

SAM SHEPARD—

“Doin’ the Things That We Want To”

By Michael Gorman

Read by Gorman at Sam Shepard’s Memorial—
La MaMa Theatre, NYC, October 2017

Playwright, Actor, Cowboy, Rock n’ Roller, Movie Star.... These are a few of the words used to describe Sam Shepard. But “friend” is the word that I would use to describe him because my relation to him has always been literary and personal. I met Sam Shepard on the page—an event that changed my life—and that’s where I still spend time with him that I cherish the most. So, American Theater, Pop Culture and Hollywood have lost a giant, influential figure, but I, like so many, have lost a quiet, supportive steadfast friend.

In the world of books and published plays where a young, aspiring writer could easily be intimidated or put-off by the presence of historic and prestigious talents, Sam Shepard was simply the easiest and most encouraging to be around.

Sam’s voice was both comforting and inspiring at the same time. “See how it easy it is?” he seemed to say. “If you’ve got the itch, scratch it. Go on, write a play. Don’t be afraid, throw that shit out the window.” A “breezier Beckett” I recently called him in a text to a friend. While other writers seemed to be hobbling their ponies, Sam was giving his horse full reign and encouraging me to do the same. “Control kills” is what his attitude seemed to say: don’t suffer the “small moment”, keep your eyes on the horizon and head for the hills.

I learned the paramount principle of “doing” from reading Sam Shepard. His plays not only encouraged me to write my own but they showed me how. I learned how a play works. No playwright’s “action” has ever been clearer than Sam Shepard’s—like cracking open the barrel of a shotgun and loading a shell. BOOM!

“There is no code anymore!” Hoss famously proclaimed to Crow in *The Tooth of Crime*, and for all intents and purposes, Sam hollered across the landscape of American Theater. All bets were off and the gates were open for dreamers like me—

the sons and daughters of farmers and fishermen as well as academics and scholars—to make their way to NYC and places like La MaMa e.t.c. to do their thing.

Another revelation I had from reading Sam Shepard was how goddamn sexy it could be to be a playwright—“a thinking woman’s beefcake”—as I recall one journalist describing him. And along with that come the funny anecdotes, of course. The story of a drunken, sexually frustrated Lanford Wilson venting at a party, “Doesn’t anybody want to fuck a famous playwright?!” And after a pause, someone proclaiming, “What, is Sam Shepard here?” Or when Sam was teaching a playwrighting class and asked his students to write down the first thing that came to mind and the young woman sitting in the front row wrote “I—want—to—FUCK—Sam Shepard.” Well, I thought, aspiring playwright to be, “There are worse problems to have than that.”

Friendship is a funny thing: how you can feel like you know someone so well without even having met him. Like the deer at dusk in a passage from Sam’s last book “The One Inside”, I sense somebody here today.

“Maybe it’s like that. A foot. A hand. Or idea. Something slips. Shifts. You find yourself in another world. You weren’t even looking. It just arrived. Appeared. Like a deer at dusk. Sudden. Still. An ear twitches. Another ear. You’re not alone. You don’t even see it. Maybe it’s just like that.”

I want to thank Sam Shepard for being my friend—for inspiring me to keep “Doin’ the Things That I Want To”. For inspiring us all to keep doing the things that we want to.

Rock on, Sam.

Mike Gorman— October 2017