

Introduction from
Sam Shepard Improvises
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Protocols of Improvisation in Performance

True West felt like a total improvisation spinning off itself. The writing of the play started when I heard the voice of Lee speaking very clearly, and then I heard Austin's response. The more I listened, the more the voices came. (Shepard, *Inner Library* 215)

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Protocols of improvisation inform American playwright Sam Shepard's parodic and self-reflexive dramatic practice. Protocols--"long-established codes" determining "precedence and precisely correct procedure"ⁱ--may at first seem antithetical to notions of freedom implied by improvisation. However, research in performance practices reveals how improvisation typically occurs either within, or in close relation to, voluntary constraints. Protocols, as voluntary constraints or strategies, ground the play of improvisation in performance situations. Such a reconciliation of freedom and constraint is aptly demonstrated by Jack Kerouac who, in composing haikus--a notably constrained poetic form--imagined himself to be a "jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session" (*Mexico City Blues*).ⁱⁱ

While the early plays of Sam Shepard are often distinguished by the extended verbal "improvisations" of his characters, as he matures as a dramatist he increasingly explores what might be conceived of as the improvisation of character within the constraints of culture, society, the family.

Shepard's source of inspiration is often found in the "realms of the self" (Ganz)--the domains of consciousness--where dramatic characters are first apprehended as

voices inflected with attitude. His striking dramatic effects often result from the synaesthesia created in the evocation of images, metaphors and ideas by sound. In this sense, Shepard's compositional practices have many analogies to music. His interest in the improvisational protocols used by jazz musicians, improvising actors, and spontaneous writers such as Jack Kerouac reflect a desire to create theatrical immediacy and presence, a theatre which resonates with an audience emotionally, physically and even metaphysically rather than making an appeal to reason and analysis through the exposition of ideas. Ultimately, Shepard's interest in protocols of improvisation is extended into the realm of the improvised character, where the performance of the self takes place within social constraints, most notably within the matrix of the family. Much like the pan-cultural archetype of the trickster, Shepard "plays" with theatrical elements to create a drama which is both metatheatrical and presentational in spirit, even when representational elements become increasingly foregrounded. Using Victor Turner's conception of play as the ad-hoc combination of what is (the imperative) with what could be (the subjunctive), I will explore how Shepard reflects parodically on the features of American culture with what Turner would call "ludic recombinations."ⁱⁱⁱ As with the spontaneous haiku, the ludic, or free, recombination of conventional theatrical elements in Shepard's theatre is an attempt to explore the limits and challenges of freedom within constraint.

The trickster archetype is traditionally both cunning and naive. Hermes, Coyote, Esu-Elegbara, and Raven are tricksters who occupy "liminal" positions on the margins of society from which to carry out their playful stratagems to perplex those who insist on order and reason. The trickster plays at the intersection, or crossroads, of culture and chaos by troping, translating, riddling, satirizing--"signifyin(g)" is Louis Henry Gates' term^{iv}--and thus functions as a cultural archetype who defines the status quo by subverting its conventions. These subversive and enigmatic qualities in turn lead to a natural association of the trickster with what is spontaneous, unpredictable and disruptive. Shepard, the playwright as trickster, has played with audience expectations within a "tolerated margin of mess" (Babcock 153).

Improvisation in performance contexts--in writing, playing music, acting, and displaying an autonomous sense of self--occurs within a matrix of constraints. Improvisation is a quality of performance within the limits of what Victor Turner calls *normative communitas*: when "individuals come together and devise rules for themselves" (*Anthropology of Performance* 44). This relationship of improvisation to a community of performative discourse accounts for the necessity of protocols to limit the field of possibilities within what Joseph Chaikin calls a "voluntary discipline" (*Presence of the Actor* 80). Chaikin comments: "Because of the way things are in this country, we often act out of a dictate that has nothing to do with ourselves. We mustn't take that into our work, for, if we do, we won't be able to recognize our own impulses..." (80). Paradoxically, so it seems, voluntary discipline liberates the impulses of the performer for purposes of self-discovery, not self-indulgence.

Sam Shepard's unpublished notebooks, his published journal writing in *Hawk Moon*, *Rolling Thunder Logbook* and *Motel Chronicles*, and his plays and screenplays written from 1964 to 1994 provide a fascinating *oeuvre* with which to explore the protocols of improvisation. His first plays were written for the burgeoning off-off-Broadway theatre, and the young playwright was influenced by Beckett, Artaud, The Living Theatre and the Open Theatre among others. Consequently, Shepard developed his dramatic practice in a heady artistic climate of experimentation, iconoclasm, and the subversion of representational conventions.

As a young playwright, Shepard eschewed revisions and claims to have been listening to, and following, voices apprehended within consciousness, what he called his "inner library":

In my experience the character is visualized, he appears out of nowhere in three dimensions and speaks. He doesn't speak to me because I'm not in the play. I'm watching it.... I'm talking now about an open-ended structure where anything could happen as opposed to a carefully planned and regurgitated event.... The reason I began writing plays was the hope of extending the sensation of *play* (as in "kid") on into adult

life. ("Inner Library" 214)

Shepard goes on to claim that the "extent to which I can actually follow the picture and not intervene with my two-cents worth is where inspiration and craftsmanship hold their real meaning" (215). For example:

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As a playwright, Shepard plays with what the inner library of consciousness provides--images and voices of characters--and combines those givens with what could be by placing them in open-ended dramatic structures.

As a discipline for following the voices of characters without imposing his two-cents worth, Shepard practised spontaneous writing as that process was articulated by Jack Kerouac.^v Numerous examples of his spontaneous prose can be found in unpublished notebooks collected in the Special Collections of the Mugar Library at Boston University. These archives are especially significant to an appreciation of Shepard's practice as a writer, showing as they do his exploratory methods, the accretion of elements that would later become published works, and something of the attitude with which he approached his craft as a writer. Excerpts from the unpublished notebooks and typescripts illustrate Shepard's debt to Kerouac's notion of spontaneous prose and how the protocols of spontaneity in writing may be applied to a dramatic practice.

Kerouac modelled his "spontaneous bop prosody" on the improvisational jazz style of such musicians as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Lester Young. It is significant that Shepard came to New York from California in the early 1960s not to be a playwright but to play music as a drummer. His intense interest in music manifests itself in both the content and structure of many of his plays, most notably *Melodrama Play* (1967), *Mad Dog Blues* (1971), *Back Bog Beast Bait* (1971), *Cowboy Mouth* (1971), *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Angel City* (1976) and *Suicide in Bb* (1976).^{vi} In those plays

where music is not explicitly reflected by content, the composition often reflects musical influences. Thus, the protocols of improvisational jazz--with roots in West African musical practices--have analogies to Shepard's dramatic compositions. For example, the long monologues--"arias"--which his characters often deliver are analogous to extended jazz "riffs" as defined by Albert Murray in *Stompin' the Blues*:

When they are effective, riffs always seem as spontaneous as if they were improvised in the heat of the performance. So much so that riffing is sometimes regarded as being synonymous with improvisation. But such is not always the case by any means. Not only are riffs as much a part of some arrangements and orchestrations as the lead melody, but many consist of nothing more than stock phrases, quotations from some familiar melody, or even clichés that just happen to be popular at the moment.... [I]mprovisation includes spontaneous appropriation (or inspired allusion, which sometimes is a form of signifying) no less than on-the-spot invention. (96)

Murray also notes that the efficacy of the creative process "lies not in the originality of the phrase...but in the way it is used in a frame of reference" (96). What distinguishes the jazz musician adept at improvisation is what Murray calls "idiomatic orientation." The "character" of the jazz musician is revealed by the "voice" of the instrument; "idiomatic orientation" is the relation of that voice to the other instruments and to the tradition.

Similarly, character for Shepard is revealed by voice and that voice invariably packs an "attitude" (see Wren). While it might be unwise to generalize this point, Shepard's characters are often burdened by constraints or attributions from which they seek release. Many attempt to improvise a character within a matrix of limitations, and in this respect they are similar to jazz musicians. Unlike jazz musicians, however, their rites of passage are not always supported by the ensemble of players, whether they be friends, lovers, rivals or family members.

Shepard's notion of character evolved considerably, especially after an

encounter with Peter Brook in London in the early 1970s. However, from the beginning, his characters rankled under constraints, or displayed a tendency toward abrupt transformation, inconsistency, and fragmentation. It was his intuition as a playwright, beginning with his earliest plays, that characters were not untrue when illogical, incoherent, or excessively reactive. A "Note to the Actors" in *Angel City* sums up this attitude:

The term "character" could be thought of in a different way when working on this play. Instead of the idea of a "whole character" with logical motives behind his behavior which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme. In other words, more in terms of collage or jazz improvisation. (62)

While many critics have seen this notion of "fragmentary" character as indicative of existential, absurdist or postmodern malaise (see Bigsby for example), for Shepard the multiplicitous character was clearly more "realistic" than the monologic constructs of psychological realism. His characters frequently inhabit the margins and are defined by a flexible multivocality accommodated by Bakhtin's notions of "dialogism" and the "carnavalesque," and Deleuze and Guattari's "nomadic" character.^{vii}

At the heart of Shepard's dramatic practice is an on-going reflection on the nature of the self situated in the landscape of consciousness. Reflecting on his early years as an off-off-Broadway playwright, experimenting with drugs, influenced by the politics of the Vietnam War era, Shepard writes, "The only thing which remains and still persists as the single most important idea is the idea of consciousness" ("American Experimental Theatre" 212). In this, Shepard alludes to the reflexive quality of "experimental" theatre--plays about theatre, plays about play, plays about performing a role: "metatheatre" in which the stage becomes a "metaphor for consciousness" (Hart *Stages* 14-15).

In Shepard's case, writing as "a process of performing the self" (Grant) is "translated" by the playwright as trickster into the riddle of the play. The intention of

the resulting "double riddle" is to reflect something true about the nature of consciousness and the self, something mythic about the human condition. For Shepard, "Myth speaks to everything at once, especially the emotions. By myth I mean a sense of mystery and not necessarily a traditional formula. A character for me is a composite of different mysteries...an unknown quantity" ("Inner Library" 217). The notion of character as "a composite of different mysteries" resists dramatic resolutions--"A resolution isn't an ending; it's a strangulation" (Lippman 11)--and parodies the conventions of psychological realism, of "building a character." In the final analysis, Shepard's is a parodic, self-reflexive drama which "signifies" on the tradition while it explores in a serious way what drives us to perform: to improvise an identity within the limitations of the *communitas*.

While I do not offer a comprehensive analysis of every Shepard play, I attempt to advance critical insights and principles which are widely applicable to Shepard's work both as dramatist and writer. I have taken illustrations from all stages of Shepard's work, including many unpublished examples from the Boston University collection; however, my intensive commentary concentrates on the plays written from 1967 to 1976, and the writing collected in the published "notebooks": *Hawk Moon*, *Rolling Thunder Review* and *Motel Chronicles*. This decade was a prolific, experimental, and formative period in Shepard's career and prepared him, in my view, for his highly original contribution to the tradition of American realism. It is in such plays as *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *Buried Child* (1978), *True West* (1980), *Fool For Love* (1983), *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) and *States of Shock* (1991), and in the screenplays for *Paris, Texas* (1984), *Far North* (1988) and *Silent Tongue* (1993) that Shepard fully explores the improvisations of character within the constraints of both family and culture. While I do not discuss works written after 1977 in detail, it is my intention to provide a critical background which supports future readings of the later plays. At this point, however, it seems appropriate to begin with what Shepard has said and written about his practice as a writer.

ⁱ *Protocol*, from *protokollon* refers to the "first sheet of a papyrus roll bearing authentication and date of manufacture of the papyrus" and literally means "that which is glued together" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*). In adopting this word to apply to various practices of improvisation, I want to convey the fundamental notion that spontaneous creation for performance purposes is consistently preceded by guidelines, rules or codes governing the improvisation, in effect "gluing" the performance together.

ⁱⁱ In "American Haikus" on the recording *Blues and Haikus* (1958), Kerouac reads haikus, alternating with Zoot Sims and Al Cohn (both on saxophone). Kerouac's interest in exploring freedom within constraint is suggested in a quote included in Gilbert Millstein's liner notes to the recording: "The American Haiku is not exactly the Japanese Haiku. The Japanese Haiku is strictly disciplined to seventeen syllables but since the language structure is different I don't think American Haikus (short three-line poems intended to be completely packed with Void of Whole) should worry about syllables because American speech is something again...bursting to pop."

ⁱⁱⁱ In Victor Turner's discussion of rites of passage, ritual, and myth--what he identifies as "liminal" or threshold-crossing experiences--he asserts that "it is the analysis of culture into factors and their free or 'ludic' recombination in any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is of the essence of liminality" (*From Ritual to Theatre* 28).

^{iv} In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Gates traces the Yoruba trickster figure Esu-Elegbara to such offspring in the diaspora as Papa Legba and the Signifying Monkey. Because these trickster figures "are mediators, and their mediations are tricks" (6), Gates associates the trickster with riddles, literary interpretation, and the translation of rhetorical tropes, figures, and structures. Gates dubs this playful literary activity "signifyin(g)" to distinguish it from the Saussurean "signifying" (46). The African-American practice of "signifyin(g)," or playing with linguistic figures to parody or pastiche a rival, is thus an important improvisational protocol relevant to Shepard's dramatic practice.

^v As will be explained in more detail below, Kerouac articulated his theories of improvised or spontaneous writing in two essays published in the *Evergreen Review*: "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (Summer 1958) and "Belief and Technique for Modern Prose" (Spring 1959).

^{vi} Dates in parentheses indicate first production of plays or initial publication of other writing.

^{vii} Richard Foreman describes the intended effect of fragmentation in his drama: "I am interested in creating a totally polyphonic theatre where all the elements work together to fragment each other, so that the audience, free from strong feelings and the need to identify, can enjoy the playfulness of the theatrical elements" (qtd. in Martin 136).