

Marek Filinger

Sam Shepard: Pohřbené dítě

Diplomová práce: Hodnocení

This is a carefully researched piece of work by someone who clearly knows and has a genuine interest in his subject. For the Czech (or Slovak) reader looking for an introduction to the work of Sam Shepard, or for a detailed analysis of his play *Buried Child*, it is a good place to start.

However, the question immediately arises: Who is this reader? By chance, a native English speaker has been asked to assess this work (and at this point I must apologize for not writing in Czech), and I must say straight away that in many places I wished I had been supplied with the English original of many of the quotations (at least in footnotes). This was especially true of the Slovak texts – it is a constant source of irritation to me that everyone in the Czech Republic is expected to understand Slovak.

Of course your intended readership, since you are submitting this dissertation to the Institute of Translation Studies, must be primarily fellow translators. All the more reason, then, to give them access to the original English texts you quote from so copiously. The specific academic context should also be better reflected in the emphasis given to *translations* of Shepard's plays – which are allotted only 20 pages out of 90. Though this comparative analysis of different translations appears to be quite perceptive and intelligent (I am not qualified to comment in detail on issues of English-Czech translation), it does rather feel like an afterthought – as if you had suddenly realised, almost too late, which department you were studying at.

Here are some specific comments/criticisms.

1. There are far too many quite unnecessary slips or inconsistencies.

Spelling/typos: 'Texax', 'Gingsberg', 'v druhém dětství', 'an interview with Seam Shepard' (and, just above it on p.94, 'Sam shepard'), etc..

Punctuation: When is it correct to start a quotation in upper case after a colon? Only when it is the start of a sentence. And 'quotes within quotes' should use different quotation marks – single or double, as the case may. I also noticed a few missing or 'floating' full stops after quotations.

Syntax, etc.: I found some bizarre grammatical slips, such as 'a zda dokáže pochopit jednotlivého obrazy' (8) or (Vince has been referred to a few lines earlier) 'Shelley, své druhé „společenské“ ja...'

On a factual level, I was puzzled to read that Samuel Shepard Rogers III was the son of Samuel Shepard Rogers IV (p.10). Also to see that Vince had switched instruments – from the saxophone (colloquially referred to as a 'horn'¹) to the trumpet (*trubka* – or is this also a

¹ Billie Holiday is credited with the remark: 'When I'm singing I feel like I'm playing the horn.'

slang generic term used by Czech jazz musicians?). I expect you got this from one of the translations.

These are all minor things, but together they do make a bad impression. They could easily have been fixed with a little editing, but it seems you were under pressure to finish quickly and had no time for that. As a translator, however, you must know that checking your work is a vital part of the job. Weeks of hard work can be spoilt if you skip that final stage.

2. Style: Occasionally your attempts to create a lively text miss the mark, eg. 'Zdálky k nám doléhá řinčení ostruh na kovbojských botách i zuřivé bubnování šamanských tanců'. Or is this a deliberate parody? If so, what of? And why?

There are a number of unfortunate turns of phrase: 'setkáváme se s dvěma milníky – ranou [...] tvorbou 60. let a rodinnou trilogii [...] let sedmdesátých.' (27) 'V Mámení mysli je divák konfrontován s absurdním humorem absurdní a post-absurdní dramatiky' (28).

And I don't know what a Victorian ending (*viktoriánský* [...] *konec*) is supposed to be (53).

3. While your work appears to have a coherent and logical structure, there is in fact quite a lot of repetition (and therefore redundancy). How many times, for example, do you remind us that the dysfunctional family in *Buried Child* (and most of Shepard's other plays) can be seen as a metaphor for the dysfunctional USA? How many times did I read observations about the American dream, about alcohol and violence, about the mismatch between happy photographs and grim reality? You have a whole section on 'Identity' (p. 36), but then you return to the subject on p. 63. I realize there is a risk, when you are working on something for a long time, to lose track of what you have said and what you have not said. Being able to organize your material and present it clearly requires a disciplined approach that, while unglamorous, is absolutely essential in all kinds of writing – and nowhere more so than in an academic dissertation.

That said, I must say I enjoyed reading your work (apart from the many quotations in Slovak!) and came to the end feeling I had learnt a lot about Shepard (whose work, I must confess, I am not as familiar with as I would like to be. I have only seen one stage production, of *True West*, and of course a few films, notably Wenders' *Paris, Texas* and Volker Schlöndorff's excellent *Voyager* – a gruelling neo-classical drama based on Max Frisch's *Homo Faber*). It was clear you appreciated and understood the text(s) you were discussing, which is always a great help, and you seem to have covered quite a lot of ground in your research.

This brings me to another small criticism, but one I shall try and disguise as praise. Given your obvious grasp of and interest in the material, why do we not hear more about what *you* think of Sam Shepard and specifically *Buried Child*? Most of your text is a collage of quotes from various sources (many from the same book, but never mind), which certainly gives us a good overview of what other people have written about Shepard. But I would like to see a more critical approach to some of this material. Having looked up Hooti and Shooshtarian, for example, (partly to check whether such an unlikely-sounding duo can actually exist) I quickly realised that they were not really worth quoting, except possibly as a target for attack. Perhaps this is because I have a slight problem with

'postmodernism' (their fetish), which I think is now so overused as a catch-all category as to be virtually meaningless.

Even more I would like to see some original Filinger – because I am sure you must have your own take on Shepard's plays. I was looking for 'your voice' but found only rather general remarks like 'Jenže ani proroci, ani mýty již dnešní Ameriku spasit nemohou', or 'Máme co dočínění spíše s travestií klasického schématu a námětu', or your admission (footnote p. 55) that it took you a while to see why the play was called *Buried Child*. My hopes were raised some pages later (68) when I read: 'Z vlastní zkušenosti pak mohu říci, že...', but you only went on to tell us you had read the early rather than the later edition of the play. It would be nice to be able to say that your work has propelled Shepard Studies a tiny bit further, with a couple of new insights or discoveries. Sadly, this is probably not the case. Or maybe you don't think that should be the purpose of a work of this kind.

I appreciated your efforts to see the play from the perspective of the theatre (plays are, after all, written to be performed). Although I did not see the Ostrava production, I can imagine more or less what it must have been like: play it for laughs, emphasise the grotesque, and avoid any kind of emotional truth or depth. I have seen too many of those trivializing, superficial productions in Prague. I recall in particular Pinter's *Betrayal* – a great play with a huge range of subtextual emotion – which came across as little better than low farce (I'm glad you pointed out the parallels with Pinter, by the way); or a Chekhov² (*The Cherry Orchard*?) in which a key monologue was utterly ruined by the pointless appearance of a squeaky pram being wheeled slowly across the stage. So I quite agree with your closing advice to Czech 'divadelníky' planning to put on foreign plays – take a look at some decent foreign productions.

I particularly liked your remarks about reading versus watching a play (p. 55), and much of Chapter 3.5., where you explore the historical and social background to *Buried Child*. Also your summary, focussing as it did on the practical question of producing a play in translation.

I have hardly touched on the notes I made while reading your work. Most of them are aide-memoires for further discussion. These topics include:

- Music and language
- Myth and classical form; myth as an emotional, not rational, medium. 'Mýtus je mocný prostředek, protože promlouvá přímo k emocím a ne k rozumu'— (Shepard, 1977, s. 62, v. p.)
- Reason vs. mysticism 'střet přítomnosti s minulostí, reality s fantazií a především v neustálém souboji rozumového chápání s mystickým porozuměním.' (p. 41)
- Critics' views of Shepard's works vs. what he says about them himself. (p.28: 'To je směšné. Myslím, že není fér nebo nefér vykládat si tak mé hry. Jen je to takový neúplný, dílčí způsob pozorování té hry. Lidé doslova ujíždějí na hledání těchto

² A propos Chekhov, I'm reminded of his comment that 'the artist is not meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say: his only job is to be an impartial witness.' Could be interesting to relate this to 'postmodern' relativism, etc.

společenských důsledků, a jak se to podobá současné Americe.’) The problem of ‘over-interpreting’; looking for *too much* meaning; attaching *too many* labels. [The playwright creates a multi-dimensional reality which, like ‘real’ reality, is open to many interpretations. You quote Shepard: ‘Když jsem to viděl, tak jsem najednou díky té produkci pochopil některé aspekty celé hry, kterých jsem si dříve vůbec nevšiml’.]

- Transferring American plays (here: Buried Child) into the Czech milieu. Problems, possibilities.
- Different meaning of ‘The Sixties’ (and Seventies) in US and Cz culture.
- Your comment about America never having been the land of unlimited opportunity.

I hope we will have a chance to talk about some of these at your ‘defence’.

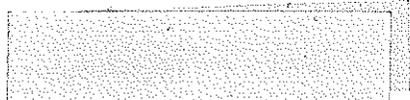
Finally, a quick remark about substandard language (p. 70). You have to be careful about labelling forms like ‘gotta’ and ‘ain’t’ substandard. Of course in their written form they are, but remember a play is meant to be spoken, and in many cases (but not all) these spellings and contractions are simply an attempt to render phonetically spoken American English. Sometimes they need a markedly ‘substandard’ rendering in translation; but often they don’t. (Discuss this with Dr. Josek.)

Assessment

Overall, this is a very good piece of work, marred by some signs of carelessness and haste. More importantly, I feel the structure could be tighter and the material better organized. Perhaps also, given the context of the dissertation, there could be more emphasis on matters directly related to translation.

Your chosen aim, however, (*poskytnout čtenáři základní obrázek o životě a díle jednoho z nejvýznamnějších amerických dramatiků uplynulého století, přinejmenším jeho druhé poloviny*), has certainly been achieved.

Grade: 2 (-)



Robert Russell

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