

Review: Shepard's buried family

Profile's 'Buried Child' cradles meaning between the blanks

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Tobias Andersen (left) and Garland Lyons. Photo: David Kinder

“Anytime a character makes us wonder, ‘Were they always like that, or did something happen to them?’...I always prefer to think something happened,” explained *Buried Child* director Adriana Baer in Sunday’s post-performance talkback. “We know Tilden was an all-American, a high achiever, intelligent...so what did happen? How did Bradley manage to accidentally saw off his own leg with a chainsaw? What happened there?”

Indeed, what happens before, and around, and behind the scenes we actually see is the crux of Sam Shepard’s eerie 1979 Pulitzer winner *Buried Child*. What’s onstage, meanwhile, is often inexplicable. Why doesn’t the family patriarch recognize his supposed grandson Vince (Ty Hewitt) when he comes for a surprise visit? Why doesn’t his supposed father, Tilden, give him the time of day? WHAT HAPPENED?

Vince and his girlfriend Shelly (Foss Curtis) are the only characters asking the obvious question, and getting conflicting answers. Baer has coached actors: “Whatever you say is, in that moment, what you[r characters] 100 percent believe to be true. Even if it directly contradicts someone else’s account of the same situation. To me, this is a play about the feeling of variable memory.”

Profile Theatre, which focuses on just one prolific playwright each season, is spending its current season steeped in actor/playwright Shepard’s cryptic, disquieting style. Baer has developed a penpal relationship with Shepard, and learned that his works—particularly this one—hit close to home. Shepard’s father lived in a trailer in New Mexico; Vince initially believes the same of his dad Tilden. Dodge is an alcoholic; Shepard’s father may have been as well. Attending a performance of *Buried Child*, the only one of his son’s plays he ever saw, Shepard’s father apparently stood up mid-show and started shouting, “That’s not how it happened!” and had to be subdued. WHAT? What happened?

“I’ve decided some things that I believe happened; some I’ve shared with the cast and some I haven’t because it wouldn’t be helpful,” says Baer. Even so, the group does an admirable job of navigating between the blanks. Anderson and Lyons as Dodge and Bradley are expert mean-muggers, their eyes as fierce and unblinking as a rattlesnake’s when they attempt to intimidate the indomitable Shelly. Hewitt fills out his role as the lone echo of the men’s former glory, all macho swagger and cowboy charm. Curtis as Shelly gets the most range—“she’s the only one reacting; she’s us,” says Baer—and we easily read the parade of trepidations and reassurances that play across her bemused body and face. Blough’s Tilden is appropriately heartbreaking: he’s pitiable, but obviously beyond our reach. Fellows sparkles onstage, but her long offstage monologue feels (and could very well be) read. David Bodin expertly fulfills a bit part as her paramour Father Dewis, reprising self-important airs he honed in a larger role in *Shaking The Tree’s One Flea Spare*.

The audience may never fully understand what happened in the barren corn-fields of this once-all-American, now shamed and forgetful family. What we can sense, without question, is its profundity and dead weight.