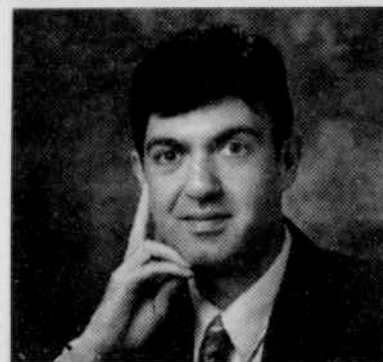


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FAMILY PLOT

*The blight of the American dream is unearthed in
Sam Shepard's Buried Child*

by C. Jay Wilson Jr.



Gary Brickner-Schulz (on couch) and Bruce Burkhartsmeier in *Buried Child*

There is nothing pretty about the theater of Sam Shepard. His plays seem to expose an accumulation of grimy discarded corruptions left behind after a church picnic. Instead of facing us with a tidy succession of morals, his theater reveals a dark nether world teeming with disaffected refugees from the underbelly of the American dream. Tearing through our polite perceptions of family, Shepard attacks the very root of

table denouement of chaos, we are increasingly made aware of the characters' psychological destitution, which parallels the physical decrepitude of the stage set. Dodge is the head of the household, whose permanent position on the couch seems to entomb him within the blight of the house. Gary Brickner-Schulz captures Dodge's cantankerous disposition with enough immobile heartiness to put any self-respecting couch potato to shame. Dodge's wife Halie (Linda Williams Janke) is positively garish as the matriarch who clings desperately to elusive shreds of her own resuscitated history.

Theater

our cultural identity and taunts us with his characters' scornful gloats of disgust.

Artists Repertory Theater's current production of *Buried Child* delivers all of Shepard's macabre charm. From the moment spectators enter the theater, they begin to feel that something is awry. The trash-strewn, ultra-dilapidated set (complete with a reclining actor) greets the audience while accompaniment of songs from the musical *Oklahoma* helps them settle into their seats. Somehow they know that, this evening, it will not be entertainment of the Neil Simon variety on their theatergoing plates.

The plot is fairly straightforward: A young man from the city drags his girlfriend into the provincial Midwest in an attempt to return to his roots, only to be confronted with a grisly family secret, his family's inability to remember him, and the stark essence of decay that defines their lives.

As *Buried Child* advances toward its inevi-

Dan Reed and Jacque Drew deliver respectable performances as Vince and Shelly, the couple making the sojourn from the city. It is Bruce Burkhartsmeier's chilling performance as Vince's emotionally unhinged father, however, that fuels the play's insouciant horror. Burkhartsmeier weaves his character's foolishness with his tightly contained hostility to create

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a startling portrayal that convinces us by way of its subtlety. A few of the performances in the play could have been toned down to allow the play's edges to develop naturally. The best way to destroy a Sam Shepard play is to drown its aspects of realism in a sea of gratuitous ridiculousness and forced melodrama.

Buried Child is one of few plays that has a decisive finger on the pulse of American consciousness. Don't allow yourself to be frightened away by the show's desolation. Even as we witness each character's apparent hopelessness, we are somehow per-

sueded to believe in the promise of rebirth as a human privilege that is wholly ours, in spite of the disintegration that encapsulates our lives.