

Buried Child Background Pack

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Buried Child
by Sam Shepard

Further production details:
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Introduction and short synopsis

The National Theatre's production of *Buried Child* by Sam Shepard, is in the Lyttelton Theatre from 29 September to 15 December 2004.

Cast	
Shelly	Lauren Ambrose
Tilden	Brendan Coyle
Halie	Elizabeth Franz
Bradley	Sean Murray
Father Dewis	John Rogan
Vince	Sam Troughton
Dodge	M. Emmet Walsh
Director Matthew Warchus	
Designer	Rob Howell
Lighting Designer	Natasha Katz
Music	Gary Yershon
Sound Designer	Paul Groothuis

Sam Shepard

Sam Shepard was born Samuel Shepard Rogers III (known as Steve) in Fort Sheridan, Illinois on 5 November 1943. The oldest of three children, he has two younger sisters. His father



Sam Shepard in
The Right Stuff, 1983

© Ronald Grant Archive,
courtesy The Ladd Company

was a pilot during World War II and remained in the forces during Sam's childhood, and so the family moved about a lot when he was young, eventually coming to live in Duarte, California where they bought an avocado farm. He left home at the age of 16 to join a touring theatre company, the Bishop's Company Repertory Players, arriving in New York in 1963 to work as a bus boy and waiter. In 1964 he changed his name to Sam Shepard and had his first two one-act plays, *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden*, produced at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery for Theatre Genesis. He quickly became part of the emerging off-off-Broadway theatre scene. His early plays are mostly one-act, highly experimental pieces which were often written and produced in a very short time. Shepard was a vital part of a very innovative and immediate theatre community where improvisation was the primary creative driving force. This influence is clear in all of his work, but most especially in his early plays, which are non-linear riffs on ideas rather than narrative-driven dramas. During this time he met Joseph Chaikin whose work with the Open Theatre was to have a strong influence on Shepard, moving him away from thinking about character in a traditional linear model to a new way:

'Instead of the idea of a "whole character" with logical motives behind his behaviour which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme. In other words, more in terms of collage construction or jazz improvisation'.
(Introduction to *Angel City*).

His first full-length play, *La Turista*, was performed at the American Place Theatre and won an Obie in 1967. Sam Shepard's writing career has been prolific, he has written 45 plays including; *Mad Dog Blues* (1971), *True West* (1980), *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), *Simpatico* (1993), *The Late Henry Moss* (2000) and, most recently, *The God of Hell*. He has written several volumes of short stories and many film scripts, including his screenplay for *Paris, Texas* directed by Wim Wenders, which won the Palme d'Or Award at the 1984 Cannes Film Festival. He has also had a highly successful career as a movie star, appearing in 16 films,

including *The Right Stuff* for which he received a Best Supporting Actor Oscar nomination. In 1986 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 1992 he received the Gold Medal for Drama from the Academy. In 1994 he was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame. From November 2004, he appears in Caryl Churchill's *A Number* at the New York Theatre Workshop.

Buried Child

Sam Shepard originally wrote *Buried Child* in 1978, and it was first produced at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco on 27 June of that year. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979. The text being used for the National's 2004 production is a re-drafted version of the play from 1996, when the play was revised by Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. Shepard attended many of the rehearsals for that production and felt the need to make changes to the text because there were more ambiguities than he had intended, and he wanted to bring out the humour that is integral to the success of the play. He says he had got fed up with seeing portentous Greek-tragedy style versions of the play.

Buried Child is the second in a series of family plays, the first of which was *The Curse of the Starving Class* (1976) and which also includes *True West* (1980), *Fool for Love* (1983) and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985). Shepard said that he had

tried to deny the influence of the family in the American dramatic tradition, saying; 'I always did feel a part of that tradition but hated it. I couldn't stand those plays that were all about the turmoil of the family. And then I realized, well that was very much part of my life, and maybe that has to do with being a playwright, that you're somehow snared beyond yourself.'

Although a work of fiction, *Buried Child* draws on a number of autobiographical elements from Shepard's own family background: Shepard's paternal grandfather owned a dairy farm in Illinois; Dodge is a Shepard family name; his father struggled throughout his life with alcoholism; of his several uncles, one of them died in a motel room on his wedding night, like the dead Ansel in the play, and another had a wooden leg due to an accident when he was ten years old. Shepard writes about visiting the farm in two of his collections of short stories, *Motel Chronicles* and again in *Hawk Moon*. *Buried Child* also has a number of literary comparisons – it has echoes of Pinter's *The Homecoming* and also of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*.

Elizabeth Franz (Halie),
M.Emmet Walsh (Dodge)
John Rogan (Father Dewis),
and Sean Murray (Bradley)

photo Manuel Harlan



What is *Buried Child* about?

Buried Child is a multi-layered play, rich with symbolism and themes, and these ideas are arguably more integral to our understanding of the play than the narrative plot.

Identity as a Creative Act

The overriding theme of *Buried Child* is the struggle between creativity and destruction. The idea of identity is explored widely within the play (identity is discussed in more detail in the section on Themes and Symbolism), but a large part of the exploration is to do with the idea of identity being in itself an act of creativity. This idea is embodied by the character of Vince. Vince has left the family home, moved to New York where he is a musician and has created a new identity for himself, so much so that when he returns to his family he is not recognised. The idea of returning to the family home is linked with the idea of finding oneself and of realising who we are, but it can often have the opposite effect. Instead of gaining a sense of self when we return home, we lose the identity that we have established for ourselves in the outside world. Home, which should be a refuge and a place where we find ourselves, becomes a place which destroys the identity we have created. This is exactly what happens to Vince in the play: he returns with a new identity but quickly becomes both confused and corrupted by the environment of home, and returns in the third act a completely different person. By altering in this way he is then recognised by the family again. Everyone in the play has different identities at different times: Dodge, as we see him now, has a very fixed identity, but Halie suggests that he used to be different, *'You used to be a good man.'* Tilden says that he used to have a 'sensation' of himself but that has been eroded. Shelly, who enters the home an outsider to the family with an intact identity, is affected by the family and the house and completely loses her sense of identity to the point that she becomes totally unlike herself, symbolised by her grabbing Bradley's false leg after expressing surprise that Dodge would do such a thing. By the end of the play she no longer recognises herself and says *'I don't even know what I'm doing here'*.

Creativity versus Destruction

The idea of an act of creativity being held back or even destroyed by the family, and perhaps more importantly by genetic inheritance, is expressed very clearly through Vince's journey in the play. It is a struggle which links very strongly to the relationship which Sam Shepard had with his own father. Everything in the play can be said to have a link to the idea of creativity as a vulnerable thing which grows. In this sense (although there is a real buried child in the play), the *Buried Child* can also be interpreted as a metaphor which represents the idea of stifled potential. The play is filled with various growing and creative things: the corn, the carrots, Vince's musicianship, the roses, Dodge gives away Benny Goodman records at the end of the play, and these really represent the idea of creativity as an indestructible force. In the end, creativity wins the war in the play because of the existence of the play itself. The fact that these ideas are being expressed in a play which is being performed by actors in a theatre is in itself an expression of creativity. In the play Tilden says *'You've got to talk or you'll die'*. Dodge refuses to speak several times during the play – *'I don't want to talk about anything'* – and he dies at its end. To try and make sense of things which are chaotic is, in itself, an act of creativity. By putting these chaotic ideas together, Shepard has both achieved a creative act and asking the audience to engage in the creative act of working out the chaotic elements within the play.

The play acknowledges a lack of resolution in the fight between creativity and destruction and keeps the idea very much alive and unresolved at the end. In the story of the play, the battle between creation and destruction is lost because Vince succumbs to the forces of destruction and compromise, but in fact it is won because of the unstoppable growth outside. Even though there are many battles lost in the play, it still ends in a state of grace because despite the pervading darkness there is an unstoppable current of creativity.

Themes and symbolism in *Buried Child*

As well as the central theme of the struggle between creativity and destruction, the play is rich with many other themes and symbolism. These ideas are extremely vivid and the metaphorical level of the play is so engaging that it is impossible for an audience not to respond to it.

IDENTITY

Vince's homecoming is the central story of the play. This introduces several ideas surrounding the theme of identity – identity as something that individuals invent for themselves; identity as a genetic inheritance; and identity as something which is unchangeable and inescapable. Alongside these are the notions of duality and identity conflicting within one person and the suggestion that identity can become blurred.

Vince returns to the family home for the first time in six years, bringing his new girlfriend, Shelly. She suggests to Dodge, whom Vince greets as his grandfather, that Vince has returned partly to reconnect with the family:

'Vince has this thing about family now. I guess it's a new thing with him... He wants to get to know you again. After all this time. Reunite.'

When he arrives – at the beginning of the second act of the play – Vince is not recognised by either his grandfather, Dodge, or his father, Tilden. After trying several different approaches to prompt a memory from them, Vince leaves

Shelly at the house and goes into town to get Dodge a bottle of whisky, saying, *'I just gotta get outta here. Think things through by myself.'*

He disappears for 24 hours (as far as Shelly and the audience are aware he may well have left for good), and returns in the third act seemingly a completely different person. Wildly drunk, breaking bottles and claiming not to recognise any of his family members, Vince breaks into the house by forcibly cutting through a porch screen. Dodge, who is about to die, sees this and declares that he will bequeath the house to Vince. When Shelly asks where Vince has been, he describes how he left the house intending to run, but as he drove away, he saw his face reflected in the windscreen, and inside his face, he saw his father's and his grandfather's:

'Same eyes. Same mouth. Same breath.'

This notion of genetic identity, and of the inevitability of being inextricably bound to your family and heritage is highlighted by Vince's speech at the end of Act Three. Returning to the house so altered, Vince creates a sense of duality and the idea that it is entirely possible that the Vince in the first half and the Vince in the second half are completely different.

On first impressions, many people believe Vince to be the ghost of the *Buried Child* of the title. While we don't believe this to be the case – and the re-writes that Shepard made to the play in 1996 go some way toward clarifying this – it is an entirely understandable reading of the story. There are deliberate echoes, repetitions and ambiguous elements that highlight the theme of identity, but that simultaneously blur the central story. For example, when Tilden is asked by Shelly if Vince is his son he replies, *'I had a son once but we buried him'*. But, when Vince returns drunk, breaking bottles and asking Dodge who he is, Dodge replies *'It's me, your Grandfather! Don't play stupid with me! Where's my two bucks?'*, implying that he did know who Vince was in the second act, but was 'playing stupid' and pretending not to know him.

Dodge doesn't disclose this to Vince, or to the audience and when Vince leaves the house and Shelly asks, *'You really don't recognise him, either one of you?'*, Dodge simply replies, *'What's to recognise?'*

M.Emmet Walsh (Dodge),
Sam Troughton (Vince), and
Lauren Ambrose (Shelly)
photo Manuel Harlan



Many other aspects of the central story remain unexplained: there is no mention of Vince's mother; of whether or not he grew up in this house; and if he did live there, how long for? Neither are we told about Vince's previous relationship with Tilden, nor understand why Tilden doesn't recognise him.

As well as the present tense narrative of the play, there is also a revelation about the family's history at the end, that links strongly to the theme of identity. The Buried Child of the title refers to a child conceived in an incestuous relationship between Halie and Tilden. Dodge, feeling that he 'couldn't allow that to grow right up in the middle of us', killed the baby by drowning it, and refused to admit to anyone where it was buried. Tilden suspects it is out back somewhere and, at the end, having spent the entire play obsessed with 'out back' and with digging up various vegetables, he finds the body of the buried child. The last thing we see is Tilden taking the baby upstairs to Halie. The incestuous nature of this child's birth results in confused identity and blurred morality: Halie is Tilden's mother but also became his lover, so the child born is both her son and her grandson; it is Dodge's grandson and stepson; and it is Tilden's son and brother.

Sean Murray (Bradley),
Elizabeth Franz (Halie)
photo Manuel Harlan

FAMINE VERSUS BOUNTY

The overriding visual metaphor is that of the various harvests that are brought into the



house. In each of the three acts of the play the harvest is characterised by a different item: in the first act, corn is brought in by Tilden; in the second carrots are brought in, again by Tilden; and in the third act, Halie brings in yellow roses. In each case the item is an example of a bountiful, vibrant, colourful living organism. Each act is marked and altered by the arrival of these brightly coloured symbols of bounty into such a dilapidated and unproductive environment. Dodge describes the farm as having been mythically fruitful in the past:

'the farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over'.

Yet now, when Tilden brings in corn that he claims he picked from 'out back', Dodge and Halie both dispute it is possible, saying that there 'hasn't been corn outside since about 1935'. But at the end of the play Halie retracts her assertion and says 'Tilden was right about the corn you know. I've never seen such corn'.

The corn and the carrots, picked and brought in by Tilden, are interpreted by other characters as significant. Halie asks, 'What is the meaning of this corn, Tilden?', and Vince argues with Shelly in the second act that 'the carrots have nothing to do with the situation here.'

Similarly, the weather in the play seems to have symbolic meaning. The pouring rain at the beginning is remarked upon by Halie, Dodge, and Shelly. It continues unabated for the whole of the first half, casting a literal and metaphorical shadow over all of the events. In the second half the sun comes out and Halie, who left the house the previous day wearing black mourning clothes, returns in a bright yellow dress with her arms full of the yellow roses given to her by Father Dewis. Halie's final speech at the end of the play is spoken as the audience see Tilden returning the buried child to her from its burial place out back. She comments that the farm is suddenly a paradise of life again, which she attributes first to the rain and then to the sun.

It would appear throughout that the productivity and health of the farm are inextricably linked to the moral health and productivity of the family. In turn, this suggests that the moral disintegration of the family is paralleled by a

literal disintegration of the vitality of the farm, and that possibly, the farm stopped producing at the time the child was buried.

The ending of the play is both optimistic and pessimistic: the sun has come out, Halie feels the farm is essentially re-born and we see the baby being acknowledged by Tilden and returned to the house, presumably so that he can grieve properly for it. Yet at the same time, Dodge has died unnoticed and Vince has taken his place on the sofa. Halie speaks to him as though he were Dodge, implying that the family has a cyclical nature. Vince, who at the beginning of the play was attempting to break the inevitability of his heritage, ends the play by being engulfed by it.

SYMBOLS OF POWER

The play opens with Dodge ensconced on his sofa, arguing with the off-stage voice of his wife, Halie. She is dressing upstairs and continues arguing with him for the first 20 minutes of the play without being seen. This immediately communicates the power struggle between Halie and Dodge.

Halie has control of the upstairs of the house. Her room, which Vince goes to immediately upon entering the house and in which Shelly sleeps overnight, is covered with pictures of the family and holds the emblems of the family's history. Both Shelly and Vince refer to the pictures on the wall and the numerous

crucifixes. When Shelly asks Dodge about the content of the pictures he is annoyed at her intrusive questioning yet abstains from any involvement in family heritage:

'Halie's the one with the family album'.

Dodge has control of the living room and of several symbols of power; the sofa, on which he spends the first two acts; his baseball cap, which is removed by Bradley while he is sleeping and which Shelly unsuccessfully attempts to claim when she enters the house; and his blanket, which is a highly contested item between Dodge and Bradley in the third act.

The very minimal nature of the set for this production ensures that each item on the stage, and especially the contested items, has a symbolic value. Dodge's sofa is like a throne and is a place contested by several characters. Once Dodge leaves the sofa at the end of Act Two, Bradley usurps his father to gain possession of it for the third act. Likewise, Tilden competes with Dodge for possession of Dodge's whisky bottle which Tilden finally gains by stealing from Dodge as he sleeps. Both of Dodge's sons remove his items of power only when he is weakened. It is Vince, however, who ultimately ends up in possession of all of the items of Dodge's power – the sofa, the baseball cap, and the house, which Dodge bequeaths to him in his final speech.

Both Halie and Dodge bemoan the lack of real men in the family and this is repeated throughout the play. Tilden and Bradley, although both grown men, still live at home and are dependent upon the support of their parents, although Dodge asserts that he never returned to *his* parents because he was *'independent'*. The family is caught in a stasis of dependency and only when Vince returns reborn at the end of the play does Dodge find a suitable heir.

Matthew Warchus,
Brendan Coyle,
M. Emmet Walsh and
Elizabeth Franz in rehearsal
photo Manuel Harlan



RELIGION

At the start of the play, Halie makes frequent references to religion in her conversation with Dodge. She refers to things as being Christian or not Christian:

'It's not Christian but it works. It's not necessarily Christian that is. A pill.'

Furthermore, her room is described as being covered in crosses, she leaves the house in the first act to have lunch with Father Dewis, and she speaks with enthusiasm about her faith:

'The messengers of God's word are screaming louder now than ever before, screaming to the four winds'.

She is the only member of the family to speak of religion and so it appears in Act One that Halie is a religious, highly moral person. However, when she returns in Act Three, like Vince, she returns an entirely different person. She has been drinking heavily and has changed clothes from her black mourning outfit to a bright yellow dress. She brings Father Dewis – with whom it transpires she is having an affair – into the family home and is openly aggressive to both

Shelly and Bradley. The Halie that returns is so different from the Halie that left, that our perceptions of her are greatly altered, which changes the way we perceive her religious fervour.

Moreover, if we take Father Dewis to be a representative of the church within the play, then that representation would seem to be highly critical. When asked to intervene in what is going on in the house, Father Dewis absconds from responsibility several times, with excuses such as, *'I've been so busy with the choir'* and *'This is out of my domain. I'm in the quiet part of town.'* When he does accept Halie's request to intervene with Shelly, he is highly ineffective and is, to a certain extent, a figure of fun within the play due to his lack of influence or ability to accept responsibility. However he does stay until the end of the play and, apart from Vince, is the last person to leave the house. He departs saying, *'I thought by now the Lord would have given me some sign, some guidepost but I haven't seen it. No sign at all. Just...'* He doesn't finish his sentence, implying that he is in fact just human and flawed, like every other character in the play.

John Rogan in rehearsal
photo Manuel Harlan



Rehearsal diary

Monday 9 August 2004

First day of rehearsals. We are in a large rehearsal room at the back of the National Theatre building. Stage Management has marked out the room for us and we have a wall, a staircase and a sofa all ready to use. The actors arrive one by one and introduce themselves. Emmet [Dodge] starts by giving every member of the cast and creative team a rare copper cent from 1932, the only year they were made in the U.S. He says that it's a tradition on every job that he does. After formal introductions we look at the model box of the set and Matthew [Warchus, Director] explains to us all how it will work.

We go onto the Lyttelton stage to look at the theatre space, which is already set up for a performance of *Iphigenia* that night. Emmet is worried that the circle is high and that his face won't be seen under his baseball cap. We all like the space, feeling it's the right balance between large and cosy. It's helpful to see it before we start so we know what we're aiming for. Just before lunch we begin a first read through of the play, with the English actors

M. Emmet Walsh and
Elizabeth Franz in rehearsal
photo Manuel Harlan



feeling slightly worried by their as yet unpolished accents. We get to the end of Act One and then break for lunch.

We begin the afternoon with the 'Meet and Greet' – where the theatre staff working on the production introduce themselves to the cast and company. In a building as large as the National, this means lots of people: there seem to be about 50 in the room. Everyone is very nice and enthusiastic to meet us. Nicholas Hytner [Director of the National] introduces himself and welcomes the cast and company to the building. Afterwards we continue with the rest of the read through and when we finish, Matthew asks what questions people have about the play. It turns out we have plenty, so we spend the rest of the afternoon asking all of the questions that the play leaves unanswered and try to start agreeing on some answers.

Tuesday 10 and Wednesday 11 August

These two days of rehearsals are spent talking in a lot more detail about the play. We ask thousands of questions and Matthew introduces some fascinating ideas to answer them. I am surprised and intrigued to learn just how many autobiographical elements there are in the play, which are never those you'd expect – for instance, Sam Shepard's uncle did have a wooden leg, like Bradley.

Matthew is very interesting and illuminating about the character of Vince. He compares him to the two brothers in *True West*, who are essentially two sides of Sam Shepard. He describes the Vince of the first half as the child who has escaped, who has changed how he interacts with the world, who is artistic and successful; and then the Vince who returns in Act Three is drawn inextricably back to his heritage, no different to any of his ancestors, drunk in a family who suffer from alcoholism, and in essence incapable of escape. This really helps us to get a handle on the character.

Thursday 12 August

We begin work on scenes today, starting with Act One. We continue talking through the text in a more detailed way and get things up on their feet for the first time. Emmet and Elizabeth [Halie] trained together and have been friends

for 40 years which means they have an amazing shorthand which is fun to work with. They tease each other something rotten but seem to have a massive amount of trust and respect for one another.

The full company has its first session with Patsy Rodenburg, the Head of Voice at the National. We go onto the Lyttelton stage to do some vocal exercises and get used to the size of the space and what we need to do to fill it. I unfortunately get too near to the stage and the actors make me join in.

Friday 13 August

We get on to Act Two this afternoon. Halie has disappeared for a section of the play and Vince and Shelly arrive, which means that the rehearsal room changes line-up and the tone of the play feels very different. Sam Troughton [Vince] and Lauren Ambrose [Shelly] appear in rehearsal properly for the first time and make proceedings feel very lively. Lauren is impressively 'off book' already and they both seem to have very acute understandings of their characters. We work through Act Two, getting it



Sean Murray in rehearsal
photo Manuel Harlan

up on its feet. It's quite a tricky section – much funnier than the first act but quite hard to play because each of the characters ends up in their own world.

Monday 16 August

The whole company has a group dialect call with Deborah Hecht, our American dialect specialist who will be advising everyone on the Illinois accent. She keeps making Emmet repeat certain words so that everyone can hear his nasal quality, which is apparently what we're all aiming for. She gives really helpful guidelines to placing the voice and vowel sounds and talks a lot about the landscape and sound matching the geography. This is a very helpful image. Everyone will have individual sessions tomorrow.

Tuesday 17 August

Sean Murray [Bradley] rehearses for the first time wearing his false leg. He has a contraption which involves strapping his left leg in a harness behind his body, and putting his knee into a moulded cast, to which the false leg is attached. The physiotherapist advises that he can only stay on it for a few minutes at a time and warns that he might not be able to walk in the false leg at all for a few weeks. But Sean gets up on the first try and speeds off around the room looking like he's had one leg for years. We rehearse the scene very quickly so as not to keep his false leg on for too long. Thankfully, it looks as if we're going to be able to play the scene (Bradley's first entrance) with Sean wearing the proper wooden leg, which is what we all want. We then repeat the rehearsal with Sean restored to two legs and work out the acting bits of the scene.

Wednesday 18 August

We get into Act Three. Matthew says before we start that he just wants to sketch this act because it's impossible to do it properly at this stage. So we go through it very gently, working out the meanings of lines and putting a very basic staging on the action so we have established what needs to happen physically. The scene will eventually need such momentum and fluidity that Matthew thinks we won't fully

address it until the rest of the play is more progressed. I hadn't realised when I read the play just how funny Father Dewis is: as with other characters, when he and Halie arrive into the world, it produces a marked change of energy to the scene.

Monday 23 August

We look at Act Two all day and in a lot more detail. Matthew alters the staging subtly and consistently to tweak moments, and we discover lots more about the characters. Matthew is really good at making the blocking fluid and natural and never letting it look 'staged'. He just keeps tweaking and tweaking little moves, like building up multiple layers, until we arrive at something so subtle that you can't remember how you got there.

Matthew has an audiotape from America of Sam Shepard reading some of his short stories and bits of his plays and we listen to it. He said that he found the same process enormously helpful for the actors when he directed *True West*, as Sam has such an unusual and rather unexpected way of delivering his own text. We



Lauren Ambrose in rehearsal
photo Manuel Harlan

all listen to several pieces, some of which are incredibly funny and all of which have a light, subtle, almost throwaway quality to the way he reads them. It's somewhat of a revelation. The rhythm of his delivery is surprising: it's irregular, he often stresses a different word to the expected one and when he gets to repetitions of a word, he has an unusual way of saying each repetition as if it is a new word.

Thursday 26 August

We go onto the Lyttelton stage for an hour and a half this morning. Matthew has the actors do some exercises in the space to get used to the size of the auditorium and the level of clarity needed to play it. He asks some of them to go into the seats and some to stay on stage and play the scenes over that distance.

In the afternoon we watch a documentary about Sam Shepard which was made whilst Shepard was directing his own play *The Late Henry Moss*, with Sean Penn and Nick Nolte in the cast. It's very interesting to see him talking and to see how he rehearses his own play. There's also some interesting stuff about his father and video footage of the two of them together. They look incredibly alike.

Friday 27 August

The first full run-through of the play – it is very confident for a first run-through. Everything is in place, we have a frame and lots of time to tweak and fine-tune everything. I am surprised again at how very funny it is.

Wednesday 1 September

We work on Act Two; Matthew gives a note to Sam about Vince which sounds like a tiny detail but means that Sam has a visible breakthrough with the part. It is really exciting. Matthew asks Sam to think about the photos we saw of the young Sam Shepard looking very, very cool – like some kind of a rock star – and advises him to not let Vince lose his cool when Dodge responds to him in an unexpected way. Lauren thinks it's good for Shelly to have this 'cool' persona too, so she takes the note on board as well, which is really fruitful. It's one of those really exciting rehearsals where things move on in a really good direction, very fast.

Monday 6 September to Friday 10 September

We're into the final week of rehearsals in the rehearsal room. We feel well-prepared already and Matthew is going to do a run-through of the play every afternoon this week. With any other play this would feel like a lot but with this play it feels like exactly what we need to do, to keep running through, getting the framework, getting the journeys, and playing the whole story.

Saturday 11 September

I take a first run-through of the play with the understudy company; in theory each of them has to be ready to go on-stage, if needed, by next Saturday when we start previewing, which would be really daunting. It's a very good first run. We're not used to rehearsing in the large space of the rehearsal room so it feels as if we're lost. However, everything is there in terms of lines and moves, and we're in a good position to start some more detailed work, so if anything were to happen they could all go on-stage, if not with full confidence, certainly with quiet optimism.



M. Emmet Walsh
photo Manuel Harlan

Wednesday 15 September

We start our technical rehearsals in the Lyttelton. We begin the morning with a sound check for Emmet and Elizabeth. We're going to try and give Elizabeth a little bit of help in the first scene, when she is off-stage for the first 20 minutes, and lift the level slightly with some additional amplification.

In the afternoon we start the technical rehearsal properly and it is the calmest technical I have ever been in: everything seems to be working as expected, and the actors are very patient and confident. We rehearse the opening of the show, a pouring rain curtain across the front of the stage, some extremely exciting electric guitars and the whole house set moving slowly downstage with Emmet on the sofa. Everyone gets very excited. Emmet declares, 'this is the best entrance anyone has had since Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now!*'

Saturday 18 September

We do a dress rehearsal in the afternoon, which is a little flat, and then a first preview in the evening. It goes extremely well, the audience laughs a lot, and they seem to really enjoy it. The actors all give good performances and everyone seems happy. We've lots of technical work still left to do, mostly tweaking the technical parts of the play. The Lighting team still has quite a lot of finishing to do – understandable due to its nature. Matthew intends to do a lot of work with music and sound cues to find out exactly where they work best.

The play opened to enthusiastic press on 29 September, 2004.

Interviews

THE DIRECTOR, MATTHEW WARCHUS [interviewed in the early stages of preview performances]

What drew you to this play and what were your original ideas about it?

It's the cocktail of tones that I find very, very interesting – the poetry alongside the anarchy and the comedy alongside the trauma and grimness of the play. That mixture is in evidence from the first line of the play to the last line. That constant kind of contradiction is very stimulating because it's interesting to direct – it's also the sort of stuff I like to watch and it's very much like life. In spite of the stylisation of certain aspects of the story, the magic realism of it, in a bizarre way its power comes from its being quite lifelike. I think there is something about the way the play is put together – the boldness of its style, perhaps its rule breaking, or its originality, or its daring – that is so well achieved it gives the play an almost classic status now. It feels like a classic play. It was probably written as a rebellious play, a sort of edgy, alternative and anti-mainstream play to a certain extent. But it's done so well that it has classic dimensions that feel timeless and important even thirty years later.

Does having worked on other Shepard plays and knowing Sam himself inform the way you approach the text?

Matthew Warchus
in rehearsal
photo Manuel Harlan



Yes. I think that when you can imagine how the writer speaks, and how they might say some of these lines, it gives a window on how they might think about a certain exchange or some aspect of a scene, or the play. To some extent the script is just a blank template, so knowing the spirit and personality of a writer and, literally, their tone of voice, can shed light on the various choices that you make as a director or an actor. Also, if you direct more than one play by any writer you start to get a sense of who they are, what their agenda is and what their obsessions are. Spending a lot of time in America has helped me understand the particularity of the geographic world that Sam is conjuring up, the kinds of people and the way of life. Even though there are extremes and exaggerations, and unusual and unique things about this collection of people and circumstances, nevertheless I've seen where it's coming from first hand and that makes a difference.

The version of the play you are using for this production is the one which Sam Shepard re-wrote in 1996. How does it differ from the original (written in 1978)?

It is a leaner, more straightforward version of the play. It's still got a lot of enigma in it but there were more obscure and enigmatic things in the original and it was problematic. He (Shepard) was frustrated by people making certain interpretations of the play – for example believing that Vince was possibly a ghost of the buried child. The confusion in the earlier draft about how and when that child died and whose it was has been mediated slightly to make it clearer. He's also sharpened the comedy a bit which is good because he loves his hybrid, he loves the unexpected comedy and I think that the earlier script could have been construed as being more straight and 'Greek' than he wanted. There was too much shadow originally; he's sharpened up the playfulness of it in the comedy.

What do you think have been the biggest challenges for the actors rehearsing this play?

It's almost as though every role in the play has a different set of challenges; I don't think there is

a universal challenge. The challenge for me has been to pull together all the disparate elements and make it feel like a coherent production. But for the actors I suppose it has been how to make sense of the bizarre – for example, is there or isn't there corn outside? Why don't they recognise Vincent? What is Shelly supposed to feel when someone is sticking their hand in her mouth? These are bizarre aspects of the play and the challenge is to make them real and plausible for the character and not just be theatrical; not to be ciphers in a story but to inhabit that grotesque and bizarre world authentically. I expect it is quite difficult to find a way of incorporating that into your sense of truth. You have to make certain clear choices, for example, decide whether Dodge is playing with Vince and does know who he is; whether he genuinely mistakes him for Tilden or whether he doesn't know and doesn't care. So you try and build your own architecture within it without wanting to normalise the play. You want to build an architecture that is quirky, but that holds together.

What have been the specific directorial challenges for you?

The surprising thing was that normally I would know the shape of the play and the production in terms of pace and temperature by the time we leave the rehearsal room. This, interestingly, would always tell me where, for example, the sound and music cues would go because they are so much an external manifestation of the temperature and pace. But I left the rehearsal room still not having found all the features of the play, its shape or temperature. In other words, some of the disparate elements are still disparate, more so than with any other play I can remember. I always knew that having an audience would make a big difference, but seeing it running with an audience, I can now identify where the missing elements are and add them through previews. That is unexpected. When I read the play it felt much more straightforward, but perhaps because the cast have had different struggles it has kept it disparate in a way.

A good example is that I imagined Vince's return would have an extremely different vocabulary to

the rest of the play, but I found that the play stops if I do that and his return becomes an appendix. In order to keep the trajectory emotionally arching through I will have to pull back the *mise-en-scène* of Vince's return: it needs to be much more integrated into the world of the play. I can't do as much with sound, lights and music as I thought might be possible because it's too attention grabbing. So you've got the extremity of the action and the story: Vince comes back an entirely different person – which is pretty extreme – but if you supplement or amplify that it hurls that whole section out of reach of the audience. In other words what you've got to do is build a bridge between that extremity of the story and the audience, to keep them attached to it. You wouldn't have known that from reading the play.

How did you and Rob Howell arrive at the design for the production?

There were two main issues with the design. One of them was purely the logistics of placing the important elements – the staircase, the sofa and then the doors. Considering all the different moves, encounters and just the spacial dynamics of it actually proved incredibly difficult – we had the staircase all over the place in designing it. We decided that Tilden going upstairs at the end was very important. We tried a staircase that could move, sliding into the middle of the stage. We had a staircase that could slide up and down stage. The script says that the door to the kitchen is on the same wall as the staircase and that's how it has been done in the past, helping certain things like Halie coming downstairs and not seeing the corn. But I wanted there to be a fundamental movement through the play – from outside, out back, through the room, to upstairs – to the shell-like escape from out back. So that Tilden's walk back with the baby to Halie should be a cross-stage trajectory, with Dodge caught in the middle. To get to that point took quite a long time and involved sacrificing other ideas. The other issue was how visually to make a production that wasn't a 'four walls and carpet, furniture, living room' drama from the 1950s or something like that. We needed something that wasn't simply 'realism' without the 'magic' of

magic-realism or, at the other end of the scale, something so operatic that it is difficult to laugh at because it is cold, stylised and extreme. So we tried to find a middle way between the two extremes. We've got the essence of a world which is falling to pieces. Rob literally built the frame with nothing first and then added planks until it got to the point where it looked like it could be half one thing and half another – half stylised and magical, and half-real.

Why did you make the decision to not use masking and to leave the real walls and workings of the theatre visible outside of the room?

It was to try and honour Sam's rock'n'roll background, that kind of gritty, alternative, studio theatre world. Sam is an off-off-Broadway person, the opposite to the well-made play, middle class, Broadway audience, and if you get too involved with cycloramas and masking and things like that, then you've got something which is very well behaved and orderly. If you just leave it in its raw state it reflects the kind of raw energy in the writing, and in the writer and his background. We did the same thing for *True West* in New York, so we had this image in our minds of what worked from that – the rawness and not being ashamed of seeing the lights and the backstage areas. Also I've always been fascinated by walking or driving along a street and seeing a street closed off because people are making a film. You see all these lights around and get this glow of incredible reality in the middle of nothing. You see people in costume, like a bubble of a different fictional reality. That's what we were hoping to do on this island in the middle of that space – create a bubble.

How did you approach casting the play and how has the production benefited from having American cast members?

For me, having spent a lot of time in America, it's becoming harder and harder to approach American plays without American actors. It's exactly the same in reverse. It's difficult watching Pinter or Ayckbourn with American actors because, obviously, we only have a broad surface understanding of different

cultures and so it becomes the surface that is reflected. That might work with some plays, but it means the detail and authenticity is always missing. So it was a question of trying to cast non-Americans: the Americans were taken as read. There had to be some Americans, but casting non-Americans became about trying to find people that not only could do an accent, but had something about them that didn't necessarily feel English. It is very hard to articulate exactly what that is. The other difficult thing is to try and make family connections, and particularly to try and have a familial connection between Vincent and Dodge when one's a young English actor and the other's an old American actor. That was enormously challenging.

SAM TROUGHTON, PLAYING VINCE
[interviewed in the early stages of preview performances]

Were you already familiar with the play or with Sam Shepard's work before this production?

No. I knew of Sam Shepard, but not really his work. I did know about *Fool for Love*, because my Dad [David Troughton] performed it here at the National Theatre 20 years ago, but as I was about seven at the time, I didn't see it. Matthew talked about *True West* in the audition and that sounded really interesting, so I had a look at that play.

So before you started work on this play did you have any ideas about what it would be like?

Not really, I certainly didn't think it would be as dark, as weird or as funny as it is. I suppose my expectations were based on knowing Arthur Miller and David Mamet, but Shepard's not at all like either of those writers. I also thought it was



Sam Troughton in rehearsal
photo Manuel Harlan

a new play, I didn't realise it was over 20 years old.

When you first read the play what did you think about the character of Vince?

The first thing that came into my head when I read the play was Jack Kerouac – particularly how Kerouac died an alcoholic, and how he reverted to real right wing political views like his father. I thought that Vince was in that area. My other thought about him was the idea of trying to forge your own path and eventually coming right back to where you've come from, which is something Matthew talked about a lot in rehearsals. But, having said that, it's not that Vince comes back as Dodge or as Tilden: he has gone on the same journey, with the drive he describes in his speech, and he's had the same sensation of himself that Tilden talks about, but it's not about turning into his father. It's not as clear cut as that.

When I first read Act Two, I thought that Vince was a ghost. It's not entirely wrong to think that. He *isn't* a ghost, but there are deliberate confusions in the play – for example, Shelly says to Halie '*I came here with your Grandson*', to which Halie replies '*My Grandson?*'. That is a ghost-like moment.

I also think that with all of the men in the play – in Dodge, in Tilden and in Bradley – you see what they are, what they have been and what they are going to become. You see Tilden as an old man and as a young boy, and it's the same with Bradley. And Vince goes through that too. All the men in the play end up being where they are now and where they're going to be and where they were at some point. It's not blatant, though, it just happens through the performance and is there to spot.

You've had to learn the accent for the part. Is it helpful or daunting to have Americans in the cast?

It's not daunting at all, it really helps because they're like tuning forks and they're always there to ask. I've done an American accent before, but working through it properly and having lots of lines makes it easier. If you had to come onstage and say one line in an American accent, it would be really daunting, but doing a

whole part is much easier. It always really annoys me when you have to list the accents you can do on your CV, it's like asking what kind of parts you can play – you don't know until you do them. It's not like you spend time at home perfecting accents. It's really just a physical thing that you have to spend time learning.

Is this play more difficult because it's set in a very particular part of America?

That does make it a bit harder. The natural tendency, which we all had, was to veer towards a Southern accent because it's much closer to an English one. The challenge has been to master the hardness of the Illinois sound. But as you get the accent you also start to get the character – especially with Sam Shepard's lines, because you have to drive it through and you can't mess around. You can't do this play in an English accent, so it actually helps.

How do you approach developing a character?

Doing this play has challenged all kinds of perceptions. I hadn't done any theatre acting for a couple of years, so I was a bit nervous and to begin with I relied a lot on other parts I had played. At the start of rehearsals I played a lot of the internal journey of the character externally, and I went through the process of having to draw that all back in. Interestingly, Matthew commented today that I should begin to get more frustrated and let the lid off a bit more because I'm now holding back a bit too much. Everyone is different and has their own way of approaching a character. If you're studying someone like Stanislavski, or whoever, it's important to remember that that is one way of doing it, and you can use whatever technique is useful. In rehearsals, if you're allowed to, it's helpful to start as big as possible and get as much out of your system at the start before you drag it back. It's much easier to go from playing big to playing small than it is to go from small and then realise that it isn't enough. It's good to get ideas out of your system because you avoid getting into a run-through and thinking, Oh, I always thought this bit should be like this, even if that was wrong. If you haven't had a chance

to fail with the part, it is frustrating. I think that's how I've gone about it. I suppose this part has come about without any planning. I remember we did a run-through and I was getting there in terms of being more relaxed, keeping the lid on Vince, trying to find this character, this kind of New York cool. (It helped to watch a video in which there were photos of a young Sam Shepard in New York, looking like the Beatles in Hamburg). Anyway, I said Vince's line, '*Don't be scared, there's nothing to be scared of, he's just old*', without thinking and did it differently. It just clicked: as soon as I said it, I thought, 'Oh my God, I think I've got it'. It's weird, but I don't think I've ever struggled this much really. It's really, really different playing someone who is completely cut adrift by the other characters in the play – his dad, grandad, even Shelly when she starts to cut carrots. Tilden says '*you die if you don't talk*'. There are moments in Act Two when the stakes feel as high for me as an actor as for Vince the character. The play doesn't stop for anyone – it keeps moving on.

In his interview, Matthew said he felt that each of the actors had very different challenges to deal with in this play. What do you think the big challenge has been for you?

My challenge as Vince has been trusting Matthew's really strong idea – which I think is completely right – that the Vince in Act Two and the Vince in Act Three are completely different characters. That doesn't mean that I play them consciously as completely different characters – of course they're the same person – but it's about getting the separation and being confident with it so that they are at opposite ends of the scale. The challenge has been to keep the powder dry before Act Three. Off the page, structurally, it's quite clear what is meant to happen; where the highs and lows are, where the gags are, and the challenge was to learn to not to play that, but to have an American attitude with it. The action of the play is a puzzle because how you read it and how you play it are completely different.

Were you able to do any preparation or research?

Sort of, but it was all a bit by accident. I listened to a lot of American music, like Neil Young and 70s American music, and I listened to the American comedian Bill Hicks, who has got the right rock'n'roll attitude for playing Shepard. That was a bit of a coincidence though, because I'd just been into that stuff for the last couple of years. I read some of Sam Shepard's short stories, and Matthew gave us a tape of him reading his own writing. I wasn't sure that I wanted to hear the tape at first, as it wouldn't normally be very helpful, but it really was with this play. It teaches you that the attitude he has is peculiar to him. Everything helped. Oh, and I did buy some saxophone music which was a complete waste of time: it was no help at all.

How has your understanding of the character of Vince developed during the rehearsal period?

I think he's become more confident. I've had to play one thing rather than the four or five things it could be. At the beginning of rehearsals I was playing Vince a bit too tentatively. I was trying to bring in too many ideas about what he was like when he was younger, and that was a problem because there are so many things we don't know. For example, who is Vince's mum? I don't really know. I imagine Tilden was probably with someone like Shelly, but it's not really important. Did he live in the house? How long was he with Tilden as a child? I found that to be, not a waste of time, but it doesn't help. I had to pick one thing rather than to worry about everything.

What is distinctive about the way that Matthew directs?

He is really patient, very cool and chilled out. He tends to let the play run a lot until it's tied itself up in knots, and then he'll untangle it. I've never run a play so much, but it's been really good with this play and probably would be with Shepard in general. I would be really interested to work with Matthew on a different type of play just to see how differently he worked. I think the way he has directed this play has been quite amazing: the play has sort of dawned on

everybody at pretty much the same time. With two weeks to go I probably still didn't really have a clear way through, knowing what was going to happen. Matthew has never definitively defined anything; he has stopped us from defining moments, which has worked really well for this play.

Is there any part of the play which you find particularly difficult?

Yes, walking upstairs in sunglasses with cowboy boots on, quickly. That's difficult.

Sam Shepard – in context

Sam Shepard has written 46 plays, 11 of which have won Obie Awards, and has appeared as an actor in 16 films.

- 1943 5 November: born in Fort Sheridan, Illinois.
- 1961 Leaves school and starts training in animal husbandry.
- 1963 Moves to New York and works as a busboy at a nightclub in Greenwich Village.
- 1964 Premieres of *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden* at Theatre Genesis; and *Up to Thursday* at Village South Theatre.
- 1965 *Dog* and *Rocking Chair* at Café La MaMa; *Chicago* at Genesis; *Icarus's Mother* at Caffè Cino.
- 1966 *Red Cross* at Judson Poets' Theatre; *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* at Firehouse Theatre, Minnesota.
- 1967 *La Turista* at the American Place Theatre; *Melodrama Play* at La MaMa; *Cowboys 2* at Mark Taper Form, LA; *Forensic and the Navigators* at Genesis.
- 1968 Touring as a drummer with Holy Modal Rounders; records 'The Moray Eels Eat the Holy Modal Rounders'.
- 1969 *The Unseen Hand* at La MaMa.
- 1970 *Operation Sidewinder* at Lincoln Center.
- 1971 *The Mad Dog Blues* at Genesis; *Cowboy Mouth* (written with Patti Smith) and *Back Bog Beast Bait* at the American Place Theatre.

Antony Sher and Bob Hoskins in *True West*, NT 1981

photo Nobby Clark



- 1972 *The Tooth of Crime* has its premiere at the Open Space, London.
- 1974 Premieres of *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, directed by Shepard, at Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London; *Little Ocean* at Hampstead Theatre Club (directed by Stephen Rea); *Action* at Royal Court Theatre Upstairs.
- 1975 Joins Bob Dylan's *Rolling Thunder Review* tour as writer of a proposed screenplay.
- 1976 *Angel City* at Magic Theatre; *Suicide in B-Flat* at Yale Repertory Theatre; *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing His Wife* at Bay Area Playwrights' Festival.
- 1977 Premiere of *Curse of the Starving Class* at Royal Court Theatre; *Rolling Thunder Logbook* published.
- 1978 *Seduced* at Trinity Square Repertory Theatre; 27 June *Buried Child* at the Magic Theatre, San Francisco, winning Pulitzer Prize for Drama the following year; Steppenwolf premiere a revised version of *Buried Child* in 1995, directed by Gary Sinise, which transfers to Broadway the following year. Shepard makes film debut in *Days of Heaven*.
- 1980 *True West* premiere at the Magic Theatre (staged by the NT in the Cottesloe, 1981, directed by John Schlesinger, with Bob Hoskins and Antony Sher; and at the Donmar (in co-production with West Yorkshire Playhouse) in 1994, directed by Matthew Warchus, with Mark Rylance and Mike Rudko alternating roles. This production is staged at the Circle in the Square in New York in 2000, with Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C Reilly again alternating roles). *Buried Child* staged at Hampstead Theatre.
- 1982 *Motel Chronicles*, a prose collection, published. Steppenwolf revive *True West* with John Malkovich and Gary Sinise (later televised on PBS). Appears in the film *Frances* with Jessica Lange.
- 1983 *Fool for Love* premiere at the Magic Theatre, directed by Shepard; staged by

the NT in the Cottesloe, 1984, directed by Peter Gill, with Julie Walters and Ian Charleson; film version 1985, directed by Robert Altman, with Shepard and Kim Basinger.

Shepard appears in the film *The Right Stuff*, receiving Oscar nomination as Best Supporting Actor.

- 1984 *Paris, Texas*, screenplay by Shepard, directed by Wim Wenders, wins Palme d'Or at Cannes.
- 1985 *A Lie of the Mind* at Promenade Theatre directed by Shepard, wins New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play.
- 1986 Elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters
- 1988 Shepard directs his screenplay *Far North*.
- 1991 *States of Shock* at American Place Theatre.
- 1994 *Simpatico* at Joseph Papp Public Theatre, directed by Shepard. The 1999 film of *Simpatico*, with Jeff Bridges, Nick Nolte, and Sharon Stone, and Shepard is directed by Matthew Warchus. Shepard is inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame.
- 1998 *Eyes for Consuela* at Manhattan Theatre Club.
- 2000 Shepard plays the Ghost in a film version of *Hamlet* with Ethan Hawke, directed by Michael Almereyda.

The Late Henry Moss opens at the Magic Theatre, San Francisco, directed by Shepard.

- 2001 NY premiere of *The Late Henry Moss*.
- 2004 *This So-Called Disaster*, a film directed by Michael Almereyda, about the rehearsal period for *The Late Henry Moss* in San Francisco, is released. *The God of Hell* New School University Theatre, Greenwich Village, from 29 October, with Randy Quaid, J Smith Cameron, and Tim Roth. November, Shepard appears in New York premiere of Caryl Churchill's *A Number*.

Julie Walters and Ian Charleson in *Fool for Love*, NT 1984

photo John Haynes



Play summary

Buried Child is set on a dairy farm in Illinois in 1978. There is a single set for the entire play – the living room of the farmhouse.

Act One

It is raining heavily. Dodge sits on his sofa watching TV; he smokes often and has a whisky bottle stashed under the sofa seat. He coughs violently until Halie, his wife, tells him from upstairs (offstage) to take a pill to stop his coughing. Halie asks whether Dodge is watching baseball on the TV – she says that it's not Christian to watch baseball on a Sunday. She remembers once going to the horse races with a breeder man on a New Year before she and Dodge were married, which makes Dodge jealous. She says she is going out to lunch with Father Dewis and that he should ask for Tilden if he wants anything, as he is the eldest child. Dodge coughs again and calls for Tilden.

Tilden enters from the kitchen with his arms full of corn cobs. Dodge asks where it came from, as there hasn't been any on the farmland since 1935. Tilden claims the back yard is full of corn. He gets a stool and pail and husks the corn



Brendan Coyle
photo Manuel Harlan

whilst Dodge watches TV. Halie (still from off stage) says that she and Dodge will have to look after Tilden, as he is like a child; neither he nor Bradley can look after themselves. Had Ansel, the smartest of her sons, been alive he would have earned well enough to look after his parents. Halie comments that if Ansel hadn't married into a Catholic family he'd probably still be alive – nor was it fitting that he died in a motel room.

She comes downstairs dressed in black mourning clothes and leaves money on the kitchen table in case Dodge needs anything later. She is annoyed at the scattered corn husks and when Tilden says that he picked it from out back, she repeats Dodge's assertion that there isn't any corn, and suspects he either stole or bought it. Tilden cries.

Halie tells Dodge that Bradley will visit later to cut his hair, but Dodge objects, saying his hair doesn't need cutting and Bradley doesn't belong in the house. Halie reminds him that Bradley is Dodge's flesh and blood and he shouldn't say such things. Halie is visibly shaken when Dodge replies that his flesh and blood is buried in the back yard. As she leaves, she asks Dodge to stop Tilden going outside in the rain.

Dodge changes the subject when Tilden asks why he said his flesh and blood is buried in the back yard. Dodge starts to cough uncontrollably when Tilden starts to go outside, so his son gives him some water and lays him on the sofa. When Dodge falls asleep, Tilden steals his whisky, covers his father with the corn husks and goes back outside. The one-legged Bradley (who cut off his own leg), enters, sees the corn, goes to Dodge, takes out a pair of clippers and starts to cut his hair.

Act Two

Later that night, it is still raining heavily. Vince, the grandson of the family, arrives unannounced with his girlfriend, Shelly. They presume the darkened house is empty. Vince goes upstairs to look for Halie while Shelly waits downstairs. Dodge wakes up and she starts to explain why she is there, but he doesn't respond. Vince comes back downstairs and

sees his grandfather but Dodge doesn't recognise him: at first he thinks Vince is Tilden but later says that Tilden is looking after him.

Dodge realises that his whisky has gone and starts shouting and pulling the cushions off the sofa. Shelly is unnerved and tells Vince that she wants to leave, but he grabs her to force her to stay. They struggle and as Vince falls to the floor, Tilden appears in the kitchen doorway, his arms full of carrots.

Tilden does not recognise Vince and does not answer Shelly's question about whether he is Vince's father. She offers to hold the carrots, but Tilden suggests they could actually cut and cook them, and goes to get a stool and a knife when she agrees. Annoyed, Vince asks Shelly to help him and not get involved with cutting carrots, but she starts, and Tilden watches her. Dodge is determined that someone will get him a new bottle of whisky before Halie comes back. Vince – incredulous that Tilden still doesn't recognise him – tries to jog Dodge and Tilden's memories by performing some of his childhood party tricks. But it doesn't work, so Vince agrees to go into town to get the whisky. Shelly is distressed at the idea of being left alone with Tilden and Dodge, but Vince insists on going. He takes the money from the kitchen table and leaves.

When Shelly asks again if either of them recognises Vince, Dodge replies "*what's to recognise?*", and turns back to the TV. Tilden is

fascinated with Shelly's rabbit fur coat, so she lets him stroke it and offers it to him. He starts to tell her about a tiny baby that went missing, but Dodge tries to stop him and, doing so, falls to the floor. Tilden forcibly stops Shelly from running away, saying that Dodge is the only person who knows the location of the baby. Bradley appears and asks Shelly if she is with Tilden. He is so intimidating towards both of them that Tilden runs out of the room, leaving Bradley alone with Shelly. He forces her to open her mouth, and he slides his fingers in and holds them there to the end of the scene.

Act Three

Next morning, the sun is out. Bradley sleeps on the sofa and his wooden leg is on the floor beside it. Dodge is sat against the TV on the floor. Shelly has made some beef bouillon for Dodge, but he refuses to drink it. Shelly admits that she was so frightened of Bradley that she hid outside until he was asleep and then crept upstairs to sleep in Halie's room. She asks Dodge about the pictures there but he seems not to know about them.

Halie and Father Dewis arrive. Halie now wears a bright yellow dress, her arms are full of yellow roses, and they are both quite drunk and giggly. Dodge hides under Shelly's coat, insisting that she doesn't leave him alone with them. Halie is embarrassed by the state of the house and apologises whilst removing Shelly's coat from Dodge and draping it over the wooden leg. Dodge claims to be cold without the coat, so Halie removes the blanket from Bradley to give to Dodge. This wakes Bradley and he demands his blanket back. Halie slaps him, then turns her attention aggressively to Shelly to ask what she is doing in the house. Without giving her time to reply, Halie realises that Tilden is missing and starts to look for him. But Shelly is upset and grabs Bradley's leg to gain attention. Halie goes to call the police to get rid of Shelly, but Bradley doesn't want police in the house. When Shelly accuses the family of taking their affairs out back to settle their problems, Halie tells her to shut up.

Dodge decides to tell Shelly the family secret, despite objections from Halie and Bradley. He reveals that Halie had a baby long after the

Brendan Coyle (Tilden),
Lauren Ambrose (Shelly)
photo Manuel Harlan



other boys were born and after they had stopped sleeping together. He let her give birth to the baby without any medical help, yet the child lived. He implies that the child was conceived in an incestuous relationship between Tilden and Halie, and so he killed the baby by drowning it. Halie denounces this as lies.

Suddenly Vince bursts on to the porch, drunk, throwing glass bottles and shouting at the people inside. Shelly and Halie try to speak to him without success. Vince now claims not to recognise anyone. Halie and Father Dewis go upstairs, Halie remembering what a lovely child Vincent was. Shelly puts down Bradley's leg and tries to go out and persuade Vince to leave, but he yells at her to stay inside and cuts through a window screen to enter the house. Bradley slides off the sofa and crawls towards his leg. Dodge starts to declare his will, leaving the house to Vince. Vince refuses Shelly's pleas to leave, saying that he has just inherited a house. She leaves alone. Vince torments Bradley with his leg, making him follow it out of

the house and shuts him outside. Father Dewis advises Vince to go upstairs and see his grandmother. Vince refuses and Father Dewis also leaves. Dodge has died unnoticed. Vince covers him with the blanket and places the yellow roses on him. He puts on Dodge's cap and lies down on the sofa. Halie starts to talk from upstairs to Vince, presuming that he is Dodge, and tells him that Tilden was right that the backyard is full of vegetables and the sun is out. Tilden appears at the kitchen door holding the remains of the baby buried in the back yard. He walks across the room and up the stairs, towards Halie.

Elizabeth Franz (Halie) John Rogan (Father Dewis), and Lauren Ambrose (Shelly)

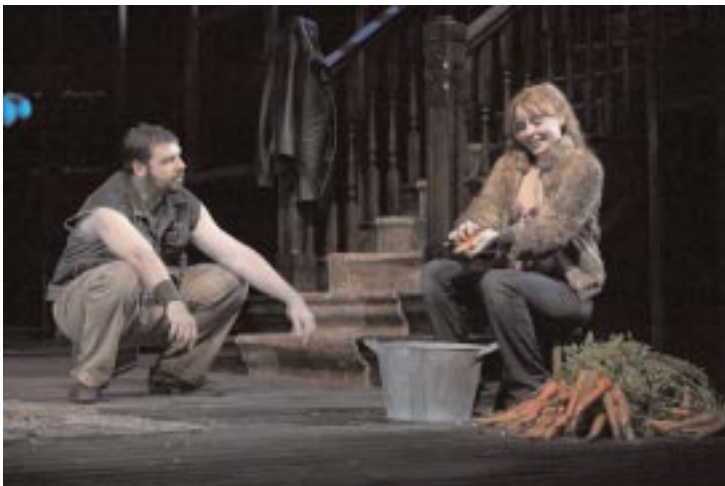
photo Manuel Harlan



For discussion

1. During rehearsals for *Buried Child* we spent a lot of time talking about the questions which go unanswered in the text and tried to work out satisfying answers to them based on the definite information we did have. Try to identify 20 key questions that go unanswered in the play and talk about how you might answer those questions.
2. The theme of identity is very strong in *Buried Child*. How and where does it arise in the text most prominently and what do you think Sam Shepard's feelings are about identity?
3. Religion and morality are both themes in the play. What do you think the author's views are on these subjects?
4. Discuss the importance of entrances in *Buried Child*. How does the writer use entrances in different ways and what happens to the shape of the play when each entrance occurs?
5. Discuss what the symbolism of the corn, carrots, yellow roses and the weather could be.

Brendan Coyle (Tilden),
Lauren Ambrose (Shelly)
photo Manuel Harlan



Practical exercises

1. Look at the various speeches towards the end of the play which Dodge, Vince and Shelly give. Try doing those speeches in the following ways;
 - a) As written, observing the punctuation.
 - b) With no punctuation
 - c) Using the word 'I guess' in addition to the speech where you feel it fits.
 - d) Using the name of whoever the person is speaking to in addition to the text wherever you feel it fits.
2. Improvise scenes which are not in the play, for example;
 - a) Halie and Father Dewis's lunch the previous day
 - b) Shelly and Vince's car journey from New York to Illinois (about 6 hours' drive)
 - c) What happened between Shelly and Bradley at the end of the first half?
3. In groups of four, stage the section of Act Two which begins when Tilden arrives in the room with his arms full of carrots and ends when Vince leaves to get the bottle of

whisky. Pay particular attention to the rhythm of the writing and which moves are essential. Bear in mind that the reason the scene is comic is because each of the four characters has a totally different agenda. What do you discover from staging this section?

Lauren Ambrose (Shelly),
M.Emmet Walsh (Dodge)
photo Manuel Harlan



Written work and research

1. Geographical location and lifestyle are incredibly important factors in understanding this play. Find out what you can about Illinois' geography and rural farming communities there. Also, Tilden says he has spent time in New Mexico. What is it like and how far is it from Illinois?
2. In the play, both Dodge and Halie say that there hasn't been corn on the farm since about 1935. There is an historical reason that could explain why an Illinois farm would stop producing corn in 1935 – try to discover what that is.
3. Read Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* and *True West*. What similarities do these plays have to *Buried Child*? What are the recurring themes in all three plays? Compare the character of Vince to the two brothers in *True West*. What themes are both plays expressing?
4. Read the original text of *Buried Child* from 1978 (included in *Sam Shepard: Plays 2*,

Faber and Faber) and then read the re-written version of the play from 1996. Look in particular at the changes in Act Two. In what ways has the play altered? How do the re-writes affect an audience's understanding of the play? Can you find specific examples of how small changes to phrasing change your understanding of the play?

Elizabeth Franz
photo Manuel Harlan



Related material

FILMS

Paris, Texas (1984) written by Sam Shepard,
directed by Wim Wenders

Fool for Love (1985) written by Sam Shepard,
directed by Robert Altman

Simpatico (1999) written by Sam Shepard,
directed by Matthew Warchus

BOOKS

'Sam Shepard' by Martin Tucker
(Continuum Publishing)

'The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis'
by Stephen J. Bottoms
(Cambridge University Press)

'Cruising Paradise' by Sam Shepard
(Vintage Books)

'Great Dream of Heaven' by Sam Shepard
(Vintage Books)

'Motel Chronicles and Hawk Moon'
by Sam Shepard
(Faber and Faber)

'Sam Shepard: Plays 1' by Sam Shepard
(Methuen)

'Sam Shepard: Plays 2' by Sam Shepard
(Faber and Faber)

'Sam Shepard: Plays 3' by Sam Shepard
(Faber and Faber)

The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard
(CUP)

The National Theatre's programme for *Buried Child* is on sale at £2.50 from the NT Bookshop. It contains a specially commissioned article on Sam Shepard by Christopher Bigsby – 'Cruising a Tainted Paradise'; quotes from Shepard himself and a chronology of his life and work; full details about cast and creative team; and many photographs – of the author, the countryside of the play, of past productions of Sam Shepard at the National, and of the cast in rehearsal.

www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/bookshop

Lauren Ambrose
photo Manuel Harlan

