

KATHERINE WEISS

“There’s no question that this is torture!” Electrocuting Patriotic Fervour in Sam Shepard’s *The God of Hell*

Sam Shepard’s *The God of Hell*, which premiered Off-Broadway in late October of 2004, was negatively received by New York critics. Although most theatre critics agreed that the Bush administration was “ripe for criticism,” many, like *The New Yorker*’s William Stevenson, felt that Shepard’s play lacked a “coherent argument.”¹ On the whole, reviewers attributed this to the fact that Shepard’s play was written too hastily and was too blata.2sm. Nearly a year later, the play at the Donmar Theatre received equally disparaging attention. While reviewers uniformly congratulated the director Kathy Burke for her ability to bring alive the humour and menace of the cartoon-like characters and set, many argued that

Marlowe's piece for the *Times* noted that "Shepard's argument is too obvious to leave

In his “takeoff on Republican fascism,” as Shepard calls his play,⁷ he criticises American patriotism, capitalism and patriarchy through images of electric-shock torture.

Even with the simple set of *The God of Hell*, Shepard attacks the American Dream which has for too long ignored the Republican invasion. Every appliance and piece of furniture in Frank and Emma’s Wisconsin farmhouse dates back to the fifties (3).⁸ The out-dated Norman Rockwellian set reflects an almost obsessive concern of Shepard’s. Indeed, in *Buried Child*, Shelly, standing outside with her boyfriend Vince, laughs at Vince’s family home because it is “like a Norman Rockwell cover or something.”⁹ And yet, in most of his plays from the seventies onward, the idyllic home is all but destroyed by the end of the play. What is it that compels Shepard to threaten the structure of these homes? In an interview with Matthew Roudané, Shepard reveals that the Eisenhower age was both a denial of America’s involvement in World War II and the Korean War and a shroud concealing the wounds of the soldiers returning home. He tells Roudané:

I mean imagine coming back into the Eisenhower fifties. It must not have been easy. At all. Where everything was wonderful, the front lawns were all being taken care of, there was a refrigerator in everybody’s house. Everybody had a Chevy, and these guys had just been bombing the (a)4(s0 1 Tf 90)5

Roudané

home and through their violent acts disrupt the “security” of the American family. Not only does *The God of Hell*'s villainous government agent's name, Welch, mean a fib or lie, it also possibly is a reference to the John Birch Society which was founded by Robert Welch in 1958 and is currently located in Appleton, Wisconsin.¹¹ Founded on anti-communist principles, the society claims to fight the “Red” forces infiltrating the US government and aims to restore and preserve the freedom defined under the United States Constitution.¹² In Scene III, Frank reminisces that he misses the Cold War (91). For Frank the Cold War represented a time when the enemy was far away rather than in his home or country. Now the enemy—be it Welch, an agent of the Republican government, who administers an unspeakable form of torture to America's men, or the US government which will possibly annihilate the entire US with their plutonium experiments—has penetrated the safety of the domestic sphere.

The lack of “patriotic paraphernalia” (21) in Frank and Emma's home creates for Welch an un-American space:

Welch: “

presence unsettles the couple's own *home-land security* in that it contaminates the home with plutonium, as is evident in the play's conclusion when the lights dim and the audience sees "*the plants begin to emanate blue flashes*" (98)—which brings the government and its torture techniques into their lives. Even before we witness the acts of torture being carried out on Haynes and see its effects on Frank, Frank's dialogue with his wife foreshadows the possibility of death, disappearance and torture:

Frank: "He kind of disappeared for a while. I thought he was dead, actually."

Emma: "Dead?"

Frank: "Yeah—or missing."

Emma: "Really?"

Frank: "Yeah—or tortured even."

Emma: "Tortured? My God!"

Frank: "Maybe."

Emma: "What kind of research is he involved in where he gets tortured?" (6-7)

The movement of this exchange, from dead to missing to tortured, exposes the play's extreme political line. Indeed, some reviewers drew parallels with Abu Ghraib.¹⁵ While the image of Haynes in a tee-shirt, khakis, a black hood on his head and a cord running

powered. Haynes is silenced and Frank no longer resists the dark future. Through torture techniques involving electrical shocks, Welch has taken both Frank and Haynes by the balls, sacrificing their individual masculinity to a larger patriarchal order, American Republicanism.

Welch's acts of torture consist of isolating individuals from all human contact outside the interrogation. Frank, the honest, hardworking farmer—an ideal image of manhood straight out of the Eisenhower fifties—sells his heifers and betrays his friend after being subjected to electric shocks to his penis. After being tortured Frank forgets his wife and his beloved heifers, and Haynes, subjected to the same torture, forgets the dangers he fled. Regardless of Welch's failure to persuade Emma to join his side, he is able to convince Frank that his friend Haynes is the enemy. Brainwashed, Frank refers to Haynes as a “two-faced, camel-loving—” (91), before being cut off by Welch, who once again uses his powers of persuasion to unite Frank with Haynes in his devious plutonium experiments. Shepard, in effect, draws a direct line from the Frontier Days to modern, chemical warfare, and thereby reveals that the minimal resistance to the War in Iraq is related to a culture of war which transforms expansion through violence into an infectious act of heroism. Continuing his critique of the US government and its military deployments, Shepard describes Frank and Haynes doing a “little pathetic march” (97) while leaving the house tranhimith Ha m0(i)-2004 Tcd

dismisses Emma's concerns about the odd salesman inquiring as to how many rooms the house has and whether the basement can be counted as one of them), the continuation of the ringing as the lights fade is aimed at waking up and alerting the American public to the possible dangers of the Republican Party and the future of America at war. However, the warning does not end with Bush's administration. Shepard asks his audience to be politically mindful of America's transformation into an icy hell run by plutocrats, selling us the American Dream—a lie founded on war and consume(r)5(jc)6(t)-2(h)-10(e)4u32(. 04 Tc ET /Arti

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