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Authenticity, Self-Invention and the Power of Storytelling: Sam Shepard's Postmillennial Work

Abstract

The article reflects upon Sam Shepard's playwrighting in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, paying particular attention to his last play, *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)*, written specifically for the Derry/Londonderry City of Culture celebrations in 2013, and originally produced by the renowned Field Day Theatre Company. The article seeks to offer an insight into Shepard's mature multilayered text, which, in many respects, looks back upon almost fifty years of his artistic creativity and, at the same time, expands his vision. It also addresses the realisation of Shepard's play in performance and the significance of his text in an interplay of multiple creative inputs involved in the production process.

While revisiting the familiar landscapes and themes, Shepard's most recent work negotiates the boundaries between the actual and the fictitious, raising debates about the persistence of myths, mortality and the haunting legacies of the past. Richly intertextual and conspicuously metatheatrical, it grapples with questions of authenticity, performativity and storytelling – the narratives that are passed down, and how they form and inform our lives. It also engages with, and further problematises, issues of personal and cultural identity, which constitute Shepard's most durable thematic threads, revealing both the dramatist's acute concern with fateful determinism and commitment to self-invention. Significantly, while Shepard's postmillennial output highlights the author's ongoing preoccupation with instability and frontiers of various sorts (from those topographic, temporal and sociopolitical to those of language and art), it equally intimates his attentiveness to correspondences between times, lands and cultures.

Keywords: Sam Shepard, *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)*, Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, Field Day, The UK City of Culture, Derry/Londonderry, authenticity, self-invention

Sam Shepard had his debut as a playwright in 1964, when his brief, purposefully disruptive pieces, *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden*, were performed in New York, off-off-Broadway, by Theatre Genesis. Since then, his work has been staged both off and on Broadway, in the leading regional and university theatres of America, as well as internationally. In the course of a career that spanned half a century, he evolved from alternative theatre to mainstream recognition and Hollywood, transforming from a counterculture rebel into a cultural icon (Wade 2007: 285). Shepard's theatre eludes facile classifications. Tapping into a wide variety of sources, genres and styles – such as



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popular music, the Western, crime stories, Greek tragedy and Beckett-style absurdity – his plays, for decades, have teased critics and audiences with intensely theatrical pastiches of legend and actuality, consistently defying totalising exegeses. During the fifty years of his work for the stage, various labels were attached to Shepard's name. He was called an "experimentalist" (Bottoms 1998: 3) and a "postmodernist" (Roudané 2002: 1). At the outset of the 1980s, when his popularity was at its height, *The New York Times* canonised Shepard as the "Playwright Laureate of the West" (Coe 1980: 35) and the "cowboy playwright" tag, still commonly associated with his name and work, has indeed proved most durable. In addition, Shepard has often been described as a "quintessentially American" author (Wade 1997: 2). As postulated by cultural scholar Leslie Wade, "[d]rawing from the disparate image banks of rock and roll, detective fiction, Hollywood B-movies, and Wild West adventure shows," Shepard's texts "function as a storehouse of images, icons, and idioms that denote American culture and an American sensibility... [They] act as a theatrical Smithsonian" (1997: 2). One can also, as if by contrast, come across voices like that of celebrated Irish playwright and director Conor McPherson, who in his introduction to a collection of Shepard's *Fifteen One-Act Plays* reflects on Shepard's peculiar resonance with European sensibilities and contends that "this most European-seeming of American playwrights, ironically, elevates the myth of the American West to its theatrical zenith precisely because his existentialism feels so European" (2012: xiii).

In his illuminating study on *The Theatre of Sam Shepard*, charting the dramatist's various developments and shifts of direction up till the mid-1990s, Stephen Bottoms stresses Shepard's lifelong "fascination" with the notion of self-invention (1998: 14). Several times in his career Shepard discarded an established style of writing in favour of some novelty, and this tendency was mirrored outside theatre in his readiness to invent new roles for himself in life. It began with his early gesture of adopting the name of Sam Shepard on becoming a playwright, in a bid to sever his ties with generations of family tradition, and it continued with his branching out, in the late 1960s, into a musical career and, from the 1970s onwards, into film acting. Throughout his life, Bottoms suggests, Shepard demonstrated "a certain restlessness with himself, and a determination to use new experiences to turn himself into something new" (1998: 15). The 2000s witnessed Shepard's new efforts to reinvent himself: the veteran American author further investigated the possibilities of the dramatic medium in a visible attempt to challenge both theatregoers and himself, striving for an authentic idiom that would resonate with postmillennial sensibilities.

The article reflects upon Shepard's most recent writing, which revisits the familiar Shepard landscapes and themes while simultaneously somewhat expanding his vision. It focuses on his last work for the stage, *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)*, which had its world premiere not in the United States but in Northern Ireland. Written specifically for the Derry/Londonderry City of Culture celebrations in 2013, the play was directed by Nancy Meckler, an American director best known for her work in the United Kingdom with Shared Experience. Moreover, *A Particle of Dread* was originally mounted in collaboration with the renowned Field Day Theatre Company at the Playhouse Theatre in Derry, and, like his two earlier plays commissioned by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, it featured Shepard's long-time friend, Belfast-born actor Stephen Rea, one of the founders of Field Day. Thus a range of creative inputs were involved in the production process. The article seeks to offer an insight into Shepard's multilayered text with a collage-like structure, as well as addresses the realisation of *A Particle of Dread* in performance. Similarly to Shepard's other postmillennial works which negotiate the boundaries between the actual and the remembered, or fictitious, the play raises debates about the persistence of myths, mortality and the undying legacies of the past. Richly intertextual and metatheatrical, it grapples with questions of authenticity, performativity and storytelling – the narratives that are passed down, and how they

form and inform our lives. It takes up and further problematises issues of personal and cultural identity, which constitute Shepard's most durable thematic threads, revealing both the dramatist's acute concern with fateful determinism and commitment to self-invention. Significantly, while Shepard's recent work highlights the author's preoccupation with instability, dislocation and frontiers of various sorts – from those topographic, temporal and sociopolitical to those of language and art – it equally intimates his attentiveness to correspondences between times, lands and cultures.

Shepard's final play was written for and staged as part of diverse arts and cultural events connected with Derry/Londonderry City of Culture in 2013. The location and occasion naturally appealed to the American dramatist, who, from the beginning of his career, had been absorbed by questions of self-definition, personal and cultural identity, and the inexorable impact of the past upon the present. Interviewed by Clare Dwyer Hogg, Shepard (2013) explicated his interest in Ireland's historical weight: "If, being Irish, you're knowingly carrying around a thousand years of history, you potentially have in you knowledge that we [Americans] don't have. The history shapes you. You go way back." The city in Ulster chosen as the UK's inaugural City of Culture is a place with two names: Derry and Londonderry, with a rich cultural history, and with such iconic historical landmarks as the City Walls, an original seventeenth-century urban fortification, which reflects Derry's turbulent past and its often divided community (Protestant versus Catholic, Unionist versus Republican) – with the divisions traced back to the siege of this once Protestant outpost in 1689.

Administered by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, The UK City of Culture is an initiative launched in 2009 with the intention of promoting cities, outside London, with viable plans "to make a step change in their cultural life and engage the whole country"; cities with a vision to use culture to effect "lasting social regeneration by engagement, widening participation and supporting cultural diversity" (National Archives 2010). The events and projects hosted by Derry in 2013, which coincided with the 400th anniversary of the founding of the city, while respecting Ulster's heritage, were also directed towards fostering new stories and gaining the confidence to move forward. The organisers, deeply committed to the peace process in Northern Ireland, did not seek to shun the uneasy past or the legacy of the Troubles, but rather to acknowledge it, draw lessons from history and bring people together. Developed through cooperation across all parties and communities in Derry, its cultural programme successfully wove together varied elements that contributed to creating "a strong and compelling narrative" about the once troubled city and its people (DCMS 2010). After all, as noted by City of Culture judge Phil Redmond, "[i]f culture cannot be used to help promote harmony, tolerance, hope and aspiration; . . . [or] help people understand their past, inform their present and help shape their future – then what role does it have?" (DCMS 2010).

One of the significant stories of Derry's year as the UK City of Culture was the re-emergence of Field Day, the distinguished theatre company founded in 1980 by playwright Brian Friel and actor/director Stephen Rea. The company resumed its activity after a hiatus of sixteen years, in December 2012, with world premieres of plays by two young Northern Irish dramatists. Based in Derry, the city with a divided identity whose communal tissue was regularly torn by horrific acts of violence, Field Day began as a cultural and intellectual response to the political crisis in Northern Ireland (Field Day n.d.). Committed to promoting new theatrical voices and developing new audiences, as well as addressing the unsettled situation in the Province in a responsible and creative manner, the company attracted eminent and courageous authors, such as Seamus Heaney, Terry Eagleton, Thomas Kilroy, Derek Mahon, Tom Paulin, Stewart Parker and Friel himself, whose critically acclaimed *Translations* (1980) was the first of many Field Day plays premiered

at Derry's Guildhall (Field Day n.d.). In 2013, the revived company staged the world premiere of *A Particle of Dread*, commissioned by and starring Rea as a postmillennial embodiment of the mythological Oedipus. Shepard, like Rea, ostensibly believed that theatre should play a part in the cultural dialogue about the past and its relation to the present and future. Remarking on his cooperation with Field Day, involvement in the City of Culture project and its implications, the playwright particularly emphasised the role of the locale in the production process, for Derry's unique history and topography contributed new layers of meaning to the authorial text:

The material we are using is pertinent to the situation here. It's not as though we are doing something just for culture. We are doing it for a reason. The notion of "place" is very strong here. There is where something happened. We explore destiny, fate, murder, exploitation, origins. The fact there is a wall round the city is part and parcel of what is going on in the play... It is important to have art and culture in a society go through transformation. Something is happening here. You can feel it. Putting on this type of play here takes on a different significance than, say, if we were going to New York. Where strife has been in the foreground, it is bound to have repercussions, or is bound to have meaning. (Sam Shepard Web Site 2014)

It should be noted, perhaps, that the Northern Irish location did not seem to be an incongruous context for the first staging of a Shepard play and that claims of Shepard's Irishness have occasionally been made in Shepard criticism. The sources of such claims are diverse and appear to have gained in validity in recent years, especially in view of the fact that both Shepard and his work had a strong presence in Ireland at the start of the new millennium. That has led several scholars to consider more seriously Shepard's Hibernian connections and investigate the implicit Irishness of the cowboy playwright. In the final chapter of *Sam Shepard and the Aesthetics of Performance*, Emma Creedon briefly relates the dramatist's numerous engagements in Ireland in the early twenty-first century. She mentions, among others, Shepard's recent cooperation with Ireland's National Theatre and productions of his five plays – *True West*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, *Fool for Love*, *Ages of the Moon* and *Curse of the Starving Class* – on the Peacock and Abbey stages between 2006 and 2011; Shepard's active involvement as a mentor for young writers in the Abbey Theatre's New Playwrights' Program in 2011; or his receipt of an honorary degree at Trinity College Dublin in 2012 (Creedon 2015: 165). Creedon also looks at the occasional presence of Ireland in Shepard's work, offering some insights into its possible significance. The critic posits, for instance, that Ireland in Shepard's plays is heralded "as a romanticized premodern sanctuary to 'revert' to" and that, in some cases, the West of Ireland seems to function similarly to the American West "as a site of authenticity" (Creedon 2015: 167). Importantly, she asserts, Shepard's evocation of Ireland, like that of his mythic American West, has more of the fantastical than realistic credibility (Creedon 2015: 168). Creedon seeks to explain Shepard's predilection for Ireland by relating it to the argument developed by Diane Negra in *The Irish in Us*, where she explores the recent commodification and transnationalisation of Irishness, which has become "particularly performative and mobile at the millennium" (Negra 2006: 2).¹ According to Creedon, Ireland in Shepard operates as "a simulacrum, a myth of origin that provides a tailor-made historical context, which is particularly relevant in terms of Shepard's probing of issues of authenticity" (2015: 168). The dramatist appears to be "harnessing Ireland's history" (Creedon 2015: 168) in his texts to spin his own tales.

¹ Negra states: "With a greater level of permission now given to claim heritage amidst the cultural romance of identities, Irishness has emerged as an 'a la carte ethnicity,' the ideal all-purpose identity credential" (2006: 2).

Also Stephen Watt recently argued for Shepard's honorary inclusion in the pantheon of Irish dramatists (Watt 2015: 242). The scholar considers Shepard's playwrighting in the context of contemporary Irish literature and analyses *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007), dedicated to Stephen Rea and resounding with Beckettian echoes and affinities, in his monograph *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing* – with Shepard being the only non-Irish or Northern Irish author discussed at length in the study. Watt later extends his examination of Shepard's contribution to the “re-foundation” of modern Irish drama (2015: 243) in his essay “Sam Shepard, Irish Playwright,” included in the collection *Irish Theatre in Transition*. Watt links there Shepard's approach in his mature one-act *Ages of the Moon* (2009), written for the Abbey Theatre, to that of one of the founders of the modern Irish theatre, John Millington Synge. What the scholar sees as crucial to this affiliation with the author of *The Playboy of the Western World* is the concern with storytelling and figures of storytellers that both writers share. “Syngean storytellers and their audiences are typically engaged in wilful acts of self-invention, making up their own meanings from ‘local idioms and forms of life’” (Watt 2015: 246). Significantly, while deftly “incorporating the local in all of its variety into the narrative texture of his plays,” Synge's theatre simultaneously gestures “to larger cultural and national formations” (Watt 2015: 246). In Shepard's major plays, too, says Watt, “the specific and delineated often deliquesces into the general,” and ambiguity lurking within the particularities of his locales implies “larger national or mythic proportions” (2015: 246–47). Such dissolution of the local into the general also typifies Shepard's last work for the theatre, *A Particle of Dread*, as does his interest in “tellers of tales” who, as teasingly pointed out by one of the play's characters, “turn things to suit their own needs,” creating “[p]lot twists” and “story” – “inventions to make the listener think he's onto something” (Shepard 2017: 50).

A Particle of Dread draws its title from a line in one of the best known tragedies in history, *Oedipus Rex*, or *Oedipus the King*, by Sophocles (1988: 87), but the parenthetical subtitle, *Oedipus Variations*, serves as a more useful clue to grasping Shepard's approach. The play, by the author's own account, is not so much an adaptation but rather a loose variation on Sophocles (Shepard 2013), transformed into something more consistent with the canon of Shepard's work. As John Winters drastically puts it, “Shepard slices and dices the story of Oedipus and shows it to us in various contexts” (2017: 350). Admittedly, the American author had long felt a deep connection to Sophocles' plays, in which the past informs the present and future, as they explore such universal themes as fate, truth-seeking, troubled family relations, or the conflict between the individual and the state (Shepard 1986; Winters 2017: 349–50). He was specifically drawn to the Theban trilogy – consisting of *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone* – which relates to the tale of the mythological tragic hero prophesied to kill his father and marry his mother who vainly attempts to flee his destiny. *A Particle of Dread* retells the Greek tale as a peculiar whodunnit that bespeaks, amongst other things, the questionable morals and mythologies of our times. In this respect, it could be argued that Shepard's updated version of the legendary history of Thebes aligns him with such Field Day writers as Seamus Heaney, the author of *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*, whose works also drew upon Sophocles and myths to comment on the present.

Composed of 33 scenes arranged in non-sequential order, *A Particle of Dread* constitutes an intellectual exercise for the audience. There are two major interwoven storylines: the ancient Oedipus myth and the investigation into the homicide of a shady Las Vegas casino boss in the Mohave desert. The action moves back and forth in time, merging settings, characters and themes. On one level, we deal with a murder mystery centring on the ruthless slaying of one Angel Langos, “the notorious Las Vegas casino mobster and drug lord,” who was found dead along with his chauffeur and bodyguard on a desolate stretch off the shoulder of Highway

15, “on the outskirts of Barstow” (Shepard 2017: 30–31). Their disfigured corpses had been “deliberately and repeatedly run over” by the gangster’s own steel-gray Bentley Phantom, leaving “the rib cages crushed and flattened, the knees smashed, and the heads completely obliterated beyond recognition” (Shepard 2017: 30–31). Although the murder is a cold case which may have been committed long ago, it must be solved, and the perpetrator identified, to lift a curse that has ravaged the city. Clearly, the spine-chilling incidents that occurred in the southern California desert are strongly reminiscent of those that had plagued ancient Thebes, and Shepard consistently refers to the classical source, yet since the allusions do not form a neat pattern and the spatial and temporal coordinates are constantly renegotiated, one has the sense of trying to piece together “a literary jigsaw puzzle” with some of the elements missing (Hampton 2014). In one scene, we are at the site of a triple murder, accompanying an obsessively meticulous forensic investigator in an overcoat and blue latex gloves who, like any audience member, is consumed by the task of reconstructing the crime and coming up with a legitimate version of events on the basis of evidence gleaned in the desert (Shepard 2017: 20–27). In another scene, we shift to the bungalow home that belongs to a man named Otto, where this modern incarnation of Oedipus, as a wheelchair-bound pensioner residing with his spouse in southern California, reads about the massacre at a crossroads (Shepard 2017: 30–37) and – prompted by the gory details of the newspaper “story” that sounds uncannily familiar (Shepard 2017: 67) – undertakes a quest to the desert to personally investigate the truth. As noted by Watt, in Shepard, similarly to Synge, “fiction veers towards myth” when “both time and place may be viewed as the constantly shifting repositories of previous times and histories” (2015: 254).

Importantly, all the key figures in Shepard’s retelling of Sophocles have their counterparts in the Greek tragedies, alternating between their double, or triple, ancient and modern identities. Oedipus, king of Thebes, oscillates between his classical identity and that of contemporary Otto. Oedipus’s antagonist, and true father, is split into the characters of Laius, Lawrence, or Larry, and Langos. Jocasta, Oedipus’s wife, and true mother, morphs effortlessly from the dignified queen of Thebes to a sensual gangster’s moll, to Otto’s level-headed wife Jocelyn. Otto’s estranged self-conflicted daughter Annalee reappears as Antigone. The unstable status of the characters’ identities was further compounded in production by Nancy Meckler’s decision to render *A Particle of Dread* with both a mild Northern Irish and an American Western accent, which puzzled reviewers. Ben Brantley (2014) speculated in *The New York Times* that the different ways of speaking helped define the varied levels of the play: “When the accent is Irish we seem to be in an older, European realm, where kings still count. When people talk with a twang, we have moved into the latter-day American West ... where kings are more likely to be criminal kingpins.” And yet, the dichotomy was not always observed, with a performer’s accent shifting mid-monologue, suggesting, perhaps, “how a myth mutates from era to era and culture to culture” (Brantley 2014).

Shepard’s Oedipus resembles a caretaker who ushers us into the play’s diverse, if interrelated, stories conflating recent events with a more mythic past. Dressed in bib overalls, a T-shirt and black janitor boots, he walks “with an exaggerated limp,” his eyebrows dripping blood (Shepard 2017: 5). While “mopping up the constant flow of blood,” the man struggles to recount a traumatic childhood experience of a spike being hammered through his ankle and then being deserted to stop a prophecy from coming true:

Right here. Isn’t this the place where you held me down? Your foot on my back. My chest in the mud. Here, wasn’t it? Someone – someone held me while you hammered a steel spike right through my ankle. Yes, that was it! A spike! Flash of light. Your powerful arm. Every inch of blood. Every vein. My ankle remembers. (*Pause.*) Or no – Was this place you dropped me off? Could’ve been. Draped

in mystery and confusion. The secret let out. Maybe that was it. Full of fear as you were. Trembling, running, hauling me across your back. Flapping like an extra skin. You think I'd forget? . . . Hanging from an olive tree. A baby human. Left for dead. (Shepard 2017: 5–6)

In the following scene, the action moves to a ghastly butcher's shop, Shepard's corrupted version of the Delphic oracle, where Uncle Del, a large muscular man in a blood-splattered apron, reads signs and prophesies an ominous future by examining the entrails of sacrificed animals. We find him hanging animal skins and intestines on a clothesline to dry and casting knucklebones, which, he affirms, "all tell a tale ... It's all written out somewhere" (Shepard 2017: 11). In the original Derry production, Shepard's stage directions regarding the physical setting of the action were translated by set designer Frank Conway into a stark, white-tiled space covered in blood suggestive of a torture chamber or an abattoir, with dripping animal skins and body parts exhibited upon a line as "testimony of lives lost in chilling circumstances" (Coyle 2013). As gloomily prognosticated by Brantley (2014): "Such is the slaughterhouse of history that has traditionally been the setting for tragedy, an arena to which people will probably always gravitate despite themselves."

Sporting a dark three-piece suit and an overcoat, the menacing Don Corleone-type figure of Lawrence appears to be no stranger to the play's macabre surroundings as he shares with Uncle Del the luscious details of his intimate life, consulting the contemporary soothsayer about his wife's infertility (Shepard 2017: 7–13). The fragmentation of the character's identity is noticeable: one moment he is Laius, king of Thebes alarmed by the oracle's divination, the next, Las Vegas gangster Langos, who reluctantly confesses to the audience that he is haunted by the memory of the child he had once abandoned, "hanging ... helpless upside down from the bough of an olive tree" (Shepard 2017: 50). Otto's daughter Annalee, Antigone in her former life, has her own tragic story to tell. Traumatized by her marriage to an abusive husband incarcerated for raping and killing the babysitter of their child, the young woman thinks of forsaking her son, whom she reckons as "marked for life" by the nightmarish familial legacy (Shepard 2017: 44). Also the character of Uncle Del takes on multiple roles in Shepard's text: he appears as the blind seer Tiresias, summoned by Oedipus to aid the state in investigating the murder of the former Theban king and locating the unwitting assassin, as well as a sightless goat-herding Traveler who offers to kill Annalee's unwanted baby "for twenty bucks" or less (Shepard 2017: 59). Interestingly, the same actor in the Derry production was cast as a hitchhiking vagabond identified as the Maniac of the Outskirts, an unbalanced, irritable outcast dwelling on the margins of society who becomes a popular scapegoat for all evils. Brantley (2014) is right in noting that dispossessed individuals, similar to the Maniac, "who feel paradoxically both outside of and implicated in the world they observe" figured occasionally in Shepard's earlier playwrighting. In the last play, most of the characters, "whether they are active players in the central tragedy or not, seem to feel both distant from and tainted by it" (Brantley 2014).

The truths in *A Particle of Dread* accrue unhurriedly, through an apparently arbitrary sequence of short scenes interspersed with monologues and asides providing swatches of minor narratives with further clues to the crime, or crimes, committed in the desert, identities of the victims and perpetrators, as well as the consequences for the generations to come. The finale of Shepard's drama, leaning heavily upon Sophocles, is predictable, if still deeply disturbing. Jocasta hangs herself and self-blinded Oedipus is slowly led offstage by Antigone, chanting "Mama" softly to herself (Shepard 2017: 115). As Jocasta's corpse continues to slowly swing, the father and daughter leave behind the horrors they have witnessed, letting the Oracle provide an unsettling closure to the play:

The whole city went back to being what it had always been – just a place where people came and went; births, lives, deaths. On the surface they seemed returned to health and self-confidence, but a distant memory still persisted, a shadow that never left. Something had been torn apart from the inside out. A ghost of something close at hand yet far enough away and so terrible as to pretend it never happened. (Shepard 2017: 116)

The closing words were bound to strike a chord with the Derry audiences in 2013, both hopeful of an auspicious future and still haunted by their violent legacies, enduring national myths, and histories of unhealed communal and individual traumas.

Resounding with echoes of ancient tales and clearly metatheatrical, Shepard's play takes up and explores a number of issues, such as the nature of tragedy, the persistence of myths in collective memory, or the question of destiny and self-knowledge. The value to be found in tragedy appears ephemeral. In scene 23, the character of Annalee charges forward and, breaking the fourth wall, addresses the audience directly in a provocative fashion, saying: "Oh, tragedy, tragedy, tragedy, tragedy. / Piss on it. / Piss on Sophocles's head. / I'd rather be dead. / I would. / No lie" (Shepard 2017: 76). She goes on to ask: "Why waste my time? / Why waste yours? / What's it for? / Catharsis? / Purging? / Metaphor? / What's in it for us? / You and me" (Shepard 2017: 76). Like many of this play's characters, the young woman would rather live without knowing the uneasy truths that tragedy affords. Still, ostensibly entrapped in her role, she proves unable to escape the destructive patterns inherited from the past and rewrite her fate, as she states: "I go around and around and around and around. / And I wind up here. / Right back here. / . . . / Exactly like you do" (Shepard 2017: 77), which could be viewed as a rather bleak conclusion derived from Shepard's ultimate work.

According to Bottoms, the playwright's occasional tendency to draw upon "the imagery of traditional myth narratives" best attests to the "profound ambivalence of Shepard's writing, his simultaneously romantic and deeply sceptical outlook" (1998: 11). And indeed, the genealogy of the figures that people Shepard's texts and his plots can be frequently traced back to various myth schemes, as diverse as Greek and Egyptian mythology, the Bible, or Celtic and Native American myths. "As with his use of pop-cultural sources, there is something of the self-consciousness of postmodernist pastiche in these instances, the ironic manipulation of the redundant fragments of ancient stories which have lost their power to affect us in their original form," argues Bottoms (1998: 12). And yet, the critic further insists, "there is also the sense that these stories might contain lingering truths, that the fragments might still resonate, that such myths – however compromised they may be – are all we have" (1998: 12).

Reviewers on either side of the Atlantic seemed unimpressed with Shepard's episodic take on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and the themes that had long exercised his imagination. They were, for the most part, united in dismissing the play as "fractured" and "cryptic" (*Irish Times*, *Time Out New York*), flawed through "fragmentation" and a conspicuous "lack of cohesion" (*Irish Independent*), "frustratingly oblique" (*Hollywood Reporter*), even "lethally muddled" (*Village Voice*). Its characters were deplored as "inaccessible" (*Village Voice*) "shape-shifters and time travelers" (*New York Theatre Guide*). While some considered the play an "unfinished end product" and tagged it as a "collaborative chaotic collective" (*Si's Sights and Sounds*), others saw the "mysterious" and "weirdly primal" collage piece where "[a]ncient myth mingles with Irish accents and desert-rat Americana" as a signature Shepardian creation, a ponderous "return to the playwright's experimental off Off-Broadway beginnings" (*Newsweek*).²

² For a representative selection of reviews of both Derry and New York productions of *A Particle of Dread* in 2013 and 2014, respectively, see Sam Shepard Web Site 2014.

Nancy Meckler, a long-time Shepard friend and director responsible for the 2013 Derry production of *A Particle of Dread* and its subsequent staging in New York in 2014, suggested that, bearing in mind Shepard's musical affiliations, one could, perhaps, apply a musical lens to the play:

[Sam] calls it *Oedipus Variations* and that's exactly what it is. The thing about Shepard is that he loves jazz, and this is almost like a jazz improvisation, where you take something that's thrown up by the story, follow it, and then you come back. Sometimes we're in ancient Greece with Oedipus. Sometimes we're in a modern version. It's like Sam's riffing on the myth, but it's still about a man who does not know his origins and gets caught out trying to get to the truth. He doesn't realize that the truth is going to destroy him. (Winters 2017: 350)

A similar interpretational key was adopted by Sophie Gorman in the *Irish Independent*, who advocated approaching the play like a piece of music, "with the theme of Oedipus like a musical coda, emerging in different forms but still recognizable" (Sam Shepard Web Site 2014). Also Stephen Rea, who had collaborated with the American playwright multiple times, and appeared successfully in Shepard's dramas, has argued that Shepard's writing "aspires to the condition of music" (2008: xi). Drawing parallels between Shepard and Beckett, Rea postulates that Shepard's plays, too, "feel like musical experiences" in that they "transcend meaning, avoid the literary and conceptual, and search for a concrete immediate reality, beyond the idea, which the actor and audience are forced to experience directly" (2008: xi).

Admittedly, Shepard's love of music, particularly improvisatory jazz music, and its impact on his playwrighting cannot be overstated (Bottoms 1998: 33). Young Sam, as chronicled by Bottoms, "grew up listening to, and playing, music which was constantly challenging the boundaries of its own form, reinventing itself through improvisation" (1998: 33). Attracted by different styles, he naturally gravitated towards free jazz, appreciating "its pursuit of unrestricted musical self-expression" (Bottoms 1998: 33). An accomplished drummer himself, Shepard commented on the inspiration he had drawn from the approach of his musical idols, especially Charles Mingus's band, which appealed to his "eclectic streak" since it allowed for combining elements "as diverse as Dixieland jazz, Mexican carnival music, black gospel, and even the European classical tradition" (Bottoms 1998: 34). He admitted:

[I] was stunned by his sense of polyrhythm ... fascinated by the idea of merging that with writing, seeing if there was a way of evoking the same kind of collage in the writing of plays. I started thinking about the kind of structure jazz has, the kind of life it implies, and I decided to see if I could be a playwright myself with what I'd learned from them. (Shepard qtd. in Bottoms 1998: 34)

Less than a decade later, in a famous interview the playwright gave to *Rolling Stone* magazine, he reasserted his "great affinity with music," describing "writing" as "a musical experience" (Shepard 1986).³ In the same interview, among his theatrical idols, Shepard mentioned Sophocles and Aeschylus, stressing that the Greeks were "all about destiny! That's the most powerful thing. Everything is foreseen, and we just play it out." Asked whether he thought a person could shape their destiny, he responded cautiously: "[M]aybe. But first you have to know what your destiny is" (Shepard 1986).

In a recently published biography of the American author, *Sam Shepard: A Life*, aimed at sorting out facts from myths, legends and rumours about the playwright, John Winters affirms that "the tale of the cursed king fighting against destiny is central to Shepard's understanding of life"

³ For a more recent interview, where Shepard summarises the significant impact of music on his life and playwrighting, see Shepard 2002: 66–67.

and could be viewed as “a prism for much of his thinking” (2017: 349–50). Clearly, the question of destiny, intertwined with Shepard’s other major thematic preoccupations, like the seeking of the authentic, the impact of heredity and inescapable legacies of the past, also present in the Sophoclean trilogy, resound in Shepard’s ultimate riff on the classic tale, *A Particle of Dread*. The importance of the aforementioned issues to the American dramatist, intimately connected with one of the most insistent Shepard themes, that of personal identity, indeed seems indisputable. Alongside his more universal aspirations, Shepard’s numerous writings and interviews with the author of *True West* register his concern with the possibility of an authentic self-expression, of “arriving at a kind of true personal speech, a statement of unique identity” (Bottoms 1998: 13).⁴ More often than not, the pursuit of the truth, including the truth about one’s identity, becomes the source of the sense of crisis that Shepard’s work repeatedly evokes (Bottoms 1998: 13).

It seems that the most cogent evidence of Shepard’s commitment to the notion of authenticity – correlated with that of self-invention manifest both in his personal life and professional career – is afforded by his dramas, in which the characters searching for “a way of acting toward the world” relentlessly strive “to create and recreate their personal appearances” (Kakutani 1984; Bottoms 1998: 15). Typically, Shepard’s male figures negotiate a constantly shifting repertoire of roles and venture to “manufacture new identities,” making up “remarkable stories about themselves, but in shedding various costumes, poses and personalities, they often misplace the mysterious thing that makes them who they are” (Kakutani 1984). As posited by Bottoms, Shepard’s protagonists, time and again,

fall back on the fact of their immediate, physical presence on stage, and perform for grim survival: it is as if, by placing other characters in the position of receptive observers, they hope to gain some fragile, exterior confirmation of their existence, and so establish themselves as coherent characters. (1998: 15)

Indeed, from the erratic, game-playing, role-switching occupants of Shepard’s earliest improvisatory dramatic pieces like *Cowboys*, to the more consistent but still performance-oriented figures in such renowned family dramas as the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Buried Child* or *A Lie of the Mind*, to, more recently, the Beckettian ill-conceived cowboy questing for “AUTHENTICITY” in his intensely metatheatrical *Kicking a Dead Horse* (Shepard 2008: 12), Shepard’s theatre routinely portrays individuals “with a profound lack of clear direction or ‘rounded’ identity” (Bottoms 1998: 15). Also in Shepard’s most recent variation on Sophocles, both male and female characters, in all their incarnations, come across as disjointed, confused about their status, foraging restlessly “in their memories for clues to their own identities that keep evading them” (Brantley 2014).

Crucially, the characters’ dependence on performance is further complicated by the fact that, “far from having an endless multiplicity of possible roles from which to choose, they seem trapped within a rather limited range of potential options, victims of deterministic influences which, try as they might, they cannot shake off” (Bottoms 1998: 15–16). As Annalee despairs in her direct address to the audience: “I go around and around and around and around. / And I wind up here” (Shepard 2017: 77). According to Bottoms, one of the most “vexed” questions posed by Shepard’s playwrighting is exactly that of “how much of an independent identity [one] can ever claim to have, if one’s fate is being shaped and channelled, even before the moment of one’s birth, by forces entirely beyond one’s control” (1998: 16). The characters in Shepard’s plots make desperate attempts to assert themselves and resist the influences of heredity, family, society, religious beliefs,

⁴ See, for instance, Shepard 2002: 71.

government authority, and even of the author himself, while these powerful forces continue to shape their actions, undermining their claims to autonomy (Bottoms 1998: 16). And yet, there is also a recurrent sense informing Shepard's writing that the struggle for self-definition, even if futile, is vital and needs to be attempted. For Shepard, Bottoms hypothesises, quite rightly, it seems, one is *both* the victim of deterministic forces *and* the creator of one's self (1998: 16).⁵ The problem of how to effectively reconcile and negotiate these two seemingly incompatible "truths," raised also by *A Particle of Dread*, was bound to prompt his audiences to question, and, in questioning, to start to pursue their own answers.

In many ways, this last dense and resonant drama epitomises Shepard's method. At once violent and obscure, emotionally charged and digressive, merging the local with the universal, the mythic with popular culture – *A Particle of Dread* encapsulates the author's sense of precarious instability informing his perception of life and work. With its splintered characters and time frames, complex layering, "patterns of internal tension and contradiction," and "loose ends and uncertainties" (Bottoms 1998: ix), Shepard's dialogical theatre invites his audiences to reason, investigate and deduce, while consistently refusing to resolve the conflict between various perspectives on such matters as the nature of identity, the search for meaning and value in contemporary culture, or the creative process itself. Shepard's exploitation of familiar generic conventions, and his preference for fragmentary narratives and collage means that, in many cases, we are enabled, even enticed, to connect the clues and form assumptions about the problems his plays dramatize, even if our conjectures and speculations are oftentimes deliberately subverted. And yet, though Shepard audiences may feel "bothered and bewildered" (Brantley 2014) by the lack of conclusive resolutions, the necessity to construct one's own story, rather than problematic, can also be seen as empowering and liberating.

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⁵ What merits noting, it seems, is that Shepard's preoccupation with authenticity and self-invention operates also on a different level and can be referred to the author's perception of the process of creation. Frequently incorporating fragments of imagery and language drawn from American popular culture, Shepard's playwrighting witnesses to a sensibility acutely aware of the fact that the idea of using spontaneous "improvisation to liberate imagination is to some extent a delusion" since the artist's imagination is largely, if not entirely, "shaped by the culture within which it operates" (Bottoms 1998: 8–9).

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