

A NOISE WITHIN'S 2019-2020 REPERTORY THEATRE SEASON

STUDY GUIDE



# BURIED CHILD

By Sam Shepard

Directed by Julia Rodriguez-Elliott

 aNW Edu

Photo by Daniel Reichert. Deborah Strang.

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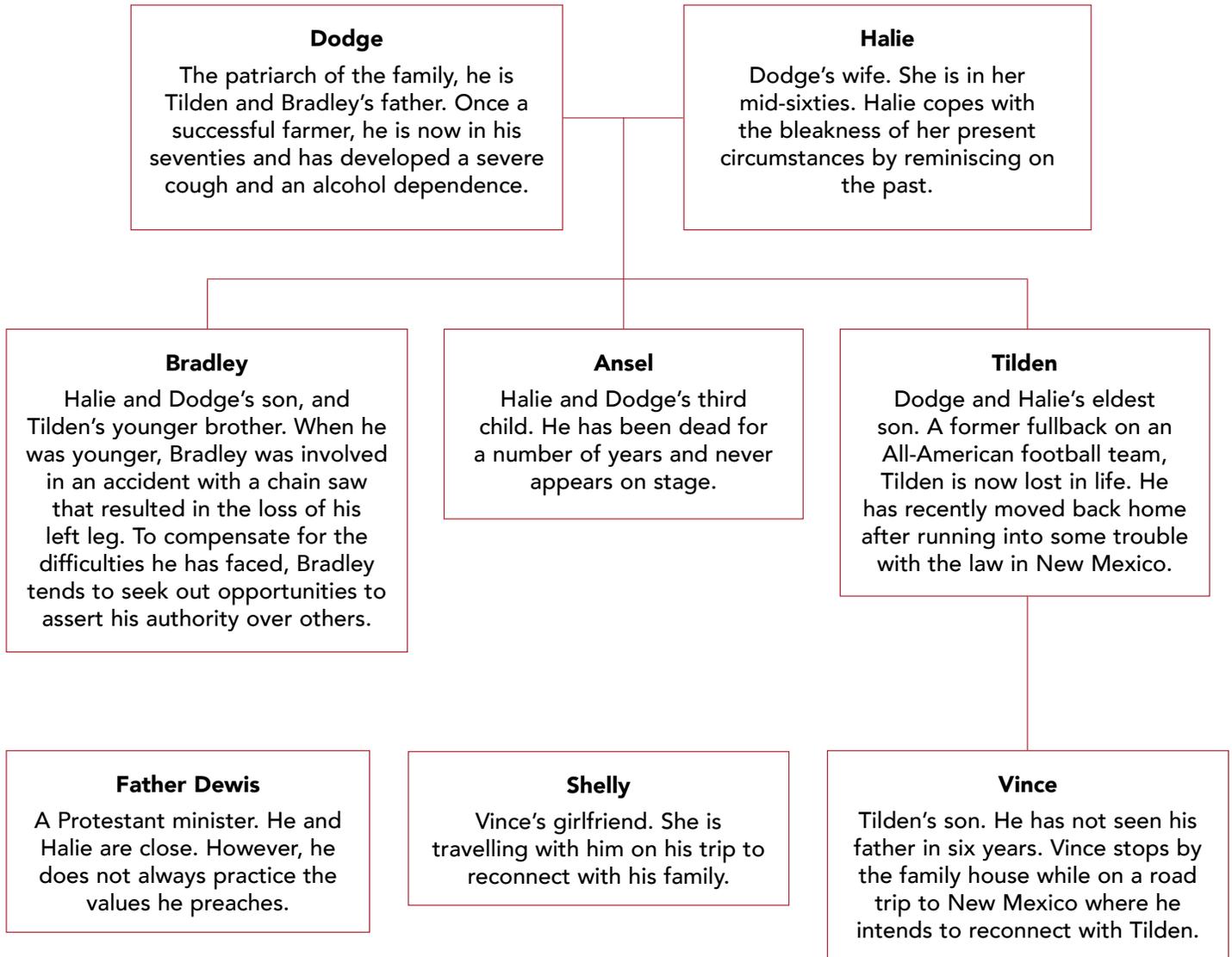
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## CHARACTER MAP



## SYNOPSIS

**It is a rainy day in rural Illinois.** Dodge sits on the couch in the downstairs living room of his farmhouse, watching TV as he takes a swig out of a bottle of whiskey he keeps hidden in the cushions of the couch. Halie, Dodge's wife, is upstairs, getting ready to visit Father Dewis, a local minister with whom Halie has a close relationship. Dodge is not well—he has a persistent and rather violent cough. Halie reminds Dodge that their son, Bradley, is planning to stop by later in the day to give Dodge a haircut.

As Halie continues to get ready, Tilden, Halie and Dodge's eldest son, enters with an armful of corn—he has been outside in the backyard working in the rain. This is strange to Dodge. Corn has not been planted in their backyard since 1935. So Dodge, convinced that Tilden has stolen the corn from another farm, urges Tilden to return the corn he picked. Tilden maintains that he picked the corn from the backyard and begins to husk it in the living room.

As she talks about Ansel, Halie comes down the stairs and prepares to leave for her meeting. When she meets with Father Dewis, she is going to ask him to put up a monument in memory of Ansel, her son who died some time ago under mysterious circumstances. She mentions that she will be back later in the afternoon.

After Halie leaves, Dodge nods off to sleep. While he is asleep, Tilden leaves the room and Bradley arrives at the house. When Bradley arrives, he immediately begins to cut Dodge's hair as he sleeps.

Later that night, Vince, Tilden's son, and his girlfriend, Shelly, arrive at the house. They are in the middle of a road trip from New York to New Mexico where Vince plans to see his father, Tilden, for the first time in six years. They have stopped in Illinois so that Vince can see his grandparents, Halie and Dodge. When Vince and Shelly arrive, Dodge is the only person around—Halie has not returned yet from her visit with Father Dewis—and Dodge does not recognize Vince at all. In fact, he confuses Vince with Tilden. Vince tries to piece together what is happening as Shelly tries to convince Vince that they should leave. Just as Shelly attempts to run out of the house, Tilden returns. He has been working in the backyard again and carries a number of carrots. Thinking that Tilden was still living in New Mexico, Vince is surprised and relieved to see that his father is in Illinois. However, Tilden does not seem to recognize Vince either. As Shelly presses Tilden further, Tilden mentions that he had a son once, but that son is buried now.

Completely dumbfounded that his grandfather and father seem to have forgotten who he is, Vince leaves, volunteering to pick up a bottle of whiskey for Dodge. While Vince is gone, Shelly learns that there is a secret in the family—Tilden tells her that there was a baby in the family that disappeared, without a trace. Dodge attempts to quiet Tilden as Bradley returns, confused to see a stranger in the living room.

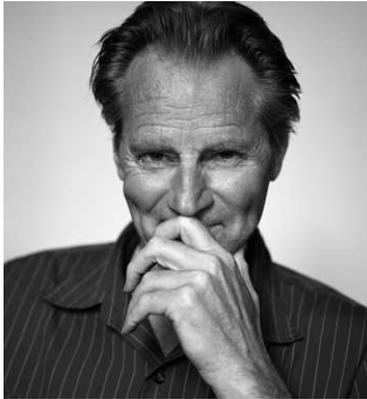
The next morning, neither Vince nor Halie have returned from their errands. Shelly spent the night in Dodge and Halie's room, and while she was up there, she noticed some family pictures that featured a baby. Shelly asks Dodge about the baby, but Dodge shuts her questions down.

As Shelly questions Dodge, Halie returns to the house with Father Dewis. Immediately, Halie launches into an apology to Father Dewis for the state of the house. Halie soon realizes that Tilden is not present and begins to berate Dodge—she had asked Dodge to watch Tilden while she was out, and he has let her down. Out of contempt for Halie, Dodge agrees to tell Shelly what happened to the baby, making Halie furious. Dodge describes how Halie had had a baby, and implies that Tilden was the father. Seeing the baby as a destructive presence in the family, Dodge drowned and buried the child.

Suddenly, Vince returns, inebriated and surprised that Halie recognizes him as her grandchild. As soon as Vince enters, Shelly begs him to leave with her. Before they can exit, Dodge tells Vince that he is leaving the house to Vince when he dies, and Vince decides that he must stay. Shelly says she cannot stay in the house any longer and leaves without Vince. Father Dewis leaves shortly after. With Shelly and Father Dewis gone, Vince realizes that Dodge has died silently. Vince is now the owner of the house. He takes Dodge's hat, puts it on his own head, and stares at the ceiling.

As Vince stares at the ceiling, Tilden returns. He carries the body of the buried child. As the play ends, Tilden makes his way up the stairs, child in his arms as Halie exclaims that vegetables have started to grow again the backyard, just like Tilden claimed. ♦

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: **SAM SHEPARD**



Sam Shepard

**Sam Shepard** was born on November 5, 1943 at Fort Sheridan, a military base just outside of Chicago, Illinois, as Samuel Shepard Rogers. Shepard's mother, Jane Rogers, was a school teacher and his father, also named Samuel Shepard Rogers, was serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II when

Shepard was born. When the war ended, Shepard's father continued to serve in the US Air Force. His service took the family all over the United States and out to Guam before the family eventually settled in Duarte, California.

As he grew up, Shepard's family life proved to be rather dysfunctional. Shepard said, "I was born into this family of cranky men." These men were his father's brothers: one who lost a leg when he was ten, one who married into the Chicago mob, and one who raised dogs. In fact, Shepard traces a lot of the anxieties and insecurities he felt later in his life back to his childhood, particularly back to his father's alcoholism and abuse. In a 2010 interview, Shepard describes the men who were present during his childhood: "The male influences around me were primarily alcoholics and extremely violent."

Shepard graduated from high school in Duarte in 1961. While he was in high school, Shepard became involved with theatre and with writing. After graduating from high school, Shepard attended Mount San Antonio Junior College to study agriculture. However, he left the school after a year to join the Bishop's Company Repertory Players, a Christian touring troupe of actors, in 1962. Shepard toured the US with this troupe for eight months before moving to New York City where he became fascinated with jazz music and the works of Irish existentialist playwright, Samuel Beckett.

The Off-Off-Broadway scene was just starting to take off in New York at this time. Shepard began to write a series of avant-garde one-act plays that premiered in the Off-Off-Broadway circuit and which received warm receptions from audiences. In 1966, Shepard made history when three of his short plays, *Chicago*, *Icarus' Mother*, and *Red Cross* won Obie Awards in the Distinguished Play category in the same year. These were the first of many Obie Awards Shepard would win. After his success with short plays, Shepard wrote his first full-length play, *La Turista*, in 1967.

In 1969, Shepard married O-lan Jones Dark, and in 1970, the two had a son, Jesse Mojo Shepard. Around this time, Shepard began to try his hand at writing for the screen. His first teleplay, *Fourteen Hundred Thousand*, was broadcast on television in 1969.

In 1971, after having a high-profile affair with singer and poet, Patti Smith, Shepard and his family moved to London. Shepard stayed there for three years, writing for the stage before taking a position as playwright in residence at the Magic Theater in San Francisco in 1974—a position he held for ten years. Shepard spent the late 1970s writing what have become some of his most revered family dramas such as *Curse of the Starving Class*, *True West*, and *Buried Child*, which won a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979. It was at this time that Shepard also returned to acting. In 1978, he appeared in the feature film, *Days of Heaven*. His performance in that film led to other roles, and soon, Shepard was acting on the big screen with great regularity. His tall, lanky, brooding, and weathered appearance served him well in his career on the screen. In 1983, Shepard's appearance in *The Right Stuff* as Chuck Yeager earned him an Academy Award nomination.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Shepard's career as a film actor flourished. He appeared in films ranging from *Steel Magnolias* in 1989 to *Pelican Brief* in 1993, from *Black Hawk Down* in 2001 to *The Notebook* in 2004. However, his work on films left little time for writing, and during this period, his work as a playwright came to a pause. Beginning around 2004, Shepard began to focus once again on writing for the stage. By this point, Shepard's writing had become darker and more complex, reflecting the political change and turmoil he saw in the country at the time.

For the next 13 years, Shepard continued to act in films and write for the stage. In February of 2017, Shepard published his last work titled *On the Inside*, a quasi-memoir in the form of a collection of vignettes and short stories.

On July 27, 2017, Shepard passed away at the age of 73 on his farm in Kentucky. He died of complications with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. In his death, Shepard leaves behind an impressive legacy of work earning him a spot among the most important American dramatists in the last half-century. ♦

Edited From:

Coymoon. About Sam. Sam Shepard, 2017.

and Winters, John J. Sam Shepard: A Life. Pgw, 2017.

## TIMELINE: SAM SHEPARD

- 1943** Sam Shepard is born as Samuel Shepard Rogers at Fort Sheridan near Chicago, Illinois to Jane Rogers and Samuel Shepard Rogers on November 5.
- 1944** Shepard's father, who had been serving in the Air Force during World War II, is transferred back to the United States
- 1946** Shepard's father's job takes the family to a number of different states. On April 17, the family moves to Guam where they stay for just over a year.
- 1961** Shepard graduates from high school in Duarte, California where and his parents run an avocado farm. Shepard attends Mount San Antonio Junior College, where he studies agriculture.
- 1962** Shepard joins the Bishop's Company Repertory Players, a touring company of Christian actors, when they come through town. Shepard tours with the company for eight months.
- 1963** Shepard moves to New York City, where he works as a bus boy at the Village Gate in Greenwich Village.
- 1964** *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden*, Shepard's first two short plays, are produced Off-Off-Broadway at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery.
- 1966** Shepard wins three Obie Awards for his plays *Chicago*, *Icarus' Mother*, and *Red Cross* and sets the record for the number of Obie Awards won in a single year. The same year, the University of Minnesota offers Shepard a writing grant.
- 1967** Shepard writes his first full-length play, *La Turista*, which allegorically addresses the Vietnam War and is about two tourists in Mexico. He wins his fourth Obie Award for this play.
- 1969** Shepard marries O-lan Jones Dark, an actress, composer, and producer. This same year, Shepard's first teleplay, *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* is broadcast on television.
- 1970** Shepard's first child, Jesse Mojo Shepard, is born.
- 1971** Shepard ends a high-profile affair with singer and poet Patti Smith. He and his family move to London.
- 1974** Shepard returns to the United States and begins his tenure at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco as the resident playwright. This same year, Shepard is hired to join Bob Dylan's The Rolling Thunder Revue tour to document life on the road.
- 1976** Shepard publishes *The Rolling Thunder Logbook*, his record of his experience on tour.
- 1978** Shepard stars in Terrence Malick's film *Days of Heaven* to great critical acclaim. The same year Shepard's plays *Curse of the Starving Child* and *Buried Child* premiere.
- 1979** Shepard wins the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Buried Child*.
- 1980** Shepard writes *True West*, which premieres at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco.
- 1983** Shepard writes and directs *Fool for Love* and wins his first Obie Award for Best Direction. The same year, Shepard is cast as Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff*, a role that earns him an Academy Award nomination.
- 1984** Shepard and O-lan Jones Dark get divorced. This year, Shepard adapts *Motel Chronicles*, a collection of short stories into the screenplay for *Paris, Texas* which wins the Palme d'Or (the top prize) at the Cannes Film Festival.
- 1986** Shepard's second child, Hannah Jane Shepard, is born to Sam Shepard and actress Jessica Lange.
- 1987** Shepard's third child, Samuel Walker Shepard, is born to Sam Shepard and actress Jessica Lange.
- 1988** Shepard makes his feature film directorial debut with *Far North*.
- 1994** Shepard is inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame.
- 1996** *Buried Child* is restaged on Broadway and is nominated for five Tony Awards, including the award for Best Play.
- 1999** Shepard stars in *Dash and Lilly* and is nominated for both an Emmy and a Golden Globe for his role.
- 2010** Shepard publishes a collection of short stories titled *Day Out of Days*.
- 2013** Shepard appears in three films: *Mud*, *Out of the Furnace*, and *August: Osage County*.
- 2017** Shepard publishes *The One Inside*, a quasi-memoir told through vignettes and short stories. On July 27, Shepard dies because of complications with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) at his farm in Kentucky.

Edited from:  
Coymoon. *About Sam*. Sam Shepard, 2017.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP OF *BURIED CHILD*: THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE OF THE U.S. IN THE 1970S

### The 1970s in the United States

were a tumultuous time. Many of the strides towards equality that marginalized groups like women, African Americans, Native Americans, and the LGBTQ+ community made during the 1960s were called into question as the political landscape in the country changed. As these groups continued to fight for equality in the public sphere and protests against the US involvement in the ongoing Vietnam War grew in number and frequency, a silent political movement towards conservative economic and traditional family values began to take hold in the country's working and middle classes. This political movement, called the "New Right" came about as a large number of primarily white working class and middle-class Americans began to feel alienated by and frustrated with the riots, protests, and emergent counterculture they saw taking place in many of the country's urban centers. In response to seeing what they perceived as turbulent activity on the rise, this group began to embrace a new kind of conservative political ideology, gaining traction among those who were tired of what they interpreted as an interfering government that they believed coddled the poor and people of color at taxpayers' expense. This group eventually grew enough to form what political strategists called a "silent majority."

In the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson publicly waged a War on Poverty in the United States. In his efforts to battle poverty, President Johnson implemented a number of social-welfare programs such as the Job Corps, the Peace Corps, the Head Start program (which provided low and no-cost early childhood education programs to children from low-income households), and the Food Stamp Program. However, as the silent majority of New Right supporters grew, they became responsible for sweeping President Richard Nixon into office in 1968, and almost immediately, Nixon began to dismantle the welfare system Johnson had established—the welfare system that fostered much resentment among New Right supporters.

While Nixon worked to implement policies that favored the interests of the predominantly white middle and working-class people who felt slighted by Johnson's



A protestor mails his draft card back to the Selective Service at an anti-war protest on October 20, 1967. Photograph by Bruce Hopkins/Tucson Citizen.

social-welfare programs in the White House, the New Right movement began to celebrate the free market and lament the decline of "traditional" social values and roles. New Right conservatives were skeptical of the government. They fought against high taxes, environmental regulation, highway speed limits, national park policies, and affirmative action.

This is not to say that the fights for equality ceased all together during this period. On the contrary, as the New Right conservative movement gained traction, other groups began to publicly respond to and refute many of the movement's political efforts. During the period, the fight for women's rights as well as the fight for environmental protection, and the fight to end the war efforts in Vietnam grew in popularity and in strength. In fact, just as the New Right movement was skeptical of the government, so too was the political left who believed that the government was not doing enough to protect American citizens. Skepticism of the government began to grow on both political sides.

These skeptical views of the government came to an all-time high when the Watergate Scandal broke news. In June of 1972 as Nixon was in the midst of a campaign for re-election, five members of the Committee to Re-Elect the President were caught breaking into the Democratic National Committee, whose offices were located in the Watergate office building. It soon became clear that Nixon himself was involved in the crime and he demanded that the FBI halt their investigation of the incident as his political aides worked to cover up

## THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP OF *BURIED CHILD*: THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE OF THE U.S. IN THE 1970S CONTINUED...

the scandal and keep it out of the public eye. With the information of the scandal still under wraps, Nixon was re-elected as President of the United States in November of 1972. It was not until April of 1974 that a Congressional committee began the process of impeaching the President for his involvement with Watergate. Before Congress could impeach him, however, Nixon resigned. After the Watergate scandal, many people on both political sides withdrew from politics all together, and a nationwide distrust of political figures began to emerge.

This is the social, political, and economic backdrop of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*. Set in 1978, the year the play was written, Shepard's work touches on issues of distrust, secrecy, betrayal, and morality reflecting the sense of distrust and betrayal felt by many in the wake of the Watergate scandal. What is more, we see the tension between the ideologies of the rural working-class and the ideologies of those from urban centers clash when city-dwellers, Vince and Shelly, enter into the world of rural Illinois where traditional morality, independence, and grit are placed at the highest value. ♦

Edited from:

Editors, History.com. "The 1970s." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 30 July 2010, [www.history.com/topics/1970s/1970s-1](http://www.history.com/topics/1970s/1970s-1).



Richard Nixon says goodbye with a salute to his staff members outside the White House after resigning from the presidency on August 9, 1974. Photograph by Associated Press.

## SUBVERTING GENRE EXPECTATIONS: THE “FAMILY DRAMA” AND *BURIED CHILD*

### THE FAMILY DRAMA

Since the age of Ancient Greek drama, families and family dynamics have appeared at the center of countless dramas. From Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* which centers on the discovery of a royal family's dark past to Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* which centers on family struggling not to crumble under the weight of issues of addiction and illness, family dramas have long held an important place in the theatrical canon. In American theatre, family dramas dominated the stage throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and Lorraine Hansberry examined the dynamics of nuclear American families through their work.

While the content explored in plays that fall into the Family Drama genre is broad, many Family Dramas share a few characteristics.

1. The family at the center of the story is dysfunctional—because of past events, members of the central family are inherently at odds with each other.
2. There is some dark secret in the family's past—from incestuous relationships to violence to the death of a child to lies about money, there is something in the family's history that brings members of the family great shame.
3. Over the course of the play, despite the all efforts made by the characters, the secret is revealed.

Typically, American Family Dramas focus on the conflict between the family's present state and circumstances and the ideal of the American Dream, and often, these plays are steeped in details and circumstances that mirror the playwright's own family experiences.

### SAM SHEPARD'S SUBVERSION OF THE FAMILY DRAMA GENRE

When it comes to meeting the “requirements” for a Family Drama, Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* checks all the boxes. It features a dysfunctional family with a dark incestuous secret that is revealed over the course of the play. However, using the framework provided by the Family Drama genre, Sam Shepard dismantles the common myths of the genre throughout the play.

One way that Shepard dismantles the genre is by subverting our expectations of traditional and archetypal family roles. Dodge, the patriarch of the family, does not act how we, as an audience, expect a patriarch to act.

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“What I wanted to do was to destroy the idea of the American family drama.”

—Sam Shepard in a 2016 interview with The New York Times about *Buried Child*

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Kirk Douglas, Arthur Kennedy, Gertrude Lawrence, and Jane Wyman in *The Glass Menagerie* (1950). Directed by Irving Rapper, based on the play by Tennessee Williams

It is the archetype of the father/grandfather character to be the head of the household, the provider, to make decisions, and to always know best; however, that is not what we see in Dodge. Couch ridden, cranky, and occasionally confused, Dodge does not fit into the mold of the archetypal father character that is so often central to Family Dramas. Halie does not fit the archetypal mother either—she violates the pattern we have come to expect mother characters to fall into based on the way they tend to act in other Family Dramas. Tilden subverts our expectations for how an All-American fullback would act—he is now “profoundly burnt out and displaced,” as Shepard's stage directions describe him, breaking into tears and cowering in the face of confrontation. Even Father Dewis subverts our expectations for how a priest character should act in his implied affair with Halie. Another way Shepard subverts the genre is through his setting. Family Dramas tend to take place in realistic worlds. While many of the elements of the world of *Buried Child* would fall into the category of realism, we quickly learn that there is something else at play in the world of the play that keeps this work from entirely fitting into mold of realism when Tilden enters with

## SUBVERTING GENRE EXPECTATIONS: THE “FAMILY DRAMA” AND *BURIED CHILD* CONTINUED...

an armful of corn from corn stalks that seem to have sprouted in the family's backyard overnight.

Shepard uses the character of Shelly as the primary tool help us understand the extent of his subversions of the genre. As an outsider to the family, Shelly acts as the voice of the audience, often highlighting and commenting on situations that are bizarre or out of the ordinary. It is Shelly who questions and continues to press Dodge and Tilden on why they seem to have no recollection of Vince. She is our voice, the voice that lets us know that this is not a typical family, and this is not a typical Family Drama. ♦

Edited from:

Putzel, Steven D. and Suzanne R. Westfall. "The Back Side of Myth: Sam Shepard's Subversion of Mythic Codes in *Buried Child*." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 1989.



Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, and George Segal in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966). Directed by Mike Nichols, based on the play by Edward Albee

## THE ENIGMATIC STYLE OF *BURIED CHILD*



"The Gleaners" by Jean-François Millet, 1857

### STYLE

Through its provocative subject matter, bizarre inter-character relationships, and shocking events, Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* tackles a lot. When approaching a piece of theater, it is important to understand the stylistic container of the play—that is, it is important to understand the primary dramatic style the playwright utilizes to tell the story they wish to share. Examples of styles of theater include: Realism, Expressionism, Absurdism, Romanticism, and Existentialism. The style of a work is different than the genre of a work. Whereas a work's genre has to do with the type of story being told (drama, comedy, romantic comedy, mystery, horror, etc.), the style of a work has to do with how the playwright communicates that story. Typically, styles are associated with historical periods, as they tend to arise across various artistic media in reaction to the events of the historical period.

### STYLE OF *BURIED CHILD*

In *Buried Child*, Sam Shepard employs a blend of elements from various styles in order to tell his story of a family tragedy. While aspects of styles ranging from existentialism to absurdism to surrealism are visible in Shepard's play, realism provides the framework for *Buried Child*.

### Realism

Realism in visual and dramatic art began to emerge in the 1840s in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The movement worked to replace the idealistic images of landscapes and portraits of Romantic art with ones that accurately reflected the state of the world—chaotic, dirty, vulnerable. During the Realist Movement, everyday life became the subject of artistic work, and artists did not shy away from depictions of the "uglier" aspects of life. Much of the work to come out of the Realist Movement addressed social, economic, and political inequities and issues. In this sense, the movement was distinctly anti-institutional.

Two of the most prominent early realist playwrights included Anton Chekhov and Henrik Ibsen, who both used their work to shine lights on ruptures in society at the time. Realism dominated theatre from the late 1800s all the way through the 1960s. However, as the world changed over that course of time, so did Realist theatre. In the 1950s, a subgenre of Realism called "Kitchen Sink Realism" became a popular form of writing. This subgenre of Realism focused on depicting the gritty lives of working-class characters and featured the characters performing mundane tasks on stage such as cleaning dishes at the sink. These plays tended to feature an angry young man's struggle to succeed in a stifling society. Prominent writers during the Kitchen Sink Realist movement in theatre include John Osborne and Arthur Miller.

## THE ENIGMATIC STYLE OF *BURIED CHILD* CONTINUED...

### Existentialism, Absurdism, and Surrealism

While Realism acts as the stylistic framework in *Buried Child*, elements of existentialism, absurdism, and surrealism are present and contribute to the overall world of the play. Existentialism, absurdism, and surrealism are closely related styles—they all concern a disruption of logic in the world. Below is a brief breakdown of these styles:

- Existentialism—a style that emphasizes an individual as a completely free agent in determining their own fate and in determining the meaning in their own life.
- Absurdism—a style in which characters find themselves in a world that lacks any clear purpose or logic.
- Surrealism—a style in which artists and writers strive to unlock images of the unconscious mind, often through dreamlike settings.

In *Buried Child*, it quickly becomes apparent that logic does not entirely dictate the natural laws in the world of the play. We see this primarily in how quickly it appears that corn and other vegetables have sprouted in the family's backyard. The speed with which these crops appear does not make al sense—it is rather absurd. It is also somewhat surreal in that the growth of the crops underscores the unconscious desire of the family members to give voice to the secrets they have been suppressing.

Tilden and Dodge's initial reaction to Vince is absurd. That they do not recognize Vince, their son and grandson, respectively, does not fit within our frame of reference for logic in the world. What is more, when Vince leaves to go buy Dodge whiskey, he has an existential experience. As he drives, he begins to see the faces of his ancestors in his own reflection of his windshield—after seeing these images, he determines that it is his purpose to return to the house and to his family. Once he does return, Vince ends up inheriting the house and actively decides to stay at the house and live out his role as the head of the household even if that means losing Shelly in the process. ♦



"Walking Man" by Alberto Giacometti, 1960



"The Human Condition" by René Magritte, 1933.

## THE ROLE OF ALIENATION IN *BURIED CHILD*

### ALIENATION

At its core, alienation is a distinct type of psychological or social ill in which there is a distinct and problematic separation between an individual and another individual, environment, or community. This separation tends to lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Many American sociologists began to notice and comment on an increased sense of alienation among young people beginning in the 1960s. These sociologists attributed this increased sense of alienation to a number of societal conditions including the rapid changes in society during the 1960s and a disintegration of communal values in American culture at large during this time. Some sociologists have noted that individuals tend to experience feelings of alienation when they perceive the government, their workplace, or their education institutions as impersonal and unresponsive to their needs.

Beyond a feeling of separation from an individual, community, or society at large, there is another type of alienation—alienation an individual feels when there is a disharmony between the individual's societal expectations and the individual's sense of true self. That is, an individual may feel alienated when how they are expected to behave runs counter to their core values.

Alienation is expressed differently by different people. For some people, alienation manifests in feelings of lethargy, for others it manifests as hostility and violence. The sense of isolation an individual feels as a result of alienation can lead that person to adopt erratic behavior.

Feelings of alienation can be caused, in part, by a change in an individual's understanding of society. When a social change challenges the way that an individual processes how the world works, some people have difficulty constructing a new reality in which they can find a place for themselves—they have a hard time determining what role they need to play in society after the change.

### ALIENATION IN *BURIED CHILD*

Vince has not seen his family in six years. While we do not know why it has been so long since he has been in contact with his father or his father's family, when Vince arrives at the house, it is clear that things have changed and that he is not considered entirely part of the family anymore. We see this when both Dodge and Tilden do not recognize Vince. After an attempt to jog Dodge's memory, Vince begins to show signs of feeling alienated:

**Dodge:** Stop calling me Grandpa, will ya! It's sickening. "Grandpa." I'm nobody's grandpa! Least of all yours.

**Vince:** I can't believe you don't recognize me. I just can't believe it. It wasn't that long ago.

**Shelly:** Maybe you've got the wrong house. Did you ever think of that? Maybe this is the wrong address!

**Vince:** It's not the wrong address! I recognize the yard. The porch. The elm tree. The house. I was standing right here in this house. Right in this very spot.

**Shelly:** Yeah, but do you recognize the people? He says he's not your grandfather.

**Vince:** His *is* my grandpa! I know he's my grandpa! He's *always* been my grandpa. He always *will be* my grandpa!

Vince grows increasingly frustrated as Dodge and later Tilden do not recognize him as family. Vince's sense of alienation as a result of not being recognized by his father and grandfather causes him to question his identity. In returning to his grandparents' house, Vince has a difficult time determining and re-constructing the role he plays within his family. In his time away, Vince's family has changed, drastically so, such that there is no longer a place for Vince in his role as a son and grandson. It is only when Vince begins to accept and adapt to the new family dynamic that he begins to construct a new identity as the head of the household.

However, the alienation we see at work in *Buried Child* does not stop there. Each member of the family alienates all other members of the family through their actions. Dodge alienates the members of his family by keeping to the couch and maintaining an emotional distance from Tilden, Bradley, and Halie. Halie alienates her family by spending a large amount of time away from them with Father Dewis. Tilden alienates the family by moving to New Mexico for some time, and Bradley alienates the family through his physical aggression towards them. What is more, alienation in this family is presented as a cycle. In assuming a new family role, Vince inherently begins to alienate Shelly and the life they had together in New York. In this sense, the cycle of alienation that surrounds this particular family continues even as the play draws toward an end. ♦

Edited from:

Leopold, David. "Alienation." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 30 Aug. 2018, [plato.stanford.edu/entries/alienation/](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/alienation/).

and "Alienation." *Feelings, People, Society, and Feeling - JRank Articles*, [psychology.jrank.org/pages/22/Alienation.html](https://psychology.jrank.org/pages/22/Alienation.html).

## TRAUMA AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN *BURIED CHILD*

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“I know you’ve got a secret. You’ve all got a secret.  
It’s so secret, in fact, you’re all convinced it never happened.”  
—Shelly, Act Three

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**The American Psychological Association** defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event.” Trauma-based emotional responses like shock and denial can begin to set in immediately after the event and can have long term effects on a person’s behavior and well-being. Typical long-term reactions to trauma include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches and nausea.

If an event is particularly troubling, the trauma surrounding that event can be transmitted to different members of a group who is close—physically and emotionally—to the event. This frequently happens in families who have experienced something traumatic. In his research on trauma across familial generations, Dr. M. Gerard Fromm describes how and why trauma is transmitted across generations:

“What human beings cannot contain of their experience—what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable—falls out of social discourse, but very often on to and into the next generation as an affective sensitivity or a chaotic urgency.”

While the transmission of trauma is often found within families who are suffering from a profound loss such as the death of an infant, it can also be found on a larger societal scale in the aftermath of a devastating disaster. When trauma is transmitted throughout a family or society it becomes part of the group’s collective memory.

Collective memory refers to a shared pool of memories, knowledge, and information unique to a particular group. These collective memories contribute to the group’s sense of identity and have a strong impact on the relationships between individuals in the group. While collective memories are formed in and by the past, they have a strong influence on the group’s present events.

In Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child*, we see the impact of transmitted trauma on the collective memory of a family. The trauma surrounding the birth of Halie and Tilden’s son, coupled with the family’s collective trauma after Dodge decides to kill the child, is so overwhelming, unbearable, and unthinkable that it falls out of the family’s social discourse. That is, the trauma is so severe

that the family refuses to mention the events—Bradley even says the family made a pact never to talk about what happened. In taking steps to actively suppress their collective memory of the event, the trauma the family experienced continues to fester silently.

We see the impact of the family’s decision to suppress the trauma of the events in how each member of the family chooses to silently cope with the trauma. Halie copes by metaphorically donning rose-colored glasses to view the past—she consistently talks about trips to sunny cities she took before she met Dodge and the heroism of her late son, Ansel. Tilden copes by running away to New Mexico. Bradley copes through aggression. Dodge copes by turning to alcohol.

It is not until Vince and Shelly arrive that we see the extent of the trauma and its transmission across generations. The family members have worked so hard to suppress their collective trauma in losing not one but two children, so when Vince arrives at the house after being absent for over six years, we see Dodge and Tilden project that suppression onto Vince when they do not recognize him as a member of the family.

What is more, at the end of the play, when Vince inherits the house he also inherits the family’s trauma. On his trip to get whiskey for Dodge, Vince sees his reflection in the windshield of his car. As he continues to drive, he notices the reflection morphs into the image of his father’s face which then changes to Dodge’s face, continuing to change and transform into the faces of his ancestors. Vince’s experience seeing the faces of his ancestors in his own reflection highlights the history and collective memory that Vince carries with him everywhere he goes, including the trauma. ♦

Edited from:

“How Trauma Is Carried Across Generations.” *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-me-in-we/201205/how-trauma-is-carried-across-generations](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-me-in-we/201205/how-trauma-is-carried-across-generations).

“Trauma.” *American Psychological Association*, American Psychological Association, [www.apa.org/topics/trauma/](http://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/).

“Collective Memory, Social Psychology Of.” *ScienceDirect*, Elsevier, 12 Mar. 2015, [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780080970868240464](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780080970868240464).

## THEMES

### THE AMERICAN DREAM

Equality, freedom, happiness, success, white picket fences, Thanksgiving, family gatherings, and apple pie—these are all ideas and symbols that the concept of the American Dream evokes. Rooted in the idea that the United States provides all of its citizens with opportunities to attain financial and emotional prosperity as well as opportunities for upward social mobility, the American Dream has become part of the cultural ethos of the country. That is, the ideal of the American Dream is an essential component of American society and culture.

From the outside, the family at the center of *Buried Child* looks like it has achieved many if not all aspects of the American Dream. Shelly, the one true outsider in the play, notes this when she and Vince arrive at the house in Act Two:

**Shelly:** It's like a Norman Rockwell cover or something

**Vince:** What's the matter with that? It's American.

**Shelly:** American? Where's the milkman and the little dog? What's the little dog's name? Spot. Spot and Jane. Dick and Jane and Spot. See Spot run.

Calling upon Norman Rockwell, a painter famous for depicting idyllic and distinctly American scenes in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shelly highlights the fact that the house has a picture-perfect quaintness to it. So much so that she goes on to describe how it would seem natural to see a milkman going about his business and a dog named Spot running around. She even compares the house to something out of the *Dick and Jane* picture books.

**"This is terrible, Vince! I don't want to stay here. In this house. I thought it was going to be turkey dinners and apple pie."**

**—Shelly, Act Two**

However, once Shelly and Vince step into the house, Shelly quickly realizes just how bleak and unforgiving the reality in which the family is living actually is. This is a family who once came close to achieving the American Dream and a family whose attempts to achieve the dream



"Freedom from Want" by Norman Rockwell, 1943.

have failed. The house the family lives in represents the place where the American Dream has completely crumbled under the weight of harsh realities and profound familial tragedy.

Each member of the family has experienced a unique failure in the pursuit of the American Dream. Tilden, once a promising and powerful fullback on an All-American football team, can now barely take care of himself. Halie describes how Tilden must be watched, as if he was a child. Dodge, once a successful farmer, has not been able to grow any crops in his yard for years. What is more, he can hardly move about in the living room without collapsing into a severe coughing fit—he has lost all of his patriarchal power. Halie's American Dream was to have a family, and while she succeeded in that venture to a point, her family is on the fringes—Ansel, arguably Halie's favorite child, is dead and so is the child she had with Tilden. In having a child with Tilden, Halie destroys her chance of fully living out an American Dream. Bradley, missing a leg, does not feel whole and acts out aggressively to compensate for his inability to attain the American Dream.

In highlighting how the American Dream has failed and festered within this single family, Shepard highlights the fallibility and the dangers of the American Dream as it acts in the American cultural landscape.

## THEMES CONTINUED...

### THE PAST AND IDENTITY

**Shelly:** So the past never happened as far as you're concerned?

**Dodge:** The past? Jesus Christ. The past is passed. What do you know about the past?

—Act Three

Despite Dodge's insistence that the past is passed, throughout the play we see how events in the family's past constantly affect the present. In fact, Dodge's question to Shelly ("What do you know about the past?") appears to come out of a place of defensiveness, highlighting the fact that the past is at the forefront of his mind, even as he is denying the significance of the past.

Tilden and Dodge both bury the past. After the death of his child, Tilden runs away to New Mexico as Dodge literally buries the child he killed in the backyard. The two have buried other elements of the past as well—we see this when neither of them recognizes Vince. What differentiates the way Dodge and Tilden address and live with the past is that Tilden eventually develops the desire to bring the past back to light—to unbury it. We see this impulse when Tilden offers Shelly vague bits of information about the buried child—information that Dodge instinctively denies when he hears Tilden sharing. Tilden's desire to "unbury" the past is intrinsically linked to his desire to reclaim his identity as the father to the buried child. This desire is so strong that he eventually finds and unearths the body of the child that Dodge buried—literally carrying the past into the present for all to see, unhidden, and unchanged by modified memory.

Vince's longing for the past drives his decision to stop at his family's home in Illinois on his way out to New Mexico, where he believes Tilden is still living. After an absence of over six years, he is interested in reconnecting with and rekindling relationships with his father and immediate family. When he draws near his family's home, he stops at sites that were important to him when he was younger—sites essential to his past and to the formation of his present identity. Shelly describes how he brought her to every shop, restaurant, and drive-in of which he has a memory. Once he arrives at the house, the validity of both his sense of identity and his memory of his childhood is called into question when Dodge and Tilden do not recognize him. Vince has a past-related identity revelation. Out on a trip to get Dodge a bottle of whisky, Vince describes how he has somewhat of an identity crisis until, as he is driving, he sees his reflection in the windshield of his car. As he drives, his reflection becomes Tilden's reflection, which becomes Dodge's reflection,



"Freedom from Fear" by Norman Rockwell, 1943.

which then becomes Dodge's father's reflection and so on down Vince's ancestral line. In this sense, Vince, as the youngest member of the family is responsible for carrying on the family line, for keeping the family's past and history alive in the present.

### GROWTH AND DETERIORATION

"You can't force a thing to grow. You can't interfere with it. It's all hidden. Unseen. You just gotta wait 'til it pops up out of the ground. Tiny little shoot. Tiny little white shoot. All hairy and fragile. Strong though. Strong enough to crack the earth even."—Halie, Act Three

At its core, *Buried Child* is an examination of the deterioration of a traditional, working-class, Midwestern family. Throughout the play, we see characters and family relationships break down. There is a universal law in physics—the second law of thermodynamics—that states entropy in the universe will increase over time. That is, all things naturally tend toward chaos over time. This law is actively at play within the family featured in *Buried Child*.

We see this trend toward entropy, chaos, and deterioration as the members of the family gradually lose their ability to keep their shortcomings and misdeeds

## THEMES CONTINUED...

hidden. When it comes to the child buried in the family's backyard, Dodge is the first to offer a hint at that secret when he calls Vince Tilden's second son. Tilden is next to relinquish details of that secret to Shelly. Ultimately, this secret and its safekeeping, or lack thereof, launches the family into a full-blown fight—one which results in Shelly wielding Bradley's prosthetic leg as a weapon, Bradley crawling on the ground after Shelly, and Dodge in a substantial coughing fit.

As the truth about the family's past is revealed and the family descends into a state of utter deterioration, crops in the family's backyard begin to grow at an inexplicable speed. Tilden is the first to notice the crops—when we first see him, he enters the house with an armful of corn that he claims to have picked in the family's backyard. However, no one has planted corn in the backyard in over thirty years. Even after he has picked the corn, he is the only one able to see the crop in the backyard—in Act 1, Halie looks out her window on the second floor of the house and claims that she does not see any corn growing in the backyard. That Tilden can see the corn while Halie cannot highlights that Tilden has come to terms with the secret on a deeper level than Halie has—he is not as interested in hiding it as she is.

After the secret about the buried child has been brought into the light and as the play comes to a close, Halie goes to her room upstairs and looks out her window again. This time, she sees a sea of vegetables and crops growing in the backyard. The growth of these vegetables emphasizes the notion that growth is possible even in a state of utter deterioration. As the secret is shared, the opportunity to grow and move past the tragedy of it becomes a more distinct possibility. ♦

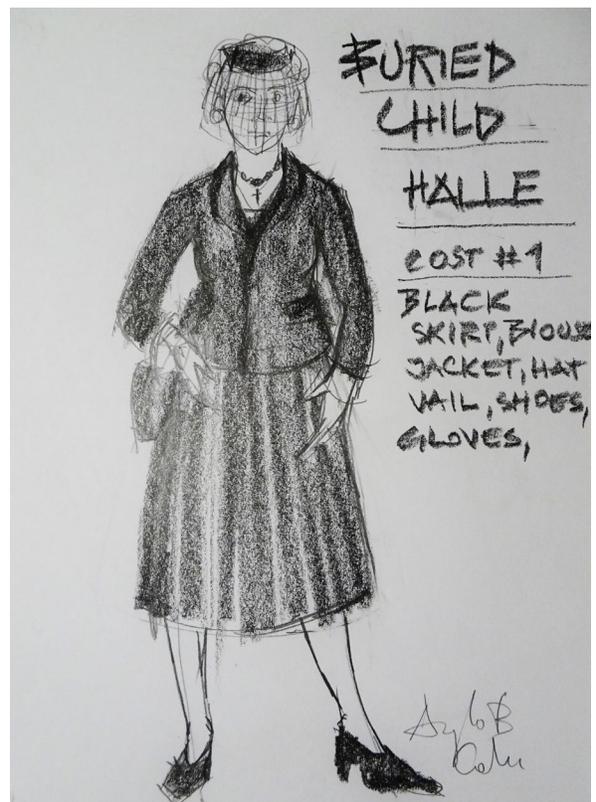
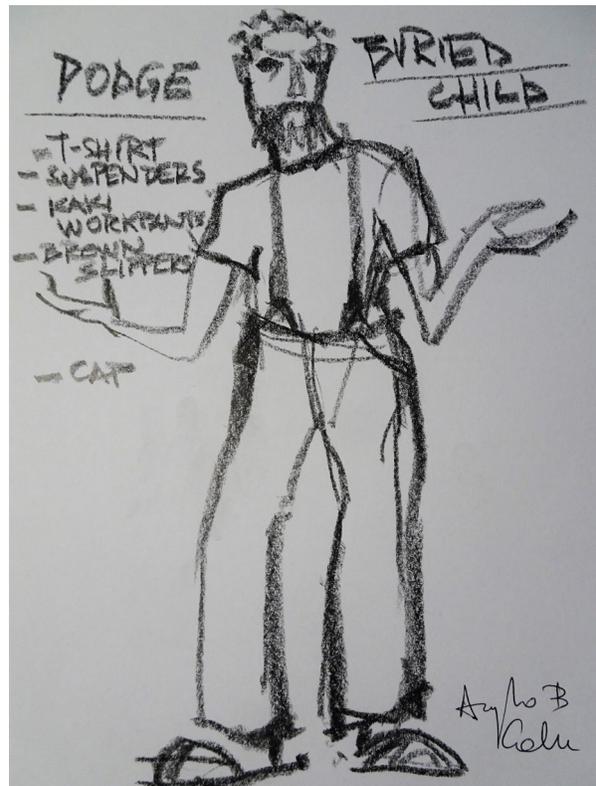
## COSTUME DESIGN IN **BURIED CHILD** BY ANGELA CALIN

**As a costume designer** I try to help the actors define their characters and also give the audience visual references to better understand the action, location and mood of the play. Sam Shepard is one of my favorite playwrights, so I was very excited to be offered the opportunity to design for his play, and I'm also glad to be collaborating with Julia on this project.

The costume designer's job is to translate the words of a play into visual images, to help define the characters in the story, and to reflect the director's vision of the play to aid the actors in creating their onstage persona. All this is achieved through color, texture, shapes, proportions, imagination, creativity, and style. I began the process of designing this show just as I do with any other show. I read the play and I have an initial conversation with the director in order to set the vision for the costumes. The next step is to gather ideas to do research for each character. There is a lot of communication between the director and designers in order to find the best visual concept for the play. The next step is to do sketches and finally to present them to the actors and artistic directors. Once the play starts rehearsing, we begin work on the costumes themselves.

I became interested in theatre at an early age while growing up in Bucharest, Romania. For a number of years, I used to spend many hours a day (after school) in the theatre and it didn't take long to realize I developed a great passion for this art form. After graduating with an MFA in both costume and set design, my work just naturally gravitated more towards costume design. I find my collaboration with both directors and actors very exciting in my quest to understand and learn about the characters in the stories.

I don't have one piece that I am most excited about. I am excited to see the whole play come to life; from the written words to the production on stage, this is a fascinating process that involves the collaboration of various artists, designers, actors, artisans, all working together. ♦



## INTERVIEW WITH SIBYL WICKERSHEIMER: SET DESIGN



### What attracted you to *Buried Child*? What is most intriguing to you about this story?

I grew up in Urbana, IL surrounded by corn fields. Literally surrounded by corn. I feel this story naturally fits the seemingly abandoned farmhouses I would drive by on old country roads. Furthermore, the writing is excellent and creates characters that feel very real no matter where you are from. I am drawn into the intimate conversations between these characters which make every audience member feel they are let in on this family's secrets.

### What is the scenic designer's job? How did you begin your process for designing this show?

I create an environment for the action of the play to take place. I began by revisiting photos I have taken of IL near my family's home and remembering fields, skies, seasons, and weather. I've designed the play before and this time, I was interested in developing the porch to wrap around the stage or house. On the ANW thrust stage this felt like a dynamic choice and allows the audience a chance to better compare the world inside of the house to the outside world.

### How did you first become interested in scenic design?

The first time I tried set design in a class my senior year in college, I was hooked. In college, I was the Stage Manager for a production of *Buried Child*.

### What elements of this play does the scenic design help tell the story?

The house is in disrepair but not necessarily because of its age, rather from the family history. I created the house with distinct areas, almost separating and pulling apart because of the unraveling of this family's secret tragedy. The upstairs is Haley's domain, the living room floor and couch are Dodge's. The outside is Tilden's. Bradley is trying to take back some area, but his bullying really has no results.

### What piece of the show are you most excited to see come to life?

Oh, all of it! ♦

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### BOOKS

- Shepard, Sam. *Buried Child: A Play*. Vintage Books, 2006.
- Shepard, Sam. *Curse of the Starving Class: A Play in Three Acts*. Dramatists Play Service, 2009.
- Shepard, Sam. *The One Inside*. Vintage Books, 2018.
- Shepard, Sam. *Rolling Thunder Logbook*. Da Capo Press, 2004.
- Shepard, Sam. *True West*. Faber and Faber, 2018.
- Winters, John J. *Sam Shepard: A Life*. Pgw, 2017.

### ARTICLES

- Bohleber, Werner. "Remembrance, trauma and collective memory: The battle for memory in psychoanalysis." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 2007 88:2, 329-352, DOI: [10.1516/V5H5-8351-7636-7878](https://doi.org/10.1516/V5H5-8351-7636-7878)
- Mir, Danish & Vijaya, R. "Familial disintegration: A study of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*. 2017 *International Journal of Academic Research and Development*.
- McNulty, Charles. "Sam Shepard, The Cowboy Playwright Who Rewrote the Rules of the American Stage." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 2017, [www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-sam-shepard-appreciation-theater-20170731-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-sam-shepard-appreciation-theater-20170731-story.html).

### FILM

- Buried Child* (2016) directed by David Horn
- Fool for Love* (1985) directed by Robert Altman
- Shepard and Dark* (2012) directed by Treva Wurmfeld

### VIDEO CLIPS

- PBS NewsHour: Remembering Sam Shepard, Playwright Who Gave Voice to the Drama of the Heartland: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8M7df72bsfk>
- The Rise of Conservatism: Crash Course US History #41: <https://www.youtube.com/h?v=OCrxD19DHA8&list=PL8dPuualjXtMwmepBjTSG593eG7ObzO7s&index=42>
- Expressionist Theater: Crash Course Theater #38: <https://www.youtube.com/h?v=B99H6Ygnzgw&list=PL8dPuualjXtONXALkeh5uisZqrAcPKCee&index=39>
- Beckett, Ionesco, and the Theater of the Absurd: Crash Course Theater: #45: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ7w2I83ba4&list=PL8dPuualjXtONXALkeh5uisZqrAcPKCee&index>

## ABOUT **A NOISE WITHIN**

**A NOISE WITHIN** A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists performing in rotating repertory immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue. Our plays will be performed in rotating repertory, sometimes simultaneously in multiple spaces, and buttressed by meaningful supporting programs to create a symphonic theatrical experience for artists and audience.

In its 27 year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at a Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its arts education program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.

### Credits

Alicia Green	.....	Education Director and Editor
Rebecca Wilson	.....	Education Manager and Editor
Rachael McNamara	.....	Author
Craig Schwartz	.....	Production Photography
Teresa English	.....	Graphic Design



Geoff Elliott & Julia Rodriguez-Elliott  
Producing Artistic Directors

ADDRESS 3352 E Foothill Blvd  
Pasadena, CA 91107

TEL 626.356.3100

FAX 626.356.3120

EMAIL [info@anoisewithin.org](mailto:info@anoisewithin.org)

WEB [anoisewithin.org](http://anoisewithin.org)