

True West: Reviews and Criticism

The profound ambivalence of Shepard's writing, his simultaneously romantic and deeply skeptical outlook, is perhaps exhibited most clearly in his periodic tendency to draw on the imagery of traditional myth narratives. In *True West*, for example, his portrayal of complementary but eternally feuding brothers, a pairing whose genealogy runs all the way back to Cain and Abel, reads as an almost too deliberate *quotation* of the Jungian scheme of conscious ego and repressed shadow side which such duos supposedly represent.

--Stephen James Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*

True West has...arguably become Shepard's signature piece, the leanest, most pointed of his full-length works. --David Krasner, *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*

Although the mediated image of the mythic West is the one most apparent in Shepard, the lure of the absent "true" West--the *pre*-meditated mythic dimension--underlies his representations, creating constant semiotic conflict: the West is signified as both absent and hidden, as both irretrievable and an irrationally erupting source. There are moments in Shepard's plays when the West breaks out of its tinsel-town image to return in a flash of "authentic" dust-clogged clothes and double-barreled violence ... but despite this occasional revival, the "true West" figures lack the strength to imagine a whole past and thus to re-create a real world. They always fade and are usually replaced by textualized and unmemoried postmodern images.

--Jeanette R. Malkin, *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama*

Shepard's masterwork...It tells us a truth, as glimpsed by a 37 year old genius.
--*New York Post*

True West is built on much starker aesthetic lines than *Horse Dreamer* or *Angel City*, but it is a further development of Shepard's treatment of the bifurcation of the artist into imagination and craft, and the danger of commodifying the imagination.

--Brenda Murphy, "Shepard Writes about Writing"

There's a lot about *True West* that is explicitly autobiographical. Like Austin, Shepard himself has put in time as a would-be screenwriter, but he's also been known to share in Lee's sticky fingers: in his book *Motel Chronicles*, he describes an attempt to steal a practically worthless painting from a room in the Chateau Marmont in Hollywood. And all the stuff in the play about "the old man" clearly relates to Shepard's father.

--Don Shewey, *Sam Shepard*

It's clear, funny, naturalistic. It's also opaque, terrifying, surrealistic. If that sounds contradictory, you're on to one aspect of Shepard's winning genius; the ability to make you think you're watching one thing while at the same time he's presenting another.

--*San Francisco Chronicle*

In *True West*, the opposing brothers effectively act as statement and counterpoint, to be played off against each other with differing degrees of intensity in the play's nine scenes, which thus become akin to nine movements. Indeed, the brothers' "themes," which start off at diametrically opposed extremes, are eventually blended and blurred to the point where they cross over completely, in a role reversal which is as much musical device as it is character development.

--Stephen James Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*

In *True West* the two brothers, Austin and Lee, represent two sides of the American present: one sophisticated, cultured, ambitious, and successful; the other alienated and outcast, raw, wild, violent. As the play unfolds, the two characters exchange places and reveal that each is the double of the other. Shepard's plays emphasize that, despite the American belief in starting anew, the past is never over but continues to intrude into the present.

--Mark Busby, *Updating the Literary West*

Shepard himself thinks *True West* is "about double nature," and most critics read it as the old true West of Lee versus the new consumer West of Austin, but this is to underestimate Shepard's complexity and his sense of humor. As early as *Cowboys* (1964) Shepard knew that the wild West was quasi-fiction--it's cowboys and Indians, its heroism and lawlessness, its veneration of male bonding. Even as a teen-ager, he was not naively nostalgic; his stage cowboys tend to be old men, ghosts, or composites. By 1980 Shepard was well aware that cowboy fiction was fostered through rampant Hollywood commercialism, to which he himself was "immune and contaminated at the same time". By 1980 it is impossible to recall the true West, if there ever was one, but the two brothers--the wild man and the domesticated man--might join to concoct a new fiction, or they might destroy one another.

--Johan Callens, *Sam Shepard: Between the Margin and the Centre*

In its dialectic, *True West* is simply following the conventions of the western, which many film critics have discussed as being focused on divided images of masculinity with the world of women or the feminine as backdrop.

--Carla J. Macdonough, *Staging Masculinity*