



Kicking a Dead Horse

By Sam Shepard

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A solitary man digs a hole in the ground, near a dead horse. Amidst the clutter of food and equipment stands Hobart Struther, who has ridden all the way out to the middle of nowhere on a holy mission. But one day into his “Great Sojourn,” things are looking bleak. His horse has choked to death, he's miles away from civilization, and there's not a person around to talk to – other than himself. As Hobart examines his rise — how he built a vast art collection while ensconced in a comfortable Park Avenue lifestyle — he digs deep into his own history, unearthing truths about his past while still struggling to find the answers he needs. With Shepard's linguistic flair, subtle humor, and probing insights, *Kicking a Dead Horse* is an invigorating addition to the works of one of America's most innovative playwrights.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Classic Shepard, rueful and paradoxical. . . . Highly entertaining.” —*Sunday Independent* “Witty. . . . the writing is razor sharp.” —*Irish Independent* “Bold. . . . Kicking a dead horse he may be, but it never feels as though Shepard is flogging it.” —*Irish Times*

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About the Author

Sam Shepard is the author of more than forty-five plays. He won the Pulitzer Prize for *Buried Child*. He was a finalist for the W. H. Smith Literary Award for his story collection *Great Dream of Heaven*, and he has also written the story collection *Cruising Paradise*, two collections of prose pieces, *Motel Chronicles* and *Hawk Moon*, and *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, a diary of Bob Dylan's 1975 Rolling Thunder Review tour. As an actor he has appeared in more than thirty films, and he received an Oscar nomination in 1984 for his performance in *The Right Stuff*. His screenplay for *Paris, Texas* won the Grand Jury Prize at the 1984 Cannes Film Festival, and he wrote and directed the film *Far North* in 1988. Shepard's plays, eleven of which have won Obie Awards, include *Buried Child*, *The Late Henry Moss*, *Simpatico*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind*, which won a New York Drama Desk Award. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Shepard received the Gold Medal for Drama from the Academy in 1992, and in 1994 he was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame. He lives in New York.

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Scene: as the audience enters, the stage is entirely covered with a sky-blue silk sheet concealing irregular mounds. No special lighting and no music or sound effects of any kind. A blank white muslin scrim covers the entire upstage wall in a wide sweeping arc, floor to ceiling. No special light in scrim other than work lights. Once the audience settles, piano music begins: Dr. John's "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," track 7 from the CD, *Dr. John Plays Mac Rebennack*. After first short piano phrase, lights begin slowly to dim to black. This fade takes up the next long verse of the song entirely. Once the verse is completed and lights have gone down to black, the scrim begins slowly to fill with a pale straw light reminiscent of wide-open prairie at midday. As the second verse unfolds and the lights are slowly rising, the sky-blue silk sheet begins to be drawn back very slowly toward the upstage wall, revealing a dark pit downstage center with mounds of fresh earth on either side of it. Directly upstage center of the pit, on a slight rise, is a dead horse laid out on its side, spine toward audience, neck and head sprawled out to stage right, tail to stage left, all four legs stiffly toward upstage. There is no blood or sign of external injury. The dead horse should be as realistic as possible with no attempt to stylize or cartoon it in any way. In fact, it should actually be a dead horse. Music fades out. Light is now full in scrim and stage, giving the effect of distant endless horizon in flatlands. Silence, then, from deep in the pit, the sound of a shovel piercing earth followed by the guttural exhalation of a man working hard. A spadeful of dirt flies out of the hole and lands on the mound to stage right. Slight pause, then this whole sequence repeats. Slight pause and the sequence repeats twice more, the spadefuls of earth landing on the stage-left mound. Slowly, a man emerges from the hole, appearing to the stage-right edge carrying a small camp shovel and breathing heavily. He tosses the shovel on the stage-right mound and climbs completely out of the hole. He stands there, breathing heavily, facing stage right, then bends over, exhausted, placing his hands on his knees. This is Hobart Struther: mid-sixties, rumped white shirt, no tie, sleeves rolled up, no hat, baggy dark slacks, plain boots for riding but not cowboy boots, dark vest. There should be no attempt in his costume to make him look like a "cowboy." In fact, he should look more like an urban businessman who has suddenly decided to rough it. Blotches of dirt and sweat cover him from head to foot. He has been digging all day. He straightens up, still trying to catch his breath, and turns back toward the

hole. He stares down into the pit, then looks upstage at the horse, then directly at the audience, then back to the horse again. Each of these "looks" should be very distinct and deliberate, in the mode of the classic circus clown. He looks back at the audience. Hobart: Fucking horse. Goddamn. He moves downstage right, where a jumbled pile of equipment has been tossed: western saddle, horse blanket, chaps, spurs, bridle, canteen, small duffel bag full of canned beans, jerky, pots and pans, small canvas tent in the old style, bedroll, rope, saddlebags, and brand-new cream-colored western hat. All of these objects should be totally functional and plain. He starts rummaging through all the gear, searching for a pair of large black binoculars in a case, talking to himself the whole time. (Searching through gear.) Of all the damn things--all the things you can think of--preparations--endless lists. All the little details, right down to the can opener and the hunk of dental floss you throw in just for the heck of it. All the forever thinking about it night and day--weighing the pros and cons--last thing in the world that occurs to you is that the fucking horse is going to up and die on you! Just take a shit and roll over like a sack of bones. Looks at audience, motions to horse. Look at that! Dead! Deader than dirt. There he is--deader than dirt. He finds the binoculars in the saddlebag, takes them out of their case as he crosses to the stage-right pile of dirt and climbs to the top of it. He holds the binoculars up to his eyes and looks over the heads of his audience. As he talks to himself, he turns very slowly clockwise in a tight, 360-degree circle, keeping the binoculars to his eyes and scanning out to the horizon the whole time. (Scanning with binoculars.) Now what? Nothing--nowhere--here I am--miles from nowhere. Only one day into it and bottomed out. Empty--badlands--horizon to horizon. No road--no car--no tiny house--no friendly 7-Eleven. Nada. Can't even track back where I could've left the truck and trailer. Lowers binoculars; stares out. You ask yourself, how did this come to be? How is it possible? What wild and woolly part of the imagination dropped me here? Makes you wonder. Looks upstage to horse, back to audience. Fucking horse. He hangs the binoculars around his neck by their strap and moves upstage toward horse. (To audience, approaching horse.) Look at that. That's where he winds up. Snorts a chunk of oats down his pipe, straight into the lung, and wham! That's it. End of the day, he's at the checkout counter. Gasping, wheezing like an old fart. Staggering--dead. Barely even got started on the grand sojourn and he drops out from underneath me. He kicks the horse in the belly, then climbs up on its rib cage and sits on the horse, staring out toward the audience. He picks up the binoculars and scans again. (Binoculars to eyes.) You try tracking it back in your raggedy mind to the original notion--the "Eureka" of it. You remember the moment very clearly--how it came to you. Surprising--"AUTHENTICITY." That's what you come up with--the quest for "AUTHENTICITY." As though that were some kind of holy mission in itself. Lowers binoculars, stares out. How could that be? A haunted, ghostly idea to me anymore. At least nowadays--days with age hanging off me like dry moss. Maybe always, I don't know. Far back as I can remember. Some idea--weighing the true against the false. Measuring, calculating--as though you were ever rock-solid certain--as though you ever had the faintest clue. Stops himself. Listens. Pause. (To himself, different voice.) And who is it exactly you're supposed to be appealing to now? Huh? Who? THERE'S NOBODY OUT THERE! Nobody. Do you see anybody? He looks through the binoculars. His voice shifts back and forth through this next sequence as though it were a dialogue between two personas. No. Do you hear anybody? Lowers binoculars, listens. No. Do you have the least little sense of the presence of another being--listening? Listening--Pause, listens. No. Nothing. Then stop blathering on to yourself, for Christ's sake. What's the point? Just the sound, I guess. The sound? My voice. Hearing my own voice. Me speaking to me. What in the wide world are you talking about now? Gives me the impression there's maybe somebody else. Don't make me sick. Your self is giving your own self the impression there's maybe somebody else? Something like that. Who could that be? I don't know. You're one sick puppy. I just need to verify certain things. Well, do it on your own time. Sorry. I've got better things to do than listen to your whining. All right, all right! Can't we just--What? Get along. Hobart stops himself and looks sheepishly at the audience, as though embarrassed to have been witnessed in this little conflict with himself. He gets off the horse and crosses very deliberately down center, in front of the pit. He talks directly and confidentially to the audience. All I can tell you is that I had become well aware of my inexorable descent into a life in which, daily, I was convinced I was not intended to be living. (Aside.) This is in the somewhat florid style of the classic narrative. Bear with me. Things will change. It's going to be a long, rough, and rocky road. I'm not exactly sure what "voice" to use. "Voice" in the sense of--you know--what--what voice suits the predicament. The--uh--what predicament I'm actually--it's not at all clear. It's--but hopefully, as things roll along and find their natural--hopefully, something--He begins to stroll back and forth, extreme

downstage, continuing to address the audience.(Strolling.) Long story short, it must have been some other poor fool's destiny I had been assigned to because I couldn't recognize it in any way, shape, or form as my own. Not one drop. Not even the simplest act, like turning a doorknob or opening the mailbox or addressing the doorman by name. Doorman? Oh yes, I had become quite the big-ass success, no less. No question about that. Quite the big shot on the block. But somewhere along the trail the thrill of the kill had eluded me. The ecstasy of power--and now there was a kind of constant hankering for actuality. Hankering? How else can you put it? The sense of being inside my own skin. That's what I missed. That's what I missed more than anything else in this world.(Direct to audience.) How could you lose something like that?He returns to the self-inquiry between the two voices and forgets about the audience.(To himself.) Are we supposed to reach out now and somehow walk a mile in your sorry shoes? Now that you've managed to get yourself into this jam? What is the petition you're making, exactly? You're not an immigrant, are you?A what?Immigrant.Why should that be?You sound funny. Suspicious.Funny?Foreign.I don't know. Maybe it's just the way you're hearing it.Don't try to put it off on me, now.I'm not.Are you the son of an immigrant, maybe?Probably so. What's the point?The son of the son of an immigrant? Twice removed?Twice?One of those white barbarians Benjamin Franklin brought over to protect us from the Appalachian wilderness?ABSOLUTELY NOT!Then what's your story? Why beat around the bush?Hobart stops. Turns to audience.(Directly to audience.) "AUTHENTICITY."Pause, then continues to audience:The little conundrum mounted slowly to a frantic state of crisis. I was running out of time. Birthdays flying by--I could see it coming. I sat down with the wife, face-to-face. Told her--look now, here it is; right here in front of me. I've turned the corner. I can feel it creaking in my bones, my teeth--the eyes are all cloudy in the mornings now. It's coming to get me, I swear. Maybe ten good physical years left and that's it--tits up; roll over, Beethoven. Ten years left to still throw a leg over a horse, like I used to; still fish waist-deep in a western river; still sleep out in the open on flat ground under the starry canopy--like I used to.Pause, to himself:When was that? This--"used to"? When was that?Long pause. He stares out, then begins to stroll aimlessly, kicking at the dirt. He talks to himself and the audience again.The kids had all flown the coop. Empty nesters--that's us--suddenly. It happens just like that. You don't see it coming. Sitting around, folded up on sofas, sipping tea and reading The Week in Review--the world going up in smoke across the blue Atlantic. Internecine warfare. Remote. Pathetic stuff. Truly. Impotent. What's there to do? I proposed it to her gently, although she had no trouble seeing the sense of it, especially since my nervous condition had gone from bad to worse, constant pacing all hours of the day and night, talking to myself--which is no surprise--and then sudden, unpredictable bursts of fury where I'd rip valuable objects of art off the walls and hurl them out the windows into the lush canyon of Park Avenue: Frederic Remingtons wrapped around the lampposts, for instance; Charlie Russellsimpaled on bus stop signs, crushed by maniacal yellow taxis. All stuff I'd discovered back in my "truer" days, hanging out worthless in lost Wyoming bars, skunk drunk in Silver Dollar saloons, staring bleary up at these masterful western murals nobody could recognize anymore through the piled up years of grime, tobacco juice, and barroom brawl blood. There they were--forgotten--just hanging dusty and crooked above the whiskey.He shifts into dialogue voices:"How much you want for that old cow painting up there?""That? Never thought about it. Why would you want to buy something like that?""Aw, just to hang up in the tack room, you know. Conversation piece.""Hell, I guess I'd take twenty bucks for it. Never look at the damn thing anyway, anymore. My back's always facing it.""Twenty bucks? I'll take it."Shifts back to speaking to audience directly:Turned that twenty into a hundred grand, that hundred grand into a million. Whole thing just kinda snowballed. I raided every damn saloon, barn, and attic west of the Missouri--north and south, took truckloads of booty out of that country before anyone even began to take notice. Some of it's hanging in national museums now. What I couldn't see, though, was how those old masterpieces would become like demons, glaring down at me, nostrils flaring, Colt revolvers blazing away. Couldn't see that back then for hell or high water. Things come back to haunt you, that's for sure.He turns, looks at horse.Like my horse--this horse right here.He moves toward the horse.I told the wife I'd been dreaming about my old horse--the one I'd left behind years before all this success with paintings. I had one good one left, out in the Sand Hills on open range. Course, he was just a colt back then--big, good-lookin' son of a buck, too. Kept visiting me night after night. Just appearing in the dark--standing there with all his tack on--waiting--beckoning with his big brown eyes. I took it as some kind of a sign--some omen or other.He pauses by the hole and sounds the word down into it--an echo answers back.OMEN.

Users Review

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