

# Sam Shepard, American playwright and actor, dies at 73

By David Walsh  
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Playwright, screenwriter, director and actor Sam Shepard died July 27 in Kentucky, reportedly from complications associated with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. He was 73.

Shepard is best known to contemporary audiences for his appealing work as an actor in various American film productions, including *Days of Heaven* (1978), *Frances* (1982) *The Right Stuff* (1983, for which he earned an Academy Award nomination), *Crimes of the Heart* (1986), *Baby Boom* (1987), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Thunderheart* (1992), *The Pelican Brief* (1993), *Hamlet* (2000), *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and dozens of others.

Shepard specialized in tough-sensitive men, often from rural or Western backgrounds. He brought to the roles intelligence and dry humor. However, when called upon, he could summon up considerable venom and represent the cruelty and callousness of police officials, politicians and federal agents.

Shepard had an undoubted influence on American culture over the past several decades. Having grown up in southern California, he first came to prominence as an Off-Off-Broadway playwright in New York with a series of one-act works in the mid-1960s. He received the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his play *Buried Child*.

He also worked on screenplays with filmmakers Robert Frank (*Me and My Brother*, 1969), Michelangelo Antonioni (*Zabriskie Point*, 1970) and Wim Wenders (*Paris, Texas*, 1984 and *Don't Come Knocking*, 2005). He directed *Far North* (1988) and *Silent Tongue* (1994).

In its obituary, speaking of his acting career, the *New York Times* commented, "He bore a passing resemblance to that laconic idol of Hollywood's

golden era, Gary Cooper, and in an earlier age, Mr. Shepard could have made a career as a leading man of Westerns."

The irony, of course, is that in many of his plays Shepard skewered this type of silent, stoical American "leading man," as it were. He went to some lengths to portray men of his father's generation in particular as seriously damaged, often bathed in alcohol, violence and abuse, both of others and themselves. In his hands, the American dream proved a mirage, a surreal nightmare. If a contradiction exists between the sharp, disturbing edge of his playwriting and his relatively conventional film acting career its ultimate source lies in the political and cultural stagnation of the past several decades.

Shepard was born Samuel Shepard Rogers in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, a US military base near Chicago, in November 1943. At the time his father was in the US Air Force. The latter was a bomber pilot during World War II, and remained in the Air Force until 1948. After attending Occidental College on the GI Bill, the future playwright's father became a high school Spanish teacher in the Pasadena, California area. The Rogers family moved to the San Gabriel Valley region of Los Angeles County in the mid-1950s and "Steve Rogers" (as he was then known) graduated from Duarte High School in 1961. Father and son had a combative relationship, which included physical confrontations.

Like many other artistically minded individuals, Shepard (who changed his name around this time) found himself in New York City in the early 1960s, drawn by music, art and theater. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was an influence, along with Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, as well as Beat poetry and prose. His first effort in the theater, a double bill of *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden* in 1964

performed at Theater Genesis at St. Marks Church on Manhattan's Lower East Side, was lambasted by one critic, who walked out, but highly praised by Michael Smith of the *Village Voice*. Smith called the plays "provocative and genuinely original."

Shepard wrote dozens more one-act and full-length plays in the decades that followed, which focused on tortured family relationships in particular, usually set in decaying social circumstances. He was perhaps at the height of this fame in the late 1970s and early 1980s. *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *Buried Child* (1978) and *True West* (1980) were widely praised and performed.

Shepard told an interviewer for *Time Out* magazine in 1996 that when he first lived in New York City, he felt "there wasn't anything [in the theater] to relate to now. There's a huge hole there. You have classic drama then you fall off this precipice into a yawning gap. I was interested in this hole. Why don't I write something in that hole? Of course, Vietnam had a big influence on it too, the whole atmosphere of the time. What in the fuck is going on here? We've fallen off the edge of something and there's no response. None. Theater wasn't looked on as the arena for that kind of thing. There weren't any scripts. How do you relate O'Neill to the psychological atmosphere around Vietnam? It was very palpable, the psychological fire going on. Panic, terror, paranoia ... and there wasn't anything that related to that climate."

Shepard and actress Jessica Lange were together for some 30 years. They had two children. Shepard also had a son with O-Lan Jones, with whom he was married from 1969 to 1984. He had a relationship, treated with great interest by the media, with singer-songwriter Patti Smith as well.

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