

Clarity of Purpose

Profile's *Buried Child*

By Alison Hallett



IF YOU'VE NEVER SEEN Sam Shepard's 1979 Pulitzer-winner *Buried Child*, you're not gonna find a better first time than Profile Theatre's current staging.

Broadly speaking, Shepard's script is about the breakdown of the American family: Set on a long-neglected family farm, it follows a drunken, addled patriarch and his overbearing wife; their two damaged adult children; and their long-lost grandson whose hippie girlfriend bears baffled witness to the family's collapse.

Under Adriana Baer's direction, Profile's *Buried Child* is strikingly clear. The stage is set with the light-dappled skeleton of a family home; there's no mistaking that we're looking at the bones of something once formidable, now decaying. From the cast, there's a sense that each actor fully understands how their character fits both into the dynamics of the family, and into the larger metaphorical significance of the show. It's rare to see so much purpose onstage, so efficiently communicated.

Tobias Andersen as Dodge, the ailing head of the family, anchors the performances. It's impossible to imagine another local actor doing the role this kind of justice, as Andersen excavates the black humor in a script that otherwise threatens to become suffocatingly grim. Where Dodge is sick in body, his wife, played by Jane Fellows, is sick in spirit, and Fellows' arch, stylized performance creates a perfect portrait of religious hypocrisy.

It's hard to imagine what it must have been like to see this play when it premiered in the 1970s: Elements of the show remain genuinely unnerving today. Profile's take doesn't answer the central question posed by Shepard's script—what, exactly, is the significance of the titular buried child?—but it does make the stakes of the question bracingly clear.