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# From Script to Stage: A Costume Designer's Perspective

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Abstract:

In the process of designing the costumes for a show, it is important to understand the psyche of each of the characters. The completion of thorough research can give valuable insight into the characters, as well as details of the setting of the play. A designer then takes this information, in the form of photographs, journals, period documents, and modern analysis and combines it to achieve a unified vision of the play's environment. They must then work with the director and other designers to present this vision to the audience.

This semester, I had the opportunity to explore this process when I was chosen to design the costumes for URI Theatre's production of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, winner of the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The play is a chilling and macabre look at American family life. Sam Shepard presents a normal family, but as the play progresses and we learn more about the characters we are forced to challenge that assumption. As we begin to question the normalcy of this fictional family, Shepard challenges his audience to question the façade that every American family presents to the world around them, and whether the "normal" family even exists. It seems, after all, that every family has that one thing that is not to be talked about.

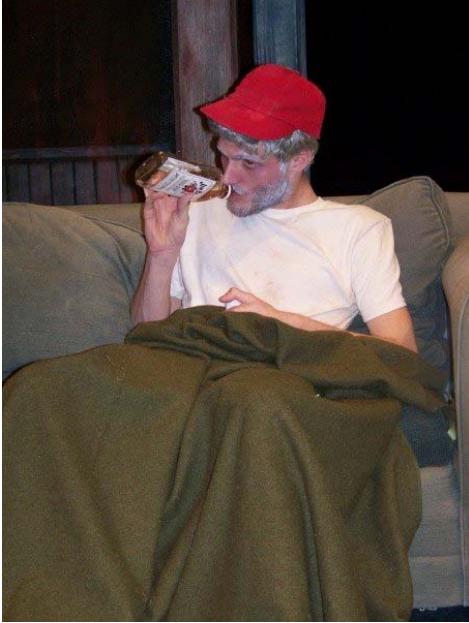
The first part of this semester was spent on the actual design of the show - developing it from vague images and feelings to real clothing for the characters of the show. The second part of the semester was spent both critiquing my work and expanding my knowledge of the themes present in this work. I did this by further analyzing *Buried Child* along with other works by Sam Shepard.

Project:

Part One: Analysis

Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* is the story of an American family, but one that holds a terrible secret. The patriarch of this family is Dodge, a bitter alcoholic who is near to death. His wife, Halie, is a religious woman who is so religious that she is currently seeing the local priest, Father Dewis. Together Dodge and Halie had three sons -- Ansel, who died several years ago while on honeymoon, Bradley, a bully who lost his leg to a chainsaw accident, and Tilden, fresh out of jail, is a man whose life has broken him. Tilden has a son, Vince, who has a girlfriend, Shelly.

When Vince and Shelly come to visit the family farmhouse it seems very Rockwell-esque. Things grow odder as Vince discovers that neither his father nor his grandfather recognize him. He soon drives away, trying to collect his thoughts, leaving Shelly to fend for herself. Tilden leaks information about the family secret, despite Dodge's protestations, and Shelly becomes fascinated with trying to discover it.



Dodge  
Photograph by Kevin Schaefer

By the end of the play, she has convinced Dodge to let it out, in a sort of final confession before he passes away. She discovers that after they had their three sons, Dodge and Halie had stopped sleeping in the same bed, but soon enough Halie got pregnant again. The baby was born, and although the rest of the family accepted the child as one of their own, Dodge could not abide its presence. He eventually drowned it and buried it in the back yard, and refused to tell anyone else where the body lay.

This story is set on a backdrop of isolation, which is present in two ways; the family as a whole is isolated from the outside world, and within the family each person is isolated from every other member of the family. The family in *Buried Child* is almost completely isolated both physically and habitually: as Dodge says "I haven't had trouble with the neighbors here for fifty-seven years. I don't even know who the neighbors are! And I don't wanna know!"<sup>1</sup> Aside from being isolated from the outside world, each of the characters is isolated from each other. The family is thus disjointed, without a true group identity. It is less a whole entity than an assortment "of individuals thrown together by accidents of birth."<sup>2</sup>

Dodge has allowed the family homestead to fall into ruin even as he ruins himself. He is looking forward to drinking himself to death, and no longer cares about his appearance or his manners, saying "I'm an invisible man!" and "I don't enjoy anything!"<sup>3</sup>. As he ceases to care about his survival, he also ceases to care about the family's secrets, and despite their protestations tells Shelly the whole story. As the elder of the family, his identity affects all those around him. His alcoholism and callousness are evident in both of his sons and in his grandson.

Vince's homecoming is less an idyllic return to the loving arms of his family than a harsh slap by reality. Neither his father nor his grandfather seem to recognize him, and this refusal drives Vince out of the house once more. He came back to try to discover his

<sup>1</sup> Sam Shepard, "Buried Child" *Seven Plays*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) 70.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen J Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 164.

<sup>3</sup> Shepard, 68.

identity, where he comes from. Shelly tries to explain this to Dodge: “I mean Vince has this thing about his family now. I guess it’s a new thing with him.... I mean he wants to get to know you again. After all this time. Reunite.”<sup>1</sup>

In Act Three, Vince returns from his overnight journey talking about how he followed a trail of his forefathers’ faces as they changed from one to the next “Clear on back to faces I’d never seen before but still recognized. Still recognized the bones underneath. Same eyes. Same mouth.”<sup>2</sup> He is coming to terms with his identity within his family as well as the ramifications of that familial connection. He comes back embracing the alcohol abuse and violence that has been seen in his relations, as he smashes bottles and cuts through the screen with a knife.



Vince  
Photograph by Kevin Schaefer

Shelly, as Vince’s girlfriend, is one of the two



Shelly and Bradley  
Photograph by Kevin Schaefer

“outsiders”. Her driving goal is survival, and in that way reflects the carnal instincts of man. She is willing to do whatever she has to in order to ensure her survival to the next day, everything from peeling carrots to hiding on the porch from the detestable Bradley. She oscillates between being at the complete mercy of those around her and being in total control. For example, at the close of the second act, Bradley forcibly sticks his fingers into her mouth, but in the third act she reverses the roles by stealing his false leg and taunting him with it.

Her role as an outsider allows her to ask the questions that none of the members of the family are able to ask, and thus is the driving force behind the exposition of Dodge’s murder of the infant.

Bradley also demonstrates a struggle for power. While he is an intimidating man, and can certainly bully his way through interactions with his brother, he becomes impotent when faced with the stress of Shelly stealing his leg and his mother scolding him. He tries to usurp his father’s role in a few ways, including shaving Dodge’s head and taking his place on the couch. Tilden has also tried to usurp his father’s place - it is heavily implied that Tilden took Dodge’s place in his marriage bed, and that Halie is Vince’s mother.

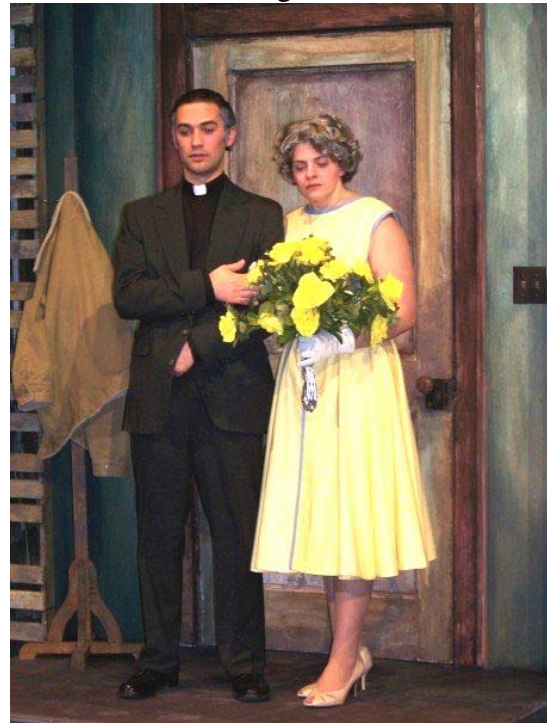
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<sup>1</sup> Shepard, 86.  
<sup>2</sup> Shepard, 130.

Aside from this, Tilden, like Vince, experiences a strong homecoming, although his occurs before the play even begins. When he lived by himself he was put in jail, and so he returned to his parents' home with no where else to go. Stephen J. Bottoms writes: "Tilden has returned to the home he loathes, and where he himself is loathed, simply for the sake of some form of human contact. His acute dislocation seems to stem from having escaped home once, only to find nothing but despair beyond it."<sup>1</sup> He is simply so lost and lonely in the big world that he has to return to the small, familiar homestead, or be swept away.

Halie seems to be full of paradoxes. In the first act, she appears as a woman in mourning for her long-dead son. She is pious, frequently referencing the struggle that the religious have in the immoral modern day: "It's no wonder people have turned their backs on Jesus!... It's no wonder the messengers of God's word are shouting louder than ever before. Screaming to the four winds."<sup>2</sup> When she returns in the third act, however, she has not only changed attire, but has spent the night drinking and carousing with the local priest.

Father Dewis is hard to place as character. He is an outsider, like Shelly, but he is not a strong enough person to challenge any of the family members. Despite the fact that he is having an affair with Halie, he is not perceived as a threat, nor is his presence ever questioned except by Vince. It is interesting, however, that he is there to witness Dodge's final confession, as well Vince's administration of Dodge's last rites.



Father Dewis and Halie  
Photograph by Kevin Schaefer

Several of the motifs explored through the characters of *Buried Child* are present in other works of Sam Shepard from around this time. For example, In *True West*, the two main characters, Austin and Lee, are brothers who reunite in their mother's home while she is away. They struggle to justify their way of life to each other and end up romanticizing the other's chosen path, but by the end they are locked in a deadly struggle under the dispassionate gaze of their mother.

In *True West*, Austin is a screenwriter and Lee is a thief and a loner. Each one secretly envies the other and through the play they begin to switch lives. Austin has been carefully crafting a script with the intent of selling it through Saul, a producer. Lee's

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<sup>1</sup> Bottoms, 164.

<sup>2</sup> Shepard 68-69.

overbearing nature and doggedness convinces Saul to buy a script from him, a man who can barely type. Meanwhile, Austin, on a challenge, breaks into several homes and steals their toaster, taking giddy delight in the neighborhood's general lack of toast the next morning. As Lee assumes Austin's more gentle and creative personality, Austin assumes Lee's more overbearing and cruel side, culminating in an attempt to murder his brother.

Once again, the play depicts a struggle within a family. The two characters are returning to the place of their youth, and nothing is as they remember. They have nothing of any depth to relate to each other with, and only start to relate on the surface once they start drinking. Like Vince, they each leave during the course of the play and come back, ready to take a more control over the course of their life.

Similarly, *Curse of the Starving Class* also features a family, living on the cusp of poverty in the Midwest. The family consists of mom Ella, dad Weston, son Wesley, and daughter Emma. Weston is a drunkard who wastes money on get-rich-quick schemes, and Ella, in an effort to get away is trying to sell the family farm. Weston is also trying to sell it in an effort to pay off some very dangerous creditors. Wesley is caught in the middle, and Emma, in the end, opts to run away for a life of crime.

Through the course of the story, Wesley slowly usurps his father's role, most obviously when he takes his old clothes and is shortly thereafter mistaken for his father. Interestingly, he does not turn to alcohol during this transition, and the change happens shortly after his father forswears drinking, trying to pull his life together.

Emma also draws comparisons between Weston and Wesley, repeatedly claiming that they have a sort of inherited violence: "A short fuse they call it. Runs in the family. His father was just like him. And his father before him. Wesley is just like Pop too. Like liquid dynamite."<sup>1</sup> She herself is not very different, as she is put in jail in the middle of the play for shooting up the club owned by one her father's associates.

Shepard used these three plays to examine the inevitability of some behaviors. Many of these characters are doomed to stumble, following in their fathers' footsteps, indeed many already are. All three families have experience with violence, and all three families are worn out and ready to make drastic changes in their lives. All three deal with the struggle of identity, that is whether your actions are self-determined or are handed down to you by your ancestors, and all three are set against a background of sharp isolationism.

## Part Two: Design

This year I was given the opportunity to design the costumes for URI Theatre's Spring 2007 production of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*. The work not only allowed me to grow as a student and a designer, but also acted as a starting point for developing my knowledge about this time period as well as Sam Shepard as a playwright.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Shepard, "Curse of the Starving Class" *Seven Plays*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) 152.

Each of the characters of *Buried Child* presented certain challenges to me as a designer, some more obvious and expected than others. The first step in designing the show was a thorough reading of the play. As well as giving me a preliminary idea of the personalities of the characters, this allowed me to anticipate many of these hurdles and start discussions with the director as to how to solve them.

One of the most obvious of challenges is in the character Bradley. When he was a young man he lost his leg in an accident with a chainsaw. This was a large challenge not only for me, but for the actor, the director, and the props designer. We had to solve this early in the production process, because our solution would ultimately affect many other things. We chose, in the end, to have the actor walk on his own leg, affecting a sort of limping, stiff gait. Alternately, we could have chosen to have the actor use a real prosthetic leg, and train how to use it. This would have required physical therapy, and I would have had to accommodate his real leg in his trousers. Our decision had other ramifications, because in the third act, his leg has been taken off, and is used very actively as a prop. Because his real leg was not hidden, the director and actor had to work to stage this section very carefully so that his actual leg did not show and spoil the moment for the audience.

Another challenge was that Dodge's hair gets rather brutally cut at the very end of act one. We ultimately decided that the most effective way to do this transition was to cut his real hair very short and then have him wear a wig in the first act, which could easily be removed during the scene change.



Bradley and Dodge  
Photograph by Kevin Schaefer



Shelly and Dodge  
Photograph by Kevin Schaefer

After having several conversations with the director about the look and feel that he wanted for the show, as well as discussing possible solutions to the many challenges that

the play presented, I began researching the time period. This research manifested itself in many ways, using a variety of sources from fashion history textbooks, to compilations of period advertising, to personal interviews. Of course the process of researching continued as the design developed and I came across more questions that required specific answers.

After reading the play and doing some preparatory research, I started to do some sketches of different characters. In order to give myself a starting point of my design, I decided to concentrate primarily on colors. Color can be a good way to make a statement and set characters apart from one another, and was thus an important part of my design. For example, Tilden is worn out, and his life has basically destroyed him. To reflect this, I tried to make him look washed-out and neutral, hence his clothes are tan and brown, as well as being muddy and grimy.

Both Bradley and Shelly feel as if they sort of own the house. Halie makes a comment about how Bradley hates seeing the house in disarray, because he feels responsible, and Shelly tells Dodge that she feels like the house is hers and that no one else belongs. Because of this, I wanted them to be in sort of royal colors - Bradley in a dark blue, and Shelly in a vibrant purple with her fur coat.

I also wanted Shelly to clash with Vince - Dodge makes a comment about how they go together like “chalk and cheese” and I wanted to accentuate this and keep this feeling that



Halie  
Photograph by Kevin Schaefer

they don't quite fit together. To do this, I put Vince in green. Similarly, purple and yellow are strongly contrasting colors, which was part of the reason to put Halie in a yellow dress for the third act.

Halie and Dodge, similar to Vince and Shelly, had to show a contrast, but theirs needed to be pronounced even further. Halie is struggling to regain her life and move on, while Dodge has given up on life and is close to death. I wanted Dodge to be washed out while giving Halie strong colors. In the first act she appears in mourning, entirely in black, but by the third act, when she returns with Father Dewis, she is in a bright yellow dress, showing her vivacity and her return to a life outside of grieving.

The director and I also wanted Halie to appear stuck in her past. Her dresses are both from earlier time periods than the rest of the styles in the play, and while her yellow dress is more modern than her black dress, it is still not in the same world as everyone else, as we can see below, comparing her with Shelly. It is as if she had decided to restart her life from the death of her baby instead of the day she is living in now. Research and specificity were especially important for Halie, because she needed to be as visually different as possible from the rest of the characters.





Halie  
Photograph by Kevin Schaefer



Shelly  
Photograph by Kevin Schaefer

After getting a rough idea of what I was looking for, I set out to buy, pull, and in the case of the yellow dress, construct the show. Of course I didn't do this all myself, Sally

Tschantz-Dwyer, the costume shop manager, was invaluable, doing the work of building the dress and helping me find things in the storage closet.



Dodge's Makeup  
Photograph by Laura Gifford

The last week or so before the dress rehearsals was left for final fittings, distressing, final adjustments with shoes, jewelry, and accessories, and last minute

additions such as jackets that were used as props. Final

decisions on makeup design also

needed to be made at this time. This was especially important for Dodge and Halie, because the actors needed to look so much older than they are in real life.



Halie's Makeup  
Photograph by Laura Gifford

One thing that I had to experiment with and learn about was distressing the clothes. I have

done some of this in classes and my work in the costume shop, but in this case it was truly up to me to make sure that it got done and that it looked the way that I envisioned it. This work included distressing Bradley's boots, Dodge's pants and t-shirt, and Tilden's shirt and pants.

Actually, the actor playing Tilden had two identical costumes, one for the majority of the show, and the second for the third act when he enters carrying the baby. This was because he was meant to be almost dripping with mud at the end.



Tilden  
Photograph by Kevin Schaefer

I used many things to achieve the distressing, such as spray paint, chalk dust, sandpaper, and fake mud made from sawdust, glue, and paint. I chose to take this process in small, carefully planned, steps, adding to the distressing on each costume piece before each dress rehearsal. This allowed me to look at the costumes on stage and see what still needed to happen, while at the same time I was in no danger of going overboard and making the costume unusable.

Now that I have realized my first practical design, I can step back and analyze what I have learnt from this process. While I am happy with what I achieved, through the course of the production I did discover some things that I will keep in mind for my next project. For instance, while no one brought this up as a negative, I personally noticed that all of the men apart from Dodge were visually very similar. I now know to keep an eye on this sort of detail.

One of the challenges that I ran into was having enough research on hand to answer specific questions. Part of this was that at the beginning of the rehearsal process the director made a decision to set the play in the early 1960s instead of the early 1970s.

While I was able to use some of my research, especially for the character of Halie, I ended up having to redo much of it, with less time to complete it.

One instance where more research and forethought would have been handy was with the priest. Although we knew he was a Protestant minister, it had not been decided what denomination he was.

We solved this by doing some quick research into the popular religions among lower-class families in that region, and came up with two probable choices, either Baptist or Presbyterian. In the end, however, the look that the director wanted for him was the black suit with a white clerical collar, and that look was more important than affiliation with one religion or the other.

The hardest character to design for, however, was probably Shelly. Basically, the director wanted her sexier and more modern, and I was hesitant to make her seem too

over-the top. As a first-time designer, I opted to make her costume simpler and then add accessories. Now that I have explored that, I may be willing next time to push that boundary a little more.

In general, I know that next time I work on a show in this capacity I will be better prepared for some of the challenges that I will face. This project allowed me to bring a design from first concept to closing night, and to do so within a supportive environment, without the pressure of doing it without enough resources.

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