

BURIED

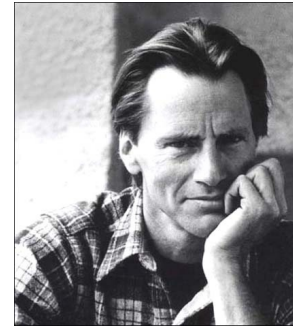


CHILD

by Sam Shepard

A Playgoer's Companion

"Through plays such as *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, Shepard might ultimately be signaling the way in which contemporary American drama itself refuses to be bounded any longer in either content or style. It is a project in which he has helped lead the way, by wedding radical ambitions to traditional form." – Thomas P. Adler, "Repetition and Regression in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*"



About the Playwright:

Samuel Shepard Rogers IV was born on November 5, 1943 in Fort Sheridan, Illinois. He had a relatively normal upbringing; his mother was a school teacher and his disciplinary father an army officer. His family settled in Duarte, California where in high school his acting and writing began. After his first year of college (where he was studying with hopes of being a veterinarian), he left school and joined a traveling theatre group named the Bishop's Company Repertory Players. He toured with them from 1963-1963, then moved to New York and began writing a series of avant-garde one act plays. He began his career in theatre in New York's off-off Broadway theatre scene at the age of 19. In Shepard's early career he was most closely connected with Theatre Genesis, located at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery in Manhattan's East Village, where in 1964 his first two plays (*Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden*) were produced. *La Turista*, written in 1964, was Shepard's first full-length play. In 1971 Sam and his family relocated to London where he spent three years writing plays. Upon returning to the US, Shepard was named playwright-in-residence at the Magic Theater in San Francisco, where he worked for 10 years, frequently employing his knowledge of music by joining various groups and bands. Throughout his career Shepard acted in feature films as well as theatre and wrote books and poetry. However some of his finest work was as a playwright in the years following his musical stint with Bob Dylan's "Rolling Thunder Revue," and his acting role in Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978). Shepard was successful in acting and writing for two decades, landing many roles in popular theatre productions and films (most notably, his portrayal of Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff* (1983), earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor. Shepard has won a multitude of awards for his writing, directing, and acting. He continues to be involved in theatre, acting, and writing of plays and short stories alike.

"The disjunction in *Buried Child* seems to increase as the play progresses, almost dissolving into chaos, because that is the nature of life." -- Susan C. W. Abbotson, *Masterpieces of 20th-century American Drama*

History of *Buried Child*

Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* was first produced at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco on June 27th, directed by Robert Woodruff and was hailed as a work of extraordinary force. In 1979 the play won the first Pulitzer Prize ever to be awarded to an off-Broadway premiere. The

Broadway production, directed by Gary Sinise at the Brooks Atkinson Theater, was nominated for five Tony Awards.



Although Sam Shepard won the Pulitzer Prize for the play, he still felt uneasy about some aspects of the writing. In the Preface to the Revised Edition, Shepard explains that it wasn't until 1995, during The Steppenwolf Theatre Company's production, that he began to see clearly the holes within the play. Shepard was inspired to bring sharp irony and wit to the character of Halie, and to present the character of Vince with more importance. "There were fewer gaps between the actors, the characters and the words," he wrote, "It's now a better play" (Shepard, July 2005) .



Ben Brantley reviewed the Steppenwolf Theatre Company's production of the revised play and affirmed *Buried Child's* status as "a bona fide classic: a work that conveys the mystical, cannibalistic pull of family ties even as they unravel." Shepard's style has been called jagged, dark, lusty, tense, uneasy, and edgy.

Some thematic notes about the play

Child murder and incest, and the breaking or collapse of the "American Dream," are decidedly recurring themes in Shepard's work. Additionally, the revolution against traditional gender roles, the financial and social struggles of the working class, fertility, the myths of freedom, the connection between bodily health in relations to the health of the land, and the overall situation of the rural American are all also deeply embedded elements in *Buried Child*.

In an article in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Peter Hays argues that *Buried Child* is one of a number of plays that "attempts to reach us through drama, the literary medium that depends on public exposure, to show us how we kill what is best in us, and thus destroy our future."

In short, he goes on to argue that "As in Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*, "the presence of food here merely underscores how spiritually malnourished, how emotionally starved these people, these heartlanders and All-Americans, are. We are a rich nation, but the riches are selfish and material. It is the American way: we have an economy based on built-in obsolescence and consumerism. Today we pave the land or hide our pollutants in it, temporarily, using it up so that it will no longer support us, a form of impurity, incest with Mother Nature, that will in fact kill our children, and is already doing so." ["Child murder and incest in American Drama," 1990]

A word from Shepard

Is it fair to say that your work suggests that the past is something you can deny, but you can't escape from?

"I suppose you could say that. (Laughter) Its not the main deal. The past is a memory. I mean, what is the past? Of course, as you grow older, the past looms a lot larger -- you don't have as much future. (Laughter.)"

This document was researched by
The members of English 2223
and assembled and edited by
Russ Hunt

English 2223: The Page and the Stage
St. Thomas University
visit our Web site, at
<http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/22231011>