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INTERACTIVE

“Curse of the Starving Class” still savage

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Home is where the hurt is.

Sam Shepard plumbs the wounds of the American psyche in [“Curse of the Starving Class.”](#) from the fractured bones of family life to the relentless invasion of real estate developers eating up the wide open spaces like locusts. Speculators run up land prices, swindle everyday folks and bury the land in strip malls, highways and endless mindnumbing sprawl.

Upon this desolate patch of terrain, one family offers itself up as a kind of blood sacrifice on the altar of the American dream in the [American Conservatory Theatre's](#) viciously tragicomic revival of the play. **Peter DuBois'** brilliantly shrewd production, which marks the 30th anniversary of its American premiere, revisits the mythic terrain of the American west with savage ferocity.

The director strikes like lightning from the play's opening moments, as the limitless desert sky (sublime set by **Loy Arcenas**) shifts under our gaze. The rosy-fingered dawn gives way to morning hues of blue. A new day might bring with it the promise of hope. Or just another turn on the wheel of disillusionment.

Weston (**Jack Willis**), the father of the piece, is a broken-down drunk, alternately plastered or explosive, leaving shards of bitterness and fear embedded in the hearts of his desperate wife Ella (Pamela Reed), his sullen son Wesley (**Jud Williford**) and his spitfire daughter Emma (**Nicole Lowrance**).

DuBois (soon to take over Boston's Huntington Theatre) wisely grounds the grotesque escapades of the play in a gutwrenching sense of flesh-and-blood reality. It's the unshakable conviction of each performance, no matter how small, that catapults this production to such incendiary heights of “liquid dynamite.”

Willis navigates the path between the brute and the man despairing for rebirth with a graceful sense of economy. Reed, who originated the part of the daughter in the play's New York premiere, brings a pit-bull's tenacity to the mother. She's a fighter too long subsumed in the role of caregiver, hair in

curlers, fluffy bath-robe on her back. Williford invests Wesley's staring, his unwaning watchfulness, with such vulnerability that it truly comes as a shock when he acts out in the play's famously outrageous acts of nudity and urination.

But it's Lowrance who is the revelation here. Her perky-nosed hopefulness soon turns as hard as cement. The iron determination that colors her blowout over her 4-H chicken leaves a stain on the play as indelible as the blood of the lamb (who bleats right on cue) in the play's final scene.

Shepard revised the text for this production, streamlining the plot until it moves as fast as a shell game. Crooks (a nicely oily **Dan Hiatt** as the shifty lawyer) and cheats (**T. Edward Webster** and **Howard Swain**) feed off their dreams of a better life. Soon there's no way out from a crushing mountain of debt and the house gets sold out from under them, a theme that rings loudly in a country wracked by the foreclosure crisis.

The larder is always bare. Hunger taunts them like a bully. One family member after another finds themselves mindlessly staring into the empty refrigerator as if it were an existential expanse, waiting, wanting, wishing to find some sustenance there.

Weston becomes obsessed with passing something down to his heirs, some tangible legacy of who he is and why he is here, but inheritance is an all or nothing game here. Sons are doomed to walk the paths of their wayward fathers even if it takes them right off a cliff.

Shepard's rewrites make the play so lean its all sinew (two acts instead of three). "Curse" now moves with relentless momentum, hurtling us toward the ground like the eagle in the play, knowing we're headed for a fall but helpless to cushion the impact.

(photo credit: Kevin Berne)