

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 8: Sam Shepard (1943 -)

Page Links: | [Primary Works](#) | [Selected Bibliography 1980-Present](#) | [MLA Style Citation of this Web Page](#) |
| [A Brief Biography](#) |

Site Links: | [Chap. 8: Index](#) | [Alphabetical List](#) | [Table Of Contents](#) | [Home Page](#) | February 2, 2008 |



[The Sam Shepard Web Site](#) (photo source)

Primary Works

Five plays: Chicago, Icarus's mother, Red cross, Fourteen hundred thousand, Melodrama play. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967. PS3569 .H394 F5

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Curse of the starving class: a play in three acts. NY: Dramatists Play Service, 1976. PS3569 .H394 C87

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Seduced: a play in two acts. NY: Dramatists Play Service, 1979. PS3569 .H394 S43x

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A Student Project by Melina Soomalan

Playwright and actor Sam Shepard was born in Fort Sheridan, Illinois on November 5, 1943. His birth name is Samuel Shepard Rogers and while some referred to him as Steve Rogers, his most popular nickname was Charlie. His mother, Jane Elaine, was originally from Chicago. She was forced to move from home to home due to her husband's constant army base transfers as a member of the Air Force. Later, Shepard's father spent a few years teaching high school Spanish. When retired from the military and teaching career, his family was finally able to settle down on a farm in the state of California. However, the quality of Shepard's family life did not improve; shortly after his retirement, Sam's father became an alcoholic. Although father and son had little in common, they shared the same name. It was a tradition in Shepard's family that every first-born son is to be named after his father (Amazon). Sam never had a very stable relationship with his father which could possibly explain the change of name that followed just a few years later.

Shepard officially changed his name to Sam Shepard in 1963 when he moved to New York at the age of 19. Before settling in New York, Shepard lived in San Francisco, California where he joined a small group of touring actors and soon became playwright in residence at the San Franciscan Magic Theatre. Nonetheless, his aspiration of becoming an actor was not served sufficiently; as a result, he decided to pursue his dreams in New York where more opportunities became available to him. Very soon after his arrival there, he took on a job as a waiter at the Village Gate in order to be able to financially support his "theatrical interests" (Amazon). While temporarily working at different places, such as La Mama, Café Cino, the Open Theatre and the American Place Theatre, Shepard received good comments for his first complete play *Cowboys* by the well-known critic The Village Voice. However, it was upon receiving two large grants, a Rockefeller Foundation and a Guggenheim grant which he earned for his contributions to the Holy Modal Rounders band, that he began to devote himself to writing full-time (Amazon).

During the same year Shepard came to New York, several revolutions were taking place. According to an online source titled WESTERNS, it was "-the year of Jack Kennedy's assassination and the beginning of the escalation in Vietnam, but also the start of the Hippie era" (Mayer, PhD 2000/1). Along with these life-changing events, the arts as a whole found its independence from society's standards, and the "Off-off Broadway" theatre was introduced for the first time (Bottom 29). The new concept of Broadway landed him several parts, and his main interest lay in Western-driven themes. Soon, he appeared in a stage-production playing the role of a cowboy; however, the late sixties brought Shepard to an awakening. In an interview conducted by Stephen Fay and published in *The Sunday Times*, he says "It was as though somebody was stuck somewhere and had nothing to do but whittle on a piece of wood, and all of a sudden discovered he could make sculpture" (1984). At this point, he had to rediscover himself, and it was of

importance to move to a new environment (Mayer, PhD 2000/1).

Consequently, Sam Shepard took his actress wife, Jessica Lange who in 1995 played the role of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and son to London, England. There, he lost focus on theatre and developed a betting habit; Shepard found a new passion for greyhound racing in White City and kept himself busy with it for a while. Fortunately, he eventually regained his focus and Shepard managed to produce four plays in London at the Hampstead Theatre Club and the Royal Court. Yet, he started to miss the States and moved back to San Francisco in 1974. Several of his plays were performed at the famous Magic Theatre, but his play *Buried Child* earned the most success and even received the Pulitzer Prize in 1979. In his interview with Fay, he states:

I guess I'm always hoping for one play that will end my need to write plays. Sort of the definitive piece, but it never happens. There's always disappointment, something missing, some level that hasn't been touched, and the more you write the more you struggle, even if you are riding a wave of inspiration. And if the piece does touch something, you always know you haven't got to the depths of certain emotional territory. So you go out and try another one (Fay 1984).

This mentality helped Shepard achieve countless productions, recognitions and awards in the future through which he gained his title as the "true American hero" (Roudane 139).

In total, Sam Shepard has composed 45 plays. Out of these 45, 11 have earned Obie Awards. Shepard has also made an appearance in an astonishing 16 films altogether. In 1984, he was nominated to receive an Oscar for his role in *The Right Stuff*. He also won the Golden Palm Award at Cannes Film Festival for *Paris, Texas* within the same year. His pieces *Far North*, *Simpatico*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *True West*, *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind* received great recognitions as well, but his major breakthrough was when he was added into the Theatre Hall of Fame in the year of 1994 after he was appointed to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1986 and earned the Gold Medal for Drama from the Academy in 1992 (Stage Door 2006).

Currently, Sam Shepard lives with his wife in Stillwater, Minnesota, as "-one of America's foremost living playwrights" (Mayer, PhD 2000/1)

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| [Top](#) |