

2 EARLY SHEPARD PLAYS AT THE PILOT

BY SYLVIE DRAKE
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Perhaps the mark of a playwright's worth can be measured by the degree to which it is impossible to separate him from his writing. Any time a Sam Shepard play comes along, new or old, it seems the playwright commands a review along with the production. And so it is with "Action" and "Cowboy Mouth," two early works now playing at the Pilot Theater II—the latter, written with rock 'n' roll poet and singer Patti Smith and, as far as can be determined, enjoying what appears to be its first professional Los Angeles outing.

Shepard has repeatedly acknowledged that he had never read a play until a "beatnik" he met threw a copy of "Waiting for Godot" in his lap and suggested he "dig" it. Shepard was 19 or 20 at the time, a displaced Southern California cowboy in Greenwich Village.

"I read it with a very keen interest," Shepard told an interviewer in 1974, "but I didn't know anything about what it was. I didn't really have any references for the theater, except for the few plays I'd acted in. But in a way I think that was better for me, because I didn't have any idea about how to shape an action into what is seen—so the so-called originality of the early work just comes from ignorance. I just didn't know."

But original it was and is. And in "Action"—essentially a play about inaction—the Beckett influence is inescapable. Four people sit around a table preparing to have Christmas dinner. But what dinner? And who are these people? Two men—Jeep (Darrell Larson) and Shooter (John Diehl)—heads shaved, wearing heavy coats and mired in a strange inertia that periodically erupts in violence. Two women, one named Lape (Susan Berlin) who does little more than sit there thumbing through a book, trying to find the place where they left off reading (or is it the point in their collective lives where they left off living?), unable to find it—and Lisa (Jacque Lynn Colton), who seems lamely in charge. She cooks the turkey—the only food served and, it turns out, the only food available; she sweeps up after one of the fellas breaks a chair. When he also breaks the one she brings to replace it, she cautions him, gently, that he'd better stop doing that. There's only one chair left.

Is this an asylum? Is it the end of the world? Are they, as the characters in Beckett's "Endgame," or even in "Godot," waiting for some imminent apocalypse? Studying themselves repetitively and in some minute detail as they wait, the way children will examine their hand or foot in the bath, as though it were a disembodied inanimate thing. There is a sense of menace, of oppression, of infinity, of pain. The play ends resolving nothing, leaving us in the dark but touched.

Under David Irving's direction, all four performers create the vacuum and the weightlessness, the manic eruptions and disruptions with a patient, sudden skill. Only Susan Berlin, in the blandest of the roles, sometimes loses her concentration. And then, for a moment, we are lifted

out of the play's discomfort and unpredictability. But only until the next move.

"Cowboy Mouth," directed by Darrell Larson, is a different kind of crazy—closer to that of Bette Midler in "The Rose," or Joplin in real life. Here rock 'n' roll singer Cavale (Robin Ginsburg) has, a program note tells us, "kidnapped Slim (Ed Harris) off the streets with an old 45. She wants to make him into a rock 'n' roll star, but they fall in love. We find them after one too many mornings . . ."

The place is a shambles. Empty liquor bottles are strewn all over the room. Drums and an electric guitar fill one corner. A regurgitation of clothes, shoes, open suitcases, stuffed animals, and even a dead crow that is no tribute to its taxidermist reflect the emotional state of revolution of this very odd couple.

The play is an extended leavetaking—a noisy tug-of-war wired together by harangues of four-letter words. (Very '60s.) The cat-and-mouse game-playing between the frenzied, demanding Cavale (Ginsburg as a Patti Smith replica) and her captive cowboy-musician (Sam the Man?) whom she surrenders only after an unprecedented but suitable prospective successor arrives, is exhaustive and exhausting. We won't divulge more than that of the amusing turn of events.

Harris has many times demonstrated his remarkable skills on Los Angeles stages and he is nothing short of superb as the bewildered, contained, but also privately driven Slim. And Ginsburg is a splendid wildwoman—arrogant, self-centered, self-destructive and strutting. Under Larson's compelling direction they give memorably embattled performances that never neglect the considerable reserves of humor in the situation.

The twin bill, presented by Harris' Coyote Productions, offers the best kind of marriage of purposes. It handsomely showcases the talents of actors and directors, without forgetting that only a performance that is predominantly concerned with serving a play well will serve the actor even better.

Performances at 6600 Santa Monica Blvd. run Tuesdays through Sundays, 8 p.m., until May 25 (463-8191). Entrance to the Pilot II is on Seward Street.

MUSEUM OF ART SLATES BETTE DAVIS FILM SHOW

The County Museum of Art will present an eight-week film tribute to Bette Davis, which will open with "Dark Victory" and "The Man Who Played God" on May 2 at 8 p.m. The series will continue on Fridays and Saturdays through June 28 in the museum's Leo S. Bing Theater.

Also among films scheduled are "Of Human Bondage" and "Dangerous" (May 3), "Now, Voyager" (June 7) and "A Pocketful of Miracles" (June 28).

Tickets are \$3 for the public and \$2 for American Film Institute members and students, and are available either in advance or at the door. Information: 937-4250, ext. 265.

WINNER OF

Cowboy Mouth Review at The Pilot



Clipped By:
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Tue, Sep 13, 2022