



"I've got literally a dozen different versions of the play," Shepard says of *Fool for Love*, which he directed at the Magic and later at Circle Repertory Company with, from left, Ed Harris, Dennis Ludlow and Will Marchetti. In the process of writing, "you take the characters and you set them in motion," Shepard says. "It's a great adventure—it's like getting on a wild horse."

R. Valentine Atkinson

way, that old cliché about somebody doing the same thing over and over and over again his whole life is true. I'm doing the same thing over each time. I'm trying to get closer to the source.

Are you more adept at doing that now than you were 18 years ago?

I'm more . . . not adept, I'm more *determined* to do it. I'm less afraid. Because there's something absolutely terrifying about going into yourself. . . . It's something that I don't understand. If I understood it, I probably wouldn't write. That's why it's very difficult to talk about, and why a lot of this sounds like it's evasive.

Do you feel that you have discovered certain things, dealt with them in your plays, and then moved on to something else?

Well, I haven't left anything behind. . . . That's not true. I've gotten rid of a lot of useless stuff. A lot of tricks.

Dramatic tricks?

Yeah. Like allowing things to unravel in a direction that you know they're not going to go by themselves. Like this play [*Fool for Love*], for instance. I wrote about 16 versions of it, and every time I came back to the first five pages. I'd write like 70, 80, pages and then bring it all the way back to the first five pages and start again—throw out 60, 70 pages. So, I've got literally at least a dozen different versions of the play, but the first five pages are the same in every one.

Is that because what you felt initially about it was the truest?

Yes. The very first meeting there was something there. I knew there was something there, and I just had to keep trying. They weren't just drafts. Every time I think *this is the play*. I'm not writing a draft—I wrote twelve plays.

As an actor, how do you approach a role?

I don't really consider myself an actor. In film you can get away with a whole lot that you can't on stage. I think almost anyone can get away with being in a film.

Is that just the nature of the medium?

Yeah. Because if you're in a tight close-up, you don't have to do much. You don't have to do anything; you just say the lines. You don't have to act. So, I mean, with film acting, for me, it's just a matter of corresponding certain parts of myself to the character, finding corresponding parts and just becoming those parts all the time. I'm not a method actor or anything. I don't have any complicated scheme behind it.

Could you act in your own plays?

I could, but I don't want to.

Why?

Well, because part of the reason for writing them is to see them. You can't see them if you're in them at the same time. I like having that distance.

Music plays a more significant role in some of your plays than in others.

I think they're all musical. I like to look at the language and the inner rhythms of the play, and all that to me is related to music directly. In *True West* there are coyote sounds and crickets and things like that. And the dialogue is musical. It's a musical, *True West*. I think it's very related to music, the whole rhythmic structure of it. Rhythm is the delineation of time in space, but it only makes sense with silences on either side of it. You can't have a rhythm that doesn't have silence in it. I studied for a long time with a drummer from Ghana. He was totally amazing. And I found out that, particularly in African music, every rhythm is related. You can play 4/4, 5/8 and 6/8 all together at the same time and at some point there's a convergence. Even though it sounds like all these things are going off in totally crazy directions that are beating up against each other, they'll always come back. That was a big revelation to me, that rhythm on top of rhythm on top of rhythm always has a meaning. So the same is true on the stage. There are many possible rhythmic structures that an actor can hit, but there's only one true one. There's one moment that he has to meet.

How do you find that moment?

Well, that's very complex. It has to do with an emotional relaxation, where suddenly the tension goes and it's just *there*. I was a drummer for a long time and I realized that a lot of the time you're straining to keep the time. And then there are times when all that drops away and everything just . . . it all just rides together. And those are the times it became simple. Absolutely simple.

Do you feel closer to certain plays because they contain more of a sense of that?

Oh, yeah. Some of them have real dumb rhythms. It depends on each piece, though. Like there's only one little part of *Buried Child* that I like, that I could watch over and over and over again. One little tiny section. It's at the beginning of Act Two, I think. Just the little dialogue between the children and the old man on the couch by the television.

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