

Professor David Peimer - The Theatre of Sam Shepard and the American Dream

- Welcome to everybody, lovely to reconnect. And David, over to you. We are looking forward to your presentation. Thanks, bye.

- Thank you very much. Thank you so much to Wendy, and to Judy, and hi everybody hope you're well. And just a quick little thing, I'm sure many of you know, but my sister who lived in Israel for many, many years has now had a double vaccination and a certificate, she can travel. So, lets hope that, light at the end of the tunnel. So, just to share with everyone, thanks again. I'm going to look at Sam Shepherd. Because we are doing some of America over these few weeks before we going on to 1930s and '40S in Germany and Europe, this is a focus on some of the American playwrights who I believe have been, obviously some of the remarkable writers and artists of the period. So, I'm looking first at Sam Shepherd, and he was born in 1943, and then died fairly recently. And I want you look at him in connection with two ideas, which is for me, how he exposes the distinction between myth and reality in American culture.

Visual slides are displayed throughout the lecture.

And obviously how that can be applied to almost any culture in a way, his approach is understanding, but because he's obviously writing about America and his plays are so deeply rooted, in particular, in rural America, the focus is on myths and reality in American culture that Shepherd sees. And I think that there are quite a few ideas which I personally feel re resonate with us today, which are powerful. And I think he had intuitive sense of what he was living through. And then almost, I would say a deeper understanding, not prophetic, but a deeper understanding of perhaps what was to come. So, these are some pictures of shepherd. There he is at the age of 20 and then obviously at older ages. The top one on the left is him giving a lecture at the TED, online T-E-D some years ago. And the other one, the picture there as well. What interests me about Shepherd is not only what he's saying about American culture, but how he distinguishes between the image and the human.

And he throws out the questions, which he doesn't answer 'cause I don't think a playwright needs to answer them. But the distinction between do we prefer the image or do we prefer the person? Do we prefer the myth and the image or the person? And what is the constant ebb and flow between the two, between the myth, the reality, and the image? And there's a constant three-way shift and movement that Shepherd talks about when he talks about his writing. And we see it, I believe, in his theatre. And I think it's so resonant to today where we are trying to understand not only the phrase, alternative facts, alternative realities, and so on. But what does it mean when we talk about the powerful myths and the relationship between the image and the reality of individuals, of communities, of societies, and cultures and then how it feeds into culture, personality, and so much in a broader societal sense of what's going on in our cultures? In America, and in England, and in other parts of the world as well.

So Shepard is born in Ohio and he's born in a pretty, I would say lower working class area,

sorry, lower middle class, between working and middle class in terms of his family, but a small town in Ohio. And a very rural connection that he has in his upbringing, in his childhood, and also throughout all his plays. What I want you to do is contrast, next week I'm going to look at David Mamet, who's Jewish from Chicago and one of the brilliant playwrights of our times, in a sense, a contemporary of Shepherd. And Mamet focused almost entirely on the urban, gritty parts of America and American myths and reality. Shepherd is rural, and I believe they really compliment each other. And the two are regarded as two of the great playwrights post Second World War after the author Miller Generation. Okay, so, Shepherd was an actor, he acted in, "The Right Stuff," some people may know and other movies. He was married to the actress Jessica Lange, who will come onto a bit later.

And he wrote 58 plays, short stories, poetry, and some film scripts. He worked with Wim Wenders, the brilliant German director, and he wrote the script called, "Paris, Texas," which I regard as an absolute masterpiece, and I'll come onto that a bit later. He won 10 Obie Awards, that's the most by any writer in American history, 10 Obie awards for writing. And he directed a few of his own plays as well. That's a massive amount for any playwright to win. And the Obies are right at the top there, that the Oscars for theatre, as everyone knows. He received a Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1979 for his play, "Buried Child," which I'm going to talk about, primarily, "Buried Child," and, "True West," those two plays I'm going to talk about mostly.

He was nominated for an academy award for best supporting actor for his portrayal of the pilot, Chuck Yeager in the film, "The Right Stuff," which is, Chuck Yeager was the Great American test pilot who tested planes, the speed of them, the supersonic engines, in a sense, the bridge between the test pilot of planes and the astronauts. And Chuck Yeager was the great American hero in every sense of the word, the independent, free, daring, bold, risk taking American pilot in reality. And, "The Right Stuff," is a movie about him and Shepherd played the character. Okay, his plays are, in a sense mostly, they're not only about rootless characters who live in the margins of American society, but actually the margins which are maybe becoming, in our times, closer to the centre. What we wrote to God in the phrase of today, the forgotten, in the sad phrase that I think Hillary Clinton used in her campaign, "The Deplorables," but they're forgotten. And I'm not talking about only people who might have been Trump supporters or not, but who have, they have an internal sense of being the forgotten.

One looks at Michael Moore's movies and the people he meets and explores, those people. And it's not only perhaps economic of losing jobs, working class, et cetera, but a certain, and it's not only white supremacy, but a certain sense of forgottenness. And I believe it's in America, in England, other parts of Europe, and possibly the first world. Okay, so I believe it's come more and more that he's speaking for people more and more, who are playing a bigger and bigger role culturally and politically today. What's very interesting and important is, he also wrote a play called, "Curse of the Starving Class," which partly was about his father and it was his first play of the family plays that he wrote. You know, American playwrights are brilliant when writing about family drama 'cause so much of the cultural conflicts, and drama, tension, released compassion, love, jealousy, hate, war happens amongst the family, as we know from Arthur Miller, to

Tennessee Williams, to Eugene O'Neill, all the great writers, they find it in the family. And of course 'cause the family is so powerful in American mythology.

His father served in the American Air Force during the Second World War, he was a bomber pilot. And after the war, and he survived, and many harrowing missions that he went on, not only the the bombing of Dresden, but many, many others. And he came back after the war, according to Shepherd's mother and the family, and as Shepherd grew up, absolutely haunted. And I don't think we can ever underestimate, and Shepherd talks about it a lot in interviews, the effect of the first and second world wars on the guys and the women who were part of it. We've spoken a lot about not only Hitler, but the Germans, and the English, and the Americans, and others of the First World War, and the utter psychological physical trauma, individually and in the society. And anybody who's had the nightmare of being in any army would know and can imagine the hell, whichever side one is on, the absolute hell and terror of being in war, and in of industrial war of such a scale that the 20th century threw out for us.

You know, so-called civilization throughout the two most horrific, cruel mechanised, industrialised wars imaginable. So, anyway, his father coming back and haunted, unable to sleep. And we have so many stories of Vietnam war and many, many others, similar things happening. He couldn't sleep, his father became an alcoholic, as Shepherd said, "A dedicated alcoholic." He was a teacher, he was a farmer, he tried all different kinds of things but never really succeeded and took it out on his family, took it out on his son, and his wife, and relatives, and himself as well, destroying himself compared to the hope that the father had had before the war. He talks about his father waking up at nightmares and dreams of bombing, seeing people burning, bombing endlessly, being shot at, seeing so many of his own playing people, anyway, you get the picture. And I think this affected this guy completely.

Obsessed with the father-son relationship, the relationship of fathers who were so damaged and traumatised by war, and then coming back to, and having to be fully civilised, and having to fit in and belong to their societies afterwards, and not having a clue how. Way before any talk of PTSD, psychology, therapies, et cetera. 1963 Shepherd moves to New York City and he meets all, 1963, he's absolutely part of the '60s. He meets Dylan, and all the musicians, the poets, the writers, Ginsburg, served all the others of the '60s and he's completely part of them. He's a playwright, and there was an amazing theatre in New York called La Mama, where so many of the playwrights to come first had their exposure. Ellen Stewart was this remarkable lady who ran the La Mama theatre and just gave opportunity to emerging young playwrights of all kinds. And it's absolutely formative, the '60s, for him. With Mamet, you'll see it's a bit different. Later, he wrote the script for, "Zabriskie Point," in 1970 for Antonioni, as we all know. Being part of the '60s, he was part of the free love culture, all of that. He wrote, "Cowboy Mouth," with Patti Smith. Everyone knows Patti Smith sang the song, "Hard Rain's Going to Fall," when Bob Dylan got the Nobel Prize, and was an amazing singer and artist in her own right, and inspired many of these guys. He was involved with Patti Smith, he was involved with Joni Mitchell, and so many others. What I'm trying to draw is a picture of this guy being part of the centre with his poetry and his playwriting.

I mean, Dylan would come and watch his plays when there were 15 or 20 people in the audience watching. He goes with his first wife, and, "Cowboy Mouth," is inspired by his relationship with Patti Smith. And they're full of American mythology of cowboys, and the '60s, and the war, and Black America, civil rights, everything going on and trying to figure out their position. Where do they belong, what's going on? And then of course, as John Lennon said in 1970, "The dream is over," the '60s, it's finished, over. It's achieved a certain amount, no question, civil rights and many other things. But the dream, as Lennon said, was over, of what it could really achieve. And so the disillusion naturally sets in for Shepherd, and Mamet, and many others. He relocates to London and there he meets Peter Brook, works with him. And Peter Brook is possibly the most interesting director I've had the privilege to see his work, and the most remarkable theatre director perhaps over the last 40, 50 years. Certainly one of them, coming from England. Many innovations not to go into that.

So Shepard is mixing with all these people who at the time are beginning their remarkable careers, he goes back to America, 1965, lives on a ranch in California. And he then in '75, Bob Dylan invites him to go on, "The Rolling Thunder Review," which was this long tour of American and elsewhere that Dylan went on. And Dylan asked him to write a chronicle, a diary if you like, of that whole journey of, "The Rolling Thunder Review." And Dylan asked Shepherd to work on some songs with him. "Brownsville Girl" the 11 minute song. Then afterwards, so he and Dylan have pretty close friendship and others. Then he is a playwright in residence in the Magic theatre in San Francisco. He takes a position as professor at UCLA, at California Davis for a while, but gives it up. He also is a screenwriter on, "Renaldo and Clara," for Dylan, working with him on that. And his plays, "Buried Child," which in 1978 wins the Pulitzer Prize, five Tony Awards, and then, "True West," "Fool for Love," and some of the others all come out after this in the '70s when he really achieves his brilliance as a playwright.

He also gets very friend with Charlie Mingus, the great jazz musician through his son. He lives with him, he stays with him. He's having affairs with women, and women are having affairs with him. Married, not married, it's all part of the '60s and post '60s generation. As Patti Smith said, "Well, me and his wife, we still like each other. I mean, it wasn't like we were committing adultery in the suburbs." And in that phrase we get the attitude of the '60s towards affairs, non affairs, marriage, and let's call it the poorest boundaries. Joni Mitchell writes two songs about her affairs with Shepherd. There's one of her great songs, "Coyote." And she's often interviewed and talks about how Shepherd seduced her or vice versa, she seduced him. And she was laughing 'cause they lived at the Chelsea Hotel. And Joni Mitchell says, "Well, he's got a woman at home, another woman down the hall, but he wants me anyway. I want him, let's go for it." Then finally he meets Jessica Lange, the Academy Award actress who was in, "The Postman always rings twice." And won the Academy Award for acting in, "Tootsi," with Dustin Hoffman, and they get married. And she was married before to Baryshnikov the great dancer, and I'll come to that in a bit. Okay, so that's a bit about Shepherd and his background.

This is some other pictures of him. You can see, the top one is a picture from one of the movies

he was in, not, "The Right Stuff." And this here, you can see he's so imbued with the cowboy image, the independent spirit, the loner, the dark, brooding, silent, handsome man. He is living that image himself. And although Jessica Lange and others talk about his wit and his humour, but you can see all the images of him, for me capture that sense of the inherited legacy of the mythology of the cowboy. What's that? The spirit of freedom, spirit of loner, go anywhere I want, independence of anything, from family, to relationship, to anything, you know? And a right to travel, and be free, and go wherever. And also massive fear and insecurities inside, but no dependency on anyone. And these are some images from his life which capture for me, however much he tried to deconstruct or demystify American mythology, he's part of it himself. From, "True West," the play, "There's no such thing as the West anymore, it's a dead issue." The one character says to the other, the one brother to the other brother, and I'm going to come back and refer to that more.

Okay, these are some of the main plays that Shepherd wrote. "Cowboy Mouth," I think says it all. And you see the titles even are very post '60s. You can see the influence of LSD, other things, in the surrealism, in the titles. And then later they get more and more specific, "Buried Child," "True West," "Fool For Love." They get less and less influenced by drugs and surreal times of the '60s. Okay, I want to talk specifically about, "True West" and, "Buried Child," and the myth and reality, and I want to relate some of this to Harari, Yuval Noah Harari and his book, "Sapiens: A brief history of humankind," and his understanding of how myths work in culture, which I find a very contemporary approach and very fascinating. And I'm going to link it to, "True West," and, "Buried Child," in particular. Okay, just so you know, "True West" is a play, which is two brothers. And the one brother lives in LA and he is gone to stay there in his mother's home. And he's trying to write the ultimate Cowboy Hollywood movie for his producer called Saul. But he lives in suburban Chicago, which is where his wife is. Picket fence, children, all the rest of it in a nice house, middle class.

The other brother has spent a couple of months in the Mojave Desert, comes back to see his brother. He's a drifter, he's a loner, he's got this cowboy independent image, and he moves in with him in the house in LA. Middle class home, which is the mother's home, and the two brothers stay there. And it's a devastating play of a Cain and Abel type relationship between the two brothers. And the irony is that the safe, secure, got the job, got the family, the kids, everything. One brother Austin, who's trying to write the cowboy movie, ultimate one for Hollywood and a blockbuster can't write it. The other one who's living as a loner, as a drifter comes in and he just starts writing. And his own sense of himself is able to connect with the mythology of this independent cowboy spirit, complete mythology, but he's able to connect. And he takes over the writing and he ends up writing the script for Saul, and he ends up becoming the famous wealthy one. But that only happens right towards the end. But the play itself is the dynamic between Cain and Abel, between the two brothers. But they're almost like Jekyll and Hyde. They're like parts of each other in each other.

They can't really exist without each other. You know, as the cowboy brother says, "Look, I only went out to the desert because I couldn't make it here in LA, I can't make it in LA, I can't make it

in the suburbs, I can't make it in the city. So I run away, it's a runaway to the desert. I'm not this big loner," et cetera. He's honest about it and he and his brother's honest, that he can't write the ultimate cowboy movie. He doesn't live it, it's not his lived experience. So they have moments of reprieve in a play, moments of honesty, but enormous amount of literally pulling at each other's emotions about their upbringing, their childhood. And they're different, but they can't, it's like a couple or two lovers who passionately are so together, they can't bear, but they can't be together, can't bear each other a lot of the time, but they also can't bear to be without each other, the passion is so great. And between the two brothers we see it as well. And the title, "True West," "Well, what is the true West?" Shepherd is asking, what's the myth? What is the ridiculous contemporary interpretation of the myth?

Not only in terms of cowboy stuff, but the West as the first world, as democratic liberalism, as constitutional democratic liberal society of freedom, of independence, of human rights, of the rights of the individual, the vote. All the aspirations and achievements of the West in England, in America, in Western Europe, other parts of the world, that is the true West. It's not, the play soars way beyond the obvious, literal meaning and the two brothers I've described. And Shepherd is touching on that ultimate big mythology. And here I want to just have a look at what Harari talks about with mythology and myths. "We tend to think that the myths are a thing of the past, fabrications that early humans needed to believe in 'cause their understanding of the world was so meagre. But what if modern civilization were itself based on a set of myths?" This is the big question posed by Harari in his book. And Harari argues that all political orders, all socials, all societies are based on useful fictions which have allowed groups of humans from ancient Mesopotamia to the Roman Empire, to modern societies, humans in large groups, to cooperate in numbers far beyond the scope of the ants, or the monkeys, or any other species. It's the fictional stories, the fictional myths that connect people to each other and that allows them to cooperate, to live together, kill each other, hate each other, violence, love, et cetera, but to basically form societies.

And Harari's argument is that, this is the ultimate connection, the achievement that humans made 70,000 years ago, which enabled them to take to flourish and colonise the world. Harari gives the example of Hammurabi, the great ruler of ancient Babylon, and America and the founding fathers. And both of them, he argues, created well-functioning societies. Hammurabi's was based on hierarchy, with the king at the top, slaves at the bottom. American's was based on freedom and equality between all citizens. And yet the idea of equality, Harari argues, is as much a fiction as the idea of a king or the rich nobleman is so-called better than the peasant. What made both of these societies work was the fact that a same set of imagined underlying principles, imagined underlying values, were similar enough and that could give rise to trust that people could collectively put in it. And this became the myth which became useful to holding societies together and humans to flourish in the way they've done. It's become the most universal and efficient system ever devised by humans, but it needs the collective fictions.

To global trade networks, to sophisticated modern capitalism, sophisticated modernism in many ways. How the fictions that we believe are part of human culture and civilization developing. And

Harari argues for the collective fictions or myths, which I imagined. And he gives the example of a couple of monkeys. So if you have 20 or 30 monkeys, and they got bananas, and suddenly let's say they've got a hundred bananas, well, how are they going to stop fighting, killing each other, so they each have equal bananas? Do they have a concept of, if they each have an equal number of bananas, they'll each be satisfied and probably be able to keep the bananas for an extra couple of weeks? Dunno, but if we imagine Ook and whole lot of people living in the caves thousands and thousands of years ago, and the one comes home with all bananas and meat from killing the buck and so on, or the bison. Right, here, we got all the food and they're spread it out. Okay, what can last, what won't last?

Keep it, eat it. And the one says, "Whoa, hang on." Okay, Ook's brother Snook, "He didn't help us get the bananas, didn't help us come and kill the bison. I don't think he should have equal," immediately a connective fiction or a myth set up. A value is set up. The value is, if you are part of equaling our work, you are entitled to equal benefit. It's an extraordinary leap of the human imagination thus, in giving these seemingly banal examples, Harari suggests there is a value of equality, human rights, the worth of work in a society amongst 25 post Neanderthals creatures called humans. So, the mythology is created and what Harari, I think fascinatingly suggests is that the ultimate myth is a collective imagined fiction. And he talks about religions, and the stories, the legends, and he talks about, of many different cultures. And in America, not only, and in the West, liberal democracy, all these things I've mentioned, the enlightenment, the playing out of enlightenment, however flawed it is in our own times, or however much it's being tested in our own times. And that is the difference between myth and reality. That reality needs collective myths to survive, to hold people together. Whether it's a myth of something as a cowboy, independent free spirit, whether it's a myth, whatever, money he talks about in his book, brilliantly, it's a complete fiction. But if enough people believe in the collective imagined fiction, the myth, then it can function and work.

But when that starts to break, a new one has to become. And that we are in a moment of extraordinary tension, for Harari, between the two. Between the breakdown of the hidden inherited myths we have in Western democratic liberal societies and the resurrection of not only the nationalism, but the resurgence of nationalism, of the superior, the inferior, of the nation, of the purest, all the stuff that the Nazis brought out with such extreme force and power. And he talks about this hugely as well. So, Harari, fascinating for me, talks that we are now living in that interregnum, into that twilight period between the myth and its breakdown, and what will emerge as the new myth of the western liberal democratic society. For Harari, it's not only fascism that may threaten it, it's also what he calls, that humans have become hackable animals. For him it's much more about artificial intelligence and the future of that in the human society, that's a whole separate story of another myth, okay? But, and what's fascinating for me coming back to little Mr. Shepherd, is that he's able to, he was looking in the '70s, and I think it came out of the '60s, which is why I tried to bring out the myths and the dreams of the '60s, how it linked to Western liberal democracy in America, England, Western Europe and so on, around the world.

And what Lennon meant by the dream, the dream of the myths could become real. Equality,

human rights, democracy, da da da da da, all the rest of it, economically on a personal level and so on. And I think what Shepherd touched on in the '70s was he understood that in his own culture in America, the exposure, the cracks between myth and reality, true West, it's a dead issue. And that meaning isn't only the cowboy stuff and the script that the brother is writing for the Hollywood producer. It resonates on a global, on a historical era level. And Shepherd alludes to that when he writes and is interviewed much later on. And he brings talks about how Dylan, and Leonard Kern, and many of the others are in this moment, and understand it as well, what happens when the myth and the reality breakdown? And something like the Corona period we're all living through now is part of that. Camus wrote this brilliant book called, "The Plague," and he talks about it during the plague, metaphorically, is when the myth and the reality of society break down. The collective fictions everybody believes in shatters, something new will come out. So not only do we have a change in terms of what Trump represents, and I'm going to get back into Trump as a human being, but what Trumpism represents, what Brexit, what many, many things represent in my opinion.

And the shifting tectonic plates between myth and reality start to emerge, captured in a simple story of two brothers, and the one's writing a script. At the end of the play, the mother comes back and the two brothers have devastated the home. You know, they've been fighting with golf clubs, and toasters, and kettles, and they've been really going for it. 'Cause obviously the one brother doesn't want his Hollywood script, this is his chance to crack the big time. He doesn't want his script written by his brother. You know, he's got this cowboy fantasy image and all that nonsense. So, but the mother comes back and sees this devastation, sees her two sons in this state, but she evades it. And all she talks about at the end, in the last few pages, extraordinary moment where she talks about, that Picasso's in town, not Picasso lecture, not Picasso exhibition or paintings, but Picasso is in town and she's going to see him, completely out of touch. And for me, it's an amazing, surreal image, he's able to capture this complete disjunction, this this schism, the fault lines between myth and reality. So out of touch, not only with the reality of her two sons, and they with her, but obsessed with talking about, she's going to meet Picasso, he's in LA, he's in town.

And I don't think it's meant to, it's obviously a moment of ridicule, and satire, and fun. And underneath it is this extraordinary sense, again, what is real, what is myth? And all that's happened, and I think Shepherd would say, obviously it's dead now, but, that what's been going on in the last four, five, six, seven years, not only the Trump period, but from before is this disjunction, the fault line between what is myth and what is real. What is the inherited myth of liberal democracy, of freedom, human rights, justice truth, the values that all of us contemporary monkeys living in our caves wherever today have? What is the reality that we live and what is the true West? What does it really mean in this way? What are the new fictional, collective, imagined values and beliefs that we can buy into now? Or that liberal democracy has to fight to maintain and keep going if that's what we value in the face of other emerging threats.

So, I think, for me, it's all linked to, and I'm happy to be accused of extrapolating far too much meaning out of one little play. But I think that artists and writers, including Shakespeare, have an

extraordinary imagination and intuition, and that they're not necessarily always conscious, but the these things sort of push through their imagination and their intuition, and things come out. And this is what fascinates me about Shepherd, and Mamet, and others. And, "Buried Child" is a similar play for me as well, and why I want to link with Harari. The one other point I want to make is that in interviews, Shepherd made the fascinating point where said that the breakdown between our myth and our reality, and also what happens with the breakdown is that the fantasy kicks in, the fantasy of the past myth kicks in. So the fantasy of the cowboy, independent loner, drifter, free spirit, and free rights, human rights, all that, the fantasy kicks in. The fantasy of self invention, the fantasy of, well, the ancient myth of the cowboy or of fighting for rights, equality, justice, truth. It's a dead issue in the West, but the fantasy still is there. For Romans perhaps living in the fourth or fifth centuries AD, the fantasy of the Roman Empire and so on.

And that's a fascinating insight for me that Shepherd makes. Are we connected to fantasies of myths we've inherited? And I think Harari would agree that the fantasies of some religious stories, as he would say, from whichever religion as he does say in his book, what is fantasy now, and what is the imagined myth, and what's real to our lives? When we look at those images of the Quechan and all the others, et cetera. And that the January the sixth, they're in fantasy. I don't even think that they believe in the myth called the confederate, et cetera. I think they're in Shepherd's world, it's a fantasy connection, a makeshift identity. I don't believe it's, they make it believed it's a reality, but it's not even a myth to something that one can say is concrete, and truthful, and real in history. That's my sense of how to extrapolate from Shepherd. He does it in all his plays. And I'm focusing on one in particular here because the title and the theme of the play I think is quite simple, but actually I think resonates provocatively.

As Shakespeare writes as we all know in Hamlet, "There's nothing, neither right nor wrong, but thinking makes it so." So, the fascination between the myth and the image of the human being. And then shepherd also talks about the capacity, therefore, to invent ourselves as society and as individuals. Because if we are always caught in this interregnum, in this clash between myth, and reality, and fantasy, then we have the opportunity to invent ourselves, to invent a myth, which is based on an inherited myth, but just shifted. So how do we shift and play with a cowboy myth? And that for me is what he does in, "Paris, Texas." For me, a brilliant movie, again, made by Wim Wenders, for me, an amazing German playwright. "American friend," "Paris, Texas," and for me, Wenders' films are about this exact juxtaposition. And, "Paris, Texas" transposes the cowboy myth onto driving the car through America, the vast landscapes of America. But the loneliness, the emptiness, the despair, the search, the quest for some meaning by finding none, finding neon lights that flash in the dark, You know, in Dylan songs, that nothing is really too sacred anymore.

You know, the junk culture, of peanut butter, TV, sandwiches, even the rock and jazz, Elvis, the Rockies, the deserts, the open spaces, the big cities, the Rockies, the out-door image, the cars, and the history of cars in the states, the bad land, South Dakota, the Grand Canyon, the hungry, brown, rushing Colorado river, families, all of these myths, have they become fantasy or not? And in "Paris, Texas," I believe that's what he's trying to capture as well. Just throwing out the

question, are the myths a dead issue, and we are living in fantasy, waiting for new myths to emerge, or how do we connect it to our own reality? And that for me is what that movie is about and other Wim Wenders' movies. But that's the one that Shepherd wrote the script for, even the title, "Paris Taxes," I mean, it says it all. So, and I think this links to his father coming back 'cause his father lived the myth of fighting for freedom, which he was, fighting for freedom, for the survival of Western liberal society, for freedom, for justice, for truth, for individual rights. And he talks about his father in relation to this. And we get a bit of a link in, "Curse of The Starving Class," the father archetype and the forgotten class. So the father becomes the dedicated drunk as Shepard calls him, who cannot cope with all these contradictions of what he fought for, believed in, but seems to have gone by the time the '50s are moving on. And he hasn't made it back in belonging to American culture. You know, basically, it's ditched him.

An early forerunner of this phrase, "The Forgotten Class," that Michael Moor made this really interesting movie about. So, what I'm trying to get at here is how to heal from that. How to emerge psychologically, how to move forward. And she talks about inventing, and one of the great American myths of the self-made man or woman, inventing an identity. You know, the cowboy thing, okay, walk up right, walk straight, the jawline set, the railroad man, destiny. But living in times where so much doubt has come in pre the '60s in terms of his father's coming back from the war generation for him, and post the '60s into our generation now is, does the self-made individual, does that myth still work? Is it a fantasy, can it be our made reality? Questions that Harari fascinatingly throws out, and I link them, as you can see, to Shepherd's plays. One other thing I wanted to mention was that Shepard even talks about war as a fantastic play, a fantastic collection of short stories by the American writer Tim O'Brien, who was a Vietnam veteran.

He talks about war as a love story because there is such a heightened intensity. There are such strong beliefs of freedom, individual, fighting, band of brothers, all of these things are so heightened, adrenaline, rushing, et cetera. What is the myth they're fighting for? And of course, they get shattered by the Vietnam War, get shattered by the Iraq War to a large extent, what happened in England and others. And these things are important because they shatter inherited, collective fictions or myths as Harari would say. And if they do, it threatens the inherited ones, which liberal democracy and living in the coattails of the enlightenment needs. Therefore, it's incumbent on us to find new ones. So what's the inherited one? What's, is this in the possibility to become an invented self-made individual, is that still possible? How, where, what? Is it only a Trump image of a P. T. Barnum where everything is myth, everything is fantasy, rather? Drawing on ancient myths of American and other cultures that for me, Trump represents in a much more menacing, mafia, cruel way, which is not part of the cowboy image, but is more part of a certain mafia image for me, of the Trump thing.

But nevertheless there in American and global imagined consciousness, or the collective fiction, as Harari would say. Okay, then, "Buried Child" is an interesting play where Vince is the son who goes back to the family farm and there's nothing growing, and he takes his girlfriend, Shelly. Nothing is growing, and he lives in the city, he's got a job, he's going to get married to Shelly,

and he is going to live, and they're going to have a family, and he can't wait to get away from this mad family he grew up with on the farm in the rural area, and just get out of there. And he comes back for a family event, and the farmhouse has overgrown, it hasn't been clean for ages, food is left all over, you can imagine all this devastated rural stuff in the farmhouse, and nothing grows in the fields. The metaphor's obvious. And Vince is there and he freaks, he can't understand it. His father's obsessed with memories of the past, "Curse of The Starving Class," also the father archetype, he's obsessed with memories of the past.

And I've spoken about how that links to Shepard's own father from the war. So Vince is a young man in his early twenties, his father's there, can only talk about his past, and the memories, and what happened. His mother's there, his grandfather, and others and so on, his brother, et cetera. Anyway, comes with his girlfriend Shelly. Now, she's the most independent, farsighted, clear sighted character. Vince is torn between should he stay there with this devastated, broken down, totally dysfunctional family, or go back and have this idyllic future in the suburbs, in the city, as a professional that he's planned with Shelly. Something draws him in and he starts to discover the truth of what happened, that his father discovered his mother had had an affair, there'd been a baby born, and that the father had taken, in a Medea kind of act of vengeance, had taken the baby, killed it, and buried it in the farm. And ever since that day, nothing grew on the farm. And in a Medea kind of way where the impetus killed the children to get back at the partner. You know, Medea kills her sons to get back at Jason in the ancient Greek play of Medea. Medea kills the children to get revenge on Jason, the husband who is philandering and having affairs left, right, and centre with other women. He's the prince, Jason.

So he's using the ancient Greek myth, and Vince eventually discovers it. And once the truth comes out, the farm starts to regenerate a little bit. The metaphor maybe is a little bit kitschy and a bit corny for us in our time, our more cynical times now. But something about when you do it on stage and the audience suddenly sees the colour, the light, the smells at the end of the play, it's a hit. You know, it's like a hit of something, like a really good shot of superb scotch. One has to imagine it visually on stage happening after all this trauma, and fighting, and everything in the play, suddenly, there's a moment of relief, reprieve, freedom, eye-opening, in the colour, the light, the change in the characters. Not in a naive, silly, romantic way, but in something quite profound 'cause it happens slowly, it's how you create the image on the stage. So, once the truth is revealed, the possibility for some regeneration happens on the farm. The obvious connection to the truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa after apartheid, I'm not going to argue whether it succeeded or not, politically or anything, but the dream of it or the mythology, everybody, and Harari said, would've to buy in to that great myth.

Tell the truth, the victims or the families of the victims will not get justice, they won't get revenge, they just get the truth, is that enough? It's another whole discussion. For the perpetrators, if they tell the truth of the killings and the torture, they get their freedom or they get amnesty rather, they don't go to prison. Is that enough? It's a though, there was a similar TRC in Chile, I'm sure many people know, and how the TRC in South Africa influenced the Northern island situation as well. So, what is the role of truth? For me, "Buried Child" is trying to look at, as an enlightened,

liberal democracy, great value, and therefore myth or collective fiction, we all buy into, the truth is valuable and important, and is necessary in the liberal democracy, and is essential. Well, how do we rediscover it in the times that we live in, in the times we've inherited? And for me, what his play is suggesting here, you know? Because once that comes the, at least the possibility, perhaps, of regeneration, rebirth, redemption, something is possible anyway, you know? So perhaps some of these values are possible to come back. He also, I want you to talk a little bit about with Dylan, where he says, and I want you to just quote this interview with Dylan here. And Shepherd writes, "Myth is a powerful medium because it talks to the emotions, the collective emotions, and not to the head. But these emotions are imagined, these myths are imagined.

They're not real, but they are real for us because we need them to live together. But it's also an area of mystery." Now that's Shepherd's writing in the late '70s, early '80s. Then he writes as well, "Some myths are poisonous to believe in, but others have the capacity for changing something in us, even if it's only for a few minutes. Dylan creates a mythic atmosphere out of the land, out of the values, out of the culture, far better than anyone else of our generation. Dylan has invented himself, he's made himself up from scratch. That is from the things he had around him and inside him, Dylan is an invention of his own mind. The point isn't to figure him out, but to take him as he is, he gets into you anyway, so why not just take him in? He's not the first one to have invented himself or even do the self invention ritual, but he is the first one to have invented Bob Dylan." It's extraordinary insight to me that in the late '70s, early '80s, Sam Shepard is writing this kind of thing, understanding his culture through the figure of Bob Dylan, the image, the myth, the reality, the fantasy as well.

Then where he talks about Dylan not being a fantasy, but having understood American mythology and the rights of human rights, and freedom, individual, everything I've spoken about, but making mythical poetry. And in a much later interview, fascinatingly, Shepherd and others said, "Dylan could only write a song about John Lennon once he had already become a mythical figure, a collective fiction of our imagination, representing values of the enlightenment, of liberal democracy, the free artist, the free mind, the free spirit, the spirit that dreams, of love, care, compassion, kindness, whatever. You know, at least justice truth at a minimum. Myth was a story in which people could connect themselves to the past and thereby connect themselves to the present and their own future, because they were hooked up with the lineage of their myths. In America, it's so powerful for me and so strong that it acted as a thread to my culture. But I fear it's been destroyed. Myth in its truest form has been demolished, doesn't exist. The true West doesn't exist anymore. We have fantasies about it now, and it's the fantasies that speak to our inner self." That's Sam Shepherd writing at the end of the '70s. And we have fantasies that speak to our inner self about it now.

Again, when I look at those Quechan on and all the others from the January the sixth, to me it's fantasy. And one needs to understand it in order to know how to take it on, in order how to react and demolish it. When one sees anti-Semitism, the rise of racism, so many other things, what we call under the rise of nationalism at the moment, to me it's individuals living fantasies of Nazi,

in these fantasies of connection to antisemitism, many, many other things, which of course are connected to thousands of years old myths and very powerfully. But in Shepherd's way, to understand it, we can figure out ways to take them on, to defeat them, whether it's using plays, or literature, or novels, or doing politically, or through education, whatever. For me, it requires this kind of insight. Otherwise it's just an endless, we just replay us and them, us and them, you know, fight, fight, fight. We're never going to defeat, outwit them, outflank them. The last point I wanted to make was, so I just wanted to read one other point that Shepherd writes about the Dylan tour. "There was a feeling that in the past at least there was perhaps some set of myths that our present state of madness could be healed by.

That we could be healed by those ghosts that we learned from the past of America. Everywhere replicas of history are being sold, townspeople are wearing costumes, flags of the confederacy, flags of America are being carried, the present is being swallowed whole by the past. Inside of this, the Rolling Thunder tour was a search for something also, we were trying to make our own connections, to find some kind of landmark along the way. It's not just another constant tour, but I felt Dylan knew that it was almost a kind of pilgrimage. We were looking for something in ourselves, a pilgrimage to find some value, some of the real true myths we could believe in, not the dead ones, the ones that had become pure fantasy." I think it's amazing that this guy wrote about this a long time ago. The one other point I want to make here is that he talks about character and the way his characters are structured in the plays are fascinating, because they don't have a core as you would have in traditional theatre.

They are a mixture of myths, of fantasy, of inherited images of themselves. And therefore identity is a changeable, an identity character becomes actor, not the other way around, character becomes the actor. Acting roles, acting cowboys, acting independent, acting billionaire, acting the rich, acting the poor, acting the forgotten, acting the artist, acting the celebrity painter, acting the president. It's an act, character becomes acting. So the core of character becomes a set of roles and one can shift between acting roles without any central belief except in power, perhaps. That for me is an understanding of Trump. But not only him, but he represents many, many other leaders and many, many other people I believe around the world, who are not necessarily great known leaders or anything, but character becomes acting. And that's why it needs fantasies all the time. And this disjunction between alternative myths, fantasies realities, it can move because it's acting, it's not real.

It touches reality every now and then when the lights go down and the person goes home to bed and wakes up in the morning with bad breath, and needs to brush their teeth, and have coffee, and other things, okay? But then I can't wait to be seduced by some more fantasy or myths 'cause it's the only way we start to feel alive in the dead issue culture, where the myths have become so downgraded and degraded. So for me that is that in terms of how he creates a character. And when one directs him, one has to know it and almost teach the actors, in terms of them having to capture it. Okay, the last thing I want to end on is Jessica Lange, who was a brilliant actress, I'm sure anybody knows. This is a picture of her when she was with Baryshnikov, and they had this extraordinary, passionate relationship. You know, she talks about

how she felt they were so similar when they met emotionally, sexually, physically, intellectually, and you can see it in the picture, they're completely in their own, I hate to use the word, I'm sorry, I apologise, but in their own bubble, okay?

They're in their own bubble, they're in their own world completely. What they have for each other you can see it utterly, it's all there. And then there's age Shepherd and Jessica Lange, they were together for 20 something, 23, 25 years, I think, age and a different feel, a different connection. And I wanted to show this 'cause it goes back to these pictures of earlier, of the going through the stages of life, going through the images, the fantasies, the role plays that we all do, I think, in life. That are the stage or theatre as an art form tries to capture, and if it hits the zeitgeist of our times, it resonates. And here, I've called it youth and age, but it's the youthful aspiration and connection of so many passions, and love, et cetera. And then there's the other one showing in a sense the maturation of life. And fascinatingly, Joseph Campbell, for me, the really interesting psychologist who wrote, "The Hero and a Thousand Journeys." It's about in America and in the West, how the aspiration of maturity is to go back to youth.

The older we get, the younger we try to look, the younger we try to say we are, there's no room anymore for the rituals of growing old, and having according recognition to the elderly, you know? And maybe as a myth again, which is romanticised, of previous generations, that the elderly had perhaps a position, a role in society of wisdom, or at least something to give. The obsession with becoming young the older one gets, and Joseph Campbell writes about the maturation of rituals in society have broken down, they're a dead issue in Shepherd's phrase, the myth doesn't work, doesn't hold us together anymore, growing older, doesn't hold us together. The value, the myth, because of the obsession with youth, looks, and all the rest of it. And I wanted to show this because here Jessica Lange and Shepherd, well, they're trying to in their own celebrity couple way maybe, or maybe I'm romanticising. Okay, then the last image is Mr. Sam Shepherd, who, in my opinion, for all these reasons together with David Mamet, and because he's Jewish and he's urban, comes in with a fascinating different perspective. But shepherd represents the rural, the Land, America. But coming out of, at the end of the '60s and into our era now. Mamet as well, but in a far more gritty and linked to marketplace, and business in the city, which I'll talk about next week. Thank you very much everybody.

- Thank you David. David, do you have time for questions? I see there's some questions.

Q&A and Comments:

- Yeah sure. Yeah sure, with pleasure.

- Do you want to stop your screen share.

- Let me just come down here, stop share, yep. And then questions.

- And if you could read out the questions before you answer them, that would be great.

- Sure. Okay, "David, even if your sister can travel, the airport is still close in Israel," says Joan. Thanks Joan, she told me.

Monty, "What about and Chayefsky?" From Monty, yeah, brilliant, amazing writers for another time, thank you.

From June, "Weren't actually married to Jessica Lange, saw, "Fool for Love" at the national in 1985, Julie Walters. It's an absolute eyeopener." If I had time, thank you, June, I would talk about, "Fool for Love" because he's dealing with myths there, a different kind, of family, and love, and et cetera. Okay, thank you, brilliant play as well. June, yeah, he wasn't married, they lived together.

Okay, from Gail. "Sounds like the plot of Woody Allen's "Bullets over Broadway." The the writer can't write, whereas the gangster turns out to be the brilliant playwright." Absolutely Gail and I dunno maybe who stole it from who, but I think he wrote, "True West" before Woody Allen wrote, "Bullets over Broadway." Romaine,

Q: "Shepherd's plays deal with the limitations of the myth, like all good writers. How do you think this translates to understanding of our current political times?"

A: I hope I've tried to resonate with some of our own times in the talk already, Romaine, thank you.

From Ron, "I highly recommend, 'It takes a Lunatic.' It's a documentary about Wynn Handman, son of Jewish immigrants who founded the American Place Theatre of Broadway. He produced Shepherd's first play and then seven others."

Great, thank you. Joan, "Cannot be argue that Trump was trying to preserve the myth while the near Marxist anarchist like BLM, self-proclaimed Marxists and Antifa, both Marxists and anarchist are trying to break down the myth. Just like Lennon Trump's nationalism may be a reaction to the radical left movements of the last 30 years." That's a huge question and I'm not trying to duck it, but I don't want to just give a glib answer. I think it's interesting, fascinating for another time, for a proper debate.

Q: From Cecil, "Is genuine or truthful writing only based on experience or can it be dreamed or imagined?"

A: Great question, it can absolutely be imagined. And I think that many of the great writers and I include Shakespeare and many others, I think intuitively, or their unconscious is in touch and stuff comes out of there, and that's imagined stuff. But they're in touch with things changing or living in a society of ideals, values, dreams, what people believe in, what they don't, all these things, and it comes out.

Q: From Linda, "David, thank you, you give a lot to think about. "Seems to me as an English person, the great American dramatists in their different ways are concerned to deconstruct and expose the American dream. Do agree? Every nation has its collective myth."

A: Absolutely.

Q: "Do you think the examination of myth is as pertinent to playwrights of other nations as to America?"

Q: Fantastic question, Linda. I think the American writers are far more honest often because they speak about it in interviews and they write about it, because they know, they've been brought up with this idea, this phrase, the American dream, the American myth. Whereas in other cultures in England, even South Africa, wherever, they're not brought up with the same phrase. So they don't see it in the same way. They see cultural shifts and cultural forces, they wouldn't phrase it as myth. And I think that's possibly a great thing that America has done in education, that it frames it as a dream, as a myth. The very word that it's a dream says it all.

Q: Tommy, "You've brought up an image for me of the, "Lord of the Flies," can you see a parallel?

A: Absolutely, and very often I think, thank you. Ron, "For a light side of Shepard, see "Baby Boom," yep. He plays the romantic male lead as a folksy veterinarian who sweeps off a Heidi strung Diane Keaton.

Great, thank you. Bonnie, "David, thank you. You seem critical of populism that we see today where one stands on an issue depends on where one sits." True.

Q: "Is the truth of the finance exec New York or the professor in California, more honest than the truth of the minimum wage worker in Michigan? Shepherd speaks to us as he has had skin in the game, son of an alcoholic and war veteran, and later wealthy, successful writer."

A: Spot on, and I didn't mean to only give a critique of populism, I've tried to give an understanding of it. And because he tries to understand his own relationship to his own father. You know, he's an alcoholic drunk, was a war hero, but can't cope with being back. And that's profound and traumatic. But later, he becomes the icon of the wealthy and successful writer who lives on the farm, you know? And so, he absolutely, he is caught in living with his own myth. The myth of the artist, celebrity writer who's the sort of silent cowboy type, detached, tall, good looking, strong jaw. He's absolutely part of his own mythology and he would ironically be aware of it, I think, completely, and making the money, absolutely.

Great point, Bonnie, thank you.

Q: Okay, I dunno if you want more Ted, "At the end of the day, is his message one of hope or hopelessness?"

A: I think it's absolutely one of hope and that's why at the end of, "Buried Child," at least the farm does start to regenerate, and that's the play that has been his most powerful, his most performed play, "Buried Child," "True West," almost as often performed. There's hope at the end.

Q: Elizabeth, "Are not the ideals of liberal democracy based on myth.?"

A: Yep. "The goodness of human nature, all men are created equal." Harari would say it's all myths, imagined fiction, absolutely.

Howard, my cousin, hello, how are you? Thank you very much, Howard. That's my cousin everybody.

- I love that.

- How's it cousin Howard? He was my big cousin who I always wanted as my big brother.

- Big brother on the group.

- And he's very close to my big sister who lives in Israel, and I love them both. And my sister in Toronto I love as well. And Howard is my big cousin in the States and I always looked up to him. Okay, thank you Howard, great to hear from you. Email me for God's sake. Okay.

- Or call you, David.

- Email me or call me, Howard, don't just leave me notes here.

- Howard, call David.

- Okay, thanks Wendy. Okay buddy, I can't get over this now. Okay, are you still a paediatrician in Washington Howard? I don't even know anymore, tell me.

Okay, Bobby, "But the truth is that all people are not created equal and I believe the end of apartheid creates a period of violent retribution against white farmers." Absolutely, which is part of perhaps the inevitable path of revolutions, Bobby. The French Revolution being, I suppose the archetypal image that the revolution devours its own children. That the victors devour themselves and devour their own ideals. Equality, fraternity, Murat, and all the others, how they devour themselves completely. It leads to the military dictatorship of Napoleon.

Karen, "The rioters on January the sixth, accept the fantasy of each stereotype, Nazis, Jews,

patriots without having understanding of the historical context." That's exactly what I feel, Karen. You hit the nail on the head. Yes, I believe that they living in their fantasies, which are connected to the stereotypes of the Nazis, Jews, patriots, and so on. They imagine they're connected to the myth of the past and that they are the true believers and true followers of the Confederacy and all the rest of it. But, we can argue, but I believe they're more connected to the fantasy, which is why I think they can be defeated, much harder if they weren't.

Q: Okay, Sabrina, "What is the current collective myth that is evolving to help us with our current reality?"

A: Huge question, fascinating question. Would take at least a lecture or a discussion. That's a brilliant question. I think the first thing is to understand what is going on at the moment and from there to look for how collective myths are emerging from the ones we inherit.

Q: From Marion, "Would you agree that the cult of reality shows create their own myth of celebrity?"

A: Absolutely. "While the public believe the individuals in the show are actually real." Absolutely. "Can the public understand that this is a myth and pure fantasy according to a script?" That's part of what I mean. We have to bring it out and show what's really going on. Every reality TV show is filmed with many cameras, the editors will spend hours in the editing room editing it completely, and then showing it. Every reality TV no matter what, including the X-factor. You know, all of these things are totally manufactured. They're totally false illusion creations and out of that the myth is created 'cause there is a hint that maybe this is real, maybe this is rarely happening, but it ain't.

Okay Karen, thank you, Robert, thank you. Betty, "Are you going to discussion Edward Albee?"

Ah, fantastic, "Who's afraid of Virginia Wolf?" Brilliant, thank you for reminding me. Sandy,

"Aren't the religions of the world myths?" Of course, so many wars and troubles. Well, I personally think they're part of it, that religions and other things taken to a uni interpretation extreme create lots of wars or can be used by seekers of power. Religions can be used by them in these ways.

From Lyn, "The problem is when the myth becomes reality, people can't distinguish between the truth." Absolutely.

Karen, "We're all part of a very big family." Yeah.

Betty, thank you very much.

Barbara, thank you.

Okay Wendy, "Part of American history is the move Westward, to moving to an unexplored, expansive world. One that has its own laws where a person can reinvent themselves was filled with brutalities." Absolutely, and Shepherd writes about that, Wendy.

Shepherd writes about the slaughters of the Native Indian or the native indigenous, and the Spanish in South America. The absolute slaughtering of the indigenous people. Same in Africa elsewhere. The same with the Romans before that, and many others. Okay, great, thank you.

Debora, "So how can you say the family is a myth when you just showed me concretely that you exist?" I exist because my parents got together at some point.

Okay, thank you. Alright, thanks, in the family. From Carol, "The original, 'True West' was wonderful. The night the actors..." Oh yes, thank you for reminding me Carol. It was an amazing performance that Philip Seymour Hoffman and Gary, anyway they did, where they played the role and then halfway through the two brothers shifted and the same actors played their opposite brother, and it was a fantastic idea, Jekyll and Hyde. And Shepherd would would've loved it, I think, that interpretation just age it like that.

Okay, "The, 'Truman Show' sums up myth and reality. Absolutely, thank you, Lawrence.

From Robin, "Can you comment on Shepard as an actor?" I liked his film work very much. He always played the same role, absolutely, Sharon.

He played the Chuck Yeager, the ultimate hero, almost like the astronaut, the test pilot, who could fly faster than anyone, took the greatest risks for his own life flying so fast these test planes.

The cowboy myths, freedom, independence, up in the air, flying fast the spirit, okay?

And then Robin, "John Malkovich, he played in, 'True West.'" Fantastic performance he gave in "True West," John Malkovich, which I think it's online actually, on YouTube. Anyway, okay, thank you. There's a lot of questions here and really appreciate.

- Thanks David, thank you everybody. Thanks for fantastic presentation.

- Thank you, thanks so much Wendy, and to everybody, and Judy.

- Yeah, enjoy the rest of your weekend.

- Thank you, you too and everybody.

- See you soon, David, let's chat soon, take care. Thanks everyone, bye, bye, night, night.