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American Clocks : Sam Shepard's Time Plays¹

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Time moves in strange ways on the contemporary American stage. In this prefabricated world the dramatic moment constantly re-sets itself : here a unity of time is more frequently experienced as a tantalizing disunity. The minute destabilizes, the hour deconstructs, the beating of a clock takes its own odd-even measure for measure. This is a haunting rhythm, as Sam Shepard describes his adventurous mise-en-scene for *A Lie of the Mind*, "of infinite space, going off to nowhere" — in particular. At the end of this ambitious three-act play, Meg moves slowly down stage right toward porch, still unaware of two other characters stuck in the same tableau, her maimed daughter Beth and Jake's "other," brother Frankie. Her eye crosses the proscenium to the fire still burning in the bucket from a different staged time in another scenic place. And as she moves out onto the porch landing, it is the empty site of this previously staged "space" that she now cauterizes for us with the finality of an ambiguous stare :

She stops. Pause.
MEG — (Still with hand to her cheek) Looks like a fire in the
snow. How could that be?
Lights fade slowly to black except for fire.²

The specular invites speculation : this attempt at a composite denouement has been designed for a dual set on which two bold time signatures are registered in terms of the explicit use of a suddenly simultaneous stage space.

Shepard's scenic vocabulary in *A Lie of the Mind* is, of course, only a more graphic display for the artificial structuring of time as it has long been known to function on the twentieth century American stage. "The past is the present, isn't it?" intones Mary Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. "It's the future too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us."³ The scenography for her dramatic revelation has been far more naturalistically arranged than anything we are likely to see in Sam Shepard's performance space. Even in *True West*, for example, a recognizably suburban kitchen is invaded by a phalanx of shiny toasters from hell. And yet Mary Tyrone's stage time may be similarly transformed by the steady intrusion of fog, mist, and her morphine-induced state. Appearing at a doorway wearing a sky-blue house coat over her nightdress, her eyes enormous, an old-fashioned white satin wedding gown trailing on the floor, her face now appears "so youthful" : "Experience seems ironed out of it. It is a marble mask of girlish innocence, the mouth caught in a shy smile." A dramatic moment is all at once liberated from the constraints of picayune illusionism as Mary, like Shepard's Meg,

¹ This essay was previously published in *Modern Drama*, 37 (December 1994).

² Citations in my text from *A Lie of the Mind* are from the New American Library edition (New York, 1986).

³ Citations in my text from *Long Day's Journey into Night* are taken from the Yale University Press edition (New Haven, 1956).

seems unaware of the presence of other characters sharing the same stage time and the same stage space :

She pauses and a look of growing uneasiness comes over her face. She passes a hand over her forehead as if brushing cobwebs from her brain... That was the winter of senior year. Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time. She stares before her in a sad dream. Tyrone stirs in his chair. Edmund and Jamie motionless.
CURTAIN

O'Neill's often acknowledged indebtedness to Strindberg notwithstanding, this playing with time relies perhaps too heavily on the realistic effects of two popular American pastimes, drugs and heavy liquor. Postmodernists prefer more romantic forms of addiction and poststructuralists insist on more ironic modes of psychological dependency : ropes repeatedly lassoed to a seedy motel bedpost or an Old Man who says he's married to Barbara Mandrell : "That's realism."⁴ In *Long Day's Journey Into Night* however, the chemistry of narcotics of one sort or another is a great lubricator of the imagination as well as the tongue ; such fourth-wall devices aim to do nothing less than unburden what we used to call the dark night of the soul. O'Neill's exploration of monologue (a lie detector if there ever was one) unlocks offstage demons and makes them "be" again in a reblocked, gothic present.⁵ Mary Tyrone's lines of closure are nonetheless meant to point to something much larger than herself : her prophesy conflating past, present, and future initiates a line of descent for a theater in which there will be no angels in America.

Arthur Miller's theater will reconfigure stage time in similarly transformative ways. His multiple set for *Death of a Salesman* literally "means" that we can be both inside and outside a protagonist's head. For this famous play is always a "dream" rising out of a highly commodified "reality."⁶ Time plays : and in this aesthetics of stage space it will be music, as I have argued elsewhere,⁷ that opens up the platform to new equations between duration and memory, stage time and temporality. Once it has been established, for example, that Willy Loman's father not only sold flutes, but made them, the sound of this instrument evokes the lost lyricism of a past that this playing with time is not going to recapture. Opening the curtain — and closing it —, the flute becomes the principal instrument for orchestrating the sequence of short scenes that play themselves out on Miller's evocative set : its main role is to inform the audience that the present is about to merge with some other time, now

⁴ Sam Shepard, *Fool for Love*, in *Fool for Love and other plays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), p.27. All subsequent citations in my text from this play are taken from this edition.

⁵ For a useful discussion of how monologue works in the American theater, see, for example, Ruby Cohn, *Dialogue in American Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971).

⁶ See Miller's opening stage directions to *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Viking, 1958), p.11. All subsequent citations in my text from this play are taken from this edition.

⁷ See Enoch Brater, "Miller's Realism and Death of a Salesman", in *Arthur Miller: New Perspectives*, ed. Robert A. Martins (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1982) , especially pp.124-126.

rendered as foreign as some other place. When Willy moves from the kitchen, to Linda and the boys, to the Woman, back to Linda, and then to Happy and Charley in the kitchen, he actually takes a double journey into the past before returning to the present, the time-slot where “everything,” unlike memory, figuratively and literally “rusts.”⁸ Later, when Biff and Happy return home after having cruelly abandoned their father in a restaurant, we hear the flute but do not see Willy. As the following scene shows, he is digging in the garden and writing the end of his own history as he talks with his brother Ben about his own suicide — a plan involving a character from his past with a future event. Finally, it will be Linda Loman who has the flute behind her voice as she talks to her dead husband as though he were still a live presence in the play :

Forgive me, dear. I can't cry. I don't know what it is, but I can't cry. I don't understand it. Why did you ever do that? Help me, Willy, I can't cry. It seems to me that you're just on another trip. I keep expecting you, Willy, dear, I can't cry. Why did you do it? I search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. *A sob rises in her throat.* We're free and clear. *Sobbing more fully, released.* We're free. *Biff comes slowly toward her.* We're free... We're free...

Although her moving speech in the Requiem combines past, present, and future, it is only the music of the flute that will be left on this darkening stage “*as over the house the hard towers of the apartment buildings rise into sharp focus*” and the curtain slowly falls.

In *After the Fall* Miller will stage three separate time zones always framed by the signature of a fourth, the ominous “fall” from the Christian Bible suggested in the play’s very title. “Flashbacks,” a term the playwright dislikes, seems hardly adequate to describe either the tempo or the mood of what happens in this play. “*The Fall*,” said Miller (referring to Camus), “ended too soon, before the worst of the pain began...”⁹ In *After the Fall* Quentin, the Miller figure, speaks to the audience in a luminous but self-indulgent present ; for the action on this stage takes place, as the scripted directions indicate, in his “*mind, thought, and memory*.”¹⁰ This is a highly subjective universe where time bends : the towers of Auschwitz and the specter of Maggie, the Marilyn Monroe prototype (completely reinvented by Josette Simon in Michael Blakemore’s 1990 National Theatre production in London, are always going to be as “true” as Quentin is “real.” Playing with the fractures wrought by time, there can be no chronology other than the continuity Miller imagines for

⁸ “Arthur Miller on Home Ground”, produced, written and directed by Harry Rasky. A Canadian Broadcasting Company documentary in the Spectrum series, first broadcast October 24, 1979.

⁹ See Miller’s introduction on the cover notes to the Theatre Recording Society Production Folio version of *Death of a Salesman*, and the Program notes to the 1990 National Theatre production of *After the Fall* in London. See also Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p.484.

¹⁰ *After the Fall*, in *Arthur Miller’s Collected Plays*, vol. 2 (New York, 1981) p.127. Subsequent citations in my text from this play are taken from this edition.

his multi-level set. And as we remember the movement of this strangely haunting though imperfect play, all of its collected “time” remains simultaneous : “*The mind has no color but its memories are brilliant against the grayness of its landscape.*”

No one who thinks long and seriously about reinventions of time in the American theater would be likely to pass Tennessee Williams by, especially since his repertory, like Shepard’s, is full of some remarkable fantasists. His most memorable female figure, Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, not only depends “on the kindness of strangers,” but equally so on the restagings of time that take place within the lies of her own mind (as she blithely sings to Mitch, “ — *But it wouldn’t be make believe / If you believed in me!*”). Who needs objective time when a master *regisseur* can refashion both herself and the stark reality of death under the light of a paper moon?

I don’t want realism. I want magic! *Mitch laughs.* Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth, I tell what *ought* to be true. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! — *Don’t turn the light on!*¹¹

Her frail “Garden-of-Eden world” will be undone, however, by those lethal “*flores para los muertos.*” Real time is catching up with her, and Williams stages the progression of her fate through the intrusive melody of an insistent “Varsouviana.” Belle Reve has been just that, a “beautiful dream.” That scene at Moon Lake Casino can never be restaged, only replayed : a shot rings out as her homosexual husband Allan places a revolver to his mouth. An unlocked door had been opened far, far too quickly : “ I saw! I know! You disgust me ...” The head of the Grey boy, tender, nervous, soft, and “effeminate looking,” “had been — blown away!”

Williams’s staging of synchronic time can be deceptive in its very simplicity. For when time plays in *Streetcar* it plays itself out as a function of discontinuous memory shaped into the discontinuity of monologue. Only in the presence of such heightened speech can the pressure of time be felt so intimately. The play demands an audience, as Marc Robinson has recently observed, “prepared to go where an unpredictable character might wander, and able to enjoy cascades of language” that rarely advance the plot but always deepen “our understanding of the character.” In this mode of dramatic speech “nothing is ever settled”, we travel with the character to the time and place her speech brings us to.¹² Blanche recites her story in the presence of Mitch, though it soon becomes clear that she is speaking only to herself. Literalizing as well as internalizing the movement of her own words, she moves both back in time and stays in the same place as the polka resumes in a major key. A character is suddenly in two “spaces” at one and the same time.

¹¹ All citations in my text from *A Streetcar Named Desire* are taken from the Signet edition (New York, 1947)

¹² See Marc Robinson, “ Four writers,” *Theater*, 24 (1993), pp.31-32. For a decisive study of the movement of speech in dramatic time, see Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare’s Soliloquies*, trans. Charity Scott Stokes (London: Methuen, 1987).

Looks like a fire in the snow. How could that be?

Sam Shepard's "time plays," however, are something else again than a mere sum of those imaginative parts we have seen represented on the American stage before. Highly susceptible to the sort of historical-survey-cum-genre-study I have been following so far, his work in the theater strives to establish its own integrity and its own vitality as it struggles to make a pact with the unities and disunities of his own playing with the presence of time in drama.

Fool for Love, like *Miss Julie* before it (but with a different variation on the mime), occurs in theater time in what Gertrude Stein famously called "the continuous present"¹³: "*This play is to be performed relentlessly without a break.*" There is no interval, but the interruptions in the action are nonetheless palpable, noisy, and real. One might even be tempted to "clock" them by counting out those heavy beats pounded by Eddie and Mae as each character enters and exits the acting arena, banging a door and setting piercing sound in dynamic motion.

Electronically wired, every opening and closing amplifies the vastness of space which seems to impinge on the "*very limits of the set*" itself. Cowboy Eddie, who works so hard to be a "man," not a "guy" (at one point he even does a backflip), has, after all, travelled some 2,480 miles to get to this performance space (or so he says). Shepard's set aims for nothing less than holding time — at least fifteen years of it — in one place. And to do so he explores stage space tactfully and richly.

Relying on a hyper-real scenography to establish a mood that may have been created by more conventional means before, the set for *Fool for Love* is oddly and permanently off-center.

Dramatist that he is, Shepard will encourage his audience to think spatially before they think thematically or discursively. The Old Man looming on the small extended platform stage left should be enough to clue us into the fact that the fourth-wall strategems of O'Neill, Miller, and Williams, however influential, will finally be subverted on this multi-purpose, multi-generational set. For this "working space," to use Frank Stella's telling phrase¹⁴, is deliberately and self-conscientiously working *over time*. Theatrically, one thinks almost instinctively — at least this "one" does — of the gallery of simultaneous sets we have seen in the English-speaking theater before: Christopher Sly, the drunken tinker off to one side in the induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, the dual balconies for the first act of Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, or the mad irregularities of "the other half" on a set idiosyncratically dressed by Alan Ayckbourn — a playwright, despite his exceedingly clever manipulation of stage time and place, not usually elevated to academic discussion.¹⁵ Shepard's division of stage space is at once more radical and more emotionally charged than any of these examples would seem

¹³ Quoted by Robinson, p.31.

¹⁴ Frank Stella, *Working Space* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986)

¹⁵ See in particular *How the Other Half Loves* (London: Evans Plays, 1971), and *Absurd Person Singular*, in Alan Ayckbourn, *Three Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977).

to imply. For, as Toby Zinman has shrewdly noted, Shepard's visual spectacle does "a lot of talking."¹⁶

Critics have been surprisingly literal in their otherwise sympathetic understanding of how these complementary spaces have been put to the test in *Fool for Love*. For while it is true that the Old Man's platform set is "there" to remind us that the past is always present for Mae and Eddie — "It's the future too" — it also reminds us that these characters are equally implicated in reinventing it. One image soon nourishes the other : Eddie will even go so far as to offer his father a drink, breaking the double frame as one stage time and one stage prop — in this case an opened bottle of tequila — suddenly "bleeds" into its strangely imperfect "other." The Old Man bucks his son up, too, urging him to speak with far greater authority to "the male side a' this thing." In this "play," however, collusion runs perilously close to delusion. Shepard heavily ironizes the arbitrary divisions between both stage times and both stage spaces by brutally undercutting the psychological truisms inherent to such performative acts of "make-believe" male bonding. In this visually binary world, suddenly shown to be no longer binary, opposites detract — especially so from the compression of the dramatic pinpointing now at hand.

In the stubborn morphology of Shepard's theater, one and one does not necessarily make two. For though time moves linearly as Mae and Eddie run through the paces of their frenetic onstage encounter at the very edge of the Mojave Desert, the representation of time on that other platform makes us see that the characters are really situated elsewhere. In a sense the Old Man is located outside any semblance of real time : the movement of his rocking chair locks him into a theatrical present which will defy any systematic attempt at chronology. Wanted, dead or alive, there or not really there, he will always play his part as fateful time-bearer to Eddie and Mae's skillful duets, for in this play his is the only real clock that counts. Time past and time present freeze into one : no matter how many times these characters noisily enter and exit, in this famous "frieze" nobody ever comes and nobody ever goes. A gasoline fire burns itself out ; but it's only a *matter of time*, stage time, before Eddie and Mae will be back for another rehearsal. There will be other gun-slinging contessas and other down-home Martin-ets. But all walls for these low-rent fools for love will be as transparent as the Old Man's imaginary picture of Barbara Mandrell. In these embodied spaces there can be no onlookers, only actors ;¹⁷ and their image is fixed. In the constancy of this stage space, time always stands prophetic and still.

¹⁶ The substance of Toby Silverman Zinman's comments can be found in "Visual Histrionics: Shepard's theatre of the first wall," *Theatre Journal*, 40 (December 1988), pp.509-518, though I am quoting here from her paper delivered at the Modern Language Association meeting in 1987.

¹⁷ See Natalie Crohn Schmitt, *Actors and Onlookers: theatre and twentieth-century views of nature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990); and Stanton B. Garner Jr., "Post-Brechtian Anatomies: Weiss, Bond, and the politics of embodiment," *Theatre Journal*, 42 (May 1990), pp.154-164.

The set for *Fool for Love* offers us, then, both a contraction and an expansion of time. For only in this way can Shepard avoid the strict, logical construction of the dramatic trap of his predecessors, where the past is fetishized and essentialized as some sort of historical/psychological explanation for what takes place in the theatrical “now.” In Shepard’s representation all margins have finally broken down, setting all time signatures equally askew. There is no stable “past,” only three compelling versions of it : Mae’s, Eddie’s, and the Old Man’s — the last now configured in the Fool’s costume of some dead-beat father-time. In other words, to quote Michael Smith, “It’s like real life. You can’t tell what’s going on.”¹⁸ When time plays in *Fool for Love*, it plays as an image of what stage time is itself : something which can only exist in “the actual moment by moment thing of it.”¹⁹ Exploring its own energies and its own possibilities, this play-time fatally turns the perception of the dramatic moment inward upon itself, making us confront that ultimate lie of the mind we take for theater itself. Shakespeare calls it “lies like truth.”²⁰

Such restructurings of time in terms of stage space, space in terms of stage time, will figure even more prominently in Shepard’s next play, where the canvas is at once more elaborate and less complete. In *A Lie of the Mind* there are many more spaces framed by the single proscenium than we might initially suppose, for this repositioning of stage time can even reveal those visionary places long buried in the human heart. The play features two cosmically (and sometimes comically) dysfunctional families in three playing times ; and those of us who like our dramatic strokes drawn broadly will certainly find them here : wife-beating followed by aphasia, patriarchal funeral ashes hidden in an urn under a bed, a display of toy-airplanes, spoon-fed cream of broccoli soup, deer-hunting, a bomber jacket and the Stars-and-Stripes, a vain search for lost Irish roots (Sligo County, Connaught), as well as a drunken father-son race to the U.S.-Mexican border, which ends in oedipal disaster. This is the cruel iconography of Shepard’s own private Montana, Wyoming, and southern California. The multi-platform set for this play therefore carries a lot of weight ; and yet its flexibility in performance allows for several stunning intersections of subjective, objective, linear, and imaginary time. As the stage lights slowly dim on one “place” and quietly come up on another, all boundaries and all borders now seem blurred. The geography of this dreamy set can even transcend time, just as it can suddenly and spontaneously re-dress stage space. At the end of the first act, for example, Lorraine exits upstage, while Jake stays in place, staring out across to stage left :

Very soft light begins to come up on BETH’s hospital bed, now made up with blue satin sheets. BETH is alone, sitting on the upstage side of the bed with her back to JAKE. She is naked from the waist up with a blue silk dress pulled down around her waist

¹⁸ Ross Wetzsteon quotes Michael Smith’s comment in his “Introduction” to *Fool for love and Other Plays*, p.4.

¹⁹ Shepard as quoted by Wetzsteon in *Fool for Love and other Plays*, p.4.

²⁰ *Macbeth*, V.v.43.

and blue high heels with stockings. She is uninjured now — no bandage, her hair soft and beautiful. She is oiling her shoulders and chest from a small bottle beside her. JAKE just stares across at her as the light slowly rises on her. She continues oiling herself slowly and seductively, unaware of JAKE. She is simply his vision.

This is the same “man” — or should I say “guy” — who will later try to get to Montana in his underpants with an American flag wrapped around his neck. But an earlier scene ends on an even more unexpected and an even more romantic note as we hear Beth’s piercing cry, “HEEZ MY HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAART!!!” Eddie and Mae, those innocent fools for love, certainly have nothing on her.

The movement of this play’s action from one side of the proscenium to the other, from Jake’s family to Beth’s, would seem to suggest that these contrastive spaces are mutually meant to exclude and inform one another. But that is not how things work in *A Lie of the Mind*. Shepard’s representation of time is far more ambitious than that. Each acting area, initially minimalist (in the first act there are no walls to define locations — only furniture and props and light on a bare space), becomes progressively more naturalistic with the addition of the paraphernalia of a highly inflected realism : although this set will never support any ceilings, acts two and three gain the definition of two walls, a window, a door on stage left and an old-style swinging kitchen door on stage right. In this way, the two competing sites move not only back and forth, but even more so into themselves, as though attempting to certify their own authority and their own truth. Oddly enough, Lorraine will end by dismantling her own space as she watches both of her sons literally move into another time, as though Beth’s stage reality finally had more staying power.

Although Shepard’s characters frequently disparage the relentless beat of their own American clocks (Lorraine says, “Time has nothing to do with it” ; standing alone in a pool of light, Jake goes even further on a blue payphone when he denounces all “that Zen shit”), Shepard’s work shows time and time again that *time* has in fact everything to do with it. As they move so determinedly and so determinately in and out of a stage space they seek to dominate and subvert, such dramatis personae are invariably playing with the raw contingencies of a new time structure that holds their own states of shock for one isolated moment of what Ruby Cohn calls “theatereality”. Shepard’s scenic vocabulary offers them — and the American theater — a new way to “look” at the presence of such time in drama, to stare it, so to speak, right in the face.

In Shepard’s theater time always plays, as it does for his predecessors, on a very tight space ; only on his stage the movement of that time has been vastly and eccentrically accelerated :

Looks like a fire in the snow. How could that be?
(*Light fades slowly to black except for fire*).

This stage space is full of temporal possibilities ; as one brother says to another in *True West*, “I’m not talking about permanent. I’m talking about

temporary.” What you do when you watch a Shepard work is explore how strangely and how suggestively this time plays. This time and this space, moreover, know no boundaries but their own, even and especially when such artificially induced images fade into the blankness of no-time before the house lights go up. HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME.²¹ “It was,” after all, as Frankie tells his brother Jake in his stage time on his stage place, “just a play, wasn’t it?”

²¹ “The Waste Land”, in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 65-66.