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Negotiating Reality: Sam Shepard's *States of Shock*, or "A Vaudeville Nightmare"

ABSTRACT

In the course of a career that spans half a century, from the Vietnam era to the America of Barack Obama, Sam Shepard has often been labelled as a "quintessentially American" playwright. According to Leslie Wade, "[d]rawing from the disparate image banks of rock and roll, detective fiction, B-movies, and Wild West adventure shows," Shepard's texts "function as a storehouse of images, icons, and idioms that denote American culture and an American sensibility" (*Sam Shepard 2*). The article addresses Shepard's work in the 1990s, when—as suggested by Stephen J. Bottoms—the writer's prime concern was with depicting "a Faustian nation mired in depravity and corruption" (245). The discussion centres primarily upon a brief anti-war play first presented by the American Place Theatre in New York City on 30 April 1991, *States of Shock*, whose very title appears to sum up much of the dramatist's writing to date, aptly describing the disturbing atmospheres generated by his works and the sense of disorientation frequently experienced by both Shepard's characters and his audiences. The essay seeks to provide an insight into this unsettling one-act play premiered in the wake of the US engagement in the First Gulf War and deploying extravagant, grotesque theatricality to convey a sense of horror and revulsion at American military arrogance and moral myopia. It investigates how Shepard's haunting text—subtitled "a vaudeville nightmare" and focusing on a confrontation between a peculiar male duo: an ethically crippled, jingoistic Colonel and a wheelchair-using war veteran named Stubbs—revisits familiar Shepard territory, as well as branching out in new directions. It demonstrates how the playwright interrogates American culture and American identity, especially American masculinity, both reviewing the country's unsavory past and commenting on its complicit present. Special emphasis in the discussion is placed on Shepard's preoccupation with the aesthetics of performance and the visual elements of his theatre. The essay addresses the artist's experimental approach, reflecting upon his creative deployment of dramatic conventions and deliberate deconstruction of American realism.

Keywords: Sam Shepard, *States of Shock*, Persian Gulf War, Vietnam War, Georges Bataille.

Sam Shepard made his debut as a playwright in 1964 Off-Off-Broadway, at the Theatre Genesis, where his experimental, disruptive one-act pieces *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden* were performed. Since then, he has seen his work staged both off and on Broadway, as well as in all the major American regional theatres. In the course of a career that spans half a century, from the Vietnam era to the America of Barack Obama, Shepard has evolved from alternative theatre to mainstream recognition and Hollywood, from being a counterculture rebel to being a cultural icon, earning both critical esteem and media attention. During those five decades of writing, he has often been labelled “quintessentially American,” and even, rather controversially, the “most American” of America’s dramatists (qtd. in Wade, *Sam Shepard 2*). According to Leslie Wade, “[d]rawing from the disparate image banks of rock and roll, detective fiction, B-movies, and Wild West adventure shows,” Shepard’s texts “function as a storehouse of images, icons, and idioms that denote American culture and an American sensibility.” “If nothing else,” the cultural critic further suggests, they serve as “a theatrical Smithsonian” (*Sam Shepard 2*). While this assessment of the artist’s standing may sometimes appear somewhat exaggerated, there can be no doubt that his works, or decades of his works, have found resonance with American audiences. Importantly, Shepard’s inclusive writings defy an easy classification. Clearly partial to “a postmodern aesthetic” (Roudané 1), the dramatist has shunned realist psychology and favoured playful eclecticism. Drawing upon and juxtaposing a diverse range of (often non-literary) sources, genres and styles—from popular music and visual arts, through crime stories, gothic fiction and science fiction, to Greek tragedy and Beckettian absurd—he has teased his audiences with very theatrical pastiches of myth and actuality, consistently eluding totalizing exegeses.

The article addresses Shepard’s theatre at the outset of the 1990s, the decade when the acclaimed, award-winning playwright-director-movie-star manifestly continued to evolve and reinvent himself. He experimented with both structure and content exploring new paths, redeploing earlier techniques and branching out in novel directions in an attempt to challenge both himself and his audiences (Bottoms 243). Stephen J. Bottoms begins his comprehensive study of the dramatist’s work, *The Theater of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*, with an intriguing postulation that the title of Shepard’s play premiered at the opening of the 1990s, *States of Shock*, if not the play itself, almost sums up the author’s entire output, offering “an apt description for the arresting, disturbing atmospheres which Shepard’s plays so often create onstage” and for the sense of disorientation frequently experienced by their characters, as well as theatregoers (1). He argues, quite rightly it seems:

The tensions and contradictions generated by Shepard's writing—whether overt or, in much of his late work, more covert—tend to disrupt any possibility of the theatrical event's being experienced smoothly, and so throw up all kinds of unresolved questions. Although Shepard's work has gone through many phases since he first began writing for Off-Off-Broadway venues in 1964, this instability has been a distinguishing feature throughout. (Bottoms 1)

The essay seeks to provide an insight into *States of Shock*, which ushers in the decade in which Shepard's overriding preoccupation seemed to be with, as posited by Bottoms, “depicting a Faustian nation mired in depravity and corruption” (244–45). The play was first presented by The American Place Theatre in New York City on 30 April 1991—that is, in the wake of the US engagement in the First Gulf War. In this brief one-act, Shepard resorted to extravagant, grotesque theatricality to convey a sense of horror and revulsion at American military arrogance and moral myopia. It should be noted, perhaps, that *States of Shock*, produced for only a short run, was not a resounding success; in fact, it met with a backlash from reviewers, and some of the concerns and objections voiced by its critics seem, at least in part, legitimate. There is, as Bottoms has observed, “an awkwardness” about this topical, impassioned play that is not entirely disguised by Shepard's linguistic and theatrical originality; “in aiming simultaneously for stylistic fragmentation and thematic focus, [the dramatist] does not quite achieve either” (244). Many reviewers, ostensibly surprised by Shepard's unprecedented commitment, deplored the play's “heavy-handedness, propagandistic intent, laden symbols, and ‘oped declamations” (Wade, “*States of Shock*” 264).¹ Yet, the haunting text, subtitled “A Vaudeville Nightmare,” stirs up curiosity and merits consideration, in particular when it comes to the way in which it interrogates American culture and American identity, especially American masculinity, by both reviewing the country's unsavory past and confronting its complicit present. The article deals with Shepard's bid to expose and explore the nation's self-consuming, destructive tendencies and crippling aberrations, looking at questions of conflict, virility, aggression, retribution and empathy, as well as tackling the economies of domination derived from Western codes of manhood. Special attention in the discussion is paid to Shepard's preoccupation with the aesthetics of performance and the visual elements of his theatre. The essay addresses the artist's stylistics,

¹ For a concise overview of the diverse criticism on *States of Shock*, see Wade, “*States of Shock*” (264–65). For Shepard's response to the largely negative reception of the play in 1991, see Shepard, “Silent Tongues” (236).

reflecting upon his creative manipulation of dramatic conventions and his deliberate deconstruction of American realism.

It has been uncommon to think of Sam Shepard as a political writer, even though the roots of his career can be traced back to the early ferment of the Off-Off-Broadway movement and the Greenwich Village counterculture of the 1960s that generally contested establishment values and embraced transgressive art by posing a challenge to authority. The veteran American playwright and a self-declared non-partisan has generally avoided being drawn into political disputes, unlike, for instance, his renowned peer, David Mamet.² However, when *States of Shock* was produced in the spring of 1991, only three months after President George Bush had declared a cease-fire ending the Persian Gulf War, it was difficult not to interpret it as the dramatist's appalled response to the excessive displays of patriotic zeal and national elation following the overwhelming victory of the US-led coalition's military offensive in the Gulf and the monumental destruction of the Iraqi forces. Shepard with this play clearly went against the grain, boldly opposing the general national mood at that specific moment in time. Although the staging was expressionistic rather than realistic and the time of action unspecified, one could easily point to several aspects of the play that linked its plot to the conflict in the Persian Gulf. For example, the memory of the round-the-clock media coverage showing the sustained aerial bombardment of Baghdad, part of Operation Desert Storm, was evoked by Shepard's deployment of a cyclorama which covered the entire wall upstage and was, every now and then, "lit up with projections of tracer fire, rockets and explosions in the night" (Shepard, *States of Shock* 5). Such images of technological warfare effectively alluded to the realities of the Gulf War, or, in the words of Bruce Cumings, America's first "television war": "not blood and guts spilled in living color on the living room rug, not the transparent, objective immediacy of the all-seeing eye, . . . but a radically distant, technically controlled, eminently 'cool' postmodern optic which, in the doing, became an instrument of the war itself" (103). Cumings elaborates further:

The advance of American technology allowed us to sit in our living rooms and watch missiles homing onto their Baghdad targets, relayed via nosecone cameras that had the good taste to cease transmitting just as they obliterated their quarry, thus vetting a cool, bloodless war through a cool medium. (122)

² For a sample of David Mamet's strong views on the key political and cultural issues of our times, see his famous *Village Voice* article "Why I Am No Longer a 'Brain-Dead Liberal'" and, more recently, his 2012 book *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture*.

To add to the effect on the audience, the war panorama in Shepard's play was accompanied by the drumming of two live percussionists situated behind the cyclorama whose driving rhythms gradually built in intensity as the cyclorama took on "an ominous tone" (Shepard, *States of Shock* 5).

States of Shock discards a meticulously detailed box-set simulating a real-world setting in favour of a minimalist stage set. Shepard locates the action in a "family restaurant," of which we are reminded several times in the course of the play, but it is more like "the dreamscape" of a diner (DeRose 136), consisting of very few, isolated properties: a simple café table with two chairs and a red Naugahyde café booth arranged on a bare stage in front of the cyclorama. The establishment is populated by an inept waitress, Glory Bee, who patently struggles to balance trays full of dishes and drinks, and two apathetic customers, the White Man and the White Woman:

The WHITE MAN sits slumped in his chair with his chin on his chest and his hands folded in his lap. . . . He is not asleep but appears to be in a deep state of catharsis. Very still. The WHITE WOMAN, sitting opposite him at the table, is more upright but equally still, staring off into up-stage space. . . . They are both dressed completely in white, very expensive outfits, reminiscent of West Palm Beach. . . . Their faces and hands are also white and pallid, like cadavers. (Shepard, *States of Shock* 5)

These two stock bourgeois figures function as "cadaverous embodiments of mainstream consumer consciousness," as Wade defines them ("*States of Shock*" 263). Indeed, detached and mostly inert, they arrogantly voice their dissatisfaction with the restaurant's inadequate customer service and their long-delayed orders:

WHITE WOMAN: My husband and I have been waiting three quarters of an hour for a simple order. . . . Two bowls of clam chowder. You'd think that would be simple enough. . . . I mean it's not as though we ordered a club sandwich or a turkey dinner with a lot of trimmings. . . . We have better things to do this morning. . . . We could have had most of our shopping done by now. We could be buying things as we speak. (Shepard, *States of Shock* 8–11)

The waitress, the White Man asserts, "ought to be fired" (9) or, as far as his wife is concerned, "shot" (17). As Emma Creedon has observed with respect to the characters' verbal exchanges recycling the vocabulary of war, "the levels of representation [in *States of Shock*] operate on mimetic, diegetic, filmic, but also textual planes as the language of warfare

is assimilated into the text" (141). As the play unravels, it becomes clear that a bitter military conflict rages outside but, oddly enough, the white American couple nonchalantly disregard both the screened clips of the war footage and the explosions of the deafening percussive assault. Undisputedly, Shepard's vision of middle America's blinkered self-involvement and smug acceptance of the violence being enacted on its behalf was bound to unsettle the viewers in the 1990s (Bottoms 245).

Interestingly, while *States of Shock* apparently meant to address, if not puncture, the post-Gulf War euphoria of national unity and shed light on the callous neglect of the American public for unrestrained destruction of the lopsided conflict in Iraq, the play was also disparaged for offering a rather dated, post-Vietnam perspective. Such objections were motivated chiefly by Shepard's portrayal of the bizarre male duo dominating the stage, consisting of the Colonel and Stubbs. The character of the belligerent Colonel sports a peculiar ensemble of uniforms and paraphernalia from America's military history which, as we learn from the stage directions, "have no apparent rhyme or reason": "an air force captain's khaki hat from WWII, a marine sergeant's coat with various medals and pins dangling from the chest and shoulders, knickers with leather leggings below the knees, and a Civil War saber hanging from his waist" (Shepard, *States of Shock* 5). Thus, the figure of the Colonel could stand for any colonel, as his assorted costume appears to imply. As an "archetypal military man" (DeRose 134), he adheres to jingoistic "principles" and "codes," and expatiates upon "American virtue" and the bravery of national heroes generated from the pioneer stock (Shepard, *States of Shock* 27, 24). In the name of the nation, he vindicates historical mayhem and destruction, arguing for the necessity of aggression: "Aggression is the only answer. A man needs a good hobby. Something he can sink his teeth into" (39). The dramatist himself stressed the timelessness of the character, originally played by John Malkovich: "I wanted to create a character of such outrageous, repulsive, military, fascist demonism that the audience would recognize it. . . . [a] monster fascist" ("Silent Tongues" 236). As the play opens, the Colonel is pushing a young man in a wheelchair with "small American flags, raccoon tails, and various talismans and good-luck charms flapping and dangling from the back of the seat and armrests. . . . He is covered from the waist to the ankles with an old army blanket" (Shepard, *States of Shock* 5–6). The presentation of Stubbs—whose very name suggests mutilation—as an incapacitated war combatant relates the character in an indelible manner to the images of Vietnam War veterans circulating in popular culture. Stubbs periodically blows a silver whistle hanging around his neck and "abruptly lifts his shirt to the armpits, revealing a massive red scar in the centre of his chest" (7). He

“[t]ook a direct hit from a ninety millimeter,” the Colonel publicly explicates. “Went straight through him. . . . It’s a wonder he’s still with us” (7). The Colonel announces that he has brought his companion to this family diner for some dessert to celebrate the anniversary of his son’s death in combat. The son—whom Stubbs heroically, if unsuccessfully, tried to shield from an incoming enemy missile—was shot dead, while Stubbs, who miraculously survived, is allegedly “the lucky one” (7).³

In their illuminating essay “Shamanism Vilified and Redeemed,” Alfred Nordmann and Hartmut Wickert, responsible for staging the German premiere of *States of Shock* in 1993, argue for the universality of Shepard’s “vaudeville nightmare” suspended between two wars, the Persian Gulf War and the Vietnam War, suggesting that “the experience of Vietnam,” as well as the “countless plays and movies about the Vietnam experience” lie behind the drama’s two male protagonists (42). They postulate, among other things, that Shepard’s works, including *States of Shock*, are intelligible not only to Americans but also to audiences across borders as they refer to “a celluloid landscape” that is generally recognizable, and thus “we relate to the Colonel as to Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*, to Stubbs as to Tom Cruise in *Born on the Fourth of July*, we see involvement of a father-image as in *Platoon*, and the rituals of remembering as perhaps in *The Deer Hunter* or *Taxi Driver*” (44). Given that those iconic movies have insinuated the Vietnam War into our—not only American but also European—past, Nordmann and Wickert continue, that “since their imagery resonates on many levels with *States of Shock*, they clearly facilitate an understanding of the code to which Shepard alludes, which he cites and undermines, with which he plays” (44). Importantly, as the authors of the essay insist, *States of Shock* must clearly be seen as much more than merely “a digest or summation or condensation of the movie-imagery of one and perhaps all wars” (44).⁴

³ Whereas the play’s political dimension, or dimensions, have been widely acknowledged, it also needs to be emphasized that *States of Shock* could equally be related to Samuel Beckett’s aesthetics and theories of representation, and seen, for instance, as a variation on *Endgame*. The main male character pairing (the master-servant/surrogate father-son pairing), the Colonel and Stubbs, could be read as Shepard’s versions of Hamm and Clov trapped in the midst of some obscure apocalypse, while the inert white couple clearly evoke Beckettian Nagg and Nell.

⁴ Nordmann and Wickert point out that if one views Shepard’s drama exclusively through the eyes of a movie-goer, it is easy to forget that *States of Shock* also corresponds to the Gulf War, a war of different dimensions and defined by different imagery than the war in Vietnam. They argue: “Shepard’s play leaves extant movies and plays about Vietnam far behind in that it shows how the archaic imagery of the Vietnam war can be mobilized for a technologically disembodied Gulf War which turns every television set into a remote control monitor from which the air strikes appear to be conducted” (44).

Similarly to Vietnam War veteran Ron Kovic, the wheelchair-using protagonist of Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*, released three years before *States of Shock*, Stubbs in Shepard's play also returns from combat duty physically and spiritually impaired, serving as an unpalatable "image of inglorious war and its brutal aftermath, known to Shepard's generation—the Vietnam generation," but carefully censored from the Persian Gulf War coverage (DeRose 135). Like Kovic, played by Tom Cruise, Stubbs too is evidently embittered by public indifference to victimization and its attempts to overlook his version of events. However, in contrast to Stone's more melodramatic approach, Shepard opts for an ensemble of overdrawn types and grotesque comedy, resorting to extravagant stage effects. His maimed protagonist disorients everyone with piercing blasts on his whistle and neurotically reverts to the day when he was hit, exposing the gaping red wound in his chest. He thus creates a spectacle which is discomforting and humorous at the same time (Bottoms 246). Moreover, several times during the play, Stubbs ostentatiously refers to his sexual impotence, looking down at his lap and dwelling on his "thing" that "just hangs there" "like dead meat":

STUBBS (to GLORY BEE): When I was hit I could no longer get my "thing" up. It just hangs there now. Like dead meat. Like road kill. (*Short pause. GLORY BEE stares at STUBBS, then pulls away.*)

GLORY BEE: Two banana splits. With candles. . . . (STUBBS *blows his whistle, then suddenly screams at GLORY BEE.*)

STUBBS: MY THING HANGS LIKE DEAD MEAT!!! (*Pause. White couple turns and stares at STUBBS. The COLONEL ignores them. He's busy taking several toy soldiers, tanks, airplanes, and ships out of his bag and arranging them on the table in front of him. STUBBS just stares into space.*)
(Shepard, *States of Shock* 12)

Significantly, the young veteran's words and actions are regarded with disdain by the white couple, who consistently refuse to be bothered by his traumatic war memories, mutilation and pain. It could be argued that the sense of alienation, betrayal and abandonment by his own country, that torments Stubbs, pertains more to the experience of Vietnam than to the generally supported and successful military campaign against Saddam Hussein at the outset of the 1990s, which was engineered to "kick the Vietnam syndrome" and avoid the stigma attached to returning Vietnam War veterans (Crane xv–xvi). On one level, Stubbs in *States of Shock*, debilitated and dependent on drugs, clearly represents "the shattered, post-Vietnam realities of young men killed and traumatized in a costly and paranoid war of expansionism" (DeRose 136). However, it is also worth noting that Shepard draws upon and satirizes the antiseptic rhetoric of Gulf War

coverage to clarify the origin of Stubbs's wounds. "It was friendly fire that took us out," the man reveals, that is, he was shelled by artillery fire from his own forces. "It was friendly fire. It smiled in my face. I could see its teeth when it hit us. I could see its tongue" (Shepard, *States of Shock* 31). Thus, the young combatant's growing resentment in the play stems not only from the fact that his suffering has been blithely dismissed by a nation nonchalant about the physical and emotional casualties of its government's hawkish policies, but also from the fact that he has been sent to the fray and mutilated by his own people:

STUBBS: The part I remember—The part that's coming back—is this.
(To COLONEL, *on his knees.*) Your face. Your face leaning over my face.
Peering down. . . . Your face, lying. Smiling and lying. Your bald face of denial. Peering down from a distance. Bombing me. (43)

The confrontation between these two male figures—enacted before symbolic representatives of the American public—drives the play's main tension. The Colonel, "a cheerleader for aggression" (Rich), insists on replicating the scenario of the victorious campaign against a vicious enemy in which he lost his son; he relentlessly questions Stubbs as to the details of the horrific experience and reconstructs the circumstances of the operation with miniature toy soldiers. He is manifestly enraged by Stubbs's continued claims that he is, in fact, the Colonel's disinherited son, incapacitated by his own troops as he was running from battle. The Colonel fervently denies the blood relation and, as the play develops, his frenzy escalates into physical violence, laying bare his inability to come to terms with the young man's impotent, disabled condition: "No son of mine has a 'thing' like that. It is not possible" (Shepard, *States of Shock* 34), and, more importantly, with the questionable nature of militarism and its gloomy legacies. Stubbs openly ridicules the Colonel's desperate attempts to overcome disorientation and reinforce his crumbling self-assurance about the glorious myths of war which he so devoutly preaches: "Hold on to an image! Lock onto a picture of a glorious, unending expansion! DON'T LET YOURSELF SLIP INTO DOUBT!" (38).

Emma Creedon, who has applied a surrealist lens to the dramatist's work of the 1990s, has analyzed *States of Shock* in terms of Georges Bataille's theory of "nonproductive expenditure," as a "performance of waste" (134–61). She argues that the brief yet multi-layered drama rendering Shepard's critique of war-mongering and deadening consumerism successfully extends his artistic vision "from the microcosm of the family," which was Shepard's focus for much of the 1980s, as evident in *Fool*

for *Love* (1983) and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), “to the macrocosm of the American psyche at large in an explicit rendering of United States military methods” (138, 135). Importantly, in this reflection upon the macrocosm of the nation, the dramatist manifestly aims far beyond exposing his country’s military hubris in the 1990s: the “cult of the self” (Creedon 136), expansionist machismo, and the “us-versus-them” scenario extolled by Shepard’s demonic Colonel which appears to be symptomatic of a more serious, and durable, American affliction crippling its citizens. What Shepard effectively does here, as suggested by Bottoms, is supply a provocative variation on the theme of “defining one’s own identity in dualistic opposition to some supposed ‘other’” (247) which features strongly in his earlier writings—notably, his celebrated family drama *True West* (1980). It is posited, rather alarmingly, that “the nation’s self-perception depends on having an opponent to demonize” (Bottoms 247). At one point in the play, both men even raise their cups in salute and drink to the enemy, while the Colonel repeatedly exclaims his appreciation of an unnamed foe whose evil united the country in revenge:

COLONEL: You have to remember that the enemy is always sneaking. Always slimy. Lurking. Ready to snatch the slightest secret. The smallest slipup. . . . Let’s have a toast. (*They click cups and drink together.*) TO THE ENEMY! . . . WITHOUT THE ENEMY WE’RE NOTHING!
 STUBBS (*toasting*): WITHOUT THE ENEMY WE’RE NOTHING!
 COLONEL: Exactly! Where would we be today without the enemy?
 STUBBS: I don’t know . . . where would we be?
 COLONEL: THE ENEMY HAS BROUGHT US TOGETHER!
 (Shepard, *States of Shock* 14–15)

Nordmann and Wickert acknowledge that, largely due to the play’s temporal and historical ambiguity, Shepard essentially invokes here “all wars at all times”; perhaps this one-act “deals with the state of war as a state of being,” they suggest, “perhaps with a permanent and pervasive disposition towards warfare on all levels of interaction, perhaps with war as the ‘father of all things’ which patterns all modes of production in modern industrial societies” (44–45). On the other hand, it could also be argued that the need for an external foe, underscored in the above passage from the play, made *States of Shock* particularly relevant to the 1990s. Military conflicts, as the Colonel insists, are not only useful but indispensable, for they offer a purpose, a stable point of reference to guard people against uncertainty. In view of the collapse of the Communist bloc and the dissolution of the Soviet Union that idea seemed to gain new validity. As the waitress in Shepard’s

play remarks: “I missed the Cold War with all my heart” (Shepard, *States of Shock* 41), thus exemplifying the disorientation brought about by the new realignment of global politics at “the dawn of a new world order” (Allison vii) and the disappearance of a distant “evil empire” against which to construct the country’s self-image. Seen from this perspective, the invasion and occupation of Kuwait launched in 1990 by Saddam Hussein, “a much less capable Soviet surrogate” (Crane xv), appeared to provide a convenient, black-and-white, “us-versus-them” scenario, setting off an immense military retribution by the coalition of allied forces which did much more than merely realize “the Wilsonian ideal of nations acting collectively to right the wrongs of an evil transgressor” (Allison vii).⁵

When interviewed by Carol Rosen in August 1991 about the genesis of *States of Shock*, Shepard recalled watching TV in a Kentucky horsemen’s bar and feeling outrage at the disturbing images of the Gulf War displayed on the screen and the wild enthusiasm that the spectacle provoked:

It just seemed like doomsday to me. I could not believe the systematic kind of insensitivity of it. That there was this punitive attitude—we’re just going to knock these people off the face of the earth. . . . Not only that, but they’ve convinced the American public that this was a good deed, that this was in fact a heroic fucking war, and welcome the heroes back. What fucking heroes, man? I mean, they bombed the shit out of these people. They knocked the stew out of them over there with bombing and bombing and bombing. The notion of this being a heroic event is just outrageous. . . . I can’t believe that, having come out of the ’60s and the incredible reaction to Vietnam, that voice has all but disappeared. Vanished. There’s no voice any more. This is supposed to be what America’s about? (“Silent Tongues” 235)

The intense outrage and horror triggered by “the whole hoax” of the war and the way everything became “choked down and censored in the media” was, as Shepard later clarifies, what ultimately prompted him to write (“Silent Tongues” 236). *States of Shock* gives vent to a feeling of indignation. It offers a parody of the nation’s fixation with endorsing ideals of virile, heroic and violent masculinity, whilst also harking back to the Western codes of manhood which are seen as an antidote to a sense of crisis and lack of purpose “in the grand scheme of things” (Shepard, *States of Shock* 33). As the Colonel emphatically asserts:

Even in the midst of the most horrible devastation. Under the most terrible kind of duress. Torture. Barbarism of all sorts. Starvation. Chemi-

⁵ See also Crane.

cal warfare. Public hangings. Mutilation of children. Raping of mothers. Raping of daughters. Raping of brothers and fathers. Execution of entire families. Entire generations of families. Amputation of private organs. Decapitation. Disembowelment. Dismemberment. Disinturnment. Eradication of wildlife. You name it. We can't forget that we were generated from the bravest stock. The Pioneer. The Mountain Man. The Plainsman. The Texas Ranger. The Lone Ranger. . . . These have not died in vain. These ones have not left us to wallow in various states of insanity and self-abuse. We have a legacy to continue, Stubbs. (24)

One of the implications of the Colonel's speech is that aggressive expansionism is "America's manifest right," even an obligation, since it constitutes "the logical extension of these frontier traditions" (Bottoms 247). Interestingly, citing what Katherine Weiss has observed about Shepard's later play, *The God of Hell* (2004)—written and produced during the more recent and far more protracted Iraq War of 2003–11—one might say that here the dramatist also essentially draws "a direct line from the Frontier Days to modern, chemical warfare," by exposing "a culture of war which transforms expansion through violence into an infectious act of heroism" (Weiss 205).⁶

Ironically, the self-righteous hyper-masculinity and militarism advocated by the bellicose Colonel fail to shelter the characters from wallowing "in the various states of insanity and self-abuse" that he stigmatizes. The meager population of the family restaurant slowly degenerates into chaos—doing justice to the play's subtitle—which is demonstrated on stage in a succession of outlandish enactments pushing the physical comedy "beyond the naturalistic into the arena of mime," or the absurd (Creedon 148); there are farcical dances, food fights, acts of gratuitous violence and, notably, flagrant masturbation. When the exasperated, paralyzed Stubbs smashes his dessert (quite fittingly, a banana split, whose phallic shape mockingly plays up the young man's erectile dysfunction), the Colonel urges him to "[b]ecome a man," at which Stubbs moves in his wheelchair towards the white couple and starts chanting louder and louder the phrase:

⁶ For an illuminating discussion on the creation, development and maintaining of mythologies arising out of the western expansion whilst highlighting how America's westward expansion often invoked sacred authority for massacre and extermination, and thus effectively united aggression with "regeneration," see, for instance, Richard Slotkin's trilogy on the mythology of the American West: *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (1973), *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992). His extensive study *The Fatal Environment* shows the durability of the Myth of the Frontier and explicates its crucial role in America's rise to power.

“Become a man. . . . BECOME A MAN! . . . BECOME A MAN!” whilst staring at the White Man, who keeps quietly masturbating beneath a napkin under the table, unbeknown to his spouse (Shepard, *States of Shock* 26–27). As the scene progresses, the Colonel begins to “*savagely whip*” the insubordinate Stubbs with his belt, and as the whipping intensifies, the White Man “*continues getting more worked up*” and gradually reaches orgasm. Even though Stubbs is beaten to the floor and crawls around the stage on all fours, the Colonel keeps pummeling him “*relentlessly,*” while the White Woman, utterly oblivious, calmly continues to eat her clam chowder (26–28). Clearly, in its choice of stylistic devices, *States of Shock* represented “a radical shift from the lyrical realism” of its immediate dramatic predecessor, *A Lie of the Mind* (Wade, “*States of Shock*” 263). Its occasional, blatantly grotesque self-indulgence seems more redolent of the dramatist’s earliest, spontaneously experimental and provocative work, like his debut piece *The Rock Garden*. Yet, as rightly pointed out by Bottoms, it is exactly through such deliberate “slapstick depravity” that Shepard’s “disgust” with the nation’s degradation and haughty self-absorption achieves its fullest realization (248).

It is worth noting that the play’s absurd action escalates against the backdrop of intermittent explosions from outside the diner, regularly reminding the audience of an ongoing military conflict. One of the most intriguing aspects of *States of Shock* is that political violence is presented as threatening, and it slowly engulfs this supposed enclave of family values and consumerism both of which are located at the heart of America. The action is periodically interrupted as the cyclorama lights up with “*the fireworks of war*” (Shepard, *States of Shock* 28) and the audience is exposed to, or assailed by, percussive eruptions from offstage drummers and sounds of battle signalling the approaching warfare. Glory Bee first reports that the diner’s manager is dead (22), and next that the cook has been wounded (25). A while later, in one of the most “Surrealist” stage images of the one-act (Creedon 152), a metal busboy’s wagon loaded with gas masks arrives “*all by itself*” and parks centrestage (Shepard, *States of Shock* 40), marking the family diner as a warzone. The confused waitress airs her disbelief:

The thing I can’t get over is, it never occurred to me that “Danny’s” could be invaded. I always thought we were invulnerable to attack. The landscaping. The lighting. The parking lot. All the pretty bushes. Who would touch us? Who would dare? (40)⁷

⁷ Significantly, Glory Bee’s incredulous remarks, as well as her nostalgia for the relative stability of the Cold War, have gained new resonance since the play’s premiere due to such domestic incidents as the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing, the Oklahoma City bombing

Ostensibly, those who would dare are her fellow countrymen, for the closing image of *States of Shock* intimates that the United States is facing an enemy within, posing a threat far more problematic than either Communist Russians or Arab Islamists. Towards the end of the play, the two male protagonists swap places in Stubbs's flag-bedecked wheelchair: while the Colonel loses his potency and remains seated facing the audience, Stubbs unexpectedly regains the use of his legs and mounts a retaliation. He advances on the Colonel from behind and grabs him around the neck in a stranglehold (Shepard, *States of Shock* 45). He then seizes the Colonel's saber with both hands, "raises the sword in one quick and decisive movement, as though to decapitate the COLONEL," "freezes in that posture" as his alleged father "stares straight ahead," and exclaims through his gas mask: "GOD BLESS THE ENEMY!!!!!!!" (46). Whether the final tableau with which the playwright leaves us indicates an act of retribution or a revolution of sorts, such a prognostication of what the nation's future might hold in store is bound to disturb. Crucially, in those final moments both the seated Colonel and Stubbs look ahead, facing out towards the audience, which could be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the audience's presence. Hence, as suggested by Creedon, "the boundaries between actor, character, and performer dissolve, and the 'attitudes' that emerge indicate pretense, role-playing, and an 'acting-out' of selfhood" (151).

The Colonel and Stubbs remain frozen throughout the closing "vaudeville" act which further undermines any possibility of "a naturalistic interpretation" (Creedon 152) since the cast don gas masks and in unison perform an American folk standard "Goodnight Irene." The White Man intones the first stanza and the refrain:

Sometimes I live in the country
 Sometimes I live in the town
 Sometimes I have a great notion
 To jump into the river and drown
 Irene, good night
 Irene, good night
 Good night, Irene
 Good night, Irene
 I'll see you in my dreams,

in April 1995, and the September 11 attacks in 2001. No less shocking were the Columbine High School massacre (April 1999), the Virginia Tech shooting (April 2007), and the 2012 Aurora mass shooting in Colorado.

and the remaining characters, with the exception of Stubbs, join in (Shepard, *States of Shock* 46–47). The blues standard referencing unrequited love and suicidal tendencies, “juxtaposed starkly with the Damoclean sword hovering over Uncle Sam, wielded by his own ‘son’” (Bottoms 249), effectively closes this peculiar, if impassioned, play, offering an exuberantly theatrical polemic on the debilitatingly polarized mindset, a perpetuation of violence, as well as mindless consumerism, not to mention the nation’s moral apathy. Surely, *States of Shock* never aspired to be a “political” drama in any conventional sense. But even though the antics of the play’s cartoon characters infuse the brief work with absurdist comedy, its stance on war is unarguably serious. Untypically of Shepard, it displays “a crusading fervor” in its “indictment of militaristic enterprise and nationalistic allegiance” (Wade, “*States of Shock*” 263).

Shepard’s deliberate, perverse experimentation in *States of Shock*, which divided the play’s reviewers and Shepard scholars, deserves some more attention. The dramatist blatantly relinquishes here the more pared-down, “refined” and “distilled” approach of such canonical family dramas of the 1980s like *True West* or *Fool for Love*, which maintained, on the surface at least, the realistic façade (Bottoms 183). Rather he opts for a minimalistic stage set, plot fragmentation, jarring effects and grotesque, as well as overblown theatricality, whilst more willingly indulging his subversive impulses. Indeed, although propelled by the unraveling of a family secret, like *Fool for Love* or the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Buried Child* (1978), stylistically *States of Shock* seemed closer to the hallucinatory pieces of the mid-1960s, “more concerned with expressing a highly personal state of consciousness than with telling a story” (DeRose 134). Some readings of the play’s stylistics saw the drama as a deplorably retrogressive step in the playwright’s career, a relapse into his former tactics and once-effective dramatic devices. Frank Rich even begins his *New York Times* review of the play’s production at the American Theatre Place with the supposition that Shepard had been “hibernating since his East Village emergence in the Vietnam era.” “[I]n its own elliptical way,” Rich further argues that *States of Shock* is “an antiwar play, written with the earnest—one might even say quaint—conviction that the stage is still an effective platform for political dissent and mobilizing public opinion.” Although, as the reviewer concedes, the dramatist’s ingenuous faith in the power of theatre seems “uplifting,” “*States of Shock* is less so.” Nevertheless, as a counterpoint, there were also voices who welcomed Shepard’s apparent drifting away from the more orthodox adherence to realistic illusion visible in his family dramas of the 1980s. David J. DeRose, for instance, applauded Shepard’s exploratory approach and commitment to reinventing himself, and also attested

to the dramatist's nonconformist spirit. He suggested that notwithstanding the play's overt political symbolism or uneven tempo and tone, its "striking imagery and theatrical energy" heralded "not so much a regression as a rejuvenation of the impassioned (and somewhat reckless) theatrical genius" (137). From the critic's perspective, "a new incarnation" of this one-time rebel of alternative theatre (DeRose 137) prognosticated well for his future artistic development. An intriguing evaluation of Shepard's recent playwrighting has been ventured by William W. Demastes, who in his *Theatre of Chaos: Beyond Absurdism, Into Orderly Disorder* investigated the parallels between the arts and contemporary scientific thought (including the theory of chaos) by probing how twentieth-century American dramatists confronted "orderly disorder" and positioned themselves in relation to "two strongly influential movements that have polarized modern Western theatre": naturalism and absurdism, which argue respectively "for a linearly causal global perspective of human behaviour and for a local vision from which ultimately no human behavioral patterns can be abstracted" (104). Demastes reads Shepard's struggles in the theatre as necessarily "cultural struggles" and places him among America's "new realist" playwrights, who are

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recently discovering that to turn away from the linear causality of the mechanists and to turn toward the dynamic, nonlinear, and evolving chaos of life may provide American culture—and indeed all of postmodern civilization—with a more accurate depiction of nature and a clearer vision of how to function within that universe. (128)

In some respects, *States of Shock* and the works that followed in the 1990s: the revisionist western *Silent Tongue* (1993) which Shepard wrote and directed, as well as his stage plays *Simpatico* (1994), *When the World Was Green: A Chef's Fable* (1996), *Eyes for Consuela* (1998), and *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), seemed to signal an interesting development in his mature writings marked by the growing importance of a contemplative, even ethical, element to Shepard's vision. Even if "the graying of the dramatist has brought with it a diminished output," as argued by Wade, one may observe in Shepard's work of that decade "a new introspection": the playwright's gravitation towards more relational thinking, and a sensibility less prone to disrupting than connecting ("*States of Shock*" 258, 276). *State of Shock* could be viewed as a self-conscious auto-critique of a sort, on the part of the author whom *The New York Times* once hailed as the "Playwright Laureate of the West" (Coe 35), for it reveals his "increasing awareness of the debilities attending masculinist codes and postures"

(Wade, “*States of Shock*” 261). It clearly deplores aggressive, exploitative expansionism by challenging the economies of domination that hark back to the frontier mentality. What is implied is that by exposing the deleterious effects of machismo and its divisive power games, there is a necessity to renegotiate the politics of relations, and the need for a more acute concern of empathetic involvement.

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