

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The American Family Dissected in *Buried Child* and *The Humans*

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 17th, 2016

The American family comes in for a drubbing in two productions—The New Group’s revival of Sam Shepard’s 1979 Pulitzer Prize winner *Buried Child* and the Broadway transfer of Stephen Karam’s *The Humans*, which could well win the same award for 2016. Both plays tear apart the idealized view of the nuclear clan exposing the disillusionment and despair beneath the rosy exterior. Though they are written almost 40 years apart, the observations are startlingly similar. Shepard is more savage and Karam more compassionate, yet both are subtle and mysterious in their examinations of the terrors in everyday life.



Paul Sparks, Ed Harris, and Amy Madigan in Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child*.

Credit: Monique Carboni

Buried Child premiered in San Francisco and then Off-Broadway in 1978. A revised version produced by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company played Broadway in 1996 (the playwright’s long overdue Main Stem debut). Gary Sinise’s 1996 staging was ominous to the point of Hitchcockian suspense with a huge staircase right out of the mansion in *Psycho* dominating the set. In the current production, now playing at the Off-Broadway Signature Center, director Scott Elliott emphasizes the dark humor so that the grim revelations are more startling.

Derek McLane’s deceptively simple set, with its faded wallpaper and beat-up furniture, suggests the ruin of the characters. The patriarch Dodge is confined to the couch, an alcoholic shell of his once-vital self. The family’s decimated farm is suddenly sprouting huge vegetables. His delusional wife Halie indulges in fantasies of her dead son Ansel as an all-American hero, while their living children, Tilden and Bradley, are respectively damaged psychologically and physically. Into this decaying milieu comes Tilden’s long-absent son Vince and his girlfriend Shelly, for what they think will be a friendly visit. But no one recognizes Vince and a horrifying secret is gradually revealed. Shepard leaves a lot unsaid: Who was Vince’s mother? What trouble did Tilden get into in New Mexico? How did Ansel die? The buried child of the title doesn’t answer any of these queries, but it symbolizes the devastated dreams and fake hopes of the family and American society.

Ed Harris’s Dodge dominates the action, a weakened lion growling with an echo of diminished power and furious at his weakness. He finds the brutal comic punch in Dodge’s fury. Amy Madigan, Harris’ wife off-stage, is appropriately pinched and repressed as Halie and expresses shattering anger as her illusions are destroyed, as does Rich Sommer’s Bradley, a bully with the spine of a coward. Paul Sparks is heartbreaking as the diminished Tilden. We don’t know all of this tragic figure’s wrecked past, but hints can be found on Sparks’ eloquent features. Larry Pine is

hilariously befuddled as Rev. Dewis, Halie's ineffectual spiritual advisor and possible lover. As Vince and Shelly, Nat Wolff and Taissa Farming, young actors with mostly film and TV credits, fail to plumb the depths of Shepard's dark vision.

Shepard is merciless in his unravelling of the comfy American dream, while Stephen Karam is compassionate for those whose slumbers are beset with nightmares. The Blakes in his *The Humans* are victims of strange nocturnal horrors such as a faceless woman and an endless tunnel. They also obsess over apocalyptic-predicting websites, natural and man-made disasters, and monsters in comic books and TV shows. These are manifestations of their anxiety and inability to cope with economic and social pressures. Like the *Buried Child* family, their illusions have been exploded. The play, just opening at the Helen Hayes Theatre, after a hit Off-Broadway run with the Roundabout Theatre Company at the Laura Pels (here's a [link](#) to my review of that production), takes a familiar template—a holiday gathering with too much drinking leading to too much truth—but gives it a ghostly twist.

Joe Mantello's tight direction and the sterling, deeply-felt performances from a magnificent ensemble cast of six is intact from the Laura Pels engagement. David Zinn's two-tiered set might have some sightline problems for those on the extreme ends of the narrow Helen Hayes Theatre, but that is the only quibble for this stunningly accurate snapshot of how we live now.

Buried Child: Feb. 17—April 3. The New Group at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue.—Fri., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: one hour and 45 mins. with no intermission; \$27—\$107; (212) 279-4200 or www.ticketcentral.com.

The Humans: Opened Feb. 18 for an open run. Helen Hayes Theatre, 240 W. 44th St., NYC. Tue.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: one hour and 35 mins. with no intermission; \$39—\$125; (800) 447-7400 or www.telecharge.com.

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