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Curse of the Starving Class

(American Conservatory Theater, San Francisco; 1,035 seats; \$82 top) An American Conservatory Theater presentation of a play in two acts by Sam Shepard. Directed by Peter DuBois.

Wesley - Jud Williford

Ella - Pamela Reed

Emma - Nicole Lowrance

Mr. Taylor - Dan Hiatt

Weston - Jack Willis

Ellis - Rod Gnapp

Malcolm - Craig Marker

Emerson - T. Edward Webster

Slater - Howard Swain

By DENNIS HARVEY

ACT bills its revival of Sam Shepard's "Curse of the Starving Class" as "a dysfunctional family classic." That not only suggests director Peter DuBois' primarily comic staging tenor, but how much more domestic disaster -- and everyday reality -- have come to be taken for granted as entertainment since the play premiered three decades ago. Newly revised and reshaped by the playwright, this first entry in his most fertile period (which then begat "Buried Child," "True West" and "Fool for Love") feels up-to-the-moment in other ways, too.

The changes aren't huge, but they tighten up a work that always seemed a tad slack at three acts. Now there are just two, picking up after intermission exactly where the action leaves off at the end of act one (dad passed out on the

dining table). A late death and a couple other plot points have been clarified; some passages, trimmed.

Overall it's very much the same grotesque tragi-farce, flavorfully set on Loy Arcenas' cutaway kitchen interior, almost as dusty as the desert scrub and rusted junk in the yard beyond. Here, day breaks as usual: Regretting the night before. When perennially drunk Weston (bearish, bellowing Jack Willis) found the door locked, he broke it down, to which fed-up spouse Ella (Pamela Reed) responded by calling the cops.

Clearing the debris, son Wesley (Jud Williford) gets precious little thanks from mom. She then dispenses bizarre hygienic wisdom to daughter Emma (Nicole Lowrance), a tomboy experiencing her first period. When Emma discovers her 4-H Club project has been ruined by careless kin, she throws a tantrum that's among the play's highlights.

Dreaming of new life in Europe (imagined in terms more suitable for Shangri-La), Ma spills that she's hoping to sell the place -- house, land, livestock and all. But Wesley doesn't want to go anywhere.

While she and "lawyer friend" Mr. Taylor (Dan Hiatt) are out conniving, Wes Senior turns up for one of his brief appearances between benders. He lets slip to Jr. that Dad, too, has plans to sell the joint and hightail it to Mexico -- no doubt to flee his debts. Neither parent seems much concerned with their children's future, beyond the vague sentiment that anything would be better than this status quo.

Act two brings subsidiary characters and a major "rebirth" for Weston. The play's gravitas comes through in the final scene, though DuBois and a sharp cast -- notably, Reed played Emma in the 1978 New York production -- otherwise emphasize the script's rosy, laconic absurdism. The verbal tumbleweeds blowing through these characters' shellshocked mindsets are nihilistic, all-American, and plain funny.

Shepard was writing back then about the suburbanization of a post-WWII West, the dissolution of small-scale agri-biz, and his own military father turned alcoholic farmer. But this "Curse" sports eerie new resonance in its comments on a culture sustained (at least for some) by debt. And Ella's belief that "Land can never depreciate" provokes a nervous, knowing yuk, given the current U.S. mortgage/home-value crises.

All design contribs are astute.

Set, Loy Arcenas; costumes, Lydia Tanji; lighting, Japhy Weideman; original music and sound, Fabian Obispo; dramaturg, Michael Paller; dialect coach, Deborah Sussel. Opened April 30, 2008. Reviewed May 1. Running time: 2 HOURS, 35 MIN.

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