

Sam Shepard's 'Buried Child' can still touch a nerve (review)

By Richard Wattenberg For The Oregonian/OregonLive
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BURIED CHILD 2014, Profile Theatre
L to R: Foss Curtis (Shelly) and David
Bodin (Father Dewis) Photo by David
Kinder

I remember being told that it's best to leave family secrets secret. But I've also heard many times: "The truth will out," and this is what the characters of Sam Shepard's haunting "Buried Child" ultimately learn. The problem is that the buried truth revealed in the play may be more than just the terrible secret of a single isolated family.

First presented in 1978, the play digs beneath the surface of the family prosperity promised to us all by the American dream. Although Shepard conveys a sense of the national self-doubt that troubled the country in the years immediately following the Vietnam War, it would be too easy to dismiss the concerns voiced by the play as products of a particular period.

The anxieties that this 1979 Pulitzer Prize winning play explore still have resonance. The play, which Shepard re-edited and further polished in 1995 for a highly acclaimed Steppenwolf production, can still touch a nerve. We have the disturbingly evocative current Profile Theatre production of "Buried Child" directed by the company's artistic director Adriana Baer as evidence of that power.

Set in rural Illinois, Shepard's play turns the Norman Rockwell idyllic vision of the American heartland, on its head. In the hope of reconnecting with his heritage, Vince, accompanied by his girlfriend Shelly, returns home after a six-year absence. On arriving, he is stunned to find that his once noble farm family has gone entirely to seed. His grandfather Dodge is an ailing alcoholic; his father Tilden is a burnt out, broken shell of a man; his uncle Bradley is a cowardly sadist; and his mother Halie is too busy having an affair with the local minister to care about anything else. At the heart of this family decay is an ugly secret--an untold tale of incest and infanticide.



Tobias Andersen (Dodge), left, and Tim Blough (Tilden) in "Buried Child" at Profile Theatre.

While certainly incest and infanticide excite in us a primal horror, one might wonder how such unspeakable transgressions relate to the idealized Norman Rockwell America. Surely, we are not to take Shepard's story literally, but are such taboo actions metaphors for some kind of grave national crime, that some viewers may understand the Vietnam War to have been?

Or does Shepard confront us with something akin to Classical Greek tragedy. When, for instance, at play's end, Sophocles' Oedipus realizes the secret of his past, he discovers nothing less than that he is the unwitting perpetrator of patricide and incest. In learning of his and his family's secret, Oedipus ultimately has to recognize the horrible contradiction that he is both innocent of intentional evil and responsible for it. Is such a contradiction what Vince's family must confront, and is this the heritage that Vince inherits?

Baer's Profile production of the play conveys a sense of this kind of tragic sensibility, but not at the expense of the play's grotesque humor. Ironically and appropriately, the sublime arises from the ludicrous in this production, and the members of the cast very adeptly negotiate this bizarre conjunction.

As Dodge, Tobias Andersen, is, wonderfully amusing as the play's emasculated, petty curmudgeon of a family patriarch. Hacking and wheezing, he remains rather inert on a center stage sofa, or on the floor immediately before it, delivering sharp-tongued sarcasm or desperately trying to wheedle whiskey out of anyone who will listen to him. Andersen's Dodge is emotionally petrified, but his eyes sparkle with the possibility of a two dollar bottle of booze.

And yet at play's end, when Andersen's Dodge finally discloses the family's unspoken history, he attains a kind of dignity. With a dry confidence, he becomes an inexorable force of truth even as he sits helplessly on the floor.

Dodge's wife, Halie on the contrary never stops trying to veil the truth, and Jane Fellows splendidly conveys this dimension of the character. Whether it be by the smooth flow with which Fellows maintains the barrage of words that Halie often uses to avoid dangerous conversation, or the overly sunny optimism that characterizes many of these speeches, or the ease with which Fellows portrays Halie's protean nature (shifting tones instantaneously and thus keeping characters like the apparent intruder Shelly off guard) -- Fellows' Halie encloses herself in a cocoon of self-assuring lies. Underlying an obliviousness that suggests something out of the theatre of the absurd, one can't help but sense in Fellows' Halie a passionate determination to silence truth similar to that manifested by Oedipus' mother/wife Jocasta.

Other performances are also strong. In his portrayal of Tilden, Tim Blough nicely conveys both the strange emptiness and the peculiar enthusiasm that mark the character's interactions with others, and Garland Lyons as Bradley also ably balances the character's early harsh, violent tendencies with his later moments of plaintive whining. In playing the roles of the outsiders to the unpredictable world of this family, Foss Curtis as Shelly successfully portrays the character's fear and frustration, and David Bodin nicely presents Father Dewis's efforts to maintain his sense of decorum even as he feels himself in way over his head. Ty Hewitt is solid, especially early on, as he struggles with the baffling reception he receives from his family. He skillfully traces Vince's transition from ordinary outsider to fully initiated heir apparent to Dodge's domain -- although one might have expected more explosiveness from him when he returns in the last act playing out macho male military fantasies.

The production's design elements are also of high quality. Alan E. Schwanke's set which gives us the frame of the house, a rather impressive staircase leading to the upstairs bedrooms, and minimal furnishings certainly supports the non-realistic dimensions of the play; however, one might wonder whether or not the spacious openness of the stage doesn't diffuse the play's tragic tension. Shareth Patel's subliminally disturbing and expressive sound design, Kristeen Willis Crosser's nuanced lighting, Jessica Bobillot's character appropriate costume subtly support the multi-layered action of the play.

Sure there are some moments of the production that could be more effective or, at least, that one might envision differently, but Adriana Baer has unquestionably found and communicated both the humor and horror in this play.