



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report:

Martin Lauer Bc "Instability of Character in Sam Shepard's Work of the 1970s" MA thesis

Sam Shepard is a theatre maker whose work has garnered extensive critical attention and as such it requires particular skill and insight to find an original approach. Mr Lauer succeeds in doing so in an engaging and intellectually convincing manner. His hypothesis demonstrates sophisticated, integrative thought and is developed clearly throughout. From the table of contents the structure of the work is both logical and thoughtful, headings are convincing, there are no redundancies. From the outset the plan of development and key areas that will be pursued are clearly communicated.

In terms of development the thesis fulfils these expectations. Chapter 1 introduces the topic and begins to map it with effective use of critical materials. There is a good effort to reflect upon those interpretations over the first few pages. While there is a sense of the direction the thesis will take, the presentation of an overt argument is postponed. Chapter 2 delivers the theoretical basis of the thesis. Material on transgression at the outset cannot be gainsaid but seems rather rote and sweeping. References to Foucault on transgression are more productive and critically processed. It is interesting to note that this work appears (in translation) also in the 1970s. Perhaps a key issue, at least worth mentioning, is the way in which transgression, as a topic emerges here for philosophers and artists just at the point in the later twentieth century when there is a growing sense that (certain forms of) transgression seem exhausted. The transition to the work of Victor Turner adds another dimension to this history in 1960s/1970s thought, in the particular realm of performance. Some seductive citations here, but what is striking is how far such "anthropology" and "ritual drama" seem from the world in which Shepard was raised and was working. I would also query the extent to which Turner's claims about Ndembu rituals (see pages 18-19) are generalisable principles or whether they are intended to be so. The conclusion drawn at this point:

"Thus, this splitting of the self—which occurs in the liminal state as one disconnects oneself from the social ties and relations to which he or she has so far adhered—necessarily produces two outcomes: Firstly, it compels the subject to examine its self under new light, and secondly, it establishes temporality as the fundamental constitutive principle in the fashioning of one's identity" (19)

might be further interrogated not only with reference to Nietzsche, but also with regard to the practical purpose of ritual performance in 'primitive' societies (which is not generally a rupturing of social bonds but a re-enforcement of them). These observations, of course, serve as a bridge to connect with the theoretical touchstone of the thesis—the work of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on schizophrenia—and Mr Lauer's hypothesis that "Shepard's plays can be effectively analyzed from the perspective of schizophrenia as a characteristic condition of man in the cultural and social environment of the post-modern era. Moreover, the fading away of differences in transgression and the liminal state "betwixt and between"



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identifiable positions particularly relate to Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's concept of "becomings." (19) To his credit Mr Lauer approaches this complex field by degrees, taking time to consider the work of Fredric Jameson and others on schizophrenia as a cultural/existential condition before elaborating on the work of Deleuze and Guattari and some of the key nodes in their work of relevance to Shepard's plays and their characters. While one might question Deleuze and Guattari's argument that "there is a liberating potential deeply rooted in the process of becoming a schizophrenic" (32), Mr Lauer deftly sidesteps this issue by carefully and selectively applying some their terminology to Shepard's work in the 1970s and, ultimately blending this with Shepard's interest in music, and specifically in jazz.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 fan out in a wide angled, yet intricate appraisal of the ways in which Shepard refracts character through the lenses of creativity, music and voice. Not only do these chapters feature stylistically excellent writing, the analysis of plays is illuminating and the research that supports these analyses is innovative and shows an aptitude for complex reflection. Chapter 3 explores *Angel City* and *Suicide in Bb* with reference to jazz and jazz improvisation. This chapter with some editing could easily be published. Here the fusion of material on jazz and Deleuzian citations works in harmony with Mr Lauer's insights into Shepard's manipulation of character in these pieces. Chapter 4 advances a convincing reading of capitalism, schizophrenia and the figure of the rock and roll artist where character is distorted, destroyed and reconfigured by Shepard in *Angel City* and *The Tooth of the Crime*. Chapter 5 then turns to Shepard's most radical dismembering of characters in *Tongues* and *Savage/Love* both produced in collaboration with Joseph Chaikin and the implicit musical structures in their fracturing of forms. Finally, chapter 6 provides a detailed and judicious overview of what has been attempted without overstating or simplifying the thesis's objectives or achievements.

With regard to the more practical dimensions of this work: there are minor format errors here and there, for instance in terms of alignment and italicisation. The level of language throughout is excellent with only occasional imperfections in tense use and spelling (note Shepard is misspelled in the conclusion). On the whole this is an eloquent and linguistically nuanced piece of writing. Presentation and format are excellent. Research is exemplary showing both initiative and, more importantly mature critical judgement. Sources are not only appropriately cited but actively engaged and analytically with throughout.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "excellent" / 1.

26.8.2013

Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD