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Staging a Life: An Interview with John J. Winters

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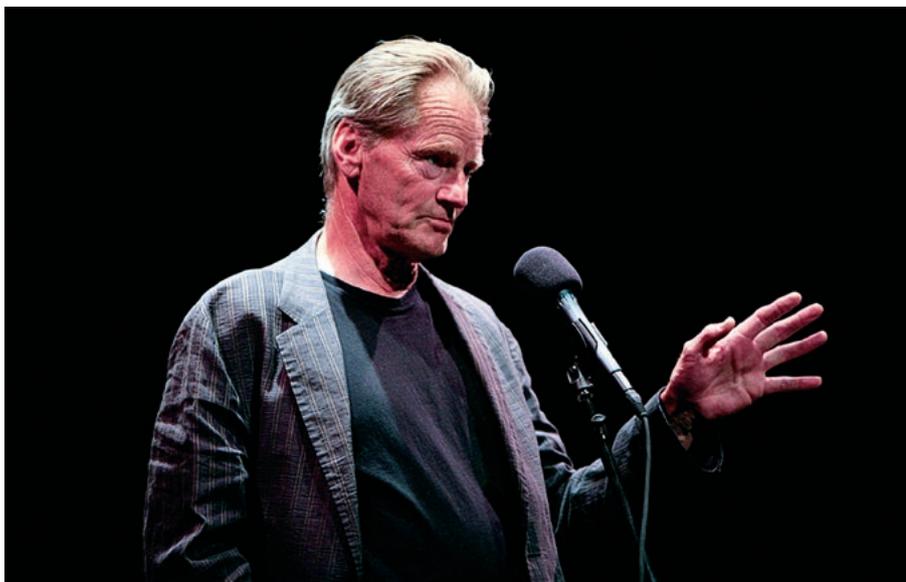
Staging a Life:

An Interview with John J. Winters

In April 2017, BSU News and Digital Communications director John J. Winters published *Sam Shepard: A Life* (Berkeley, Cal: Counterpoint Press), a major biographical treatment of the renowned American playwright, actor and musician, who has since passed away—in July—at age 73. The book is John’s first, and it has already received important accolades. John has taught for many years in the English department as an adjunct faculty member. A veteran journalist, he writes for many newspapers, including *The Boston Globe*, and regularly contributes reviews and commentary to Boston’s WBUR. His work has appeared in *Playboy*, *Salon*, *The Providence Journal*, *Art New England*, *Runner’s World*, and *Rhode Island Monthly*. In late summer 2017, BSU Professor of English Benjamin Carson interviewed John about his remarkable subject.

Ben Carson: *In his Introduction to Shepard’s Seven Plays, Richard Gilman writes, “the real difficulty I share with many critics isn’t so much deciding what the work is as knowing how to write about what it is.” Shepard’s plays are formally challenging and resist attempts to*

identify clear themes. They often reject linear plot development and end ambiguously, and consistent characterization gives way to sudden shifts in personality and role reversals. How would you characterize Shepard’s plays?



Sam Shepard (1943-2017) (Getty Images).

John Winters: Your question reminds me of something Shepard wrote to Brandeis in 1976 in acceptance of the first of the two Creative Arts Awards he received from the university: “I’m dedicated to the possibilities of exploration and discovery in my work.” This says it all. He wrote without preconceived ideas about plot and character, and cared little what audiences expected from a night at the theater. The so-called Well-Made Play wasn’t even on his radar. *Waiting for Godot* had blown his mind, not only in its language and humor, but in the things that Samuel Beckett was doing on the page. Beckett cleared the decks, tossed out the traditional ideas of what theater was supposed to do and be. Shepard proceeded from there. He was also lucky in that he came to New York after the Beats, the Abstract Expressionist painters and other leaders of the avant-garde had made the radical somewhat acceptable. The early 60s also brought to significance, culturally speaking, a youthful generation intent on being heard and desirous of seeing their own lives and predicaments presented onstage and onscreen.

BC: *While Shepard was born in Illinois and grew up in California, he, like so many artists of his generation, got his start in New York City. How important was NYC and the “Off-Off-Broadway” movement for his development?*

JW: Shepard often remarked how lucky he was to arrive in the city, specifically Greenwich Village, just as Off-Off-Broadway was getting its legs. While he brought a singular vision and voice to his work, his writing fit right in with the nascent OOB scene. Many downtown writers, directors and actors were familiar with the European theorists who’d emerged in the 50s, like Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, and these ideas were in the air. Also, the plays of Beckett and Eugene Ionesco were beginning at that time to be produced in America, which cleared the way for Edward Albee’s game-changing *The Zoo Story*. As one playwright told me, Albee showed you didn’t need fancy sets, large casts or sophisticated dialogue to stage a play. Experimental work soon became the



John J. Winters (Photograph by Karen Callan).

order of the day in the handful of little theaters that were springing up all over the Village in the early 1960s. Shepard and his writing could not have found a more simpatico place to land.

BC: *What were Shepard's early influences and how did they shape his aesthetic and his intellectual development? I'm thinking here not only of Joseph Chaikin and Patti Smith but also jazz musicians like Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy. All of these figures, particularly Chaikin, left their marks on Shepard's work.*

JW: I found in the archives one of Shepard's notebooks where he dissects the playing of Charles Mingus, discussing how there were

rhythms on top of rhythms in his playing, and how, generally, a jazz performance can take off in an entirely new direction at the drop of a hat. And in his notebook, Shepard is trying to figure out how language – dialogue in this case – could mimic this. He also felt there was a close affinity between language and music,

and you can see this in all his plays. His early work was notable for its use of soliloquies, which Shepard (and many critics) felt were like jazz solos. As for Joseph Chaikin, the guru of avant-garde theater, he reinforced Shepard's experimental tendencies as a writer, especially with regard to the theories of Brecht and Artaud. He also taught Shepard about the importance of actors using the body and breath, and how actors need to be "present" and in the moment. These last lessons would come to affect Shepard the actor and later, Shepard the director. As for Patti Smith, she opened his eyes to the importance of great literature and how it can serve as sustenance for one's own artistic endeavors. She definitely turned him on to the Symbolist poets, particularly Arthur Rimbaud.

BC: *What about Bob Dylan, with whom Shepard co-wrote the brilliant song "Brownsville Girl"?*

JW: When Sam arrived in the Village around 1963, Dylan owned the place. He lived there, was a regular on the local folk stages and had written some of his greatest songs in various locales around the Village. It was a dozen years before they met, but Dylan's freedom with language and penchant for creating a mystique about himself influenced Shepard from early on. When Shepard signed on for the Rolling Thunder Revue tour in 1975, he got to see Dylan up close, onstage, and even discussed writing with him. Concision is the main lesson he took away from Dylan, as well as the reinforcement of the importance of rhythm in any kind of writing. Also, Dylan's lyrics can be oblique; even his songs that feature a narrative don't necessarily have a traditional structure or firm ending. The same can be said about pretty much all of Sam's plays.

His work is strange, challenging, and funny and the best of it has at heart a sense of mystery, something ineffable.

BC: *Shepard was introduced to the work of mystic G.I. Gurdjieff by his life-long friend (and one-time father-in-law) Johnny Dark in the early 1970s. You say in your book that Shepard took Gurdjieff's spiritual awakening program, "The Work," seriously, attending meetings of the Gurdjieff Society regularly for decades.*

JW: Someone who'd known him well told me that to understand Shepard one needs to realize the impact Gurdjieff's teachings had on him. Ultimately, the Work seeks to help adherents reach a higher level of consciousness. Gurdjieff's primary teaching was that man sleepwalks through life. He also believed that every individual has multiple "I"s inside. Those who "wake up" can reach happiness and that higher level of consciousness. This is as deep as Shepard went into The Work, but he remained dedicated to it. In plays like *Angel City* and *Action*, there are characters who are described as sleepwalking, being in a trance, or portrayed as desperately disconnected from their surroundings and life in general. This can also be seen in several of Shepard's plays, particularly *True West*, where both "sides" of the brothers at the center of the play come to the fore. The brothers actually seem to trade places. The fluidity of character, apparent from the outset in Shepard's plays, post-1970, becomes more sophisticated. Think of the grandson Vinnie in *Buried Child*, who visits his grandparents but is not recognized by his own family. Or the various character "switchbacks" that occur in *A Lie of the Mind*. Gurdjieff's basic beliefs, like the other influences that were key to Shepard, untethered him from the traditional needs and expectations of dramatic writing.

BC: *Shepard won the Pulitzer Prize in 1979 for Buried Child but you tend to agree with most critics that A Lie of the Mind (begun in October 1979 but not staged until 1986) is Shepard's best play.*

JW: There are many reasons for this, aside from this play having one of Shepard's best plots and a wholly satisfying ending. *A Lie of the Mind* also marks his maturity in the

deployment of structure and design. Some of the scenes speak to others, a few scenes end on dramatic high notes, and the play includes some of the most compelling images Shepard ever put onstage. It is also the play where Shepard cuts closest to the bone in dealing with his father's alcoholism, its effect on his real-life family, and the old man's death.

how he viewed the films in question. With movies he cared about — usually high-quality projects, those featuring rural settings, or films dealing with matters close to his personal concerns — the scripts are marked up with plot details, thoughts on his character's motivation and reminders to "be present" etc. For the TV movie *Ruffian*, for instance, where he plays a

Unauthorized doesn't mean "hatchet job," but only that the subject of the biography was not given final say over the content of the book; they may or may not have participated in other ways. Authorized indicates that either the family or the estate was involved, and that can be tricky as far as getting to the truth of any matter, for obvious reasons.

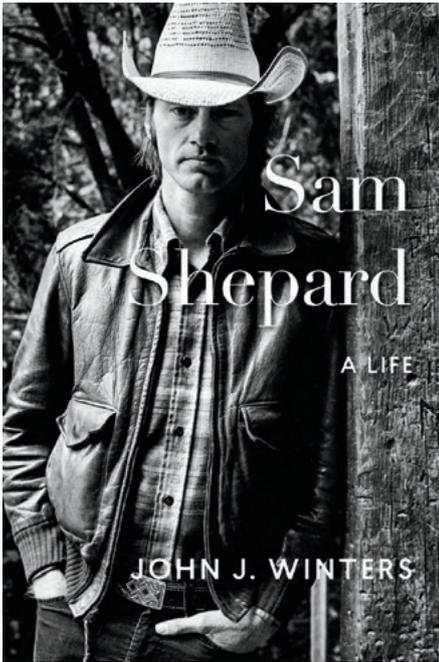
BC: *Although Shepard appeared in roughly 60 films, I get the sense from your book that he was always a reluctant film star.*

JW: A few years ago an interviewer asked Shepard how he picked his film roles. He laughed and said, "Sometimes I just need the work." When he first started doing films in the mid-70s, he worried a great deal that it might undermine his writing. Then, he found he could, as he put it, feed his horses for a full year just by acting in one film. On this point, I find it interesting that as uncompromising as Shepard was in his writing, when it came to film work, he was able to compartmentalize, separating movies that meant something to him and those that were just a paycheck. You can tell from the working scripts in his archives

horse trainer, Shepard tweaked the dialogue to be more realistic, based on his personal knowledge of the racing life. The films he is only doing for money are free of any such marks. That's not to say he was ever anything less than professional in any film role.

BC: *You detail the beautiful, stormy, and tempestuous love affair Shepard had with Jessica Lange. Their 25-year relationship ended around 2010.*

JW: Their torrid affair was clearly the impetus behind Shepard's Pulitzer-nominated play *Fool for Love*. When they got together, he was working on this play about forbidden love. As far as his acting goes, there's no evidence that she had any effect on Shepard. She's one of the greatest actresses of her generation,



became clear that he would not make himself available for interviews. Whether that was due to his illness or his long-held disdain for the media and publicity in general, it's hard to say. As for authorized versus unauthorized, even sophisticated readers don't always fully understand these terms. Unauthorized doesn't mean "hatchet job," but only that the subject of the biography was not given final say over the content of the book; they may or may not have participated in other ways. Authorized indicates that either the family or the estate was involved, and that can be tricky as far as getting to the truth of any matter, for obvious reasons. I like to say my book is "proudly unauthorized." Frankly, with the letters and archival material I worked with – particularly the dozens of journals I found – I think I was

JW: Tension and humor are the keys to Shepard's best plays. Tension, in that one never knows when things are going to go awry or explode onstage. His dark humor, meanwhile, tempers his bleak vision. Shepard doesn't "do" hope, believing that in the end we all get clobbered. But his plays are shot through with a mordant humor, something he inherited from Beckett. His work is strange, challenging, and funny and the best of it has at heart a sense of mystery, something ineffable. See one of his plays, and just as with Beckett or Pinter, you may find yourself discussing it for days afterward.

BC: *How do you think Shepard will be remembered?*

JW: He's one of the greatest dramatists of the past half century. He was also an actor who brought to the screen something rare – "authenticity" is the term most used to describe it. He was more than just a Pulitzer-winning writer and Oscar-nominated actor, however. He wrote the screenplay for the now-classic film *Paris, Texas* and played drums with the cult 60s band The Holy Modal Rounders, who once opened for Pink Floyd. He had his short stories regularly featured in *The New Yorker*, and on top of all this, he was a damn good horseman whose thoroughbred breeding operation produced its fair share of fine racehorses. That's a long list of accomplishments. But I know he wanted to be remembered as a writer of plays and prose. In that regard, I think his lofty reputation is secure for a long time to come.

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yet her work, for Shepard, merely served to take her away from him. One thing she did successfully was turn him into a family man. If you can imagine Shepard getting up at the crack of dawn to make breakfast for their two kids, packing their lunches and then dropping them off at school—for years this was part of his life.

BC: *You note in the acknowledgements that Shepard "didn't participate in this project." Did you invite Shepard to participate?*

JW: Yes, as I like to say, he resisted my charms at every turn. I wrote him several letters and was in touch with his agents and it quickly

better off "unauthorized." Shepard is so open and candid in his letters and these journals that I doubt any number of interviews with him would have been as revealing. These materials, along with dozens of interviews with those who know and worked with Shepard, gave me all I needed for the book.

BC: *Shepard's key early plays remain popular here and abroad, particularly in England, where Shepard lived for three years. Why does Shepard's work still resonate with theater-goers?*



Benjamin Carson is Professor in the Department of English.