time.

⁶ The term is used by Hartman (1991: 73); my emphasis.

⁷ Shepard paraphrased by Scott Christopher Wren in “Camp Shepard: Exploring the Geography of Character”. Shepard conducted a four-week-long playwrights’ workshop as part of the Bay Area Playwrights Festival III, held during the summer of 1980 in Marin County. *West Coast Plays*, asked Scoot Christopher Wren, one of the participants, to record the progress of the event and to give a sense of the playwright as a mentor.



Peter Jay Fernandez as Petrone and Sheila Dabney as Laureen in the “Shepardsets” production of *Suicide in B-Flat* at La Mama Annex, New York City, 1984. Photograph by Jerry Vezzuso.

“I know when I’m being bushwacked” (205), states Pablo at the end of his vindication of the conspirational nature of improvisation. The fact is not that they are being bushwacked by anyone, but that, in their use of the ruling logic of the “either/or”, they perceive any alternative to conventions as extremely dangerous. The arrival of a third musician, Laureen, who enters dressed in a bathrobe carrying a double bass fiddle, opens even more widely the abyss separating the musicians from the detectives. The strategy employed by the playwright is, as in many other works, to oppose two different realities – Louis and Pablo’s world of rational fact vs. the jazz musicians’ improvisation of reality, which they perceive as something fluid and shapeless. The gumshoe detectives’ encounter with Niles’s mates, far from bringing them closer to the truth, takes them further from it: despite their single-mindedness, or because of it, they will never achieve their objective, as if they remained perpetually at the margins, at the periphery, the “extra frills” (212). Pablo and Louis’s response to the musicians’ vague and indeterminate answers and their complete lack of interest in their investigation is exaggerated and paranoid, although extremely funny: they are typical Shepardesque characters in their heightened perception and extreme emotional reaction when driven to a state of

crisis they cannot endure. In entering Niles flat they have stepped into “unknown territory” and they show an authoritative single-mindedness that fails to engage in a playful dialogue with it. But Louis and Pablo, it must be reminded, are two-dimensional characters taken from popular culture: the strength of these confrontations and their comic success derives from extrapolating these two prototypical characters and placing them in a context completely foreign to them, and of course, a very sophisticated one. They insist on perceiving improvisation in very simplistic terms, that is, as a scattered chaotic eruption, rather than as a playful dialogue with the unknown. Yet can we actually expect from them, in spite of their eagerness for meaning, the ability or the sensibility to embrace the complexities of a reality they fail to grasp? Once again we come across Shepard’s fascination and intriguing rapport with popular images. Figures emerging from a celluloid text appear as a promising factor and Shepard seems to be playing with their attraction but also with their ultimate deceiving nature, pointing out then at the absurdity of seeking the truth, in a media bombarded cosmos, guided by characters whose iconic origin as media artifacts makes them very familiar but ultimately depthless.

Suicide seems to be at this point another instance of Shepard’s whimsical playing with and reconstruction of pop icons, another instance of a mental topos like *The Mad Dog Blues* (1971), what Konstantinos Blatanis defines in *Popular Culture Icons in Contemporary American Drama* as the playwright’s peculiar “mythopoesis” (2003: 28). Yet a sudden appearance, half way through the performance, forces us again to reconsider: Niles, accompanied by Paulette, enters the stage carrying a flashlight, both invisible to the rest, and we can no longer be sure of anything that is going on. Actually, the detectives’ suspicions and overplayed reactions suddenly seem not so out of tune as we initially thought. Niles and his friend occupy the same physical space as the other characters, but they are clearly on a different plane of reality. Pablo, Louis, Petrone and Laureen cannot see them as they move around, nor even hear them as they talk, but we do as the audience; Louis’s crazy conjecture at the beginning of the play, that Niles might have fooled them all, suddenly resonates with an unexpected actuality. Are they dead or are they alive? The question remains ambiguous until the end of the play. If the impossibility of finding the truth has so far been treated in epistemological terms through the discussions between the detectives and the musicians, now the ontological status of all characters and events is subverted. By presenting two contradictory but simultaneous planes of reality, the reality of both is under question. So as a new line of action begins to unfold parallel to the previous one, and we actually see the character whose dead body had apparently been found with the face blown off, we must restrain ourselves from making too many assumptions about a play that seems to be constantly changing course. And yet, could not this uncertain ontological status be thought of as another instance of the free use of the dynamics of jazz improvisation? The foregrounding of presentness in jazz improvisation, mentioned above, is achieved by leaving structure to the bare

minimum: expanding tonic (distension) and dominant (tension) centres into areas (combined with a blurred sense of cadence) in order to create a tonal milieu rather than a tonal structure or pattern. As we will see, the (vital) structure of the character that has now appeared might have been reduced, in a similar fashion, to the bare minimum, devoid of a fixed centre, forcing him to search for and improvise other ways of being, as well as to expand the areas in which to act.

5. PLAYING OUT DEAD AND ALIVE

For the rebel dramatist is one who dreams – and puts his dreams to the test.
Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt*

As the second line of action is enacted on stage, we get to know that Niles's apparent suicide was a way of freeing his artistic self, a way of destroying his status as a great artist in order to start anew. The artist seen "in an increasingly narrow light" (DeRose 2002: 227) as he is more and more successful was the starting point of this article. The playwright takes here an interesting step further in his exploration of artistic success by combining it with his pervasive exploration of new modes of being that could be described as postmetaphysical, for they challenge traditional concepts of identity as stable personal essence. In such an endeavour Shepard's work establishes a dialogue or a continuity with the work of his predecessor Luigi Pirandello, although in a fashion which could be defined in literary terms as postmodernist, that inevitably makes them diverge.

Niles seems to find himself in the same situation and to fear what the unnamed hero of *When one is somebody* (*Quando si è qualcuno*) – the autobiographical play that Pirandello completed in 1933, three years before his death – feared himself: to be trapped in the role defined by his public. Pirandello's protagonist found a temporary escape from this situation by publishing under the pseudonym of a young and unknown poet to be, however, eventually discovered. "Only when one is nobody, he learns, can one exist in time; when one is somebody, one is petrified, immobile, dead. In the midst of making a commemorative speech on his fiftieth birthday, he begins to turn into a statue of himself, while his spoken words are engraved on the façade of a house behind him" (Brustein 1990: 281).

Shepard finds and tests another way of escape for the artist trapped by the public and by himself. Those acquainted with the playwright's previous production should not be surprised to encounter once again a character which, deprived of such an indulgent thing as personality, is instead "a fractured whole"⁸, and which is

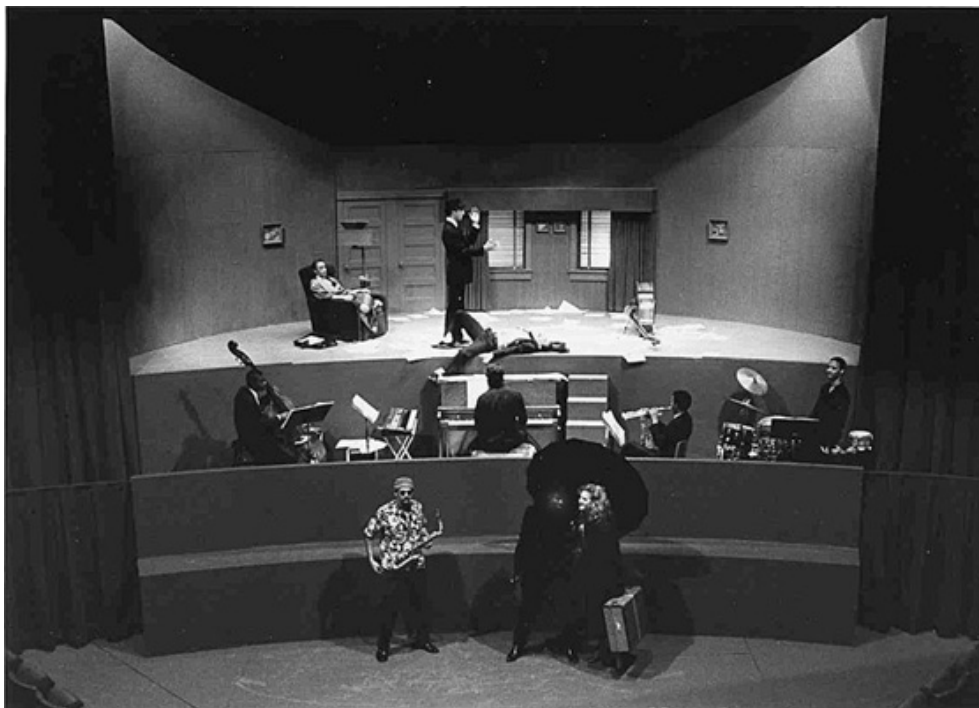
⁸ In the "Note for the actors" of the published edition of *Angel City* Shepard explains: "Instead of the idea of 'whole character' with logical motives behind his behaviour which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and

then deeply worried about his performance of self; for Shepard's characters embody a mode of existence in which the only way *to be* (momentarily) is inevitably to *play* (roles): deprived of the stability of concepts of identity (forms, categories, resemblances, unities of apperception, predicates, etc.) they find themselves continually inventing new roles.

In the deadly confrontation staged in *The Tooth of Crime*, Crow, the young gipsy resembling Keith Richards had proved to be superior to Hoss, the Elvis-like old rocker, because the former had the ability to constantly change style, showing a protean self capable of continuous adaptation: he was able "to switch to suit" (Shepard 1997: 230), whereas Hoss was "stuck in his image" (Shepard 1997: 224). Endless self-invention is regarded as a necessary tool for survival, but in *Suicide in B-Flat* a new problem is posed. If the self is to be created and recreated, it needs also to be destroyed. The suicide the title referred to is no other than Niles's killing of himself, of his old selves, as a way of escape but also as a means of leaving room for new possibilities of existence. What is particularly interesting about *Suicide* is that the killing of selves is treated in proxemic or theatrical terms, rather than merely rhetorically, as in *Tooth*, where the key to success depended to a larger extent on the knowledge and use of references, and thus was an ability developed in linguistic terms. In *Suicide* the murder of old selves is actually enacted on the stage as a ritual: but, as a deed, it has consequences, so Niles soon has a growing suspicion: "What if it turns out to be harder playing dead than it was playing alive?" (210).

The means by which the killing is enacted are actually very simple. First Niles dresses up in a child's cowboy outfit and Paulette then shoots him with an arrow. He does not react when two arrows hit him. Afterwards he will undress and will take another costume from his suitcase: he will dress up in tails and will be shot again, this time with a gun. The first unexpected results of these two rituals are that when Niles is first shot, the arrow ends up stuck in Louis's back, whereas when the dandy-Niles is aimed at, the hail of bullets reach Pablo instead. These imaginative leaps from one plane of reality to the other make them finally merge: the detectives, even if they are not dead, cannot help believing that they are being bumped off by an unseen enemy; as for the audience, there is also a growing suspicion that, as Petrone warns Louis and Pablo, "you will never get to the bottom of it" (224).

pieces of character flying off the central theme. In other words, more in terms of collage construction or jazz improvisation" (Shepard 1988: 61-62).



The picture shows some of the innovations introduced by George Ferencz in the 1984 production of *Suicide in B-Flat*: an ensemble of jazz musicians performing an original score composed by Max Roach for the occasion (instead of the pianist of the script) and the actual or visual representation on stage of the different planes of action. Photograph by Lawrence Mason, Syracuse Stage.

Niles's rite of passage is deceptively simple: as a matter of fact it turns out to be a really tricky gesture. In "Language, Visualization and the Inner Library" Shepard explains "The reason I began writing plays was the hope of extending the sensation of *play* (as in "kid") on into adult life. If "play" becomes "labor", why play?" (1993 b: 214). The ritual itself is in fact no more than kid's play, which is why it does not have an *immediate* effect on the musician; all children have played dead sometimes and all adults, when playing with children, have to pretend often to die after imaginatively being shot. But the tricky thing about *Suicide* is that Shepard *actually* contrives a very common kid's play to be performed on stage and *actually* extends it into adult life in order to explore its consequences *as if* it were real, so that at the end of the play, as Niles states "Someone was killed here for sure" (229). Niles's ritual, as innocent as it might look, is the act which, in theatrical terms, most clearly shows Shepard's revolt as a playwright as dramatized in *Suicide*, and that is none other than to dream of new modes of existence which allow for escape from self – which is by nature unstable, fragile, fractured – but which also grant its renewal. The dramatist's endeavour, though, as Brustein reminds us, is to put the

dreams to the test, and it is then that revolt becomes too a painful undertaking: “The idea of revolt remains pure and absolute, but the act of revolt is usually a source of tension, suffering or despair. And while the rebel character is usually an extension of the playwright, the playwright is always examining the consequences of his actions” (1991: 14). Even before Niles and Paulette get everything ready for the ritual, the musician expresses his doubts and his fear of the unknown, showing a deep concern about loneliness. “It’s not so easy to leave a life. It’s not the easiest thing in the world. I can still smell myself in this place. It feels like I never left” (209). As Bottoms states, Niles’s mocking ritual is, however ingenious, an attempt at “a growth process which might lead to the relinquishing of masculine egoism and the discovery of other, neglected dimensions of experience” (1998: 145), but the murder of old selves does inevitably entail a powerful loss, bringing a sense of emptiness and mourn that are not easily overcome. And whether or not Niles is finally able to overcome this loss is a question that remains ambiguous until the end of the play, for we eventually see him step into the plane of action that he had so far avoided in order to be arrested by the detectives. The enigmatic final image of the play shows the three of them handcuffed together.

In his article “Expectation, Confutation, Revelation: Audience Complicity in the Plays of Sam Shepard” Steven Putzel explains:

As the various levels of or planes of action unfold before us, we begin to realize that the search of Pablo and Louis is for the author, for Niles, the artist who has imagined and improvised all of this into a stage world. Here, as in *Angel City*, the meta-theatricality of Shepard’s work is not as obvious as that of Pirandello; we don’t have fictitious stage managers, directors and actors with which to deal (1987: 151).

That the stage world might be a reflection of Niles’s head – he complains as he enters that he is hearing voices, and Louis anguishly exclaims “I feel like I’ve slid into somebody else’s head here or something” (213) – is indeed an acute interpretation of a play that reflects interestingly upon the acts of creation and self-creation, which lead as well to notions of responsibility over our own acts, as noted above. And yet its meta-theatricality does not diminish its ambiguity, its complexity, its ex-centricity.

The play was revived in 1984 in a version directed by George Ferencz and with a new musical score composed by Max Roach as part of a festival called ‘Shepardsets’, which included as well *Angel City* and *Back Bog Beast Bait*. Produced by La Mama E.T.C. and Syracuse Stage and staged at La Mama Annex in New York City, and at Syracuse Stage afterwards, all productions were very

positively reviewed, particularly for being “magnificently directed and mounted”⁹. Despite the success of the production, critics insisted however on the difficulty of the script: Michael Feingold from *The Village Voice* said “*Suicide in B-Flat* is a beauty, but it’s also one of Shepard’s knottiest dramatic conundrums”¹⁰. Mel Gussow went even further: “Facing *Suicide*, a true sleuth or a preconditioned theatergoer might bang his head against the barricade of exegesis”¹¹. There is no doubt that this is a demanding play, not readily accessible to logical explanation. But the creation of such a garbled theatrical conundrum must have a *raison d’être*, so we should refrain from seeing in it a barricade of exegesis and try to hear closely to what the text itself suggests, instead of thinking, like Pablo, that this on stage improvisation was meant for “rubbing up against the very grain of sanity and driving us all to complete and utter destruction” (205).

If, as noted above, jazz improvisation is understood to mean stepping out of the normal structured boundaries of music, as well as “the liberation of certain aspects of the music from rule-governed regularity, so as to make them variable, and so potentially expressive” (Hartman 1991: 70), in Shepard’s playwriting this is translated into stepping out of the normal structured boundaries of common plot creation. George Ferencz described the structure of the play in musical terms: “There is a melody line and a bass line playing against each other”¹². And as Zinman further explains “in *Suicide*, the characters go through alternating contradictions of situations until both answers to the question, is Niles alive or dead, are played out completely. This becomes an interesting way of viewing Shepard’s radical alteration of dramatic structure, away from the linear and away from resolution” (1984: 16).

Shepard enjoys talking about music rather than about theatre in interviews and has often emphasized his passion for it. In ‘The Rolling Stone Interview’ he declared “I’ve felt myself to be more of a musician than anything else, though I’m not proficient in any one instrument. But I think I have a musical sense of things...and writing seems to me to be a musical experience – rhythmically and in many other ways” (Cott 1986: 168). Some other comments on his experience as a musician in that same interview can actually become really helpful to understand how a play like *Suicide* works. In San Francisco, Shepard states in ‘The Rolling Stone Interview’, he studied with African drummer Kwaku Dadey and discovered that polyrhythm (the simultaneous sounding of two or more independent rhythms) was an ancient African concept, rather than an invention of contemporary jazz; getting together with eight other people to play congas, he found out that playing

⁹ Sysyna, “Shepard’s ‘Suicide’ rich in comedy and symbols” *New York City Tribune*, 10th Dec. 1984, p.6B

¹⁰ “Sharp Shepard” *The Village Voice*, Dec. 4th 1984, p.107

¹¹ “Stage: Shepard’s ‘*Suicide in B-Flat*’” *New York Times*, 29th November 1984, p.20 section C.

¹² Quoted in Zinman, p.16

simultaneously in rhythms of 5s and 6s and in 6/8, 3/4 and 4/4, even if “everything stacked and piled up at the beginning”, if you tried to catch up carrying the lines three or four measures, it eventually worked out¹³. He described this connecting principle in jamming “like the ocean. If you’re playing an individual part and I’m playing an individual part and we can’t figure out how these two are going to merge – assuming you are sticking to your part and I to mine – they just eventually merge. I don’t know how but the rhythmic structures underneath each one of this parts eventually map out” (Cott 1986: 168). Shepard’s account of his personal experience is interesting because what he is trying to explain, polyrhythm, is a concept that probably even beginners in musical studies might be familiar with, and yet it reveals one of the playwright’s most precious qualities: his rare sense of innocence and wonder before the simplest of events, an unpreconditioned and almost pure view of what surrounds him.

In *Suicide* Shepard seems to have translated this improvisational experience into a stage event by creating two independent planes of reality, each with its own rhythm, that eventually merge and remain connected. It is no wonder that such an unconventional structural choice should bring forward uncommon forms of meaning. Probably more engaging about the use of the dynamics of jazz improvisation as an aesthetic device and as a principle of composition are the conceptual novelties that accompany the formal or structural innovations of the play. What Zinman refers to as “Shepard’s radical alteration of dramatic structure” (1984: 16), that is, one that plays out two contradictory actions that instead of cancelling one another out, are played out until they inevitably merge, creates a signifying system that unifies the different components without resolving the contradictions between them, supporting thus the rejection of certainties. This reveals a more profound subversion than the challenge to conventional structure of action as exposed in Aristotle’s *Poetics*: it is a revolt against the foundational principles of logic that still govern or common way of thinking, which had already been exposed and analyzed too by Aristotle in *Metaphysics*. Both the structure of the play and the ontological status of all characters challenge the basic law of non-contradiction, by which one cannot say of something that it is and that it is not in the same respect and at the same time. So all the questions Niles poses at the end of the play “Am I dead or alive? Is that it? Is this me here, now? Are these questions or answers?” or “Are you inside me or outside me?” (229) remain questions that might be answered but that lack a definite, clear or unequivocal reply.

What is of particular interest about the translation of the liberty of improvisational modes of jazz into dramatic composition is that in this particular play it defined what was *later* described in literary studies as postmodern aesthetics and poetics, which according to Linda Hutcheon, is “if it is anything, a problematizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common sensical and the

¹³ See Cott (1986: 168 and following).

‘natural’. But it never offers answers that are anything but provisional and contextually determined (and limited)” (1990: xi). In Shepard’s case it seems to be clear that this (postmodern) “sensibility” was not the conscious application of a chosen literary style but an example of intuitive experimentation arising from the ‘translation’ to the stage of certain concepts and techniques from a realm different from the theatrical one. This conversion was inevitably a ‘free translation’ due to the passage from a non-referential medium to a referential one, but it can certainly be said that the playwright was successful in recognizing of the new formal and conceptual devices that this process brought about.

6. POETICS OF THE POSSIBLE

*The territory available to a theatrical event is so vast that it has to be narrowed down to ingredients like plot, character, set, costume, lights, etc. in order to fit into our idea of what we know. Consequently, anything outside these domains is called “experimental”.*¹⁴

The deliberate refusal we find in *Suicide in B-Flat* to solve the contradictions it creates, or to reach a logical resolution, is not an iconoclastic stance devoid of purpose, but a call for aesthetic freedom. The creation of a staged reality which looks like a preposterous world of pure arbitrariness, a “hallucination”, as Brustein qualified it (1980: 119), where truth won’t ever be found, might be perceived on the contrary as a space in which other forms of meaning deserve to be negotiated. “Something new is called for now. There’s no need for remorse” (206). “That’s what we’re after” says bass player Laureen “A new dimension” (220). Laureen’s discourse about her endeavour as jazz musician acts, as Putzel suggests, as metonymy for creation, which extends to the playwright’s own work.

I have explored the ways in which Shepard used jazz improvisation as an inspiration for dramatic writing at several levels, and one of those is then to turn the play’s discourse about jazz into a metadramatic one. The “new dimension” Shepard seems to be after in a play like *Suicide* seems to be a space capable of providing the “freedom of recognizing different ideas and expression of order” (Hartman 1991: 70), as jazz musicians were doing in the sixties. But there is another element whose role is essential in this yearning and which is intimately related to the notion of aesthetic and conceptual liberty: *imagination*. The emphasis placed at the beginning of the play on the “reconstruction of the imagination”, and on its consequent epistemological value in the search for meaning, acquires in retrospect an unexpected importance as a tool for the creation of a new sensibility; for a play like *Suicide* demands an audience, but an audience with a contemporary sensibility, capable of engaging with the play’s playful discontinuity, or to put it in other terms, an ability to perceive and react freely to the *poetics of the possible* which the play itself creates by

¹⁴ Shepard in Marranca (1993: 212)

extending the boundaries of what is accepted as “possible” in the world of matter. The play abandons the comfortable and safe ground of direct explanation and easy understanding to create openings instead of reductive propositions, inviting spectators to imaginatively behold what they are watching.

To have “eyeballs to see into the possibilities” (196) as Pablo puts it at the beginning of the play, allows us, for instance, to reflect upon the final image of the play in several ways, without having to reject any of the interpretations. Thus Niles’s move towards the detectives can be seen as a step backwards, as the rejection of the loneliness created by the loss of old selves and the appearance of a sudden emptiness that cannot be overcome. Freedom is never easy, for it implies the continuous emergence of contradictions and choices, so to be free one needs to *dare to be free*. But Niles’s enigmatic gesture may not necessarily be thought of as a failure. His move makes the two planes of action that had previously run in parallel converge completely, so it might as well be seen as the necessity to embrace, or to accept as they are, the different components of self, even the reactionary or the futile ones. On a different level, Niles’s move to be handcuffed together with Louis and Pablo is interesting if seen in the light of the ambivalent relationship of the artist (and the playwright) with popular images. Pablo and Louis are pop culture icons inasmuch as the murdered cowboy and the gangster were. Niles’s insistence on seeing the mythical side of the cowboy figure, to perceive him as a hero, had made him doubt whether it should be killed at all (a doubt that had finally been ignored due to Paulette’s determination and clear sight on the issue: “He’s a weasel! He’s a punk psychopath built into a big deal by crummy New England rags” [217]). Could Niles’s final gesture then be seen as his eventual recognition of the importance of the role that popular culture plays in contemporary aesthetics, a powerful influence that should not be denied? For the acceptance of mythic figures from popular culture does not deny the acknowledgement of their nature and the recognition of their limitation as celluloid texts.

Finally, this, as with many other captivating images of the play or its breathtaking monologues, could as well be enjoyed in their evocative power, just for their own sake, devoid of any particular sense or reason. Not that these images should be thought of as the expression of pure randomness but maybe they could be regarded “in a more oblique fashion” or even “in the slanting light of [their] own absurdity”, freed of the theoretical solemnity of modern criticism, as Ihab Hassan suggests in *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (1984: 9). Things do *not* need a *cause* in order to *be*, or in order to become the object of our attention and analysis.

In the end, as Pablo regretted at the beginning of the play, “all we come up with is supposes” (194). The detectives fail to solve the case: not even “trying to reconstruct the imagination of it”, of Niles’s death, do they manage to gain meaning; so if the play, eventually, shows another revolt, a revolt against the logic of signification, against our overemphasized desire to put everything together, or to seek in literature a function that it lacks – the function of clarifying the world – let

us then accept the invitation it poses to us (as spectators, as readers) to step into unknown territories, to imaginatively penetrate *other* dimensions of experience and enjoy them when we are there.

REFERENCES

- Blatanis, Konstantinos (2003). *Popular Culture Icons in Contemporary American Drama*. Madison, Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Bottoms, Stephen J. (1998). *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brustein, Robert (1980). *Critical Moments: Reflections on Theatre and Society 1973-1979*. New York: Random House.
- . (1990). *The Theatre of Revolt: Studies in Modern Drama from Ibsen to Genet*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Cott, Jonathan (1986). "The Rolling Stone Interview: Sam Shepard" *Rolling Stone* (18 December 1986- 1 January 1987): 166-72, 198, 200.
- DeRose, David J. (1993). *Sam Shepard*. New York: Twayne.
- . (2002). "Sam Shepard as musical experimenter" in Roudané M. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 227-246
- Geis, Deborah (1993). *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Hartman, Charles O. (1991). *Jazz Text: Voice and improvisation in poetry, jazz, and song*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Hassan, Ihab (1984). *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Hutcheon, Linda (1990). *A poetics of postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Kearney, Richard (1998). *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Lippman, Amy (1984). "Rhythms and Truths: An Interview with Sam Shepard". *American Theater* 1, no. 1 (April 1984): pp. 9-13, 40-41
- Putzel, Steven (1987). "Expectation, Confutation, Revelation: Audience Complicity in the Plays of Sam Shepard". *Modern Drama* 30 (June 1987): 147-60
- Shepard, Sam (1988). *Suicide in B flat in Fool for love and other plays*. New York: Bantam.
- . (1993) "American Experimental Theatre: Then and Now" in Marranca, B. (ed.) *American Dreams: The imagination of Sam Shepard*, New York: PAJ Publications, 212-213
- . (1993 b) "Language, Visualization and the Inner Library" in Marranca, B. (ed.) *American Dreams: The imagination of Sam Shepard*, New York: PAJ Publications, 214-219
- . (1997) *Sam Shepard: Plays 2*. London Boston: Faber and Faber.
- Shewey, Don (1997). *Sam Shepard*, New York: Da Capo Press.

- Wade, Leslie A (2005). "Sam Shepard and the American Sunset: Enchantment of the Mythic West" in David Krasner (ed.) *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 285-300
- Wren, Scott Christopher (1980). "Camp Shepard: Exploring the Geography of Character". *West Coast Plays* 7 (Fall 1980), 75-106.
- Zinman, Toby Silverman (1984). "Shepard Suite". *American Theater* 1, no.8 (December 1984): 15-17

AGRADECIMIENTOS/ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

La investigación y redacción de este artículo han contado con el apoyo y la financiación de la Comunidad de Madrid y el Fondo Social Europeo, por lo cual les expreso mi enorme gratitud.

Sincere thanks are due to photographers Jerry Vezzuso and Lawrence Mason; to director George Ferencz; to Ellen Stewart, founder and artistic director of La MaMa E.T.C. and to Ozzie Rodriguez, from La MaMa archives, for their generous support and permission to print the photographs.