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11-7-2017

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#### Citation Information

Weiss, Katherine. 2017. Book Review of Emma Creedon, *Sam Shepard and the Aesthetics of Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*. Vol.5(2). 392-396.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2017-0036> ISSN: 2195-0156

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## Book Reviews

**Emma Creedon.** *Sam Shepard and the Aesthetics of Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, xi + 199 pp., \$90.00.

Reviewed by **Katherine Weiss**, E-Mail: weisk01@etsu.edu

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2017-0036>

*Sam Shepard and the Aesthetics of Performance* begins with an exciting premise: its author Emma Creedon takes issue with scholars who have aligned Shepard's plays with realism, naturalism, or, as she more simply puts it, with "Reality" (xi). Every student and scholar of the American playwright has come across academic titles that connect Shepard with Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, among other champions of American Realism (see Bigsby 175–7; Kolin 402–3; Krasner 108–9; Roudané 176–233). Despite the connections that can be drawn between Shepard and an aesthetic of realism, Creedon reminds us that theatre reviewers have often voiced an alternative lineage – Shepard's debt to Surrealism. She notes, however, that "academic criticism has thus far failed to consider the implications of this expression and its subsequent connections to the visual. Nor have there been any attempts to situate Shepard's plays within the context of the aesthetic and formal principles of Surrealism as a visual artistic movement" (ix). What follows is Creedon's attempt to provide academic criticism to explore the connections that reviewers have been making since Shepard's early plays.

Creedon's book moves chronologically through Shepard's plays – a common way to unfold an academic narrative. However, this structure throws readers off-balance. We are expecting a discussion that follows the direct link between Shepard and Surrealism. Instead, the discussion (an excellent one that ties Shepard's aesthetic to painting and other visual arts) delves into the visual connections between *Icarus's Mother* and Roy Lichtenstein's "Star Jockey:"

Both Lichtenstein and Shepard are parodying the quixotic misconceptions that construe the gruesome, inhuman realities of World War II; both pieces were produced in the 1960s, an era when the threat of conscription, which was exclusive to the American male, was pervasive. (4)

To validate her connections between Lichtenstein and Shepard, Creedon launches into a discussion that connects Lichtenstein's Pop Art, a genre of painting that was initially called "New Surrealism" (21), to Salvador Dalí through the Surrealist's "exploration of paranoia" (4). This type of fine weaving to trace an aesthetic not immediately identifiable as Surrealist occurs throughout Creedon's work.

Indeed, it is the connections she makes between Shepard's works and painting that breathe fresh air into the body of scholarship. For example, in connecting the final monologue of *The Rock Garden* to Dalí's 1929 painting *Lugubrious Game*, Creedon claims that the Surrealists, like Shepard, celebrate and admire the "territory of childhood [...] as an idealized landscape, free from the constraints of reason. Yet it also figured as a rich burial ground where anxieties and fears could be secreted and pilfered as source material in years to come" (17). Creedon is onto something here; Shepard's works are haunted by the buried secrets of the mind. However, unlike the Surrealists, Shepard's youths are not residing in an idealized space. They attempt to survive in a vicious world ruled by adults. While Vince in *Buried Child* may remember the past as a time when he entertained the adults by playing the piano on his teeth (Shepard 95), Shepard, who goes further than the Surrealists, reveals the idealism of childhood as an illusion. Anxiety, war, and conflict are ever present in childhood as witnessed in *Curse of the Starving Class's* reference to model airplanes hanging from Weston's bedroom ceiling (Shepard 137).

Perhaps childhood is a stage in which selfhood is not yet thrown into question as it is in Shepard's London plays. The plays Shepard wrote during his self-exile, Creedon argues, depict the characters as searching for selfhood and in the process donning "figurative and literal masks" (21). It is at times like this, however, that I question Creedon's thesis. After all, the search for selfhood has become a prevalent theme in much of the art and literary works of the twentieth century – not just for the Surrealists. According to Creedon, what connects Shepard's search for the self to Surrealism is Shepard's links to Pop Art. Pointing to *The Tooth of Crime* as an example, Creedon notes that the play is rife with popular culture references and to "the consumerist adulation of material wealth" (28). Creedon goes on to explain that Shepard's play, and others of this period, employ pop culture references and images of consumerism to critique "ritualistic devotion, lamenting the loss of 'true' myth" (28). While I agree with Creedon's insight here, I question whether we need to invoke Surrealism in the discussion. Its insertion does little to enhance our understanding of the aesthetic choices Shepard made when writing and, at least with *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, directing his London plays.

Creedon's analysis of the "disembodied voice, mediumship, the failure of the body, and the powerful 'voice' of Beckett" (106) in *Tongues, Savage/Love*, and *The War in Heaven* – three plays born out of Shepard's collaboration with Joseph Chaikin – is among her best. Chaikin is central to this discussion since, according to Creedon, he introduced Shepard to Beckett's prose and plays. Although there is regrettably little written on Beckett's influence on Shepard, nonetheless Creedon is not the first to do so. She, however, does not make mention of any of the

existing work on this subject, not even Susan Brienza's 1987 book chapter "Sam No. 2: Shepard Plays Beckett with an American Accent" or Philip C. Kolin's discussion of Shepard's influences in *American Plays Since 1945* – an unfortunate omission. That said, her illuminating discussion of the similarities between Beckett's *Not I* and *That Time* with that of *Tongues* and *Savage/Love* makes up for this omission. "[I]n its dramatization of an interior monologue, void of visual stimuli, with surreal stage directions that disorientate the audience and create an antinaturalistic *mise-en-scène*" (114), *Tongues* echoes Beckett's plays of the 1970s onwards and his prose from the 1960s onwards. Having been reared by an abusive and alcoholic father, Shepard discovered that his thematic interest lay in the after-effects of traumatic experiences. In this, he finds literary fathers in Chaikin, who had to find an outlet for his personal trauma as his health was deteriorating and speech thereby compromised, Beckett, who courageously joined the French Resistance during WWII and Irish Red Cross after the war, and the Surrealist Simone Breton, whose poetry Beckett translated and who worked as a physician during WWI. Creedon concludes her discussion with this insight:

The treatment of language [...] suggests an attempt to give expression to aphasia, most literally in *The War in Heaven*, although an interest in the failure of language and its constant deferral of meaning is evident in the works that Shepard and Chaikin developed even before Chaikin's stroke. This correlates to Shepard's continuous denial of meaning in his plays, a refutation he has maintained throughout this dramatic writing career. (133)

The "failure of language" and "denial of meaning," indeed, are to be found in Beckett as early as his 1937 letter to his German friend Axel Kaun. Like Beckett, Shepard explores the ways in which language cannot express the trauma of the characters. Moreover, both Shepard and Beckett are known for their reluctance to speak of their work as having meaning. Even in Beckett's plays, characters like Hamm ask, "We're not beginning to ... to ... mean something?" – a question which Clov rebukes with a "[b]rief laugh" (Beckett 40). However, an irony arises because in the aesthetic of "impotence, ignorance" (Shenker) which Beckett strove for and Shepard inherits, both create texts that are rich in their abuse of language and full of meaning. Meaning for Beckett and Shepard, possibly, is bound up in a call to action or in a resolution as it is for writers of the problem play such as Henrik Ibsen or twentieth-century socialists such as Arthur Miller or Bertolt Brecht. It is meaning in this sense, I maintain, that Shepard and Beckett fail to provide.

Creedon offers a new way to view Shepard's so-called misogyny. According to Creedon, "Shepard's representation of women" should be read "in comparison to the treatment of women by Surrealism" (43). She continues, "Shepard, like Surrealist artists, has exploited violence as an instrument in the bolstering of the male ego" (43). Creedon treads on dangerous territory as such claims can lead to

over-simplified readings. However, in connecting the family plays with paintings by René Magritte, Max Ernst, and Dorothea Tanning, Creedon creates a rich analysis of Shelly in *Buried Child*, May in *Fool for Love*, and Beth in *A Lie of the Mind*, among others. Creedon refuses to shy away from the violence Shepard's women are subjected to, but notes that despite being "symbolically raped, killed off, neglected, and nearly beaten to death," they are never "erased" (78) and thus often hold more power than his male characters.

Along with her examination of the patriarchy's treatment of women in Shepard's plays, Creedon reflects on *Angel City* and Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's 1929 film *Un chien andalou* as "political reactions against capitalism" (88). Despite her fine discussion of Shepard's critique of capitalism in this work and the connections we can make in regards to the argument in subsequent works such as *Curse of the Starving Class* and *The God of Hell* (a play Creedon neglects to discuss here or in her penultimate chapter on *States of Shock*), nonetheless her connection to Shepard and the surrealist film by Dalí and Buñuel lacks the fine weaving accomplished elsewhere in the book. The subsections have too neatly kept these works apart rather than bringing them together. As a result, the capitalist critique of Dalí and Buñuel's film is never explicit. What is more, Creedon misses the opportunity to tie the film to her exploration of gender in Shepard's plays. The cutting into the woman's eye in *Un chien andalou* is certainly an extreme act of violence against a woman that mirrors the acts of violence against the women on Shepard's stage.

Creedon provides an excellent discussion of what she terms Shepard's "performance of waste" (135). She does not simply examine the stage images of cluttered junkyards and the bodily fluids that characters dispel; instead, Creedon explains that "the levels of representation operate on mimetic, diegetic, filmic, but also textual planes as the language of warfare is assimilated into the text and contributes to the wasteful performance," and continues that "[t]he coexisting levels of representation produce a Cubist scenography, in the vein of Picasso's infamous painting *Guernica* (1937), the most notorious antiwar statement ever produced by a visual artist and a key work in the history of Surrealism" (141). Shepard's performance of waste, too, links directly to the Surrealist interest in depicting acts of a gratuitous nature, or *acte gratuit*, thereby giving resonance to the masturbation scene in *States of Shock* and the urination episode in *Curse of the Starving Class*. But more crucially, it speaks to Shepard's critique of American involvement in the Middle-East. The Gulf War for Shepard was the ultimate gratuitous act – America's performance of waste on an international scale. While Creedon brings *Simpatico* into this discussion, she leaves out *The God of Hell* – an odd choice, as Shepard's 2004 political play reveals America's Iraq War and American patriotism as wasteful and deadly performances.

Creedon concludes with a discussion of Shepard's more recent work with the Abbey Theatre, an unclear ending to an otherwise compelling study: "I conclude with the suggestion that at present, Dublin offers the same stimulation for Shepard that it presented to Beckett as inspiration for a Surrealist treatment of experience" (168). Whilst her final chapter aims to return to Beckett and by extension the Surrealists, there are distinct differences between the playwrights. Shepard, as Creedon admits, is not Irish nor Irish-American. More importantly, unlike Beckett and James Joyce, whose works are haunted by images of Ireland, Shepard's are haunted by America. Thus, I suggest a different account to Shepard's work in Ireland. Dublin offers Shepard the distance to his native land as Paris did for Joyce and Beckett. Distance becomes necessary when writing about home and family. The Surrealist aesthetic, too, functions to create distance by bringing the object too close to the viewer until their perception is altered much like the way audiences flinch before the blade cuts into the woman's eye in *Un chien andalou*. Furthermore, I am not certain I would categorize *Kicking a Dead Horse* as "a contemporary Western adaptation of *Waiting for Godot*" (164), as Creedon does. Shepard's play is more reminiscent of Dalí's paintings of horses and desert landscapes, such as his untitled work of a horse with two human skulls on it, or of his famous painting *The Persistence of Memory*. Despite the problematic conclusion and several distracting typos (such as the misspelling of characters and scholars' names), Creedon's study should be commended for its provocative delving into Sam Shepard's complex debt to the visual arts.

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