

actors theatre of louisville



PLAY GUIDE

Production support provided by:



BROWN-FORMAN SERIES

TRUE WEST

BY SAM SHEPARD

DIRECTED BY ADAM RAPP

ABOUT THE TRUE WEST PLAY GUIDE

This play guide is a standards-based resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts and to encourage essential questions that lead to enduring understandings of the play's historical meaning and relevance. Inside you will find history/contextual information and vocabulary that lay the groundwork of the story and build anticipation for the performance. Oral discussion and writing prompts encourage your students to reflect upon their impressions and to analyze and relate key ideas to their personal experiences and the world around them. These can easily be adapted to fit most writing objectives. The Bridgework connects theatre elements with ideas for drama activities in the classroom as well as integrated curriculum. We encourage you to adapt and extend the material in any way to best fit the needs of your community of learners. Please feel free to make copies of this guide, or you may download it from our website: ActorsTheatre.org. We hope this material, combined with our pre-show workshops, will give you the tools to make your time at Actors Theatre a valuable learning experience.

True West student matinees and play guides address specific **EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES:**

- Students will identify or describe the use of elements of drama in dramatic works.
- Students will analyze how time, place and ideas are reflected in drama/theatre.
- Students will explain how drama/theatre fulfills a variety of purposes.

If you have any questions or suggestions regarding our play guides, please contact Steven Rahe, Director of Education, at 502-584-1265 ext. 3045.

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SYNOPSIS

Brothers Austin and Lee are about as opposite as they come. Austin is a clean-cut, responsible screenwriter living the safe suburban lifestyle. Lee is a reckless, poorly groomed drunk who steals household appliances. After five years without seeing one another, they cross paths in their mother's home just outside of Los Angeles. Austin is housesitting and Lee has come to raid the neighborhood. Lee makes it impossible for Austin to concentrate on writing his screenplay, talking of his adventures in the Mojave Desert and pestering Austin to lend him his car. After crashing Austin's important meeting with big producer Saul Kimmer, Lee sells Kimmer on his own idea for a modern Western. Having no experience as a screenwriter, Lee must enlist his brother's help, sparking a sibling rivalry. Will the brothers ever settle their differences or will their feud tear them apart?

- Lacy Mudd

SETTING

The play is set in the clean and tidy home of Austin and Lee's mother, located in Southern California, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles. All of the action takes place in the kitchen and an adjoining alcove. The sound of crickets and coyotes can be heard from outside.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Austin

A well-educated screenwriter. He has a wife and children but has come to his mother's house while she is away so that he can focus on his work. He appears to be very successful.

Lee

Austin's older brother. He mostly likes to drink and steal things, so he hasn't found quite the same success as Austin. He's also staying at his mother's house, but not to focus on any kind of work.

Saul Kimmer

A slimy Hollywood producer. He's out to do one thing—make money.

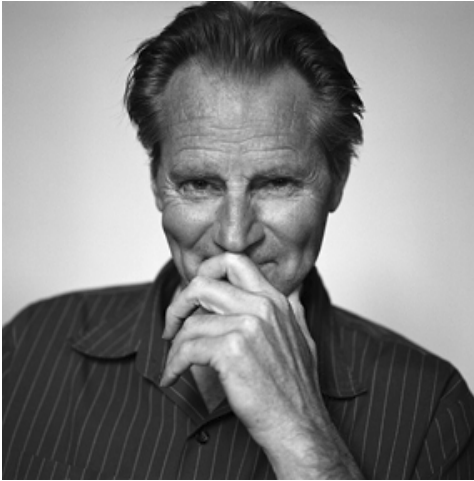
Mom

The mother of Austin and Lee. Something has happened to her in her life that has left her powerless and absent.



Jim Belushi and Gary Cole in *True West* at the Drury Lane Theater

ABOUT SAM SHEPARD



Sam Shepard

Born Samuel Shepard Rogers (nicknamed “Steve”) in 1943, Sam Shepard spent his childhood on his family’s avocado farm in Duarte, Calif. He attended Mount San Antonio Junior College to become a veterinarian but when his father’s alcoholism drove

Shepard to a breaking point, he left school and joined a traveling theatre group. In 1963, he adopted a new persona, changing his name to Sam Shepard and moving to New York.

Shepard joined the Off-Off-Broadway movement on New York’s Lower East Side and took an interest in avant-garde theatre. In 1965, three of his plays (*Chicago*, *Icarus’ Mother* and *Red Cross*) earned him his first Obie Award and he emerged as one of the movement’s most promising playwrights. Some of his most successful plays include *La Turista* (1967), *The Unseen Hand* (1969), *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Fool for Love* (1983), *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) and *Sympatico* (1991). *True West* (1980) is part of his “family trilogy,” along with *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976) and *Buried Child* (1978), which earned him a Pulitzer Prize. He has received ten Obie Awards and a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. He was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1994.

Shepard has also done considerable work in film, serving as actor, director and screenwriter. His 1984 screenplay for *Paris, Texas* earned him a Palme D’Or at the Cannes Film Festival and he received a Best Supporting Actor Academy Award nomination for his role as Chuck Yeager in 1981’s *The Right Stuff*. His work has become known for its ability to disorient audiences while remaining authentically American.

- Christine Noah

ABOUT ADAM RAPP



Adam Rapp

Adam Rapp was born in 1968 and grew up in Joliet, Ill. After his parents divorced when he was five years old, Rapp and his brother and sister were raised by their mother. He went to St. John’s Military Academy and earned a basketball scholarship to Clarke College, where he took his first poetry class and discovered a

love for telling stories. Upon graduating, he moved to New York to pursue a career as a writer.

Rapp began as a young adult novelist, with works such as *The Buffalo Tree* (1990), *Missing the Piano* (1994) and *The Copper Elephant* (1995). After seeing his brother Anthony in a production of John Guare’s *Six Degrees of Separation*, he became enthralled by theatre and started writing plays, completing a two-year playwriting fellowship at The Juilliard School. In 2000, his play *Nocturne* was staged at the American Repertory Theatre and was later produced Off-Broadway. One of his best known works, *Red Light Winter*, debuted at Steppenwolf Theatre in 2005 and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. His other plays include *Finer Noble Gases* (Humana Festival, 2002), *Trueblinka* (2002), *Bingo with the Indians* (2007), *The Metal Children* (2010) and *The Edge of Our Bodies* (Humana Festival, 2011).

Rapp has directed two films as well as many plays, including several of his own. His latest play, *Through the Yellow Hour* opened in New York City this September. He continues to write novels, and he also plays guitar and sings in Less the Band. His work is hailed for its grit and realism, as well as its juxtaposition of the comic with the tragic.

- Christine Noah

TRULY AMERICAN: SAM SHEPARD'S AESTHETIC



Sam Shepard in the film *Bandits*

Theatre, with whom he collaborated on several works. The Open Theatre focused on making non-naturalism (a form of theatre that attempted to alienate an audience from reality) approachable for actors. Chaikin taught actors to use physical exercises to reflect internal action and to build an ensemble to create cohesion within a nonlinear play. The conflict in Shepard's plays derives from an ensemble of complex characters—like Austin and Lee, the estranged brothers in *True West*—who collide and clash, leading to dramatic changes. Shepard also gives his characters very specific physical actions (such as Lee's prolonged destruction of Austin's typewriter with a golf club) to express their inner turmoil.

Perhaps Shepard's greatest and best-known influence is, ironically, one that he tried to escape: his father. His father's impact

on Shepard is profound, and it is somehow entwined in every play that he's written. In *True West*, Lee and Austin's father has secluded himself in the desert, but his absence has a clear hold on the men who reminisce about their experiences with him while resenting his abandonment and alcoholism. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the drunken and careless father holds his family together through fear, while each family member's jealousy over one another's relationship with him drives them apart. Through his authentic reflection of fathers (both present and absent), audiences often walk away from his plays with a little piece of Shepard himself.

Shepard packs his plays with fascinating contradictions: the realistic alongside the absurd, the familiar and the unusual, the authentic enmeshed with the unidentifiable. The result is a style that can warm a soul, break a heart and pack a punch.

- Christine Noah

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What kind of literary influences do you have?

What do you think is the virtue of combining the realistic with the absurd?

Is emotional authenticity important in the theatre?

Post-show Questions:

How did you see Shepard's influences manifest themselves in *True West*?

What strikes you as American about *True West*?

For decades now, Sam Shepard has been recognized as one of America's greatest living playwrights. So why have Shepard's plays left such a lasting impact on critics and audiences alike? How has he developed his unique and powerful style?

When Shepard moved to New York in 1963, he found himself smack dab in the middle of the Off-Off-Broadway movement, which was a reaction to Broadway's increasing commercialism. Written in the late '60s and '70s, his early plays shocked audiences with their bold language and logic all their own. But his non-naturalistic technique is enmeshed with true-to-life themes: the search for identity, frustration at not being able to find it and dissatisfaction with the inauthenticity that surrounds us.

Because Shepard grew up playing the drums, rock and roll—and figures like Bob Dylan and Mick Jagger—became a part of how he sees (and hears) the world. He has also acquired a taste for the improvisational techniques of jazz music. The influence of both of these genres manifests in his playwriting: the rhythm, language and mood of rock-and-roll radiate in his plays (some of which utilize a lot of music). His storylines and characters flow with all of the spontaneity of a jazz improvisation, giving us the feeling that anything could happen next. These influences have led to plays both lyrical and daring.

Perhaps these influences have also given Shepard's work its uniquely authentic sound; his keen ear for American dialects builds a strong connection to American culture, particularly the American West. His language gives his plays a straightforward rawness, while allowing an ironic distance from the ground level of action, making his plays all the more complex. Sometimes he doesn't even need dialogue—his plays often culminate in vivid stage images that reflect everything the language has built up to. Shepard also took cues from Joseph Chaikin and the Open

AN INTERVIEW WITH ADAM RAPP

Adam Rapp is a busy guy. He writes novels and plays, directs theatre and film, plays in a band and his repertoire is only growing larger. But Education Intern Christine Noah managed to squeeze in a few minutes with him to discuss his plans for *True West*, how he works as a director and the treacherousness of phone cords.

Why did you choose to direct this play and what do you find compelling about it?

I've always been a huge fan of Shepard. I think his intense family dysfunction and his muscularity of his characters and the language they speak were things that I really related to personally. When the possibility of directing it at Actors Theatre was brought to me, it was exciting. I think *True West* is an incredibly tight, beautifully structured play. And these brothers are these two kind of shape-shifting animals that become each other in a way, and that's a really interesting psychological premise. I also think the physical world of the play is an incredibly challenging thing to create authentically. And when I heard that they wanted to do this play in the round, all my fear and excitement was set on end, because it's a really hard thing to show violence in the round. And because it scared me, it was exactly the reason why I thought I should do it.

***True West* was written in the '80s. Are you going to modernize this production at all?**

We're going to do it period. I feel like to modernize this play would be a great disservice. I mean, the guy strangles his brother with a phone cord at the end; if we suddenly stick it in the digital world, it would be a digital phone and there would be no phone cord! Also, when you leave a house in 1970, the next time you can call somebody is when you get to a payphone. These days, I can text you as I'm walking down the stairs. In the analog world, stakes were higher.

What should those stakes mean for the audience? What do you want people to take away from the play?

Well, first of all, I want them to forget that they're watching a play. And then I hope that, through the violence and the cost of the play, people will realize how fragile and ephemeral our relationships with our families are. I hope people leave and go

call their brother or their child, because I hope that it wakes us up to how much we take for granted with our relationships with our families.

Speaking of families, Shepard's father had a big impact on all of his plays. How do you think that the father relationship is displayed in *True West* and how do you think that it affects the brothers?

The father's offstage, but there's an incredible legacy of drinking and violence. Even when the mother comes onstage at the end, you realize that there's something that's either been battered out of her or just emotionally devastated in some way. And there's a kind of past dimension of the father's drinking, and then the boys start to drink, and you get the sense that they're becoming their father in some way. There's something incredibly violent and sad and almost biblical about that legacy. So I feel like it's an incredibly intense shadow that I'm excited to really dig into, because the father is a mystery in the play.

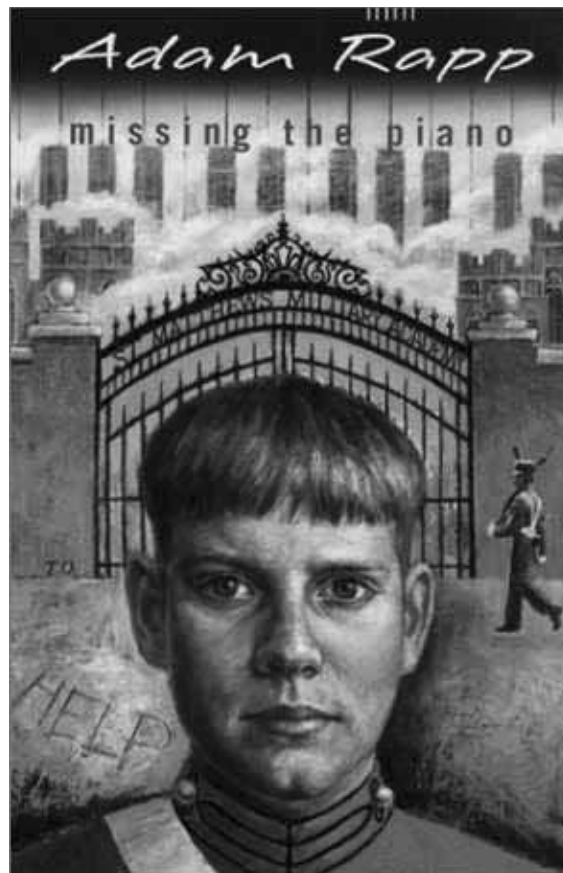
You seem to be an old pro at directing now, but you used to only be an author and a playwright. So what got you into directing?

When my plays started getting produced, I was frustrated with the directors I was working with. I felt like they were afraid to take things into a scary place or into a darker realm. So I just said, I'm going to figure out how to do this on my own. I insisted on it at one point

and it was a successful experience. And from then on it's been a part of the process for me as an author. To me, directing is a continuation of the authorship, and the script that is ultimately published is very much informed by the physical world of the rehearsal process. I feel very alive with the exchange that happens between directors and actors. That has been a really fun exploration for me as an artist. So it feels like a very natural thing for me to wear both hats.

So where does that exploration start in the rehearsal room? What's your directing process like?

The place I always start is around the table. I will never get actors on their feet until all the thoughts are accounted for in the play. And when that feels right, I do this exercise where



Missing the Piano, a novel by Adam Rapp

I read every piece of dialogue and stage direction so that the actors can simply cut the geography of the play and be connected with each other. They can hear the music of the play and just be in the world. Then we start to build the staging work. As they get more familiar with the text, we just continue to do sections. I try to give them as many repetitions of the play as they can possibly have before an audience comes, because I feel like even in the first preview the audience should see as good a show as on opening night.

Being a playwright clearly influences your work, but you're a musician as well. How does music influence your work?

I think of language as music. I mean, there is a musicality to every play. In some ways I think of myself as a conductor when I direct, making sure the words are spoken at the correct rhythm and with the right intensity and with the right music. So that's a huge part of the way I think about theatre.

Final question: What other projects are you working on or will you be working on after *True West*?

Well, I'm doing my new play *Through the Yellow Hour* at Rattlestick in New York, which opens in September. And then I come down to Actors Theatre to do *True West*. And then right after that I'm directing the film adaptation of my play *Red Light Winter*. And then I think I'm going to act for the first time in a long time in a play called *The Big Knife* and that starts in mid-February. I'm a little terrified about that, but we'll give it a shot.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What do you think are the benefits of directing a play you've written yourself? The disadvantages?

Post-show Questions:

How do you think Rapp handled showing violence in the round? Did you feel like the action was real?

How did you see the father figure affect Austin and Lee?

What did you feel was the "rhythm" of the play?



Edge of our Bodies by Adam Rapp



Nocturne by Adam Rapp



Finer Noble Gases,
2002 Humana Festival
of New American
Plays By Adam Rapp

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES: THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN *TRUE WEST*



Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly in *True West* at Circle in the Square Theater

“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

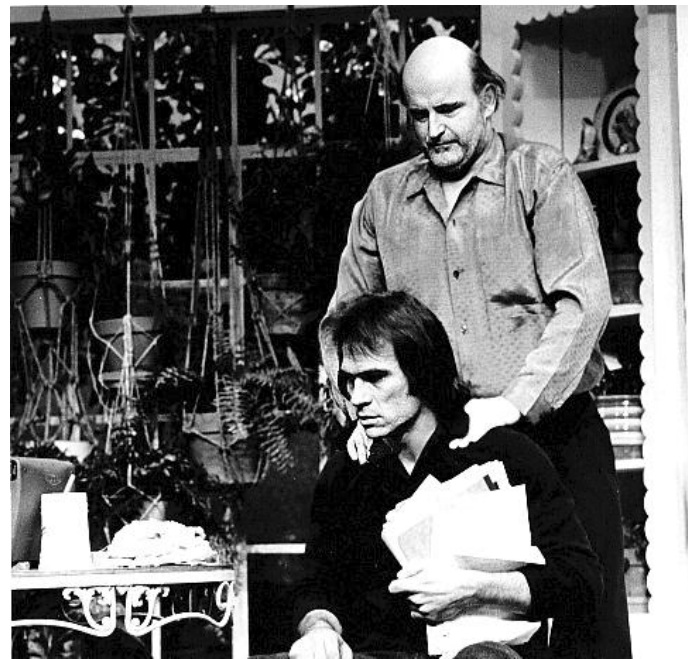
What is the “American Dream?” What would make any of us perfectly happy? Some believe the American Dream means finding fame and fortune, or, at the very least, settling down in a nice house with a nice spouse and having nice children. For others, the American Dream is rooted in the idea of freedom: open 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 to 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



Tommy Lee Jones and Peter Boyle in *True West* at the Public Theater

BRIDGEWORK

BUILDING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN STAGE AND CLASSROOM

The following assortment of discussion starters, exercises and activities offer theatre concepts aligned with state standards. By exploring drama as a mode of learning, students strengthen skills for creative problem solving, imagination and critical thinking.

AT YOUR DESK ACTIVITIES

1) **Character traits.** Create a family tree using character traits. Each family member (Austin, Lee and Mom) will have four branches. Two of those branches should list two of each character's flaws. The other two should list the positive aspects of each flaw. For example: stubborn turns into independent. By the end, each character should have two flaw branches and two positive branches, creating a family tree.

2) **Differences and Similarities.** Austin and Lee are extremely different; that's one of the reasons they fight. But they are also very similar—that's another reason they fight. Create a Venn Diagram of the two characters. On the outer circles write the things that make them different. In the inner circle, write the things that make them the same. Now, think of someone with whom you don't see eye to eye (parent, sibling, cousin, peer at school, etc.) and create your own Venn Diagram for you and that person.

3) **Text work.** Get descriptive with perspective. The Mom character is only in the play for a short time. She comes back to her house expecting one thing and finds another. Taking what we know from her dialogue below, write two inner monologues for the Mom: one inner monologue about what she expected to see when she came back and one inner monologue about what she actually sees. Make these very descriptive. Also try to include how she feels about each scenario, whether it's the expected situation or the real situation. Here is an example of some of her dialogue. What evidence can you glean from it?

Mom: What happened in here?

Mom: What're all these toasters doing here?

Mom: (*To Lee*) What happened to your shirt?

Mom: I just started missing all my plants... Oh, they're all dead aren't they.

Austin: Stay here, Mom. This is where you live.

Mom: I don't recognize it at all.

ON YOUR FEET ACTIVITIES

Transformation Circle

Everyone form a circle. First person sends a sound and a motion to the person to their right. That person sends it to the person next to them and so on. When the sound and motion makes it all the way around, the person standing to the left of the first person starts a new sound and motion. Repeat until everyone has had a turn. In *True West*, there is a theme of qualities or traits that get passed down from generation to generation, and how those legacies affect the characters. Identify how the sound and motions change with each person. Encourage the students to try to match it perfectly. We are all different; something for one person can be completely different for another person, no matter how hard they try to replicate it.

Sound Mash-Up

In *True West*, there are a lot of sounds—sounds from outside the home, inside the home, etc. As a class, create a sound design. One student begins making a sound that she/he can repeat. Another student adds. Then another student adds, and so on, until everyone has added a sound to the group. The result should be a cacophony of sound created solely by the students! If the class is too big, split them into groups with a few students per group.

Mirror Mirror

Divide into pairs. The two people in the pair will face one another. One person in each pair is going to be the leader. The leader will start a movement and their partner must mirror them. Switch leaders. Eye contact and trust are very important in this activity! What was it like to see what you were doing on another person? How did it feel looking into a "mirror" and seeing a different reflection?

COMMUNICATION PORTFOLIO

NARRATIVE

True West explores the idea of coming home to a place that is unfamiliar. Write a story about something in your life that used to be familiar but has now changed. It could be a place you used to live, or a friend you lost touch with. What's different? How? What's the same?

ARGUMENTATIVE

Write a review of the performance of *True West* that you saw at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Describe what it was like to watch the play, but be sure to write more than just the plot of the play. Think about how the play tells the story. Make the experience come alive for the reader. Use lots of sensory details when describing the play's elements, like the costumes, lights, props, and music. Also consider how the actors delivered their lines and how the director realized the vision of the play. Let the reader decide for themselves if the play is worth seeing.

INFORMATIVE

Austin and Lee are writing a screenplay set in the West about two cowboys who ride horses, chase each other, and fight over the same woman. Write the fight scene of that screenplay, using the character of Austin as one cowboy and the character of Lee as the other. Look at their dynamic within the play *True West*. How does their sibling rivalry manifest in a different setting?



Laurie Metcalf and John Malkovich in *True West* at Cherry Lane Theatre

IF YOU LIKED TRUE WEST...

BOOKS

Days Out of Days by Sam Shepard

Blood Brothers by Willy Russell

FILMS

Brothers

Me and My Brother

Far North

PLAYS

Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks

August: Osage County by Tracy Letts

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller



Chad Smith and Bruce Willis in *True West* at Liberty Theatre

GLOSSARY

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 and smaller parts of central 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.

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SHOCK US! WITH YOUR BEST TEN-MINUTE PLAY.

Attention: Young Playwrights!

Actors Theatre of Louisville is seeking submissions for our New Voices Ten-Minute Play Contest.

Students grades 6-12 living in the Commonwealth of Kentucky or the (812) area code of southern Indiana are invited to submit their very best ten-minute play to New Voices, Actors Theatre of Louisville's annual ten-minute play contest for young playwrights!

Guidelines, tips, examples and submission details are outlined at ActorsTheatre.org/NewVoices. You may also email your questions to NewVoices@ActorsTheatre.org.

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actorseducation

Deadline for submissions:
October, 31 2012, Halloween

Missed the deadline? Send us your play anyway! We'll automatically enter it into next year's contest.

New Voices Young Playwrights Festival
Winning plays will be fully produced at Actors Theatre of Louisville in April 2013 and will be published in our New Voices Anthology!