



*Sam Shepard's
Master Class
in Playwriting*

Brian Bartels

*C*herry Lane Theater, in Manhattan's West Village, is not located on Cherry Lane at all, but on Commerce Lane (nowhere near the Financial District of Lower Manhattan). It's a venerable theater company that has been around for years, not very big, nowhere near Broadway, tucked in a corner on one of the most beautiful neighborhoods in New York: an urban paradise. It would seem wrong if anything other than a theater company were in this location. After everything is gone, this place feels like it will still be here, waiting for an audience.

Monday, November 6, 2006, 7:46 P.M. Excitement hovers. The crowd is your standard theater audience: median age, late forties, and I am, as always, one of the

youngest people in the room. Women dominate the group: sweet, good-natured ladies who all seem to know one another.

People meander inside Cherry Lane's second-stage space, which seats about fifty or sixty; every seat is taken. Some people are dressed like characters in one of Sam Shepard's plays. The event is being videotaped: a surprise, given Shepard's record of determined privacy. He doesn't do press junkets or interviews for the films he acts in. This is written into his contracts. Nor does he really like flying all that much. He has, however, in recent years, opened up somewhat, offering glimpses into his artistic and personal life such as he's generally shied away from. Perhaps that is why the Master Class you are about to read is a one-night-only window of opportunity; the experience is another taste of what continues to simmer on the stove before the lid goes back on and we keep cooking.

The stage is set. Orange stage lights illuminate the foreground, with a simple black chair and a small table nearby, holding a bottle of water. A backdrop of white fabric outlines leafless branches. From a distance, the white fabric looks like embroidered music notes—fitting for a musician turned member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Moments later Shepard is introduced, taking a purposeful stride toward the stage. This is the man responsible for *Chicago*, *Tooth of Crime*, *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, *True West*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Simpatico*, *A Lie of the Mind*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Buried Child*, *The Late Henry Moss*, *The God of Hell and Kicking a Dead Horse*. He drafted a book while traveling with Bob Dylan's 1975 *Rolling Thunder* tour, as well as cowriting "Brownsville Girl," one of Dylan's most treasured songs. His fiction includes *Motel Chronicles*, *Hawk Moon*, *Cruising Paradise* and *The Great Dream of Heaven*, as well as a new collection to be published in 2008. When he's not writing, he finds opportunities to act onstage and in feature films.

When he sits down on Cherry Lane's minimally decorated stage, his first goal as director of this one-night production is lighting. "Can we find a way to get these lights down here?" he says, his hand over his eyes as he squints into the crowd. "I could be getting a sunburn up here and not notice it until it's too late."

The Master Class will consist of a question-and-answer session, and the action gets going, as in any of Shepard's forty-five plays. A man in his midforties with endless notes is the first one called upon, and we dive into substance:

I really think that we are not just one person. We are a multiplicity of beings, if you want to call it that. Not to get too philosophical about it, but it's very easy for me to see character in the shifting, myriad, ever-changing tableau rather than one part.

CROWD MEMBER: You're an alum of the Cherry Lane, and you were here in . . . ? Way back in 1968?

SHEPARD: Oh, way before then. I did a one-act here in 1964 or '65 that was called *Up till Thursday*, and then, of course, later came *True West*.

CROWD MEMBER: As an actor, what do you expect from your writers, and as a writer what do you expect from your actors?

SHEPARD: I don't compartmentalize things like that. I'm not interested in borders so much as I like putting things together. I don't ever look at things so black and white like that.

CROWD MEMBER: You had a play called *Angel City*, and you gave instructions to the director of that play. You said to anyone who directs this play—and one of the characters turns into a lizard—that what you'd rather have are characters that are fractured whole, with bits and pieces of the characterizations flying off the central theme of the play.

SHEPARD: I really think that we are not just one person. We are a multiplicity of beings, if you want to call it that. Not to get too philosophical about it, but it's very easy for me to see character in the shifting, myriad, ever-changing tableau rather than one part. We're used to looking at character in a traditional sense, of being something we can define by behavior or background. You know what I'm saying?

But it may not be like that; it may be much more interesting. For me, anyway. It may not be so interesting to lock down the character with specifics. What I'm interested in is this shifting of the character, you know, not the exactness of definition.

CROWD MEMBER: Have you been generally happy as a director, or as a playwright watching a director?

SHEPARD: No.

CROWD MEMBER: Are there any Brechtian influences in your work?

SHEPARD: Brecht influences everything. Absolutely. There's a play he wrote called *In the Jungle of Cities*, in which he pits a librarian against a gangster. An extraordinary play. A simple man, leading a simple life, and this demonic character comes in and says, "I am going to kill you," to this humble librarian. "Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday, I will." And that's very upsetting, and that play influenced the writing of *Tooth of Crime*. This thing of total surprise. I think writing is like that. It's a total surprise. There's no way you can predict it. No way. As much as you think you know, and as old as we get, it can continually surprise.

CROWD MEMBER: I'm curious about why you rewrote *Tooth of Crime* so many years later.

SHEPARD: I felt the play was outdated, and I don't think a piece of writing should be forged in iron, and necessarily, the great thing about a play is that it moves and shifts, from production to production, and we see that shift. I mean, I've never written a play that I couldn't rewrite.

CROWD MEMBER: In interviews from the '80s you said that a play isn't really thought up; rather, it's something that you catch that sort of exists. How does that work with craft?

SHEPARD: Interesting question. Songwriters that I admire the most—Willie Nelson and Dylan—both feel that way about songwriting. The song exists; it's there, and being out there you need to get ahold of it somehow. Willie wrote "On the Road Again" on the back of a napkin in about five minutes. Like the Beatles song "Blackbird," it's so simple that it could've been there the whole time. However, it doesn't mean that you don't have to struggle or practice craft. You don't know when it's going to land. Is that clear?

CROWD MEMBER: Is there too much craft in that process?

SHEPARD: I don't think you can have too much craft. Maybe you can't have enough. It's a funny balance between what we like to call inspiration and what we like to call work. And you can't do without either one. If you hang

around and wait for something to hit you in the head, you're not going to write anything. You've got to work. You want to work *for* something. And these experiences, or accidents, can happen anytime. Through the back door. For instance, I've been working on these stories, fiction, for some time, journals and whatnot, and I'll be writing a while and take a look at something, and BOOM! there's a play that's developing while I'm working on short fiction, and I can't not write it in that moment. I'll think about all this time I've been spending working on this goddamn book, and then, what's justified?

CROWD MEMBER: Does that change the way you tell stories? Has our cultural evolution—the way technology continues to curb our attention spans—does that affect your cultural outlook?

SHEPARD: Well, culture itself is always gonna be poverty-stricken. We don't live in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia or Greece. We live in a destroyed culture. There is no culture here. It's shreds of stuff. We're amongst shrapnel. So if you're looking for culture to support your attention, then you're out of luck. The question to ask is "What is attention? Do we even understand the first thing about what attention is?" I mean, they're these definitions that don't define anything. We don't understand what attention is because we've been hammered by nonattention. The thing to do is to try and discover what attention is, what is the substance of it. It's a tool that's also true of actors. We work with material that is constantly moving.

CROWD MEMBER: Sometimes you direct your own work. What motivates you to direct your own plays and work on your own material?

SHEPARD: What motivates it is not being able to find a director.

It's been a great thing in a way, because I've learned much more about production. As a director, you start to understand what it means to talk to actors, what it means to talk to a lighting designer, to work with space. You get to understand what theater's about, and it is about far more than what you as a writer think. For me, it's been a blessing not to have found the right director.

CROWD MEMBER: You've also been an actor. How does that correlate with the approach you take in working with a director?

SHEPARD: Are you talking about film or theater?

CROWD MEMBER: Film.

SHEPARD: Film is a different matter. Oddly enough, there are many film directors who don't understand what acting is even about. I'm telling you the truth. Very few understand, or even care. For the most part, acting in film means trying to stay above water. They are far more interested in other matters relating to the production, so as an actor you're expected to show up carrying the goods. In theater, you get six to eight weeks rehearsal time, whereas in film you show up ready to go. So the rehearsal time in theater is devoted to the actors, which it should be.

CROWD MEMBER: Do you think that will ever change?

SHEPARD: It'll never change. There's too much money in film. That's the attitude. You're talking about a machine that operates distinctly over money. There's no room to mess about with the actors. Film's . . . terrible.

CROWD MEMBER: A lot of your writing and directing is very musical.

SHEPARD: I am a musician. I'm not a studied musician. I've always found that music and writing are entangled.

CROWD MEMBER: How do you prepare for acting in film?

SHEPARD: It depends on the role, you know. But I'd rather talk about theater.

CROWD MEMBER: What do you consider your best play?

SHEPARD: I don't hang on to them like that. In the second week of the production, I've had it. I'm ready to move on to the next thing. Productions can be grueling. But *True West* a couple years ago, with Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly, was an incredible production because they switched roles every third performance. And the reproduction of *Buried Child* that Steppenwolf did was a great thing to be part of. For the most part, I don't follow them like that and try to nurse them.

CROWD MEMBER: Could you tell us about the last days of Joe Chaiken? You had quite a moving experience with this longtime friend and collaborator.

SHEPARD: It was strange because I had experienced this earlier with a mother-in-law. He came out of unconsciousness, and you never think of language as being . . . he virtually lost the meaning of words, and it was so weird, because he was so eloquent. I would go out of my way to listen to him. We had ex-

ercises to get him out of this locked-down vocabulary, and as we were doing that, he had this idea of an angel—you know, Joe would have extraordinary ideas that came out of nowhere—and I couldn't tell if it was this mythological idea of a certain character, and we originally wrote it as a radio play, and then it became a piece in which we designed it so he could perform it himself. It was about an angel who crashes to Earth and doesn't know how he gets there, so everything is seen through that perspective, which is a shattered reality, and all of the language comes out of that experience. Sometimes the light goes out completely, and sometimes it comes back, and with Joe it went out completely. That piece was about trying to get him back.

CROWD MEMBER: How much does the environment in which you're writing affect you?

SHEPARD: I think the best writing, for me, happens on the move. When I'm riding in a train or a car. When you don't have a home. There's that feeling that when I'm traveling, I'm on fire, so I never figure out why this need to move all the time creates writing. It just goes.

CROWD MEMBER: Have you ever noticed any specific schools or traditions of acting that seem to get your work?

SHEPARD: The actors with the most chops are the ones who gather from all kinds of styles, not just the Methods, not just Chinese Theater, not just mimes. They have a taste of many different things and are open to many different things. They're fascinated by everything around them, and—

(A crowd member near the back takes a photograph.)

SHEPARD: Don't take any pictures, okay?

CROWD MEMBER: It's for the theater.

SHEPARD: Okay. Um, it's an interesting thing. Many actors who absorb in an internal way can't do the physical thing. And I always wonder why these things exclude each other. Peter Brook has experimented with this in the past. Actors should have a wide scope. They must have that, in order to bring something new to the theater.

CROWD MEMBER: I did a reading last week where I was praised for my dialogue, but got knocked down for my monologues. When monologues are lyrical and poetic and stand out . . . as someone so familiar with that element,

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do you ever feel that monologues that inhabit such poetic spins, like *Tooth of Crime* . . . is there a certain point where you need to cut it off or "dumb it down," so to speak?

SHEPARD: It's interesting. I'm writing a monologue now, and I just decided, within the last few days, to let it rip, let it go and not worry about whether it's lyrical or whatnot, and let it spin. And, on the other hand, I've done stuff where I've let it be very compound, very precise. I guess it depends on where you want to go with it. If you're gonna do this and it's gonna be onstage, why not let it go?

Though you look at somebody like Beckett, who is the master of conciseness. Look at *Krapp's Last Tape*. It's like acid rain, every word is. You couldn't replace a word in that piece. When he rolls, he rolls in a way in which he couldn't be more precise. But I don't think there are any rules. It's an interesting problem. And it's interesting for the actor, too. I've been guilty of writing way too much and then realizing, *Hell, an actor can't do this. He'll run out of gas. It doesn't make sense.*

CROWD MEMBER: Do you write every single day?

SHEPARD: I don't have a process. You have to take the plunge. It's easy to talk about the process, but it's a confrontation. You're confronting a blank page. It's like drawing. You stare at a blank canvas and it goes from itself. You can call it a process, but you're studying where this inspiration comes from. I don't even have a specific time I write.

CROWD MEMBER: Does your writing have a destination?

SHEPARD: Sometimes, but often I've found when you know where you're going, it deadens something. If I have some sort of a vague idea—or specific idea—you're already there, and you're not allowing yourself to travel to the end. It's like you're driving cross-country to Omaha, you know; if you're dreaming about Omaha the whole time, you're going to miss the trip. And it's not a bad idea to know where you're going, but you can't have that thing determine conclusions for you. What's in front of you is a big part of evolution. I'm not against having a destination, but that point can sometimes blind you from your trip.

CROWD MEMBER: Do you have . . . ?

SHEPARD: I have a hard time finishing anything I write.

CROWD MEMBER: Could you expand on the comment you had in a previous collection stating, "I don't want to be a playwright. I want to be a rock star."

SHEPARD: I think I was nineteen when I said that. (*Laughs.*) I discovered that I never really had a career. I'm just doing what I do. Back in the '60s, everyone wanted to be a rock star.

CROWD MEMBER: Do you ever think of audiences when you write?

SHEPARD: Yeah. Going back to Joe Chaiken, he developed the Open Theater, which was a very powerful, experimental practice in which many actors were challenged in their involvement. He'd do a Brecht play, a very simple, one-act Brecht play, like a clown piece; then he'd, say, "Do it as though the Queen of England was watching your show," so it changed. "Now do it as though Muhammed Ali is sitting there. Now do it as though the fascists are about to take over." And it was amazing to see that and how it took over the actors. It led me in a lot of different directions in terms of thinking about the audience. Now, in monologue that's interesting because you have to consider the language and characters, whether you're addressing the audience or ignoring them.

CROWD MEMBER: There's a scene in *True West* in which the character Lee is remembering a scene from a film called *Lonely Are the Brave*, which is a Kirk Douglas film, and he talks about his horse dying. And no one else onstage has ever heard of that film. Can you talk a little bit about how that informs the audience?

SHEPARD: He's the kind of character who would like that movie. It's as simple as that. Why did he like that movie? Because he saw himself as that guy. He's the kind of character who would like that movie, regardless of whether or not anyone else liked it. It's part of his persona, his bravado, his deal. I can say that film made an impression on me. It was one of what they called "modern Westerns," and Walter Matthau played the sheriff. It was a nitty-gritty black-and-white film, almost symbolic, but at the same time the kind of film that never could be made now. It's a part of America that's gone now. It's a part of reality that's gone. Which is sad. We've lost touch with a real character.

CROWD MEMBER: Chemistry onstage. How do you develop it?

SHEPARD: I don't think in terms of chemistry. I know that term's used a lot, but I don't get it. What works well is excellent actors, and when you get those kind of actors together, great stuff happens. Actors who have the chops are like jazz musicians. You don't bring in people who can't play with the band. So if everybody plays well, you can make some pretty great sound. Great actors challenge each other, and before you know it, something happens. I don't get in their way. I think directors get in actors' way too much and prevent something worthwhile. There aren't enough directors who trust actors and who nurture. Somehow, in one way or another, I feel the English actors have a better way of creating that spark. They know how to allow characters to arrive.

CROWD MEMBER: How much do you prepare characters for your plays?

SHEPARD: I don't do a lot of character development. I think they . . . come. Pinter is interesting for that. Pinter, from what I understand, starts with almost nothing, and he writes these incredible characters. From a word, from something so tiny, and I've always admired that. It's like painting, again. You set up something and BAM! It becomes something else. Not to say that there aren't writers who consider tapestry. You'd be hard-pressed to say Shakespeare didn't think about his characters. But that's never been my fascination as much as the plunge of it all.

CROWD MEMBER: How did *True West* come about?

SHEPARD: My mother had gone to Alaska, and I was housesitting for her in California, and I was completely alone, with crickets, and I started to dream this thing up. It just started to come. I wrote it in its entirety in that house.

CROWD MEMBER: When you were beginning as a playwright, did you have another playwright you looked at for guidance?

SHEPARD: Beckett. He's the only guy. He could be the only playwright on earth. That's all we need is Beckett. I idolize Beckett from every aspect. He represented the epitome of the modern playwright. Nobody was doing that stuff. You gotta understand—I mean, you probably do understand—that nobody was doing what he started. He totally reinvented it. He absolutely stood it on its head. There had been nobody like him.

CROWD MEMBER: What do you think about the current state of American theater, and where do you think it's going in the future?

SHEPARD: I don't care. I'm only concerned with writing plays. I start worrying about the state of American theater, and I'm not going to get anything done. I'm sorry, but I'm not interested.

CROWD MEMBER: Did you love theater and decide you wanted to get into writing, or did you first love writing and see theater as a perfect conduit?

SHEPARD: Actually, I was interested in music and acting, but I didn't want to do the audition thing. I hated the audition thing. I wanted to be autonomous, and writing offered me a part of myself, to take a notebook and go to a coffee shop and write. I didn't have to depend on anyone, and I didn't need the money that a filmmaker needs. I love that immediacy, and also that thing about dialogue: it's a kind of way about doing music. That's a comparative form of literature for me. Written literature just stays in a book, and with theater you can go and do things in space and time. So playwriting, where you can build from nothing, you can incorporate just about anything into. Theater will swallow whatever you feed it, you know. You can put painting or sculpture into the acting; you can film or have film onstage; it's the whole thing. It has so much potential. And yet we think of it as this primitive form, but maybe that's why people keep coming back to it, for its rawness. And I also love that it's language spoken. It's language that hits a room.

CROWD MEMBER: Do you go to the theater?

SHEPARD: Sometimes. I'm not a big fan of stuff. Every once in a while, you get surprised. I know there's some good stuff out there.

CROWD MEMBER: Did you see *Pillowman*?

SHEPARD: Yeah.

CROWD MEMBER: What did you think?

SHEPARD: Well, he's a wonderful writer, Martin McDonough. He is one of the guys. But that's not my favorite play of his. I love *The Beauty Queen of Leneane*.

CROWD MEMBER: I don't want to put a negative spin on it, but there's a lot of physical violence in your plays. Why do you include that?

SHEPARD: Because life is violent. Violence rules the world. So why not embrace it? We live in extremely violent times, in this world. I'm not all for heads rolling, but this is a violent country, is it not?

CROWD MEMBER: Are you drawn to country music or singer-songwriters in general, or something similar?

SHEPARD: I'm not particularly interested in forms. There's wonderful stuff coming out of country music. There's a whole thing going on right now with old-time music, and this thing, with traditional instruments being played in new ways, that pushes the envelope. When you're seeing someone playing the banjo like a saxophone, it's a push. I love the idea of breaking new barriers. It's gotta be like that. I don't think it's good to sit with one method and say that's the end-all.

CROWD MEMBER: You've mentioned painting repeatedly tonight. Is that another hobby?

SHEPARD: No. I draw a little bit, but painting is not something I do. I wish I could, but there's two things I can't do: painting and novels. Scratch those off the list.

CROWD MEMBER: Would you share with us what a beginning is for you?

SHEPARD: I think beginnings are by far the most exciting. That's where the fire starts. I have no problem with beginnings. But then then you have to go on your nerve, and you have to follow your nerve, and that's why beginnings are also very important. It's just like music: you have to start with just the right note, or else the song can go bad fast. It's a question of paying attention to the potential. Not to say that you want to get tight and constricted with what that start is, but it's paying attention to where that start should

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be. Take *Krapp's Last Tape*, with the banana in the drawer. It's total surprise. Comes from nowhere. This guy's listening to tapes; then he pulls a banana out of the drawer and puts it in his mouth. All of a sudden, it's a comedy. He eats the banana, puts it on the floor, and slips on it later. It's absolutely brilliant. It's like a physical psych gag.

But the writing can't be vague. It has to be specific. Peter Brook wrote a fabulous book called *The Empty Space*, and what he's saying is, at the end, theater is this blank canvas, which is probably the most exciting thing in the world, and yet frightening. That, to me, is the essence of how you follow. What do you see happen? Say you're sitting in the audience, and you're the only one there. What do you see happen? What would you like to see happen? What completely surprises you? It's as wide-open as that, and not getting too concerned with the process and big ideas and politics. What physically happens between the audience and the play? Have you seen Slavin's *Snowshow*? Clowns are boarding trains in which they become the train. It's an extraordinary piece in which they stare at the audience. Just by that, the audience goes nuts. It's technique, and yet, at the same time, it's doing its own thing. Great theater.

CROWD MEMBER: How do you make yourself finish things, if it's such trouble?

SHEPARD: I'm actually working on something that I started many years ago, and seeing its core value. Lot of times, you start something brand new and let it flutter away before you know it. You have to agree to work on the piece.

CROWD MEMBER: Could you give us an example of writing something like *Buried Child*?

SHEPARD: I dipped into this family thing for a little while, and I didn't really want to write family plays. It is that American tradition, those family plays,

so I thought of writing something that hadn't been exposed or touched on. Then I started working on it, and it turned out to be pretty dark, and I wanted it to be a comedy, so that was the first time I started drawing up characters from my past and messing around in that territory: family-gone-wrong.

CROWD MEMBER: Can we go back to Beckett for a second? (*Shepard nods.*) Did you get into his work as a distant admirer or did you actually know him?

SHEPARD: No. It's one of my biggest regrets. I wish I had met him.

CROWD MEMBER: Did you ever act in any of his works?

(*Shepard shakes head no.*)

CROWD MEMBER: Would you like to?

SHEPARD: Maybe.

CROWD MEMBER: Do you find there are enough places to put on your plays?

SHEPARD: There's never been a political involvement. I was lucky enough to come from the '60s, where Off-Off Broadway was the only alternative. Broadway was locked up, Off-Broadway was as locked up as Broadway, all commercial theater. The doors were closed to experimental theater. And we invented it. And we said, "Okay, let's go do it in that space, that café or that church." The fire department was trying to close us down all the time because we didn't have exit signs over the doors, and we just did it. We made it happen. I'm not sure if that vitality still exists now, but I can tell you, Off-Off Broadway existed because we said, "To hell with Broadway, and to hell with commercial theater. We're going to do it our way in the spaces available because we believe in it enough."

I find it hard to believe that the city has changed that much, that people who want to get stuff done can't get those things done. Somewhere. Take Ellen Stewart (*from La MaMa*). This was a bulldog of a woman. She put plays on regardless. Get it done. I don't know if there are people like that around anymore. I find it hard to believe it's a political element or economic element. I mean, goddang, if people want to get stuff done, they'll find a way to get it done. Don't you think? What do you think? I don't know.

CROWD MEMBER: How do you know when a play's done?

SHEPARD: You write things in different states of mind. After a long day of writing, once you sleep on a story, that next morning isn't the same as when you were engaged the previous night. You look at it later and realize it isn't at all how you imagined it to be. So when you write a play ten years ago, and then come back to it, you're a different person. So I think, Why not rewrite it in that new light?

CROWD MEMBER: How do you know when to do that?

SHEPARD: The play has a rhythm. You gotta listen to it. You'll know. I hate endings. I can tell you that. Always. Trying to force something. Not fun. Beginnings are extremely fun, middles are . . . (*grumbles*) and endings suck.

CROWD MEMBER: Do you do a lot of rewrites based on rehearsals with actors?

SHEPARD: Around actors, yeah. Oftentimes, good actors are great at finding bad writing. If you're watching your actors and listening to actors, they'll find a problem. A lot of times I've rewritten almost entirely around an actor. They find that communication with character. Ed Harris is like that. He'll just say, "What is that?" and he just knows what is and isn't working.

CROWD MEMBER: Do you write a lot of stage directions?

SHEPARD: I don't like stage directions that much. I like them abbreviated and concise. The problem with stage directions is that you're trying to locate the space, and the point of view is always shifting. So you have to work in the blueprint. So the best way to create direction is probably the traditional method, which is from the proscenium. You have to sort of designate where it's happening. Look at Beckett's stage direction. It's very specific and precise.

Theater commands community, and sure enough, it delivered that night. Also at the session were a former playwriting classmate and a woman who dines at the restaurant where I tend bar. This was not a big space we worked in. It was like a slight modification of a high school classroom. In New York City. I was lucky enough to get a ticket to the session. Eight million people in this city, and I was one of a lucky fifty. I expected to be anonymous, and I knew two other people in attendance and recognized two more.

How we begin and how we finish . . . I guess it's true, it isn't so much in how it all ends as in how we got there. Like Mr. Shepard, I'm having a helluva time finishing this piece about one of my idols.

CROWD MEMBER: Is there any advice you can give us?

SHEPARD: Plunge in.



Brian Bartels

Brian Bartels was raised in the small town of Reedsburg, Wisconsin, but currently lives in New York. He is writing a creative nonfiction book on music and America. A novel excerpt recently debuted in *Void* magazine. His latest play, *I'll Believe in Anything*, is about Pluto being demoted from its status as a planet.

Photo by Quinn Chandler