

least in part because it made him a martyr to Holocaust deniers. But Holocaust denial would exist with or without martyrs; deniers honor Brasillach because he was a sincere Nazi and a committed anti-Semite. Those who deny that the Holocaust happened are always anti-Semitic. They say it never took place, but think it should have taken place. Like Brasillach himself, they have amputated part of their brains. NR

■ THEATER ■

# The Old New Thing

CHARLIE SCHULMAN

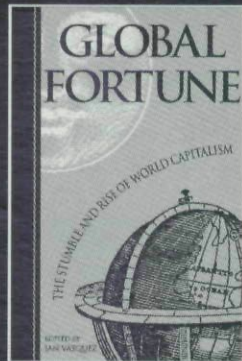
SINCE the days of Lewis and Clark, the American West has seemed to hold the promise not only of vast land and ample resources, but also of an authentic American identity. This myth has only become more powerful during the 20th century through figures such as Jackson Pollock, John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, and the Marlboro Man, icons of a lost, more real frontier. Sam Shepard's *True West* (1980), recently revived for a Broadway run, aspires to that kind of authentic western identity while closing the book on it at the same time.

A prolific writer of mystical plays that explore a rootless, American-outlaw sensibility, Shepard came onto the scene in the '60s and worked with Off-Off-Broadway theater groups such as La MaMa and Café Cino, writing plays that earned him eleven Obie awards and a small, loyal following. Shepard has long been preoccupied with the stock characters of American popular culture, from Hoss, the warrior/rock star in *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), to Dodge, the dissipated patriarch of the Pulitzer prize-winning *Buried Child* (1979), to Colonel, a grizzled war veteran in *States of Shock* (1991).

In keeping with his plays, Shepard has carefully cultivated a loner, maverick

Mr. Schulman is a playwright and screenwriter in New York City.

## THE STUMBLE AND RISE OF WORLD CAPITALISM



After two world wars, the Great Depression, and experiments with socialism interrupted the liberal economic order that began in the 19th century, the world economy has now returned at the very least to the level of globalization that it previously enjoyed. Capitalism has made the 20th century one of unrivaled prosperity, yet critics still fault markets for spreading instability and poverty—citing financial crises in Asia and elsewhere as evidence. These essays assess such claims, propose improvements to the international financial system, and evaluate the prospects that the recent conversion to global capitalism will be sustained. Contributors include Deepak Lal, Julian Simon, Mario Vargas Llosa, Rudiger Dornbusch, and Andrei Illarionov, chief economic adviser to Russian president Vladimir V. Putin.

*Global Fortune*  
 Edited by Ian Vásquez  
 Available at fine bookstores.  
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mystique. Photographs of him invariably include the requisite cowboy hat and vest, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth; he often conducts interviews by phone from a ranch in an undisclosed location. He has also undergone a transformation from bohemian playwright to Hollywood actor, appearing in suitably manly roles in movies such as *The Pelican Brief* and *The Right Stuff*.

*True West* is Shepard's most conventional and often-produced play, the third in a series of family dramas that marked the end of his more experimental career and brought his work to the attention of a wider audience. Despite innumerable awards and critical praise, the current Circle in the Square production, starring Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly, is the first to have a successful run on Broadway and has become the subject of much media hype.

*True West* tells the story of two brothers: Austin, a successful, Ivy League-educated screenwriter, and Lee, a slightly unhinged drifter who has spent the last several years roaming the desert. The brothers have converged on their childhood home on the edge of Los Angeles's suburban sprawl while their mother is vacationing in Alaska. Austin has come to get away from his wife and kids so he can work on his latest script; Lee has returned broke, and plans to burglarize the neighbors' homes.

Conversations between the brothers convince Lee that he should write a screenplay about his experiences in the desert. Lee disrupts a meeting between Austin and his slick Jewish producer Saul Kimmer (Robert LuPone) and ends up with a development deal. When Austin refuses to ghostwrite Lee's story, his own project is dropped, and he falls into drunken despair. This dramatic reversal, in which each brother assumes the other's persona, ignites a conflict that continues through the play's charged final scene.

This reversal seems at first to hinge on the differences between the two brothers: Austin's Hollywood insincerity versus the authenticity of what Kimmer calls Lee's "true-to-life western." It's clear, however, that Kimmer wouldn't know an authentic idea if he stepped in one. Shepard's foil and real target here is Hollywood, with its insatiable hunger to

develop the untouched landscape of real life into formulas for mass consumption.

As Lee reads from his script, it begins to sound like a hackneyed version of the West appropriated from a B movie. Meanwhile, a drunken Austin recounts his recent visit to their estranged alcoholic father in which the old man loses his false teeth in a doggie bag full of left-over chop suey. This pathetic revelation briefly unites the brothers in the realization that only such personal stories, at once both heartbreaking and hilarious, really ring true.

In the end, one feels the brothers (and their different Wests) are equally inauthentic and tainted by their association with Tinseltown's schlocky superficiality. The only true West appears in the bleak view of Alaska presented by



Philip Seymour Hoffman, John C. Reilly, and Robert LuPone in *True West*

Austin and Lee's mother (Celia Weston), who returns at the end disillusioned from her vacation. "It was the worst feeling being up there. In Alaska staring out the window. I never felt so desperate before," she says plaintively of the only remaining American frontier. Shepard seems to suggest that everything Hollywood has not yet appropriated is totally undesirable.

The irony of *True West* is that while each brother attempts to maintain his authenticity in the face of the insatiable machinery of popular culture, the play itself owes its success to theater actors for whom these roles have served as springboards to Hollywood fame. Although the first New York production with Peter Boyle and Tommy Lee Jones was panned by critics (and disavowed by Shepard), the 1982 production at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater starring John Malkovich and Gary Sinise was widely praised and

launched both actors' screen careers.

The current production once again features two up-and-coming movie actors. The new twist on the play, masterminded by director Matthew War-chus, has Hoffman (*The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *Magnolia*) and Reilly (*Magnolia*, *Boogie Nights*) rotating roles every three performances. This is more than a highly effective public-relations gimmick that encourages repeat visits by the audience. The brothers' interchangeability is thoroughly supported by the text—they are meant to be seen as two sides of the same person—and both actors give powerful performances.

However, this faithfulness to the spirit of *True West* is undercut by other aspects of the production, in particular the absence of an intermission, strategically placed by Shepard to highlight the climactic reversal. The decision to remove the intermission makes the brothers' transformation seem less complete than in other productions, and the strong performances in the second act don't compensate for this error in judgment. The result is that the production seems slightly out of balance: Lee's manic quality predominates and muffles the full effect of Austin's reversal. There is also a tendency to play for laughs rather than fully expose the painful desperation at the play's core.

*True West* reprised the themes and characters of Shepard's earlier work in a far more conventional form, resulting in wider success for the playwright. Twenty years later, these themes and characters have come to seem ordinary and familiar. The wild applause and standing ovations that have greeted the current production therefore suggest how much has changed in our perception of "authenticity" in theater. Shepard's depiction of deracinated antiheroes roaming a deromanticized American West has become the norm in the age of *Roseanne* and *Natural Born Killers*. The decision to cast two "indie" film stars cleverly enhances the audience's perception that they are experiencing a cutting-edge theatrical event. The production's success, then, lies not so much in any newfound or daring insight about the search for an authentic American self as in the commercialization of the avant-garde clichés it both embodies and exploits. NR

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