

**In Search of a New Theatrical Language:
Sam Shepard's 'Tongues' and 'The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on
the Eve of Killing His Wife'**

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Every writer is on a quest for his own mode of expression, his own language. Sam Shepard said so himself in *The Rolling Thunder Logbook*: "We're not born with any word language to begin with. There must be a kind of system of thought which a poet gears himself into. Over years." (52). If one had to discuss S. Shepard's system of thought through his body of work, it would necessarily have to be inspired by his musical background. He had, after all, always wanted to become a rock and roll star. Music has always been a constitutive element of his compositional language. It is woven into his texts, either in the very fabric of the text, in the shape of lyrics, music sheets, in the rhythmic and percussive qualities of his language, texts, or rhythm that appear as stage directions, or in the actual appearance of live bands, musicians or singers on his stage. Whether it be rock and roll, classical, jazz or country, music is a part of the construction of his own all-encompassing American stage language.

His reflection on music is crucial to his work at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, his artistic home between 1976 and 1984. This thread, which was already present in his early writings, appeared then to be central to his message. At the Magic, in his continued exploration of the performance process, he took on the endeavour of working on the two experimentations I will discuss further - *Tongues* and *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing his Wife*. Even if the musical experiments from that period have been pushed to the periphery of his critically acclaimed body of work, this accomplished corpus of music plays and musical experimentations that have appeared as a minor diversion may have in fact constituted landmarks in Shepard's understanding of the theatre of the late 70s. These musical experimentations, I will suggest, reveal a certain view he held on the horizons and limits of theatrical language. In the research he conducted on stage language, S. Shepard yearned for semantic

transparency. In doing so, Shepard tried to break free of text. His fascination for the musicality of language and his drive to bring his audience to a new kind of experience led him to investigate the possibilities of a sort of total performance including visuals, music, text and the actor's body.

How are these two experimental works revelatory of his approach to both theatrical text and music? How can we set up a critical framework to understand the particular musical quality of his take on language and dramatic action that will be transferred in his later work?

In search of a language to express a particular kind of experience

By the 1960s and 1970s, Shepard's experiments on stage were frequent. In order to question his own stage language, he started to rely less and less on his almighty omnipotence as a writer. Shepard had stopped longing for a pure authorial presence and had instead opted for a more open, dialogic process in which text and performance respond to each other in a particular dialectic. His directorial approach had now shifted to a kind of playful exchange of ideas in which no singular vision is imposed on the production. The genesis of *Tongues* was a collaborative work with a long-time friend and co-worker of his, Joseph Chaikin, based on playful musical and linguistic improvisations; *Pecos Bill* was written along with a jazz composer, Catherine Stone, in the same fashion. Both texts therefore came from a confrontation of words with musical elements. Consequently, in these two instances, both the text and its musical counterpart inform and feed off each other without either one ultimately claiming ultimate precedence.

This original writing process came from the acute awareness Shepard had of the difficulty of coming up with a language that was able to channel the experience he wanted to convey. In Shewey's biography, Shepard spoke of 'the very difficulty of finding a language (...) as a means to express feeling' (98). In fact, what terrified him and the characters he crafted is the absence of a common language that would in turn distort or block communication. Throughout his linguistic and musical experiments, he thus expressed his yearning for a 'pure' language that, as Ann Wilson states, 'does not mediate experience but acts as a transparent medium that fully reveals the signified' (257). The written

text could not alone create the illusion of presence on which theatre's sense of reality is based. These musical experiments hence enabled him to make his stage 'present' to his audience and in doing so to create his own form of communication in the way no text alone can. S. Shepard's yearning for language as a transparent sign directs the research he conducts on stage language. In order to investigate a more satisfying way of conveying meaning, *Tongues* was an attempt to explore what Chaikin would call "thought music" (Blumenthal, 139). *Tongues* is a piece composed of different voices relating their life story or a moment in their existence, each speaking independently and separated by percussive elements that permeate the stage. The actor and the musician alternate between the different moods conveyed by the different voices.

The piece's juxtaposition of percussions and words suggest the failings of text in communicating a full experience. In the final section of the piece, words reveal their complete inadequacy in expressing the life of the spirits. Language is depicted as no longer being an authoritative means of expression, with both a speaker and a listener - it becomes instead a dialectic learning process with its natural surroundings:

Today the people talked without speaking.

Tonight I can hear what they're saying.

Percussion- soft.

Today the tree bloomed without a word.

Tonight I'm learning its language.

No percussion, arms stay frozen, silence, blackout. (Tongues, 318).

In this extract, percussions in the stage directions contaminate the words and create the effect and structure of a Native American chant, a highly spiritual and musical mode of expression, seemingly more in tune with the spirits. The body itself performs a kind of musical segment that accompanies and reinforces the musical structure of the language uttered. At the end of the segment, the body is still. The resulting silence becomes an echo of the percussion- true communication is thus achieved. This musical structure is here suggested as a way to communicate beyond the limits of the world of the living - bridging the gap of the incommunicability with the world of the dead.

As A. Wilson suggests in her essay, in the section of *Tongues* staging a seemingly fruitless dialogue between two voices about their respective

hunger, desire is recognized only through the medium of language: "Would you like to go eat? Isn't it time to eat? (...)". Sprung from an actual conversation between Shepard and Chaikin during their collaboration, the paradox of the exchange lies in the impossibility of desire to be satisfied because the very recognition of desire by both voices is predicated on language. Since this hunger is mediated through language, there will be "[n]othing left but the hunger." (*Tongues*, 310) This marks the loss of the full presence of the signified- all that remains is the sign. No food is there and will ever satisfy the hungry: "SPEAKER: (...) Nothing will satisfy it. Absolutely nothing." (*Tongues*, 310).

In attempting to make the signified fully present to his audience, Shepard subsequently tries, through the use of rhythm and music as a counterpoint to text, to overcome the loss that attends the separation of the signifier and the signified in text.

Building a character through voice

In order to craft new meaning and original characters through an innovative stage language, Shepard had to account for an original flaw in the very nature of text. One of the problems with text as a means of communication is that it is already informed with preset values and distinctive characters: as Mikail Bakhtin states in his essay 'Unitary Language':

In language, there are no neutral words and forms (...) All words have a taste of a profession a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. (278)

As a result, in order to create characters that communicate beyond the limits language imposes on their identity, Shepard attempted to build characters through different linguistic means and sought to investigate ways in which 'character development might evolve directly from music or sound' (DeRose, 340).

As S. Shepard was conducting "an attempt to find an equal expression between music and the actor" (DeRose, 341), his experimentation on language led him to consider the 'voice' as the primal element in language. This was no doubt a result of his own confrontation with text as

an actor. In his own search for communication he states that "Voice is the nut of it. Character is an expression of voice (...). If a writer is totally connected with the voice, he will be with the words." (Wren quoting Shepard, 76) In order to coil this entirely specific form of language, Shepard drew on his watching of the Open Theatre 'Sound and Movement' workshops. In these workshops, actors responded to each other's spontaneous inputs in order to generate material. He subsequently envisaged his characters as collages, and indicated to his actors (in *Angel City's* 'Note for Actors') to think of the characters as "fractured with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme". It therefore makes sense that he went on to co-create two pieces with the former director of the Open Theatre, Joseph Chaikin, in order to investigate further this particular musical structure and quality of this new form of language.

The Jazz language

After his stay in London in the beginning of the 70s and his subsequent realization he would never make it in rock and roll, S. Shepard gave it up for Jazz, as instrumentation and as a structural component for his work. He started instead to use the classic jazz format as structure for his experimental language. S. Shepard saw Jazz as an inherently American phenomenon¹: hence Jazz was an American mode of expression.

Why did Shepard investigate Jazz as a way of creating a new form of language? First, he was seduced by the possibilities it presented in bringing a musical, rhythmic and percussive quality to his text. In *Tongues*, rhythm frees the text from the imperative of narrative, allowing it to limit itself to the primary elements of the theatrical text- voice. The form thus experienced could then acquire meaning through the audience's experience of the two art forms combined. Shepard and Chaikin sought to create according to a musical model. Chaikin admitted: 'We're never looking for the dramatic structure. We're looking for [a]...shape that's musically tenable.' (Blumenthal: 1981, 141). This musical shape is to be found in the rhythmic backbone and sections of written text to hold together other more free-form sections improvised on the night of performance. The rhythm percussion creates complements or counterpoints to Chaikin's speech rhythms. The motifs are introduced by a voice, as in a musical composition, and then repeated and commented

on in different beats, voices and variations. Each part or pattern allows Shepard to investigate a new compositional method; each part has its patterns built with its internal logic. The vocal fragments thus emerging break the linear flow of the traditional narrative and sketch out the characters as distinct corpuscles, unintegrated, 'anomalous' and musically autonomous. Each voice is developed in between two cycles of percussions, or a cycle of percussion and a silence - with every new voice revealing a new character. Each new presence is generated by the contrasts in the sounds of percussions and voice.

The New Mothers' Voice displays some Jazz-solo technique of creating self-contained aria-like monologues with their own internal rhythmic dynamics. Words are used as percussion, vibration and breath. As happens in jazz, phrases are repeated with minor variations: 'Nothing they told me was like this' / 'Nothing they told me'; 'This blood' / 'This blood from me'. The phrase 'how to' and the word 'just' recur within segments as rhythmic punctuation that resemble a breathing pattern, and recalling the very act of labor. The musical quality of language in this text reinforces the physicality of language. The theme of the segment - along with the physicality of the moment portrayed (birth) calls for a physical mode of expression - a physical texture and presence. The simultaneous experience of hearing percussions and voice makes the audience envisage voice as a physical presence that can be compared to that of a percussion sound.

In his quest for a 'pure language' (as Wilson calls it), a new semantic system that could lead to a more direct way of communicating with his audience, Jazz allowed him to move in new 'emotional territories'. Shepard, quoted in DeRose, states that while working with jazz composer Catherine Stone during this period, he realized that "Jazz could move you in surprising territories without qualifying itself. You could follow a traditional melody, and then break away, and then come back, or drop into polyrhythm... But more importantly it was an emotional thing. You could move in all these emotional territories and you could do it with passion. There was a form in a formless sense." (DeRose; 1981, 234)

But music also held an important function in the unfolding of the dramatic action itself. Jazz drummer Max Rouch, who served as a musical director for some of Shepard's plays, said that "music in

Shepard's plays (became) another character in the play. It speaks as much as the actors do" (1981, 242). This is especially true in *Tongues*, where percussion and voice share the stage and communicate together for the audience and with the audience. As the piece unfolds, the physical presence of the instrument (or instruments as the stage is covered in performance with a broad collection of percussive elements spread around the percussionist) announces the give and take between the two personae, voice and accompaniment- yet another feature of jazz. As in jazz improvisation, when the voice on stage gives way to silence, it allows for instrumental responses.

The audience and form

Shepard's thoughts on audience response changed after his stay in England in the beginning of the 70s: he realized he no longer wanted his audience to react with mindless enthusiasm or with reductive intellectualizing. He expressed his quest for another form of response and hypothesized that 'somewhere between the Who Concert and the Royal Court there must lie another possibility" (1981, 202). The relationship he sought between audience and stage is itself a dialogic and non-hierarchical one. The audience should not extract a clear statement from a play but be liberated to respond to it in their way – this view was similar to the vision Shepard held of the process of writing itself.

Music and immediacy

His experimental plays allowed for the introduction of a second semiotic system, music, into the already complex relationship between text and stage. Music can bridge the gap between the stage and the audience by creating a simultaneous and visceral response. In an interview, Shepard confesses that 'when you play a note (...) there's a response immediately. You don't have to wait to build up to it through 7 scenes. (...) Music communicates emotion better than anything else I know, just anything! Just bam! And there it is. You can't explain exactly how the process is taking place, but you know for sure that you're hooked" (1981, 236). If music communicates an experience to the audience differently, then one could venture that the words that accompany this music must in a way acquire a new form of presence.

Shepard's innovative play structures also upset audience response. Significantly, although he borrowed forms from generic conventions (such as jazz structures, operetta, theatre, etc.), he purposely sought to unsettle the audience by shaking their expectations through the collage and hybridization of these forms of expressions. In *Tongues*, for example, Shepard rejects traditional plot structures and the build of dramatic action and opts instead for a Jazz-collage construction. Far from following defined story structures, the voices depict loose collections of images and speeches, and make completely unrelated moments emerge into the proceedings (moments of death, work, birth, etc.). This, along with the interpolation of voice and percussion sounds, invites the audience to remain in the present of each utterance - nothing leads to nothing - but rather words invite a particular experience in the moment. Furthermore, the unsettling texture of the piece - neither play nor musical, yet a 'performance' - and its particular 'presence' that prevents the audience from severing the performance from a meaning to be found elsewhere, renders the audience helpless in being able to anticipate or project what will be or what form the piece will take. Interestingly, through the confrontation of voice and percussion, two different semiotic systems we recall, the performance of *Tongues* challenges the normalization of meaning production in the text. Through hybridizing different forms, the multiplicity of codes and textual systems generate a new form of meaning yet to be clarified. In trying to set up a satisfactory interpretative system, the audience of *Tongues* must consider the function of Jazz instrumentation, its relation to the text and the subsequent form this hybrid language creates. Who 'speaks' and who 'speaks back'? How is this piece meant to be listened to - as a unit or a doubling? Does music or do words prevail in the audience's experience? Visually, in the performances Chaikin and Shepard staged of *Tongues*, the position of percussionist (sitting back to back with the actor) is that of a puppeteer. He sits in the shadows, behind the actor, prompting the voice and embodying in fact the authorial voice on stage. His body also reflects the musical quality of the voice - the stage directions suggest a form of dance that both creates a rhythmic structure and communicates a third musical language. Visual communication through the dancing body activates a new network of meanings through the emergence of this new form. In light of the foregoing, another question arises: how can the audience

experience those three languages and the specific semiotic systems they embody (voice, percussions and the body) and to what effect is this hybrid language created?

The fragmentation of time in song

In his operetta or 'musical' *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing his Wife*, Shepard choses music to relate the famous American myth of Pecos Bill. Pecos Bill, as the story goes, was a cowboy who became known for accomplishing phenomenal feats thanks to his supernatural powers and his flawless shooting. He fell in love with Slue-Foot Sue, who he found riding down the Rio Grande River on a catfish as large as a whale. His faithful horse, who felt jealous of the cowboy's new interest, decided to bounce the new missus as high as he could off his back, all the way to the moon. In an attempt to get her back, Pecos Bill accidentally shoots and kills Sue. Shepard's play opens with a tableau combining visual elements and music. For the audience, therefore, music appears before the text and sets up its own musical and visual system, its own set of semantic relations through which the audience will build its understanding of what precisely will constitute stage language. The two characters then appear on stage physically bearing hints of their mythical history (the cowboy suit and the catfish) and start singing the story of Pecos Bill through the spectrum of the sorry death of Sue. The primal appearance of music over text pushes the spectator into establishing for himself the connection between visual and musical perception and text. Will music hence be central to the message or will it simply give direction to the ensuing text? Will it be understood as object or subject to this language? Will it simply serve the function of a gesture towards particular elements of text or visual discourse?

The thematic texture suggested by the title, 'The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing his Wife', governs the structure - it fuses words and music into a single unit of perception, suggesting a slow-paced piece filled with pathos. As the play unfolds, music and text seem to coexist equally to the audience. Scoring is part of the overall sensory fabric of the play. The absence of a clear-cut stage movement allows the audience to be fully impacted by the language that results from this double input. Music allows the listener to construct a new reality that

draws on a set of preconceived attributes – for music is never neutral to the listener.

The myth of Pecos Bill is often recalled in the United States in the form of a song, a 1948 Disney musical composition² that has been sung over and over again since then on stage and in movies. However the theme of the Old West is also associated in the musical construction of the United States with country music. Country music is the rhetoric of man relating his life, all the wrong he's done and the woman he's lost. This type of music is a music that lives through the past tense - time becomes an old condition. Country and Western Music call to mind a network of related themes: storytelling, alcohol, the land, small-town seediness and the failings of heterosexual love. Country Music is a discourse about the past - the characters no longer exist in the moment. Yet Country Music does not only recall themes; it also calls on a particular structure through which the themes are developed. A man addresses an audience directly, varying between past and present tense in his storytelling: his stage movements are scarce, the melody supporting the narration is awkward and the accompanying voice broken. American mythical hero Pecos Bill's recalling of his unfortunate past with Sue seems to thematically fit the musical landscape of Country Music. No objects are on stage to reflect a form of history - the stage is immemorial. The instruments chosen to create the scenery and stage the scene for the operetta, along with the low-pitched melodic moments the characters sing, strangely recall this music while creating a unique overall melody, minimalistic and resolutely modern in its composition. Music and the act of performing become an experience in time - not only do they recall the glorious past of the cowboy, but they also give an insight into what the future will hold for the hero. The Paul Bunyanesque cowboy and the wife he accidentally shoots mournfully see themselves as they will be represented in the national myth: 'rotten in the memory of men' (The Sad Lament, 94). The section title 'Now I'm alone' refers to these changing times.

The audience is an entire part of the musical composition: the characters address it directly to testify of the existence of these Mythical heroes, to attest their fictional presence before them and to recall their exploits. In fact, it is through their memory and the song that conveys it

that myths exist, or through them that the fictional nature of the myths of the West is established. The subtitles invite the audience to experience a mood or theme in the unitary perception of both music and words. Although the words should actually describe what the structure of the music is doing and what the music is saying, the piece itself is a humoristic musical comedy resting on the discrepancy between the serious topic - the fragmentation of culture through the disappearance of myth in national memory- and the burlesque rendering of the mythical element through its musical presentation. Finally, music holds yet another function. It is a unifying presence, in that it ties up the different times referred to in the text and links the fictional and the real space of America, thus drawing the audience further into the play's emotional texture.

Many questions are raised by the respective functions of both text and music in the performance; does the accompaniment contribute to the lyrics with its own senses of motifs or does it break from it, bringing forth a new message in the proceedings? How do the words of the characters match a melodic sequence and the rhythm of the motif, or the refrain's tone? The quality of the language itself, through its hybridization with music, changes and challenges the nature of the message it conveys. The presence of melody gives another quality to the text: it itemizes its syllables or words as an onomatopoeic identity, an exclamation or a spoken letter. If a distinctive musical meaning emerges, it is one hard to apprehend - how do the verbal and musical meanings coexist? Do they reinforce each other without ambiguity or redundancy? Is the text set to the music thus appropriated by it? Does the verbal text give up its aesthetic and structural identity when confronted to music? The only certainty lies in the fact the listener is invited to consider the musical unit.

Where does theatre end and musical performance begin?

Shepard's plays frequently cry out for a treatment in performance that underscores their rhythmic and musical qualities. Words that hold the function of percussions, like vibration and breath that hit and move the air, have been a trademark of Shepard's plays since his earliest. He sees writing as an experimentation 'that led to rhythm discovered in space and time - packing up words and stretching them out along with their size and shapes and sound'. Sam Shepard's language also begs for

musical or percussion accompaniment. In his experimental works, Shepard gives it a try - he sees what happens when music is thus added. Music becomes the model for generating a new stage language, thus locating the matrix of his new poetics outside of the text. When working on *Inacoma*, Shepard said each piece had its own "particular musical nature". In the program notes to the play *Superstitions*, the actors stated how they approached the work in musical segments: "It became clear that the role of music was as varied as the drama it surrounded. At times its presence initiates action, at other times it echoes and reflects the action. The music can be the natural sounds around the characters or the moods inside them. It can also be an equal participant in conversations, or an entry point to parts unknown." (DeRose, 236) Shepard re-invested these new-found musical structures in his subsequent 'music-ridden' theatrical work. But looked at more closely, these works carry the trace of their musical genesis and the musical experience they generate for an audience. In the very structure and themes of some plays, Shepard creates an alternative rhetoric in his theatre that the musical experimentations suggested.

These attempts to transfer musical structures to the stage will be constitutive of his later work. In *Fool for Love*, for example, the play opens with very musically-explicit stage directions that will govern the whole staging of the ensuing play: 'to be performed without a break'. The opening speech uses dull, repetitive vocabulary but in a constantly modulated ebb that recalls a musical tune. In a single, on-going movement, rhythmically punctuated by the slamming of doors, the characters come and go and rhythmically charge the stage. A two-way confrontation is built crescendo-like to peaks of violent intensity before giving way to quieter, more reflective passages, which then in turn become confrontational. The musical structure constitutes the intense emotional texture of the relationship that takes place between the two protagonists, making the audience envisage the very violence of the scenes through both sound and the harshness of the words uttered. Shepard also thickened the doors and walls when he staged this play to emphasize the percussive quality of the stage violence through the slamming of doors. And although *Pecos Bill* is as musical as Shepard wrote his plays, complete with music scores, he saw *True West* more truly

a 'musical' than any of his previous work. *True West's* structure suggests a musical awareness of time on stage. It is divided in nine scenes or nine movements: the brothers' 'themes' begin as diametrically opposed extremes and become blended and blurred to the point where they cross over completely in a reversal that is as much a musical device as it is character development.

These two examples might suggest ways in which one could investigate further the reception of these post-1978 plays in Shepard's body of works, and the stage possibilities they offer. Given the hybridization of the musical stage and the theatre stage during this period, perhaps these readings might enlighten us into thinking on a new emerging musically-laden theatrical stage language.

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Notes:

¹ Sam Shepard wrote this in Village Voice whilst in London.

² The songs for this animated film were written by Eliot Danzig and Johnny Lange and sung by Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers.