

Theater: 'The Starving Class'

By RICHARD EDER

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“WE don't belong to the starving class,” howls Emma when she learns that her mother has boiled and eaten her chicken, the one she had raised from the egg and was planning to dissect for her 4-H club.

Ella, the mother, regrets the mistake but is too busy wolfing down a whole plate of bacon to concentrate on her daughter's wrath. Meanwhile, Emma's brother, Wesley, is urinating on the posters she had prepared to go with the dissection.

It is a bad moment for Emma, but by the time Sam Shepard's "Curse of the Starving Class" is over, things have gone badly for the whole family.

The central notion of Mr. Shepard's play, which opened last night at the Public Theater, is hunger. Emma's protest is futile; for Mr. Shepard the common people—white-collar, blue-collar or whatever—is one great starving class. Its hungers, its ambitions, its wants are artificially stimulated; and what it strives for is phony food that doesn't bring satisfaction, only a new voracity.

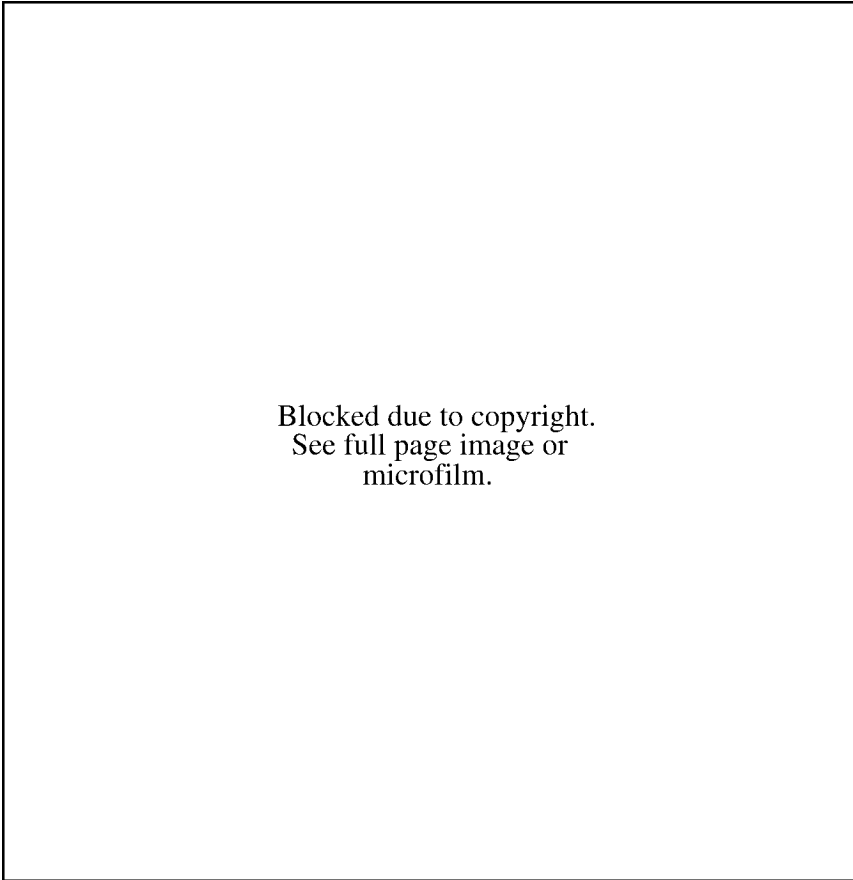
Ultimately, the message goes, American life is controlled by crooks and swindlers who delude the people and end up stripping them.

Mr. Shepard has worked out the message in images of considerable power, and in a style that oscillates between realism and savage fantasy. A violent humor predominates, slipping into plain violence. Unfortunately, much of the force hangs in the air. It plays like a play that reads well, as if Mr. Shepard had failed to consider what would happen when his parable took physical form on the stage, and his images were played out by real actors performing in real time.

The family—the son and daughter, the mother and a father who appears partway through—live in a kind of hellish chaos. Their house is a ramshackle, collapsing affair somewhere in the West. A little money seems to come in, though the father lives in a drunken haze, but the family's eternal moral deprivation and hunger are symbolized by a decrepit icebox.

The talk returns obsessively to eating, and periodically each character goes over to the icebox and stares into it. It is generally empty. When the father manages to bring home food, it is something nobody wants — artichokes. At one point, the mother stocks up the icebox, but she has bought the food by selling the house to a swindler.

The household, in effect, is disintegrating. The mother tries to run off to Europe or Mexico, but ends up asleep on the table. The daughter wants to run off to become a car mechanic, so she can help people stranded on the road—and steal the engines when they are not looking. The son has an inchoate obsession with keeping the family



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Frederic Ohrlander

Ebbe Roe Smith and sheep in "Curse of the Starving Class," a new play by Sam Shepard at the New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theater

together, and the father rallies at one point, bathes, sobers up, does the laundry and tries to head off the growing chaos. Ultimately, a gang of murderous creditors takes over, blows up the family car with the daughter inside it, and seems determined to kill the father as well.

Essentially the characters are grotesque archetypes. They are often funny, and often the savage parody they personify does register. But that is the problem. Mr. Shepard has deliberately dehumanized them and drawn their recognizable natures into surrealistic extremes. They become messages

But we are stuck with real figures doing real things on the stage. When the son begins to gorge himself obscenely on everything he finds in the icebox—he stuffs in raw eggs, raw meat, heads of lettuce—the message is about the American obsession with consuming. But we have to deal with the sight of all this food on the floor: all this stage blood—the son is injured—smears about. There is no reasonable relation between the message and the means employed to declare it; the metaphor and the metaphor's mechanics fight each other.

Olympia Dukakis gives an absorbing series of grotesque variations as the

Hunger in America

CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS by Sam Shepard. Directed by Robert Woodruff; setting and costumes by Santo Laquasto; lighting by Martin Tudor; music by Bob Feldman; production stage manager, Zane Welner. Presented by the New York Shakespeare Festival, Joseph Papp, producer, Bernard Gersten, associate producer. At the Newman/Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street.

Wesley Ebbe Roe Smith
Ella Olympia Dukakis
Emma Pamela Reed
Taylor Kenneth Welsh
Weston James Gammon
Ellis Eddie Jones
Malcolm John Aquino
Emerson Michael J. Pollard
Slater Raymond J. Barry

mother. James Gammon plays the father in an effective, basically realistic style: His transition from shambling drunk to fastidious housekeeper is very good. Pamela Reed is fierce and funny as the daughter. The rest of the cast does well, though Ebbe Roe Smith makes the son excessively maudlin and slobbery.

Santo Laquasto has constructed a spare, dingy set. The stage is slightly inclined, and every object is at the wrong angle and distance, producing an appropriate physical disquiet. The director, Robert Woodruff, has allowed the action to drag excessively, accentuating the play's tendency to self-indulgence.