Chapter 6

States of Shock and Simpatico: Performances of Waste

Introduction

In its symbolic dramaturgy, catastrophic spectacularized imagery and stratified layers of representation States of Shock (1991), Shepard’s response to the Gulf War, illustrates a return to a more visibly identifiable Surrealist expression after the minimalist stage imagery of his works conceived with Joseph Chaikin. On the other hand, the Surrealism of Simpatico (1994), which will be discussed in the latter part of this chapter, although not as overt as States of Shock, emerges in the play’s off-kilter realism, the episodic, collage treatment of time, the physical manifestation of otherwise internalized anxiety, the discrepancies of scale and time, the atmosphere of paranoia, and the realization of fantasy.

States of Shock in Context

In States of Shock, Shepard extends his artistic vision from the microcosm of the family, [his focus for much of the 1980s as evident in Fool for Love (1983) and A Lie of the Mind (1985)], to the macrocosm of the American psyche at large in an explicit rendering of United States military methods. Subtitled “A Vaudeville Nightmare,” States of Shock premiered on April 30, 1991 at The American Place Theatre under the direction of Bill Hart. In this play, Shepard’s fervently recycled exploration of the archetypal battle between father and son is amplified. The character of the Colonel could be any colonel, as his costume suggests—he is “dressed in a strange ensemble of military uniforms and paraphernalia that have no apparent rhyme or
reason.”2 The war in the mimetic space of the “family” restaurant fuses with the war of the diegetic domain to create a perpetual state of wartime. Thematically, this play demonstrates an interest in the Surrealist concept of the acte gratuit (gratuitous act), evident especially in the scenes of masturbation and random violence. This play also extols the cult of the self, a distinct feature of modern art, which is distilled into obsessive pursuits in Surrealism.

Formally, Shepard creates a desecrated surreality in the scenography, stage imagery, and in the nonnaturalistic performance of the body. He denies the audience any sense of a meaningful temporality or spatial sequentiality in this environment of ubiquitous wartime. Adorno, writing on Beckett’s Endgame (a play which will be discussed as an influence on States of Shock) states, “[a] bombed-out consciousness no longer has any position from which it could reflect on that fact.”3 In Adorno’s words, a “bombed-out consciousness” denotes a fragmented psyche, a prismatic processing and rendering of experience. What Shepard dramatizes here is phenomenological collapse, an experiential representation that Callens compares to the “division” (détournement) theory of the Belgian Surrealist Marcel Mariën: “a more radical appropriation [...], a reversal or reorientation of perspective (action based or discursive), which refuses to settle down.”4 Thus, Surrealism operates in this play both simultaneously in the instability of perspective of the heterogeneous depiction of wartime and in the playwright’s and the characters’ compulsive expurgation of the repressed, a direct result of the legacy of militarism over time. In addition to exploring how Shepard complicates perspective in the representation of wartime, this chapter will also address how, in much the same way as two grotesque, dismembered beings wrestle fruitlessly in Dalí’s painting Premonition of Civil War (1936), the male characters in States of Shock are constantly grappling with transgenerational trauma. This is a pressing concern for Shepard throughout his writing career. As Shepard’s men are locked within cyclical systems of recrimination, any attempt at transgression seems futile. Such worthless expenses of energy imply a performance of waste.

States of Shock is set in a typical American diner as the “Red Naugahyde” (143) café upholstery required by the stage direction suggests. The Colonel and Stubbs have come to commemorate the anniversary of the death of the Colonel’s son, whom Stubbs apparently saved in battle by using his body as a shield to protect the young man from ancillary fire. As a result, Stubbs is wheelchair-bound, impotent (“My Thing Hangs Like Dead Meat!!!” [150]), and he lifts his shirt to reveal a scar on his chest at intermittent periods throughout the play. They are served by an incompetent waitress, Glory Bee, who struggles to balance the trays of food and drinks and who belts out an old Billie Holiday song at one point as she cleans up the mess that the