



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

**Supervisor's Review**

Michal Sičák, "Myth, Ritual and Identity of the Postmodern Man in Selected Plays by Sam Shepard and David Mamet," MA thesis

Michal Sičák's dissertation proposes an examination of questions of identity as they are staged by playwrights Sam Shepard and David Mamet in the context of post-1960s American theatre. While the topic per se has been treated with relative frequency by a number of critics, what makes the dissertation noteworthy is the way in which Mr Sičák engagingly situates his discussion within the cultural and theoretical context.

The work is organised around five chapters that have been divided logically with meaningful sub-headings. Chapter one unfolds the rationale for the project, charting the cultural and political impulses in American society at the beginning of the Cold War period and how these impulses shaped the theatre of the era. Appropriate emphasis is placed upon how by the 1960s diversity "was reflected in all social spheres" (8) as well as in literature and the performing arts. This diversification is manifest in the history of Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway theatre in New York, and is a key aspect of both Shepard and Mamet's early careers. The chapter justifies yoking Shepard and Mamet, despite their obvious differences as playwrights, by proposing that "their goal was quite similar: to discredit the feeling of a unified American identity [...] to challenge the lethargy of the American people and to show the flaws of the mythic American dream and the false preconceptions people consider in their 'pursuit of happiness'" (9). The subsequent explanation of the dissertation's objectives is clear and logical, though it might have been useful to observe (as other scholars have done) the highly gendered nature of the crises staged in both playwrights' work.

Chapter two connects developments within American theatre culture from the 1960s with theories of performance, theatre anthropology and how this discourse contributed to Shepard and Mamet's work at that time. The survey of theatre history is well wrought and structured around important critical work on the topic (Erika Fischer-Lichte, Stephen J. Bottoms, Marvin Carlson and Christopher Bigsby). The point of departure is the naissance of performance art and the shift away from a theatre defined in terms of text and drama. Mr Sičák treats the principal influential groups and practitioners, and indicates their impact upon Shepard and Mamet's thinking about theatre. The history of performance leads to a discussion of the theoretical modalities of the performative as formulated by Marie Maclean in *Narrative as Performance*. Mr Sičák perceptively notes how while Maclean acknowledges theatre's ritual heritage she does not consider this trajectory further (22). Consequently, he turns to the work of well known theatre anthropologist Victor Turner and to that of the founder of the Performance Group, Richard Schechner. The chapter therefore takes the reader from the emergence of performance and performance theory through to the concept of the performative and then to theoretical work that considers ritual and myth in theatre and performance, while at each point returning to the ways in which these developments contribute to an analysis of work by Shepard and Mamet. This trajectory is an ambitious one and is accomplished with considerable clarity.



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Chapter three hones in on the work of Sam Shepard. Mr Sičák examines at length two plays: *La Turista* (1967) and *The Tooth of the Crime* (1971). His selection here deserves some note since it clearly avoids the standard choices for student research (i.e. *True West*, *Buried Child*) and shows both imagination and initiative. Throughout the chapter Mr Sičák combines lucid close reading of the plays with strategic discussion of critical sources successfully maintaining a focus on identity, ritual and myth.

Chapter four considers David Mamet's *Edmond* (1982) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), contrasting (with reference to Carla McDonough's work) Shepard and Mamet's dramatic attitudes and treatments of postmodern masculine identity in America. Again, the close analysis of the plays is well informed by critical research and is perceptive. Here, while the exploration of identity crisis and the dismantling of myths are thorough, the chapter is somewhat less convincing with regard to how ritual might function in Mamet's work. That said, the concluding chapter admittedly does suggest that ritual in Mamet is "secularized and depersonalized" (76). Nevertheless, the final assertions that in Mamet, at least, "rituals no longer served as an important gateway in one's development" (78) or that they have lost all power due to secularization might be questioned.

To conclude, besides the above point about the status of ritual, and some minor language errors (i.e. the heading on page 71), the work displays a fluent writing style, undertakes a complex analysis of the chosen subject that is solidly constructed on considerable research, citations are strategically used throughout and there is a strong attention to detail in presentation. Therefore, I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "excellent" / 1.

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