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“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 blatantly anti-Republican to sway the presidential election to the left. Some complained, too, that the cartoonish nature of the play was an oversimplified take on the war in Iraq and American patriotism.

Nearly a year later, the play’s London debut 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 despite Burke’s efforts Shepard’s play failed to sustain a dialectical argument.² *The Independent*’s Paul Taylor complained that what the audience gets is “Not shock and awe, but overkill.”³ Less scathing reviews, such as Sam

Marlowe's piece for the *Times* noted that "Shepard's argument is too obvious to leave you with many new ideas to chew on; but there's still bite to this sour slice of American pie."⁴

Regardless of the overall disappointing reception by critics, Shepard's play was well-received by the English public, which some may attribute to Britain's anti-American-policy sentiments. While this may, in fact, explain the packed houses at the Donmar, Kathy Burke, best known for both her acting roles in "in-yer-face" films such as *Nil by Mouth* and the hilarious television show *Harry Enfield*, told one reporter that she was immediately drawn to Shepard's play because of his very love for America.⁵ Astutely, she recognises that only a truly "patriotic" man could write a play so deeply invested in his country's future, hinting perhaps at her own reasons for taking on dark comedic roles, darker dramatic ones, and directorial projects such as Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (2004).

In spite of having rushed the production of his new play to the stage, Shepard created a work that is far from being anti-American and far from being a rough piece for theatre. Whereas the bulk of American and British reviewers wanted Shepard to be less obvious in his attack on American republicanism and more direct in his attack on the Bush administration (a bizarre contradiction that suggests that they wanted their apple-pie both ways), Shepard avoids transforming his play into a "period piece"⁶ that will fade as the history of Bush's control does. Rather, Shepard skilfully employs images of torture, revealing that politically inflicted injury is both a tool used by unstable governments and a vehicle that destroys the body and the family in the hope of maintaining political power.

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 shit out of Germany and Italy and the South Pacific and then they come back; I mean it just must have been unbelievable.¹⁰

The outward wealth and prosperity of this age represented an ideal that was unable to accommodate the bombings of Europe and the South Pacific.

Moreover, the set recalls the anti-communist sentiments of the fifties. Shepard’s play brings back memories of an America that feared invasion from foreign shores and leftist movements. The home exposes the family’s struggle to secure its American pie ideals. However, Shepard’s villains are always insiders—American forces that invade the

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: “Well, Emma, this is Wisconsin, isn't it? I'm not in Bulgaria or Turkistan or somewhere lost in the Balkans. I'm in Wisconsin. Taxidermy and cheese! Part of the U.S. of A. You told me that yourself.”
 Emma: “What are you driving at?”
 Welch: “You'd think there would be a flag up or something to that effect. Some sign. Some indication of loyalty and pride.” (19)

Bulgaria, Turkistan and the Balkans are all non-western nations with historical allegiance to the Soviet Union and/or Islam. Welch, in effect, aligns Frank's and Emma's lack of outward loyalty and pride to their heritage to non-western, communist and Islamic ideology. However, despite the couple's refusal to invest themselves in the politics of their nation, they have carried out a family farming tradition. Emma was born in the house and has spent her whole life in it.

In the image of Frank's and Emma's farmhouse, Shepard reveals that the American Dream is built by those who wilfully remain politically blind. In Scene I, Welch, who peddles patriotic cookies and flags, among other kitsch, notices that Frank and Emma's flagpole is "empty. Barren. Just the raw wind slapping the naked ropes around" (19). While the audience is repulsed by this slimy, political salesman who represents a new brand of patriotism which, according to Shepard, Americans are being sold,¹³ Welch's comment tells the audience that this couple refuses to align themselves with or strongly oppose any political affiliation. Their non-political disposition results in the curdling of American "Heartland" or "Dairyland," as Emma corrects Welch (14).

Emma and Frank's home is vulnerable because, as represented in the metaphor of the barren flagpole, Frank is impotent. Emma and Frank not only have no children—a rarity on Shepard's stage—but also he is unable to protect Emma, his fugitive friend Graig Haynes, his heifers or his home. Even images of nurturing in the play prove futile. Emma over-waters and as such potentially kills her plants. And, Frank's heifers are "replacements for the originals since calving has," as Philip Fisher argues, "gone out of fashion,"¹⁴ or become impossible. Because the farmhouse has ceased to be the birthplace of ideals and new hopes—only Haynes' coffee stains the couch now, whereas in the past it was the blood and afterbirth of premature calves (48)—it has become exposed to natural decay and man-made destruction.

Through Emma's first words, "He's not up yet?" (4), the audience discovers that this quiet farmhouse has an unexpected visitor, Graig Haynes. Haynes, who Frank assures his wife, is "not a scientist" (4) but rather works for the government on some secret mission, hides out in the couple's basement—the house's foundation. Haynes'

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 directly into the fly of his pants (90) recalls those disturbing photographs of Iraqi prisoners being tortured and ridiculed by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib, this image likewise recalls Samuel Beckett's famous Pozzo/Lucky, master/slave dichotomy. Lucky is led on a rope and when he does not obey Pozzo, who represents the tyrannical landowner, Pozzo yanks the rope and calls him pig.

What *Waiting for Godot* and this play reveal in their representations of the tortured prisoner or slave is that the political institutions imprisoning them are shaky. Pozzo in Act I of *Waiting for Godot* begins to lose his hold on Lucky; he often has to repeat his orders, and in Act II Pozzo has gone blind and is fully dependent on Lucky to lead him. Elaine Scarry, in her seminal work *The Body in Pain*, argues that torture is

often administered when the reality of a political power is highly contestable, and the regime unstable.¹⁶ In *The God of Hell*, Welch's government has lost control over their plutonium experiments, and their "researcher," Haynes, has escaped. What Welch rationalises as "some minor leakage" (68), Haynes reveals as a deadly disaster. He first tells Frank that plutonium is

The most carcinogenic substance known to man. It causes mutations in the genes of the reproductive cells. The eggs and the sperm. Major mutations. A kind of random compulsory genetic engineering that goes on and on and on and on. (41-2)

And later Haynes tells Welch: "I'm not going back there! The whole state's going to explode. Colorado is going to be blown off the map" (68). Plutonium, named after Pluto, the god of hell, will ultimately transform the earth into a living hell if released into the atmosphere.

Despite Welch's inability to sell his sugar-coated political jargon to Emma, this plutocrat is able to unsettle the foundations of the farmhouse and secure his newly gained territory. When Welch is seen stapling a "*string of tiny American flags... to the cupboards above the sink*" (67) in Scene II, the audience realises that this dangerous yet unsteady political power has successfully invaded America's "Heartland" (14). The sound of the staple gun punctuates the rest of the scene, revealing that after a mental battle this territory has been colonised. Welch has both tracked down the fugitive and usurped Frank's position in the home. Undeterred by Haynes' initial defiance, Welch succeeds in reprogramming him, securing the government's power and its dubious plutonium experiments.

Torture, in this play, is implemented to "break" the men of the country so that they will submit—which is in part achieved by severing communication. Each time

Haynes touches another individual “*a bright blue flash of light emanates from Haynes’ fingers*” (30) which he excuses as “Static shock” (31). Later Frank, too, is inflicted with this curious condition. Although at this point in the play it is unclear whether the “static shock” from which first Haynes and then Frank suffer results from plutonium contamination, or the “electric shock” torture applied to the men’s genitalia to force them into submission, the blue flash either way ultimately destroys community and family bonds. Welch’s torture technique is, to use Elaine Scarry’s phrase, “world destroying.”¹⁷ Static shock is a minor electrical shock caused by low voltages on the surfaces of metal and plastic materials. Whereas the voltage of static shock is common and low (100kV), voltage reaching 220 AC and above is dangerous. Electricity has been used since the late nineteenth century to destroy the “undesirable” pathological nerves of the mentally ill and to kill off individuals who threaten the social order.¹⁸ One of the consequences of electro-therapy is loss of memory. These traits of electricity are seen in Shepard’s play. Welch utilizes electricity to rid the US of those who in any way defy the government’s agenda, by both creating memory loss and severing communal bonds.

Yet, curiously, Welch claims that the problem with America is that there is no memory of Pearl Harbour, the Alamo, or the Bataan Death March (72). Shepard does much more than criticise America’s involvement in Iraq. Thomas Adler points out in his analysis of Shepard’s 1976 play *Curse of the Starving Class* that Shepard is “decidedly anti-capitalistic” and “pits the military strong against the weak and prides itself on dominance and conquest and oftentimes false heroics.”¹⁹ This, too, can be said about *The God of Hell*. Welch, the deceptive, lying government official, goes to war with Frank, an honest dairy farmer. The battle ends with the family home taken over and Frank over-

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 together.

Only Emma can resist, albeit at times feebly. Emma gathers her strength to ring the bell—a warning reminiscent of the sirens announcing air-raids during WWII. This bell, a relict from an old school house, is paradoxically both ineffective and powerful. Whereas throughout the play, the bell has not sufficiently raised alarm in her husband (he

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 consumerism.

¹ William Stevenson, "The God of Hell" (*Broadway.com*, 16 November 2004), <http://www.broadway.com/gen/Buzz_Story.aspx?ci=502566>

² Paul Taylor, "Not Shock and Awe, but Overkill" (*The Independent*, 28 October 2005), <<http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/theatre/reviews/article322954.ece>>

³ Taylor.

⁴ Sam Marlowe, "Theatre: *The God of Hell*" (*Times Online*, 27 October 2005), <<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,14936-1845341,00.html>>

⁵ Jay Rayner, "I'm a Person who Walks on Eggshells" (*The Guardian Unlimited*, 23 October 2005), <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1598399,00.html>>

⁶ (*Seven Plays* 13) Austin in *True West* tells his brother Lee that he is working on "a period piece."

⁷ Robert Simonson, "Sam Shepard's New Play *God of Hell* Debuts Off-Broadway Oct. 29" (*Playbill*, 29 October 2004), <<http://www.playbill.com/news/article/89273.html>>

⁸ Sam Shepard, *The God of Hell* (New York: Vintage, 2005). Subsequent references are to this edition.

⁹ Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 83.

¹⁰ Matthew Roudané, "Shepard on Shepard: An Interview" in Matthew Roudané, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 71.

¹¹ Elyse Sommer, "A CurtainUp Review: *God of Hell*" (*CurtainUp*, 2004), 6 June 2005.

¹² The John Birch Society, "About the John Birch Society," 20 October 2006, <<http://www.jbs.org/about>>

¹³ Don Shewey, "Patriot Acts" (*The Village Voice*, 16 November 2004), <<http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0446,shewey,58452,1.html>>

¹⁴ Philip Fisher, "The God of Hell" (*The British Theatre Guide*, 2005), 18 October 2006.

¹⁵ See Shewey and Susannah Clapp, "Torch Songs and Torturers" (*The Observer*, 30 October 2005). Don Shewey also briefly draws a connection between Shepard's play and *Waiting for Godot* in his review "Patriot Acts."

¹⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸ Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 31-32.

¹⁹ Thomas P. Adler, "Repetition and Regression in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*" in Roudané, ed., 119, 120.