



BY SAM SHEPARD

**CYGNET
THEATRE**

TEACHER STUDY GUIDE

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About this Guide

This Study Guide contains a variety of resource material to accommodate different classes and levels. Teachers need not use all the material found here but rather choose the most appropriate materials given their current curriculum. Topics may be used separately or in any combination that works for you.

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Cygnnet Theatre Company values the feedback of teachers on the content and format of its Study Guides. We would appreciate your comments or suggestions on ways to improve future Study Guides. Comments may be directed to **Taylor M. Wycoff** by email at taylor@cygnnettheatre.com.

About the Play

Austin simply wants to focus on finishing his screenplay. But when his petty-thief of a brother, Lee, barges into a meeting with a producer and hijacks Austin's script, it sets off a sibling war to rival Cain and Abel as both brothers struggle for identity.



Production photos from the 2000 Broadway revival of True West starring Philip Seymour Hoffman, John C. Riley, Robert LuPone, and Celia Weston

Plot Synopsis

Austin is house-sitting for his mother while she is in Alaska. He is in the midst of writing a screenplay. His brother Lee visits the house in order to steal from the neighboring houses. Lee pesters Austin as he tries to write. Austin gives Lee the keys to his car, with Lee's assurance that he will be out of the house while Austin meets later with a movie producer.

Saul Kimmer, the movie producer whom Austin is working with, visits Austin at the house. He seems excited by Austin's story. Lee returns in the middle of the meeting. Lee invites Saul to a game of golf the next morning, and convinces him to hear an idea for a screenplay. Austin and Lee stay up all night writing an outline to show Saul. They argue and threaten each other, but they finally reach an understanding and start to work in earnest.

Lee returns giddy from his golf game the next day because, as part of a gamble he made with Saul, his story is going to be produced- instead of Austin's. Austin is incredulous, but Saul comes by and tells him that he has decided to produce Lee's story instead. That night Austin gets drunk while Lee tries to type out the screenplay to accompany his movie idea. Austin mocks Lee for not being able to write a screenplay, while Lee bets Austin that he could not even steal a toaster.

The next morning, Austin polishes the thirty toasters he has stolen from neighborhood houses and Lee is wrecking the typewriter with a golf club. Austin wants to get away from the suburbs and begs Lee to take him to the desert. Lee agrees, but only on the condition that Austin help him write the screenplay.

Mom returns from her trip unexpectedly. Austin tells her that he and Lee are going to the desert. Lee says it is not going to happen, and tries to leave. Austin strangles him with a telephone cord. Mom leaves the house to escape the fighting. When Austin thinks he has killed Lee he begins to go. Lee, however, jumps up quickly and blocks his brother's exit.

- Emily Yavitch

Characters

AUSTIN is in his early thirties. He has a home with his wife and children. He and his brother Lee have a tenuous relationship. Austin has a solid life: he went to college and now works as a screenwriter, while Lee has always been a drifter. Austin is afraid of Lee- but he also envies the freedom of Lee's life. Austin is working on a screenplay while he house sits for his mother. When Saul Kimmer, the movie producer, drops Austin's script in favor of Lee's, Austin gets incredibly angry. He gets drunk, steals toasters, and desires to go to the desert- in short, follow the sort of life Lee leads.

LEE is Austin's elder brother. He returns from three months roaming the desert. He was with his father, who is a drunk. Lee is resentful of Austin, whose life is more stable than his own. Lee sells his story idea to Saul- and plans to use the money to help his father.

SAUL KIMMER is a movie producer.

MOM does not have much influence over her sons. She tries to ignore the dangerous relationship between the two of them.

- Emily Yavitch

Glossary of Terms

(in order of appearance)

Hoppalong Cassidy: a fictional cowboy hero created in 1904 by the author Clarence E. Mulford, who wrote a series of popular short stories and twenty-eight novels based on the character. The character has been the center of films, television programs, radio programs, and comic books.

Safeway: a supermarket chain located throughout the Western states, with the greatest concentration in California.

Al Jolson: an American singer, comedian, and actor in the 1910s through the 1940s. He was known as "The World's Greatest Entertainer."

Lee Trevino: A Mexican American professional golfer from Texas, who won six major championships during his career.

The Grapevine: A portion of the Ridge Route part of Interstate 5, a two-lane highway, from Los Angeles, California to the San Joaquin Valley

Mojave: a U.S. desert that occupies a portion of southeastern California, southern Nevada, southwestern Utah and northwestern Arizona.

Geronimo: a prominent leader of the Bedonkohe Apache who fought against Mexico and the United States for several decades during the Apache Wars.

Handicap (in regards to golf): a numerical measure of a golfer's potential playing ability, based on the tees played for a given course. It allows players of different skill levels to play against each other on somewhat equal terms. The higher the handicap of a player, the poorer the player is relative to those with lower handicaps.

Our Production

The Artistic Team

Director/Scenic Designer.....Sean Murray
Stage Manager.....Chandra Anthenill°*
Lighting Designer.....Conor Mulligan
Sound Designer.....Matt Lescault-Wood°
Properties Designer.....Angelica Ynfante°
Costume Designer.....Jessica John Gercke°
Wig & Makeup Designer.....Peter Herman°
Fight Choreographer.....George Ye°
Dramaturg.....Taylor Wycoff
Assistant Stage Manager.....Marie Jahelka*
Assistant Scenic Designer.....Chad Dellinger
Stage Crew.....Trevor Frank
Executive Director.....Bill Schmidt
Production Manager.....Jenn Stauffer
Technical Director.....Sam Moore
Lighting & Sound Supervisor.....David Scott
Wardrobe & Wig Maintenance.....Katie Knox
Charge Artist.....Syd Stevens

The Cast

MomJill Drexler
Lee.....Manny Fernandes°
Austin.....Fran Gercke°*
Saul KimmerMatthew Gottlieb

*Member of Actors' Equity Association, °Cygnet Resident Artist



Manny Fernandes and Fran Gercke in Cygnet Theatre Company's production of *True West*.

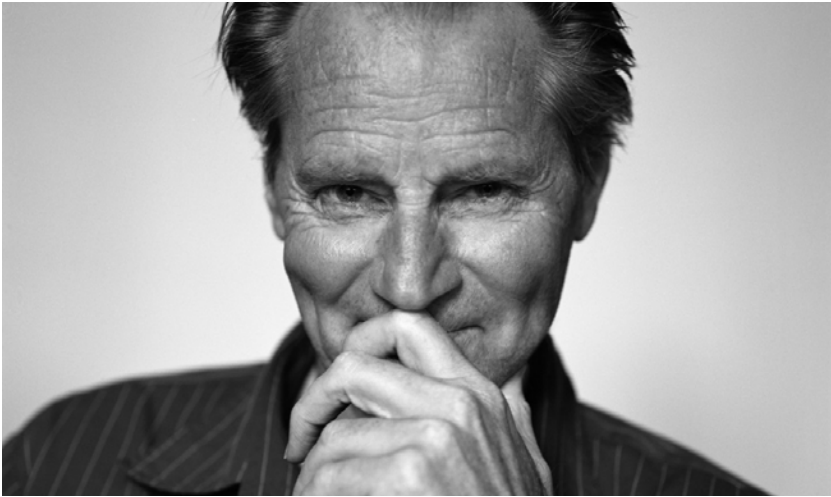
From the Dramaturg

First performed at San Francisco's the Magic Theatre on July 10, 1980, *True West* is at first glance a far more traditional narrative than those usually spun by Sam Shepard. Indeed, he built his reputation for being almost stubbornly experimental and his plays defied the kitchen sink realism so persistent in the American theatre. With *True West*, however, he abandoned the long monologues and lack of cohesive narrative characteristic of his earlier works in favor of clever banter and tight plotting.

True West takes its place in Shepard's ongoing investigation of the volatile relationship between father and son. Throughout the entire body of his work, Shepard has almost obsessively mapped the painful necessity to at least attempt to break away from a father's influence. And although the brothers' father never appears onstage in *True West*, "the old man" nonetheless hangs over the entire play like a pendulum over the pit. Still, there is much more worth exploring in *True West* beyond this familiar theme.

To help you in that regard, I have put together this guide for your reference as you prepare your students to attend the show. The first section, "About the Play," provides the foundation for attending the production- a plot synopsis, character descriptions and relationships, and a list of terms students may be unfamiliar with. What follows then is supplementary information about the playwright and several analyses of *True West* that look at the show from a variety of different perspectives. "True West, False West" comments on Sam Shepard's use of duality and role reversals as a mechanism to explore the central question of identity. "The Myth of the American Dream in True West" asks you to contemplate how we define the "American Dream" and whether or not it can be attained by the characters in Shepard's play. A common theme in Shepard's work, particularly his family plays, is family ties and the curse of ancestry, which is explored in "You can't escape your past: Mythology and American Identity." In "The Real West" you'll find a comparison of The Old West vs. The New West. Finally, I have included a brief synopsis of Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* and a bit of insight into our decision to run the shows in repertory, and a friendly reminder of proper theatre etiquette. I hope this information proves helpful and enjoy the show!

About the Playwright, Sam Shepard



Sam Shepard is often cited as one of the greatest American playwrights, along with the likes of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O'Neill. A prolific writer of 57 plays, 11 of which have won Obie Awards, Shepard has also penned numerous short stories, poems, and musical and dance compositions. He is also a director, an accomplished stage and film actor, and a practiced drummer good enough to have shared the stage with such accomplished musicians as T-Bone Burnett and Bob Dylan.

"I just dropped out of nowhere," Shepard said of his fall 1963 arrival in New York at the age of 19. With his first production opening before he turned twenty, his early work quickly exploded in the Off-Off Broadway theatre movement at places like Caffé Cino, La Mama, the Open Theatre, the American Place Theatre, and Theatre Genesis. As a California native, he also had an artistic home at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco (where *Fool for Love* and *True West* were both originally produced). By the time he was thirty years old, Shepard had penned more than 30 plays and had won several Obie Awards. By the time he was 40, he was second only to Tennessee Williams as the most produced playwright in America. His plays tend to explore themes of love, loss, and dysfunctional family life and are often set in the gritty small towns and open spaces of the American West. Aside from those themes, his plays are difficult to categorize except for the fact that they blend unexpected humor and beauty with brutal honesty and painful relationships.

Most critics agree that Shepard made his greatest contribution to American drama when he wrote his "family trilogy" which includes *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976), *Buried Child* (1979 Pulitzer Prize for Drama) and *True West* (1980). Moving away from his experimental phase, Shepard was inspired to focus more on his characters, arguably resulting in his most substantive and impactful work. He explained this shift in focus saying, "It suddenly occurred to me that I was maybe avoiding a territory that I needed to investigate which is the family. And I avoided it for quite a while because, to me, there was a danger, and I was a little afraid of it."

Some critics believe *Fool for Love* (1983) and Shepard's next play, the Drama Desk Award-winning *A Life of the Mind* (1985), which explored similar themes, extended his exalted "family trilogy" into a "family quintet." After writing about an endless cycle of male violence in *True West*, Shepard said that his move to female characters was an attempt to explore a way out for men because he was "beginning to realize that the female-side knows so much more than the male side. About childbirth. About death. About where it's at."

Shepard's plays are never documentary in style, as the line between reality and fantasy is always intentionally blurred; his plays are often departures from real life, inspired by his own autobiography but never directly linked. As scholar Sherrill Grace keenly states: "However straightforward they may seem at first, however careful Shepard may be about realistic details or with characters who seem very familiar, sooner or later an audience is forced to abandon the comfortable realm of logic, clarity, predictability and familiarity for an illogical realm of intense emotion, violent unpredictability and complex symbolic inner states." Shepard's realism is not the cozy realism of finicky families quibbling over the dinner table; his worlds evoke violent, lustful, and dangerous realities that can't always be wrapped up and tied with a bow. Or to put it in his own words, "Beginnings are definitely the most exciting, middles are perplexing, and endings are a disaster."

True West, False West

When you're looking for someone, you're looking for some aspect of yourself, even if you don't know it ... What we're searching for is what we lack.

—Sam Shepard, in an interview with The Observer, March 2010

The play *True West* was first staged at San Francisco's Magic Theatre in the summer of 1980 and can be read as one of Shepard's most poignant inquiries into the ironic process of working both in the film industry (he had recently appeared in the critically acclaimed film *Days of Heaven*) and as a playwright. Shepard here retreats from the spectacular staging of his earlier works and uses a more naturalistic mode to explore the inner workings of the individual. It's as if Shepard grew out of his rock and roll fantasies and began to pursue the question of identity through the grittier emotional universe of the dysfunctional family.

Specifically, *True West* gives us two brothers, Austin and Lee, as they house-sit for their mother. The two brothers seem entirely different-- Lee is a desert drifter and sometime thief who arrives at the house uninvited, while Austin is a Hollywood screenwriter. The ferocity with which they war with one another indicates not only a deep-seated conflict between them but also an equally compelling symbiosis. "I wanted to write a play about double nature," Shepard said later, "one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's a real thing, double nature. I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It's not so cute. Not some little thing we can get over. It's something we've got to live with." (qtd. in Shewey, p. 141) Note that this explanation moves from the personal to the collective very quickly: first he implies that he knows what it feels like to be "two-sided," then he declares that it is a universal condition.

While it is debatable whether all of us suffer from some sort of psychic split, it is certain that Shepard does, and the well-known double life of Sam Shepard looms large over any and all productions of *True West*. As Sheila Rabillard observes, "Certainly Austin and Lee, the opposite and to some extent interchangeable brothers, correspond to two sides of the Shepard known to the audience: the photogenic and much described playwright from California ... and the rough-hewn character familiar from the films he had appeared in at this point in his career." (in Wilcox, p.83) In this way the public persona of Sam Shepard is very much present in *True West*, and the fierce battle between the two characters echoes the struggle between Cavale and Slim-two earlier Shepard characters- in its frankly confessionalist subtext. Like the play that they came from- *Cowboy Mouth*- *True West* pits characters against one another in exploring the larger issue of the conflicted identity of a single artist.



The setting is "40 miles east of Los Angeles"-- in other words, almost precisely where Shepard spent his teens with his family in Duarte, California. (in *Seven Plays*, p.3) In *The Unseen Hand*, Shepard named the setting "Azusa," which he says is also forty miles east of Los Angeles. The playwright's introduction to this play confesses an obsession with the place, described as one that "grew out of nothing and nowhere. ...People who couldn't make it in the big city just drove away from it. They got so far and just quit the road...It was a temporary society that became permanent. Everybody still had the itch to get on to something better for themselves but found themselves stuck. It was a car culture for the young.

For the old it was just a dead end. ...[T]hese Southern California towns have stuck with me not so much as a fond memory but as a jumping off place. They hold a kind of junk magic. (Action and The Unseen Hand, pp.43-44) This area "40 miles east of Los Angeles" is not merely an autobiographical font of local color; it is the magic source for the playwright's dramatic tension, his heart's country. It is the real place where Shepard spent his formative years, yet the playwright also condemns its artificiality. It is Shepard's heart's country perhaps because, not in spite, of its dual nature as both authentic and inauthentic.

Clearly present in *True West* is this sort of tension between the surface appearance of a sort of middle-class-America Eden and its inherent emptiness. Austin, the younger of two brothers house-sitting for their mother, says, ironically, "Indoors. Safe. This is a Paradise down here." (p. 39) Lee, on the other hand, recognizes that this place is truly the dead end to which Shepard earlier referred in saying, "Kinda' place that sorta' kills ya' inside," though he sees the surrounding neighborhood a motherlode for stealing televisions. (p.12)



Production photos from the 2000 Broadway revival of *True West* starting Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Riley.

By scene six, Lee is dazzling Austin's producer, Saul, with a screenplay of his own, and Austin takes to petty larceny and begs to be shown how to live in the desert. The process of concocting Lee's screenplay is especially interesting in that it seems to mock the very idea of depicting life with anything even approaching realism or authenticity. Austin's screenplay concerns the nearly universal experience of love, while Lee's depicts an improbable, and seemingly endless, chase through the panhandle of Texas.

The contentious brothers agree to share with each other their particular gifts. As Austin coaches Lee through the creation of a script, the brothers enact the very conflict dogging Shepard:

LEE: Just help me a little with the characters, all right? You know how to do it, Austin.

AUSTIN: (on the floor, laughs) The characters!

LEE: Yeah. You know. The way they talk and stuff. I can hear it in my head but I can't get it down on paper.

AUSTIN: What characters?

LEE: The guys. The guys in the story.

AUSTIN: Those aren't characters.

LEE: Whatever you call 'em then. I need to write somethin' out.

AUSTIN: Those are illusions of characters.

LEE: I don't give a damn what ya' call 'em! You know what I'm talkin' about!

AUSTIN: Those are fantasies of a long lost boyhood. (p.40)

Likewise, the characters and fundamental concerns of Sam Shepard the adult artist often verge on what some might call the "fantasies of a long lost boyhood"-- rock-and-roll and cowboys, most conspicuously. But this may provide a clue as to the artist's choices: if Shepard's formative artistic influences were Hollywood westerns then it is

perhaps only fitting that he would exhibit an affinity for those forms even after he was ushered into the pantheon of serious dramatists. His apparently sincere interest in pop culture "fantasies" may be seen less as an irony or a folly than a return to his own origins.

The supposed gift Lee possesses for writing for the screen is what Saul calls "raw talent" (p. 34), and closely resembles Shepard's own often mythologized untutored approach to writing. Furthermore, Austin is portrayed as the meticulous artist, one who is "in touch" (p. 41) with mainstream society and media, as opposed to Lee's "speaking from experience" (Ibid), specifically the experience of a marginalized existence in the desert. Questioning Saul about what he sees in Lee's writing, he leads the dialogue into a discussion of authenticity:

AUSTIN: What do you see in it? I'm curious.

SAUL: It has the ring of truth, Austin.

AUSTIN: (laughs) Truth?

LEE: It is true.

SAUL: Something about the real West.

AUSTIN: Why? Because it's got horses? Because it's got grown men acting like boys?

SAUL: Something about the land. Your brother is speaking from experience.

AUSTIN: So am I! (p.34)

Lee has not experienced the bizarre episode he describes in his screenplay, but Saul picks up on the idea that there is a mythical quality to it as it relates to the land, which suggests a primal experience-- Lee is a romantic. Austin, on the other hand, asserts his own authenticity in writing about more common occurrences, like love. And though Saul chooses Lee's work over Austin's, both artists have a point in that they are equally authentic in many ways. The dichotomy between the two brothers then breaks down entirely as the brothers live too closely for several days and each becomes fascinated and involved with the other's life. The result is violence, and the final image on stage is that of Lee blocking Austin's escape from the room, as lights fade to black and a lone coyote calls in the distance (p. 59). Lee has the upper hand, however, and the implication is that the demonic older brother, having served as the catalyst for most of the play's action and brought his unusual insight to the dialogue, has transformed and trapped Austin. Meanwhile, Austin has merely provided his brother with a constructive, yet highly problematic, outlet for his creativity. One can assume that Shepard's own romanticism, perpetually battling with the demands of our highly structured commercial world, is the more forceful component of his psyche.

The authorial imagination seems superficially concerned with the authenticity, or the "True"-ness, of art, and in particular when fed into the commercial machine that is Hollywood. Most deeply, however, the play enacts a profound psychic split. Nowhere does Shepard address the broader concerns of "humanity's" split, let alone offer resolution or hope. *True West* is a drama set within the inner landscape of the author, his characters playing out his most violent and contradictory compulsions. The finale is one of claustrophobic tension, and it is the work of a deeply frustrated and extraordinarily ambivalent artist.



The frustration, though, finds release in the creation of art (as seen earlier as Slim brutalizes the drums and attacks the guitar in *Cowboy Mouth*), yet the ambivalence between the purity and passion of the artist (Lee) and the dazzling artificiality of Hollywood is ever-present. The conflict between Lee and Austin finds them returning again and again to the typewriter, their figurative battlefield.

Though the final image of the two brothers locked indefinitely in an insoluble conflict forms the visual conclusion to *True West*, there is another moment, earlier on, which is equally important. At the end of Act One's fourth scene, Lee dictates his "true" western to Austin at the typewriter as the lights fade, and it is a startlingly insightful soliloquy:

So they take off after each other straight into an endless black prairie. The sun is just comin' down and they can feel the night on their backs. What they don't know is that each one of 'em is afraid, see. Each one of separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going." (p.27)

The typing then stops as the lights go to black, and the sound of the crickets fades (Ibid). The struggle in this passage is recast as a quest. There is motion forward, but it is a blind chase choreographed by two unwitting collaborators. The final scene echoes this poetic monologue in its implication that the clash of the two characters represents an open-ended struggle towards an unidentifiable goal. However, the mere possibility of conclusion, as the two "fictional" characters race across "tornado country" swapping trucks for horses, questing endlessly, urges them on indefinitely. They, like Lee and Austin and, indeed, like the disparate forces that drive Sam Shepard as an artist and as a man, must remain suspended in eternal pursuit. For the central problem for any romantic, Hough rightly contends, is "insoluble." (xix) The search for identity necessitates, for Shepard, such a journey of continual motion in which roles are taken, then escaped. And the authenticity of such a quest comes from its very impossibility: to reach its destination would not ring true. The quest must continue-- if the truck runs out of gas, hop on the horse-- through the endless cycle of adoption, critique, and abandonment of roles, because no one role ever seems to get the author where he wants to go.

In his appraisal of Bob Dylan in Rolling Thunder Logbook, Shepard concludes, similarly, in "If a Mystery is Solved":

If a mystery is solved, the case is dropped. In this case, in the case of Dylan, the mystery is never solved, so the case keeps on. It keeps coming up again. Over and over the years. Who is this character anyway? (p.73)

Ironically, just three years after the first production of this play, Sam Shepard would become famous beyond his wildest dreams and find himself nominated for Best Supporting Actor for his role as Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff*. Two years after that, in 1985, his face, partially concealed by a large cowboy hat and sunglasses, would appear on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine (Nov. 11, 1985) under the banner headline, "TRUE WEST," begging the question, "Who is this character anyway?"

-John Blackburn

The Myth of the American Dream in *True West*

The funny thing about having all this so-called success is that behind it is a certain horrible emptiness.

—Sam Shepard, in an interview with The Observer, March 2010

What is the “American Dream?” What would make any of us perfectly happy? Some believe the American Dream means finding fame and fortune, or, at the very least, settling down in a nice house with a nice spouse and having nice children. For others, the American Dream is rooted in the idea of freedom: open roads, no expectations, no demands and no limits. In Sam Shepard’s world, it seems that no matter how the



American Dream is interpreted, his characters are doomed to never achieve it. Instead, they are held back from their dreams by what they see as their missed opportunities. In Shepard’s *True West*, brothers Austin and Lee are two men determined to leave their current lives behind in pursuit of the American Dream, only to discover they can’t let go of the opportunities they never had.

Austin and Lee are so different, they hardly seem like they could share the same parents. The two men can barely share the same house without killing each other. By most people’s standards, younger brother Austin seems to have achieved the American Dream. Through hard work and responsible choices, he has developed a career as a Hollywood screenwriter. He has a wife and children, and like any good son, he still lends a helping hand to his mother when needed—even babysitting her houseplants while she is away. Austin represents the more standard, materialistic American Dream: attaining success through a career, money and family life.

Where Austin has succeeded, wild child Lee appears to have failed. Lee lives the life of a drifter, roaming the untamed desert he calls home. A heavy drinker and a thief, Lee returns to his mother’s house not to help care for any houseplants, but to steal appliances from Mom’s neighbors. Lee embodies the quintessential ideals of the Old West: while he may lack in wealth, he is free to roam where he will, disregarding society’s rules and answering to no one.

The brothers have their fair share of differences, but they also have one thing in common: each man actually envies the life the other leads, and craves that opposite version of the American Dream. Lee, seeing an opportunity for a fortune that stealing appliances will never bring him, decides to give the successful screenwriter role a try by wrangling a movie deal from Austin’s Hollywood producer contact, Saul. Austin, on the other hand, begins to feel he isn’t really so successful after all. He is no longer satisfied with his life as a writer and family man, and longs to return to the desert. The brothers eventually trade places: Lee struggles to write a screenplay on Austin’s typewriter, while Austin resorts to heavy drinking and stealing toasters. By the play’s end, neither brother has found happiness, and both are doomed to flee further into a desert that seems an unlikely place for dreams to come true. Whatever the American Dream may be, it can’t be found here.

-Whitney Miller-Brengle

You Can't Escape Your Past: Mythology and the American Identity

"There is no escape from the family. And it almost seems like the whole willfulness of the sixties was to break away from the family, the family was no longer viable, no longer valid somehow in everybody's mind. The "nuclear family" and all these coined phrases suddenly became meaningless. We were all independent, we were all free of that, we were somehow spinning out there in the world without any connection whatsoever, you know. Which is ridiculous. It's absolutely ridiculous to intellectually think that you can sever yourself, I mean even if you didn't know who your mother and father were, if you never met them, you are still intimately, inevitably, and entirely connected to who brought you into the world – through a long, long chain, regardless of whether you know them face to face or not.."

– The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard



A major theme in Sam Shepard's work is that you can't escape your past. Or your father's past. Or your grandfather's, and great-grandfather's, and on down the line.

In this world choices made generations before determine our actions, beliefs, and destinies in ways we often can't understand except through a primal, half remembered and certainly half understood mythology.

Shepard is an American writer and is interested in what it means to be American – particularly the often unacknowledged violence, domination and savagery at the heart of the country. We have mythologized these stories to make them palatable, but the darkness at their heart informs the myths and our reactions to them. The stories he explores are the myths of the west, but they apply to the whole nation since the mythology of the cowboy and the

wild frontier permeates the entire country. The myths were in the east with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows and the resonance of dime novels. Later the movies brought the myth of the heroic (but very violent) cowboy nationwide creating the template for how most Americans think, whether they admit it or not.

Shepard takes the national story/myth and scrutinizes it on a family level (it is likely he sees us as a tribal people at heart, and families are the tribes related by blood and territory). The family (like the country) is supposed to be "civilized," with rules, laws, a structure, logic, and on the surface this is the case. There is usually a father, mother, children, a home, a community around it, often a religious figure appears. But underneath all this "civilization" is a darkness, a need to dominate either through physical or emotional violence – and that violence has been there from the beginning. It's supposed to be a long-buried secret, but it keeps coming to the surface, creating havoc on the innocent and the guilty. It is the violence that, arguably, was needed to tame the frontier (which we should remember, started at the deeply forested eastern shores of the continent held by Native Americans who often weren't in a mood to be "dominated.")

The taming of the frontier and the rugged individuals who used violence to wrest it away, break it, then control it, played out every few decades as the move west went on. The frontier in Illinois, Ohio and the Virginias was just as, if not more, violent and brutal than the frontier in Wyoming, Nevada and California. It's an old story (and one that has been played out in every country the world over since "civilization" began) and Shepard says, built into our DNA so that no matter how "civilized" we claim to be, it is still just under the surface. The myths try to explain it, but in the end even the myth is incapable of controlling it.

- Randall Wise

The Real West

I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn't be symbolic, metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's a real thing, double nature. I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It's not so cute. Not some little thing we can get over. It's something we've got to live with.

-Sam Shepard on True West

Sam Shepard mentioned in an interview that he wanted to write a play about how people are divided -- have a "double nature."⁷ This gave *True West* reviewers fodder to write about themes of sibling rivalry, role reversal, and the old west vs. the new west in the play. Scholars also find these elements in *True West*, but they focus on the importance of myth. For Tucker Orbison, *True West* contains different levels of myth: The mythical west of cowboys, who aren't always civilized; the mythical journey of the artist, where the artist deals with archetypal conflicts; and the mythical struggle of the "second-self," where Lee is presented in Jungian terms. Lee is a "shadow figure" whose only goal is to achieve a "total psychic integration" with Austin.⁴ Other scholars like Jeffrey Hoyer have argued that Shepard used the archetypal story of Cain and Abel, but it has undergone "ironic and comic revisions that undermine both the patriarchal values of Lee and the matriarchal values of Austin".³ For William Kleb, Austin and Lee are a gestalt of Shepard's psyche. The two brothers are a manifestation of the "divided-self," and Kleb emphasizes that the gestalt is a portrait of the artist because of similarities between characters and setting in *True West*.⁴ From these critical arguments, scholars posit that myth is an important element in *True West*; however, they don't put much emphasis on the myth of the old west Lee envisions and the new west Austin envisions. This essay will argue that myth is a prevalent element in the context of Lee's vision of the old west and Austin's vision of the new west, and because the brothers' versions never achieve equilibrium, a true west never emerges from the play. What does emerge is a play elevated to the stature of myth.

The initial moments of act one, scene one set up the contrasts between the brothers. Austin, who is trying to write a script by candlelight, is illuminated, but when the lights rise full, we find that Lee is present in the scene, too. "Mildly drunk" and taking a "slug of beer," Lee emerges out of the darkness.⁶ The stark differences in characters are apparent in the two brothers' actions. Austin is trying to be rational and write, but Lee's irrationality often introduces chaos into the scene. An example is when Lee questions Austin's work habits:

Lee: You always work by candlelight?

Austin: No—um—Not always.

Lee: Just sometimes?

Austin: Yeah. Sometimes it's soothing.

Lee: Isn't that what the old guys did?

Austin: What old guys?

Lee: The Forefathers. You know.

Austin: Forefathers?⁶

Lee immediately recognizes the connection to the past generations of writers and the romantic implications of "candlelight burning into night" and "cabins in the wilderness" because Lee is a natural man, a drifter, an outdoorsman.⁶ Candlelight reminds Lee of the "first settlers of the west."³ Austin, a married businessman, living in the suburbs, however, does not recognize any connection to past generations of writers because he is further removed from nature.

Lee's attributes of the old west emerge when Austin, wanting Lee out of the house when Saul comes over to talk business, refuses to give him the keys to the car. Although Lee tries to follow the "social game" by promising to take care of the car and fill it with gas, his brutal, uncivilized nature manifests itself when he says, "I'll just take the damn thing."^{2, 7}

Austin tries to combat the violence with rational, civilized language and by offering Lee a sum of money. The monetary offer proves to be more disastrous. Lee is against Austin's "Hollywood blood money" because it paid off their father; consequently, Lee uses violence and shakes his brother.⁷

Early in the first act Austin and Lee emerge as opposing forces: one is rational and civilized; one is irrational and uncivilized. The distinction continues into scene two, but Lee begins to suggest that the old west, the west where rugged frontiersmen camp out on the desert because the heat is cleaner and the houses out there have a "sweet kinda' suburban silence," is "like a paradise."⁷ Lee finds this "paradise" by wandering the Mojave Desert, and an important point is that Lee does this alone. He is an independent individual who has neglected to speak to family members in years and cannot be confined. The small set tries to confine Lee, but Lee constantly leaves the set: he slips in and out of the window, he leaves the stage to go golfing with Saul, and he leaves the stage to go steal televisions. This is contrasted with Austin's new west, a west where business comes first. Austin never mentions his script as art; it is a "project," "period piece," or "just a little research."⁷ Austin's reluctance to call his work a piece of art may be suggesting he is only interested in money, not art. Another interesting point about business is that Austin is dependent on Saul because Austin needs his script produced so he can get money to support his family.

The business aspects are affirmed when Saul decides to not pursue Austin's romance script and pursue Lee's "true-to-life". . . "Contemporary Western."⁷ As act one closes, we learn Saul gambled with Lee on the golf course, and because Saul lost the bet, Lee has a chance to get his script produced. Lee's script is notable because it contains elements of the old west:

"So they take off after each other straight into an endless black prairie. The sun is just commin' down and they can feel the night on their backs...And they keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going."⁷

The connection to nature is apparent with the "black prairie" and "the night on their backs". A temporal position is suggested through this passage because the chaser and chasee have no conception of where they are going. The passage contains no conception of the future or the past because the characters are focused on the present. The cowboys Lee envisions are isolated in a never-ending present and their existence is not confined to one or two locales. The cowboys populated in Lee's old west have a near absolute freedom.

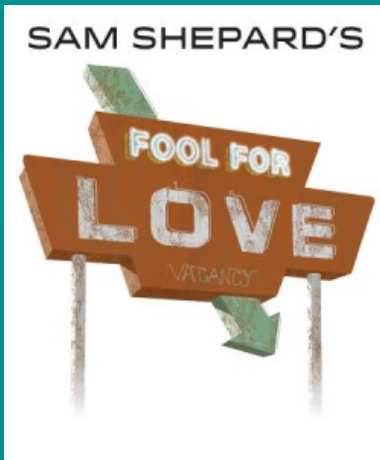
As act two opens the sharp distinction between the two brothers begins to fade. Lee is attempting to become an artist and work in society instead of stealing to gain wealth. This is a slight change from the Lee in act one who says that he "fooled around" with art; however, Lee still contains his independence: "they can't touch me...They can't put a finger on me. I'm gone."⁷ Even though Lee wants to create art, he will not be confined. Austin, too, exhibits a desire of not wanting to be confined. He assumes traits of his independent brother when he says "I might just drive out to the desert for a while" because "I gotta' think."⁷ Of course, driving to the desert is something Lee would be more apt to do, and Shepard's trademarks, the "unfixing of reality and of character," begin to manifest themselves.¹

When we get to scene seven, the brothers have entirely switched roles: Lee is sitting at the typewriter trying to write, and Austin is splayed out drunk on the kitchen floor. The comic reversal impinges on the realistic setting of the play because we are forced to suspend our disbelief to believe that Austin, the civilized brother, is now uncivilized while the near-illiterate Lee attempts to write a sellable western. The transformation is unrealistic, but Shepard grounds the scene in a concrete reality with the man-made objects: toasters, drawers on the floor, beer bottles.

-Timothy Mathisen, read more at <http://timmathisen.hubpages.com/hub/Sam-Shepard-True-West-Analysis-The-Real-West>

Fool for Love

Cygnets Theatre's production of True West is running in alternating repertory with Sam Shepard's Fool for Love.



Through searing truth and dark humor, *Fool for Love* shows the story of two people who just can't live without each other whether they like it or not. May is hiding out at an old motel in the Mojave Desert. Eddie, an old flame and childhood friend, finds her there and threatens to drag her back into the life from which she had fled. Reality and dream; truth and lies; past and present mingle in an explosive, emotional experience.

What does “in repertory” mean?

When a theatre company says that they are producing two or more productions “in repertory” (or commonly shortened to “in rep”) it simply means that they are presenting several plays from their repertoire, usually in alternation or rotation. This can take on a variety of forms- for us it means we are presenting two related plays that alternate every night.

What is the benefit of doing two shows in rep?

The idea behind the repertory part of our season is to give the audience the opportunity to see two related shows back-to-back, enhancing the experience of the plays and understanding of the themes. Last year we presented two very different shows that shared some of the same characters, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the subsequently inspired *Travesties* by Tom Stoppard. This year we are excited to again share two very different shows that this time share the same playwright (Sam Shepard), *True West* and *Fool for Love*.

Why these plays?

Sam Shepard is often cited as one of the greatest American playwrights, along with the likes of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O'Neill. His plays tend to explore themes of love, loss and dysfunctional family life and are often set in the gritty small towns and open spaces of the American West. Other than that, Shepard's plays are difficult to categorize except for the fact that they blend unanticipated humor and beauty with brutal honesty and painful relationships. In selecting these two plays, Cygnets' Artist Director, Sean Murray, wanted to give the audience two very distinct lenses through which to view Sam Shepard and his work. That being said and despite one show being about two brothers and the other about two lovers, having the opportunity to see both productions in such proximity will help you find those connections, providing for a much more involved and exciting theatre experience!

Theatre Etiquette

When we visit the theatre we are attending a live performance with actors that are working right in front of us. This is an exciting experience for you and the actor. However, in order to have the best performance for both the audience and the actors, there are some do's and don'ts that need to be followed. And remember that we follow these rules because the better an audience you can be the better the actors can be.

1. **Don't** allow anything that creates noise to go off during the performance—cell phones, watches, etc.
2. **Don't** take pictures or video recordings during the performance. All of the work is copyrighted by the designers and you could face serious penalties.
3. **Don't** eat or drink in the theatre.
4. **Don't** stick gum on the bottom of the seat.
5. **Don't** place things on the stage or walk on the stage.
6. **Don't** put your feet up on the back of the seat in front of you.
7. **Don't** leave your seat during the performance unless it is an emergency. If you do need to leave for an emergency, leave as quietly as possible—and know that you might not be able to get back in until intermission.
8. **Do** clap—let the actors know you are enjoying yourself!
9. **Do** enjoy the show and have fun watching the actors!
10. **Do** tell other people about your experience and be sure to ask questions and discuss what you experienced after the show!



Recommended Resources

Books and Articles:

- The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard edited by Matthew Roudané
- Estrangement and Engagement: Sam Shepard's Dramaturgical Strategies by Susan Harris Smith
- The Politics of Stage Space: Women and Male Identity in Sam Shepard's Family Plays by Carla J. McDonough
- Portrait of the Artist: Sam Shepard and the Anxiety of Identity by John Blackburn

Websites and Organizations:

- The Sam Shepard Website
<http://www.sam-shepard.com/index.html>
- Actors Theatre of Louisville *True West* Play Guide
http://actorstheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/TW_studyguideKL_lowres.pdf

Movies and Video Clips:

- **Shepard & Dark**, a documentary by Treva Wurmfeld
<http://www.musicboxfilms.com/shepard---dark-movies-71.php>
- **Sam Shepard: Stalking Himself** (Excerpt, PBS Great Performances)
(1 of 3) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDjtxabtdKs>
(2 of 3) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk51mNH5CFY>
(3 of 3) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2RRp3RZUQA>