ABSTRACT

A Director's Approach to Sam Shepard's *True West*

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Sam Shepard's *True West* is a black comedy that tells the story of Austin and Lee, two brothers leading vastly different lives who meet unexpectedly at their mother's home in suburban Los Angeles, and through a series of increasingly surreal events, attempt to assume the identity of the other. This thesis surveys and critiques the research and practical phases of Baylor University's May, 2015 mainstage production of this play. Chapter One examines the life and works of Sam Shepard with special attention given to *True West*'s critical legacy and major productions. Chapter Two analyzes Shepard's play and applies relevant critical theory to his text. Chapters Three and Four chronicle the application of this analysis and theory to directing the play and collaborating with actors and designers. Finally, Chapter Five assesses the production's strengths and weaknesses.

A Director's Approach to Sam Shepard's *True West*

by

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Fragmented Families and the Detritus of Americana: Sam Shepard's Life and Career

Introduction

True West stands out as one of the most produced and critically-acclaimed plays by Sam Shepard, one of the most highly regarded American playwrights of the twentieth century. This hyperreal dark comedy explores mythic conceptions of the American West and Hollywood alongside questions of identity conflation and construction through the story of Lee and Austin, two brothers leading opposite lives who meet at their mother's home in suburban Los Angeles and assume the other's role. This thesis explores Baylor Theatre's 2015 production of that text and applies critical theory to the analysis of Shepard's play and its production. The works of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard are considered in assessing *True West*'s relevance to contemporary culture and the production team's approach to creating a unified interpretation of Shepard's play.

Chapter One provides a brief overview of Shepard's life, career, and the production history and critical legacy of *True West*. Chapter Two analyzes the text of this play and applies critical theory to understand its relevance to contemporary American society. Moreover, it explores how these analyses can be applied to directing a fully realized production of *True West*. Chapters Three and Four address the application of this analysis and theory to the design and rehearsal processes of this production. Finally, Chapter Five assesses the final product's strengths and weaknesses.

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American playwrights as varied as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Clifford Odets, Tracy Letts, and Lillian Hellman have explored the concept of "the American family," questioning what this particular social entity means within their own historical contexts and through the lens of personal experience. Sam Shepard did not always explicitly tackle this particular topic in his writing, but his most significant works explore familial disintegration. The following chapter examines Shepard's life and career with a focus on his "family plays," followed by a more detailed assessment of the context and significance of his 1980 black comedy, *True West*.

Biography

Sam Shepard was born on November 5, 1943 at Fort Sheridan, Illinois. His father served in the U.S. military for the better part of his childhood, and due to his father's career Shepard become accustomed to traveling from an early age. In a 1980 interview with Kenneth Chubb and the editors of *Theatre Quarterly*, Shepard stated: "My father was in Italy then, I think, and we moved around, oh, to Rapid City, South Dakota, to Utah, to Florida—then to the Marina Islands in the South Pacific, where we lived on Guam."[1] Upon his father's discharge, Shepard's family settled in South Pasadena, California, where Shepard's father pursued a college degree by taking evening classes. Shepard has spoken of both his father's brilliance and his demons, always casting alcohol as the most pernicious of his problems. Carole Cadwalladr of *The Guardian* delves into these issues in a 2010 interview with the playwright:

> His father was a bright man, the winner of a Fulbright scholarship, a fluent
> speaker of Spanish, but he never found that outlet. Or at least the outlet he found

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[1] Kenneth Chubb et al., "Metaphors, Mad Dogs, and Old Time Cowboys: Interview with Sam Shepard," in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York: PAJ Publications, 1981), 189.

was drink. He struggled with the return to civilian life after the war, moving his family from airbase to airbase, training as a Spanish teacher, until he was sacked for drinking, and then moving the family to Duarte, California, where he attempted to farm, his drinking increasing year by year. "The alcohol just completely deranged him," says Shepard.[2]

Shepard has also admitted to and continually works through his own alcoholism, a trait directly related to his father that has caused legal and personal issues throughout Shepard's life:

> He's been sober, he says, since the drink-driving incident [in 2009]. "And prior to that I was sober for four years and then I relapsed. It's a constant struggle. It's such a knucklehead disease because you refuse to see it. It wasn't until the 90s that I actually started going to AA and made a real compact with myself to quit. And I did quit for four years. And then I picked it up again. It's like being a junkie. I think I have that sort of thing in my blood, in my psyche. I can become addicted very easily, although the curious thing is that I have two sisters who are not. So I don't know. Maybe it's just a toss of the dice."[3]

Even after Shepard began seeking help for his alcoholism, he admits that his addiction remains a chronic struggle that he continues to fight against today. Alcoholism appears to run in Shepard's family, and its omnipresent specter created rifts between Shepard's father and his children. The absence of a father figure and the resulting familial discord serves as one of the most (if not the most) vital themes in Shepard's dramaturgy.

Before beginning his artistic journey, Shepard worked on ranches and pursued agriculture at Mt. San Antonio College. Here, Shepard speaks of his original career aspirations and the 1950's artists who altered his life trajectory:

> SHEPARD: I was thinking that I wanted to be a veterinarian. And I had a chance actually to manage a sheep ranch, but I didn't take it. I wanted to do something like that, working with animals. I even had the grand champion yearling ram at the Los Angeles County Fair one year. I did. It was a great ram.
> EDITORS: Quite a break from this very pastoral sort of prospect, when you

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[2] Carole Cadwalladr, "Sam Shepard Opens Up," *The Guardian*, 20 March 2010. http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/mar/21/sam-shepard-interview

[3] Ibid.

decided to go to New York?
SHEPARD: Yeah. At that time the whole beat generation was the big influence.
It was just before the time of acid and the big dope freakout, which was then still
very much under cover. We talked about Ferlinghetti and Corso and Kerouac and
all those guys, and jazz…[4]

Shepard gave up on college and his inklings at veterinary work, and moved to New York

City in 1963, beginning his dramatic career. Before he started writing for the stage,

Shepard had performative aspirations; during a playwriting master class at the Cherry

Lane Theatre in 2006, critic Brian Bartels recorded an exchange between Shepard and an

audience member that recounts his early aspirations:

CROWD MEMBER: Could you expand on the comment you had in a previous
collection stating, "I don't want to be a playwright. I want to be a rock star?"
SHEPARD: I think I was nineteen when I said that. (*Laughs.*) I discovered that I
never really had a career. I'm just doing what I do. Back in the '60's, everyone
wanted to be a rock star.[5]

For a time, Shepard pursued music as his primary vocation, and he still plays the drums

every so often. Though Shepard never ascended to the musical stardom of Bob Dylan or

The Doors, his writing echoes the edginess and poetry of these and other 1960's music

icons. In fact, Shepard spent the early portion of his career around groundbreaking

musicians and avant-garde artists of a similar aesthetic to Dylan and Jim Morrison.

Thanks largely to these artistic influences, Shepard's early dramatic writings embody the

counter-culture of the 1960's.

In the New York City of 1963, Shepard found himself surrounded with artists of

anti-mainstream proclivities and iconoclastic perspectives. Here, Shepard describes the

artistic eclecticism of the city and his first impetus to write plays:

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[4] Chubb et al., 189.

[5] Brian Bartels, "Sam Shepard's Master Class in Playwriting," *The Missouri Review* 30, no. 2
(Summer 2007): 81.

> …I went to New York with this guy Charles, who was a painter, and really just liked that whole idea of being independent, of being able to do something on your own. I tried to get into the acting scene in New York, though I really very soon dropped out of that. We were living on the Lower East Side, and there were these jazz musicians, Danny Richmond who played drums, and I got into this really exciting music scene. The world I was living in was the most interesting thing to me, and I thought the best thing I could do maybe would be to write about it, so I started writing plays.[6]

Shepard began writing plays on what almost seems like a whim, and wrote vociferously after penning his first plays, (*Cowboys* and *Cowboys #2*) because, as he coyly describes: "…there was nothing else to do."[7] Shepard describes getting his first production as a result of his job at the Village Gate, a nightclub known for bringing in the best American jazz of the time:

> The head-waiter at the Village Gate was a guy named Ralph Cook, and he had been given this church, called St. Mark's-in-the-Bouwerie [sic], and he started a theatre there called Theatre Genesis. He said he was looking for new plays to do, and I said I had one. He came up and read this play, and two of the waiters at the Village Gate were the actors in it. So it was sort of the Village Gate company.[8]

Initially, Shepard's play, *Cowboys #2*, was panned by most critics, save for one writer from *The Village Voice* who convinced Shepard to stay in New York and continue writing.[9] Scholar Christopher Bigsby notes that: "while these early plays are, indeed, often little more than visual and verbal collages…they do hint at the power of a playwright then experimenting freely with the component elements of his craft."[10] The

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[6] Chubb et al., 189-190.

[7] Ibid., 190, 191. Technically, the "original Cowboys" was lost, so Shepard wrote it again and gave it the name "*Cowboys #2*," first performed at St. Mark's in 1964. According to Shepard, he wrote these plays "…because Charles and me used to run around the streets playing cowboys in New York" (Ibid., 190).

[8] Ibid., 192.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Christopher Bigsby, "Born injured: the theatre of Sam Shepard," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, ed. Matthew Roudané (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 17.

"free experimentation" that Bigsby cites serves as a hallmark of Shepard's writing style throughout his career, as he employs spontaneity and a lack of self-censorship in playwriting. In his introduction to a significant volume of Shepard criticism, Stephen J. Bottoms writes about the formation of Shepard's writing style in working amongst the avant-garde artists of the early 1960's, and its influence on the entirety of his career. Bottoms writes:

> In this respect, the early lessons of nontheatrical influences, including action painting, beat writing, and especially jazz music, have been crucial. Shepard has continued to cherish their key principle of unrestricted spontaneity in the creative process, of pursuing the expression of one's immediate impulses rather than trying to submit oneself to preconceived ideas of structure and content.
> […]
> Shepard's free-form technique is evident in its most raw, undeveloped state in his very earliest plays, but he has continued to practice it, with modifications, throughout his career. He claims, for example, that *True West* (1980) went through thirteen different drafts before he was happy with it, and that each of those drafts was not merely an adjustment of the previous one but a complete rewrite.[11]

Crucially, Bottoms notes the dual importance of the impulsivity of Shepard's writing and the editorial maturity he achieved later in his career when he penned his most significant plays.

Amongst the jazz musicians of NYC in the 1960's, Shepard found the concept of musicality central to his own writing, saying in an interview with Matthew Roudané:

> So I've always felt that music is very important. Writing is very rhythmic, there's a rhythmical flow to it – if it's working. I've always been fascinated by the rhythm of language, and language is musical, there's no way of getting around it, particularly written language when it's spoken. The language becomes musical, or at least it should in one way or another. I still play music a little bit.[12]

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[11] Stephen J. Bottoms, "Introduction: States of Crisis," in *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 6.

[12] Matthew Roudané, "Shepard on Shepard: an Interview," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, ed. Matthew Roudané (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 66-67.

Shepard's musicality ties to his focus on theatrical immediacy and the effect of spectacle and action upon an audience. In short, Shepard's dramaturgy does not concern itself with traditional linear through-lines or realistic plot structure; instead, as Bottoms again describes, Shepard's plays function more as sensory experiences designed to make audiences fully aware of the present moment and the painful contradictions of human existence, saying:

> [Shepard's] is a theatre of fragments, and often of verbal and visual glut, in which disparate elements butt up against each other in abrupt or unsettling juxtapositions, and in which intense, disturbing confrontations are inextricably entwined with a certain wild playfulness and madcap comedy (Shepard's plays are nothing if not funny). This inclusive approach often makes the plays seem unwieldy or somehow incomplete, yet onstage it is also this very "flaw" – the lack of structural or thematic resolution – which makes his best work so provocative. […] In short, Shepard's plays tend to be structured less as chains of events than as collages or patchworks of colors, sounds, and confrontations: the focus is on what is happening on stage *in the moment*, rather than on the explication of some fictional past or future…[13]

The a-structural, impromptu nature of Shepard's plays echoes the improvised jazz he heard at the Village Gate, and he demonstrates his flair for the unexpected throughout his career, including when he moved out of his overtly avant-garde phase of the 1960's.

Nevertheless, the 1970's proved a decade of momentous change for Shepard, in both his personal life and his career. As the 1970's began, Shepard experienced tremendous artistic growth and concurrent upheaval in his personal life. Following his first major phase of writing in the 1960's, Shepard married actress O-Lan Jones in 1969, and their son Jesse was born in 1970. Quickly after his marriage, Shepard began an artistic and intimate affair with actress/musician Patti Smith; while this affair threatened Shepard's family, it also provided him with inspiration and artistic collaboration with the

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[13] Bottoms, "Introduction: States of Crisis," 2-3.

talented Smith. Ultimately, Shepard decided to leave Smith and return to Jones and his son, coinciding with a hasty retreat from New York City to London in 1971, a trans-oceanic move that (alongside the tumultuous affair with Smith), Shepard connects to his disillusionment with America and the chaos of the 1960's.[14]

Shepard links his own recognition of American identity and its characteristics to his time away from America itself. Speaking here with Roudané, Shepard credits his stint in Britain as providing perspective on his own national identity, saying, "…it wasn't until I came to England that I found out what it means to be an American. Nothing really makes sense when you're there [in America], but the more distant you are from it, the more the implications of what you grew up with start to emerge."[15] In that same interview, Shepard contrasts the agonizing tumult of living through 1960's America with the idealized memory and historical narrative of that decade:

> SHEPARD: But the sixties, to me, felt extremely chaotic. It did *not* feel like some heroic effort toward a new world, like many people make it out to be. There was an idealism on the one hand that was so out to lunch in the face of the realities.
> […]
> The reality of it to me was chaos, and the idealism didn't mean anything…
> ROUDANÉ: And this prompted you to go to London in 1971?
> SHEPARD: Oh yeah, very much. I mean I wanted out. I wanted to get out of the insanity. Of course I was also running away from myself![16]

Though Shepard drew many aesthetic influences from the 1960's and formed the basis for his artistry in that decade, he recognized a fundamental disconnect between the perception of the 1960's, especially among his contemporaries, and the real disarray and crisis of the time. The contradiction between the perception and lived experience of

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[14] Roudané, 65-66.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

1960's America echoes the conflation between idealized image and harsh reality which Shepard explores in his writing.

Perhaps most significantly, Shepard regards his sojourn to London as an attempt to escape his own identity, an attempt which he later deemed a futile endeavor. Shepard views American identity as inextricably linked to familial ties and lineages; he continually returns to writing about the family and the omnipresence of its influence. He states:

> ROUDANÉ: Could you comment on your life-long interest in exploring the American family?
> SHEPARD: The one thing that keeps drawing me back to it is this thing that 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…We were all independent, we were all free of that, we were somehow spinning out there in the world without any connections 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...[17]

Shepard's time in London allowed his thoughts on heredity and Americans' attempts to distance themselves from their predecessors to develop, and he would continue to develop and explore these ideas throughout his career. Furthermore, Shepard's notions about heredity and Americans' outright resentment of their heredity germinated while he was in London, and he brought these ideas back to the United States.

Shepard's London years also deepened the collaborative nature of the work. He began—through written correspondence—an artistic relationship with Joseph Chaikin, director of the Open Theatre and avant-garde guru. Shepard and Chaikin's relationship spans many years and artistic collaborations, even persisting through Chaikin's massive stroke and onset of aphasia in 1984. Chaikin's aesthetic deviations from Stanislavskian

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[17] Ibid., 67-68.

Realism and the deliberate performativity he encourages in actors feature prominently in Shepard's characters, particularly in Shepard's deceptively "realistic" works, such as his four "family plays." Significantly, Shepard credits Chaikin as the primary source of his own understanding of theatrical collaboration.[18] Near the end of his time in London, Shepard undertook another collaborative first for his career when he directed one of his own plays, 1974's *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, featuring acclaimed actors Stephen Rea, Bob Hoskins, and Ken Cranham.[19] Though his time in London came to an end in the same year, Shepard used the insights gleaned in his expatriate days to further his career and assert his prominence as an American dramatist.

In 1974 Shepard and his family moved to San Francisco, where he began his involvement with The Magic Theatre, and where he was named playwright in residence in 1975. He also joined Bob Dylan's *Rolling Thunder Review Tour* in 1975 as a possible screenwriter to document it. While on the road, Shepard wrote prodigiously.[20] Shepard's writing began to orient towards the American family, and it seems that the generative material for what many theorists consider his most significant group of plays formulated at this time.[21]

In the late 1970's and the early 1980's, Shepard's career continued to skyrocket as he found mainstream success as a dramatist, screenwriter, and film actor. As a result of his forays away from the theatre and into film, Shepard met actress Jessica Lange on the

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[18] Ibid., 74-75.

[19] Ibid., 66.

[20] Much of the raw material Shepard generated during this tour would eventually be published in a 1982 prose collection entitled *Motel Chronicles*.

[21] Gary Grant, "Writing as a Process of Performing the Self: Sam Shepard's Notebooks," *Modern Drama* 34, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 553.

set of director Graeme Clifford's film *Frances*, and the two quickly began a romantic

relationship that ended Shepard's troubled marriage.[22] Lange and Shepard had two

children together, and remained life partners until 2010 when the couple finally split due

to irreconcilable differences. Shepard continued his prolific writing career, and garnered

many prestigious awards in his lifetime. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1979 for *Buried*

Child, eleven Obie Awards for his Off-Broadway work, a Best Supporting Actor Oscar

nomination for his role in *The Right Stuff* (1983), and a Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film

Festival for his screenplay of *Paris, Texas* (1984). Shepard's work has enjoyed

numerous acclaimed premieres and revivals, and he continues to work across a range of

performative media and roles. Shepard now divides his time between his ranch in

Kentucky and Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he gives his time to the Santa Fe Institute,

an interdisciplinary think-tank.

Major Works: the Four "Family Plays," 1977-1983

Among the best known of Shepard's works are the four "family plays:" *Curse of*

the Starving Class (1977), *Buried Child* (1979), *True West* (1980), and *Fool for Love*

(1983). In both an authorial and personal sense, Shepard finds his way back to the subject

of the family because he considers it impossible to ever fully extract oneself from that

nearly universal social construct. He once stated, "I'm interested in the family's

biological connections and how those patterns of behavior are passed on. In a way it's

endless, there's no real bottom to it."[23] Shepard regards his family plays as works that

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[22] Jones and Shepard's divorce became finalized in 1984, though Shepard began living with Lange in Santa Fe, NM in 1983.

[23] Roudané, 68.

influenced one another, incorporating the discoveries and themes of the prior into the next and molding them into new dramatic entities.

Shepard's first family play was 1977's *Curse of the Starving Class,*[24] a play that paired Shepard's avant-garde era shock value and sensationalism with the coherence and familiarity of the American family drama. *Curse* premiered on April 21, 1977 at the Royal Court Theatre in London, and as Shepard critic Thomas P. Adler describes, it "focuses on the severely dysfunctional Tate family to explore issues of home and heredity, rootedness and escape, of determinism and change. The 'curse' of the play's title is biological and familial, as well as a result of social and economic forces."[25] In the play's action, the Tate family attempts to sell their dilapidated, modest home despite the machinations and attempted wheeling-dealing of the alcoholic firebrand patriarch Weston. His son, Wesley, attempts to hold the crumbling family together as his mother Ella becomes increasingly disillusioned with her lot in life and his sister Emma rapidly descends into a life of crime. Following the plot's many twists and turns the play reaches its climax as two mysterious men named Emerson and Slater show up to collect Weston's debt, and ultimately blow up his car, also murdering Emma in the process. Violence, death, decay, and insatiable hunger define the world of *Curse*, and director of the initial production and longtime Shepard collaborator Robert Woodruff typifies this play as, "The Great American Melodrama. I got the deed! No, you don't! I got the money! Here come the cops! And the guy with the black moustache comes on at the end twirling

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[24] For brevity's sake, herein after this play will be referred to as *Curse*.

[25] Thomas P. Adler, "Repetition and Regression in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, ed. Matthew Roudané (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 112.

it."[26] Though *Curse* pertains to a family and their issues, by classifying it as a melodrama Woodruff places the play outside the immediate context of American realism while still connecting it with the form. This dramaturgical trait is an important characteristic of the four family plays.

The second play of the series is 1978's *Buried Child*. This play's 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and many successful revivals (including a 1996 Broadway run for which Shepard penned significant revisions[27]) demonstrate its theatrical sustainability. *Buried Child* received its premiere on June 27, 1978 at San Francisco's Magic Theatre under Woodruff's direction. In the play, Vince, a prodigal grandson, returns to his family's decrepit farm which sits smack in the middle of an agrarian wasteland. Vince has brought his out-of-place girlfriend Shelly, who cites her initial reaction to the house as "…like a Norman Rockwell cover or something."[28] However, the house is anything but idyllic. Dodge, Vince's immobile grandfather, exists as a near-corpse on a sofa pointed toward the shaky light of a television. Halie, his morose grandmother, wanders the house, haunted by her family's disintegration. Tilden, Vince's mentally unstable father, roams the acreage pulling crop upon crop of corn into the house, much to Halie, his mother's, amazement. She claims that nothing has grown on the family's acreage for years, yet Tilden's bushels of corn suggest otherwise. Bradley, Vince's powder-keg of an uncle, rages at everyone within his reach (including Shelly). One may accurately describe the world of *Buried Child* as a nightmare of Rockwell's sublime Americana. Shepard scholar

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[26] Robert Coe, "Interview with Robert Woodruff," in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York: PAJ Publications, 1981), 153.

[27] This important revival originated at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, directed by Gary Sinise, and later moved to Broadway.

[28] Sam Shepard, *Buried Child*, in *Seven Plays* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 83.

Thomas P. Adler states: "Shepard steadily undercuts such mythicizations of the American nuclear family as it appears in popular culture by showing the disparity between the real and the imagined. For this is a family in denial, inhabiting a fetid atmosphere."[29] The moribund landscape seeps into both Vince and Shelly as they attempt to respectively reconnect and connect to the land and heritage. Ultimately, Vince usurps the patriarchal claims of both Dodge and Tilden by giving in to the violence that characterizes his family's estate and legacy. As the household's balance of power shifts, deep-seated secrets come to light, the most significant of which concerns the play's namesake: a (most-likely) incestuous love-child of Tilden and his mother, born and then drowned and buried on the farm. At the play's conclusion, Tilden unearths and presents the infant's corpse to Vince, who has claimed his grandfather Dodge's place on the home's metaphorical throne: its filth-laden sofa. With this grotesque final image, *Buried Child* serves as Shepard's bleakest take on familial succession and the violence it demands amongst and between kin.

Just over two years after the premiere of *Buried Child* at the Magic Theatre, *True West*, the primary subject of this study, debuted on July 10, 1980, with Woodruff once again directing. In this deceptively simple black comedy, two brothers named Austin and Lee have an unanticipated rendezvous at their mother's home in suburban Los Angeles. On the surface, Austin, a screenwriter with a family, and Lee, a hard-drinking, reckless drifter with streak of kleptomania, seem to have little in common, but by play's end, they trade roles (or perhaps lives) and back again. Austin plans to sell a trite, cliché screenplay to a fast-talking Hollywood producer, and Lee snatches the deal away from Austin with an idea for a Western that, according to the producer, "has the ring of

[29] Adler, 114.

truth…"[30] Goaded into screenwriting his brother's "bullshit story,"[31] Austin reacts by

drinking heavily and stealing toasters from the neighbors. Eventually, he demands that

Lee take him into the desert on a search for a "real life." Conversely, Lee cannot write

and resorts to bludgeoning Austin's typewriter with a golf club. The feuding brothers

find that they cannot take on the mantle of the other, nor do they find satisfaction within

their current lives. The play ends with a stalemate: both brothers locked in a never-

ending standoff with one another after Austin nearly commits fratricide with a phone

cord. At its climax, *True West* demonstrates that Austin and Lee cannot exist with each

other, or without each other, an impasse that rips both of them apart from the inside-out.

 Fool for Love, Shepard's 1983 tour-de-force for one male and one female actor,

rounds out Shepard's extremely successful string of premieres at the Magic Theatre, with

Ed Harris as Eddie and Kathy Baker as Mae, the play's dueling lovers and half-siblings,

and with Shepard himself directing. The play opens in a squalid motel room in the

Mojave Desert, with Eddie vociferously and violently promising Mae that he will not

leave her again, while an otherworldly figure known as the Old Man presides over and

comments on the play's action. Eventually, Mae reveals that she has a date this evening

with a man named Martin, and accuses Eddie of infidelity with an enigmatic woman

known only as "The Countess." Eddie rages at Mae, and upon his arrival, Martin is

dragged into the fracas. The Old Man also emancipates himself from the role of outside

commentator and begins speaking directly to Eddie and Mae, revealing more about his

own illicit trysts with Mae's mother and the emotional trauma it wreaked upon everyone

in the immediate vicinity. Eddie and Mae's own incestuous relationship comes to the

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[30] Shepard, *True West* (New York: Samuel French, 1981), 42.

[31] Ibid., 36.

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forefront, and Mae reveals the Old Man's wanton behavior toward her mother as the

impetus for her mother's suicide. As unspeakable revelations continue to pour out to

Martin and the Old Man alike, "The Countess" arrives offstage and sets fire to Eddie's

horse trailer, rendering the play's metaphorical explosions between romantic and familial

partners literal.

These four plays represent arguably the most cogent, potent, and theatrically

viable samples of Shepard's dramatic *oeuvre*, and they best exemplify Shepard's most

pertinent and often explored themes. The family plays address an oft-explored concept

for American playwrights, but do so with an acridity and brutality that exposes the

fissures and fragments in this basic social unit. Furthermore, these plays are four of the

most frequently produced and critically lauded in Shepard's canon, speaking to themes

and resonances that remain popular and pertinent to a broad audience. This study's next

segment examines three prominent themes in the context of the family plays. Each of

these plays treats on the consequences of absent fathers on their family units, the effects

of violence on the dissolution of civilization, and the truths and lies of American

mythology.

Absent Fathers and Shifting Familial Roles

From his early adolescence onward, Shepard cites his relationship with his own

father as tenuous at best and abusive at worst, saying, "He was very strict, my father, very

aware of the need for discipline, so-called, very into studying and all that kind of stuff. I

couldn't stand it—the whole thing of writing in notebooks, it was really like being

jailed."[32] Shepard spent a large portion of his life distancing himself from his father,

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[32] Chubb et al., 188.

though the effects of his father's mistreatments and maladies linger in the author's memory. Consequently, spectral "Old Man" or father figures creep their way into much of Shepard's dramaturgy, especially so in the four family plays. Moreover, the father's absenteeism in each of these plays demands that other characters (often unwillingly and unsuccessfully) take up the mantle of patriarch or shift around their positions and roles within the family to unfamiliar or hostile territory.

In *Curse*, Weston, the patriarch of the Tate family, remains physically absent at play's beginning, but makes his presence felt through the shattered door that his son Wesley cleans up throughout the play's first scene. Upon Weston's arrival, it seems as if his family may be better off without his presence, especially with his violence, drunkenness, and attempts to sell the family's orchard for a pittance. Toward the play's climax, as Weston becomes more entangled in the seedy underworld in which he has squandered much of the Tates' money and resources, Wesley must assume the role of patriarch, a role he does not have the ability to undertake. Ultimately, when Emerson and Slater finally murder Weston via car bomb, Wesley and his mother Ella reminisce about him, longing for the presence of a stable head-of-household where none ever existed.

In *Buried Child*, Dodge, the patriarch of the family, remains all but physically absent as he unceremoniously rots and becomes intertwined in the fabric of the sofa at center stage. Upon his first entrance, Dodge's son Tilden brings an armful of corn with him, and unceremoniously dumps it on his father. Furthermore, Tilden removes the husks from the corn, and lays them across Dodge's emaciated figure, reinforcing the thematic image of Dodge as a hollowed-out husk of a man who lies stagnantly on the couch, powerless and ineffectual. This ritualistic burial of his father leads the audience to

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believe that Tilden will eventually assume the role of patriarch; however, the revelation of incest invalidates Tilden's claim to the seat of power. Tilden transgressed the limits of family by allegedly engaging in a sexual relationship with his mother, and Dodge drowned the incestuous child born of his son and wife's illicit affair. This violation of a nearly universal social taboo renders Tilden a permanent outsider, a father who became a father again under unspeakable means and thus forfeited his position as an individual of rank. Tilden's son Vince eventually takes the patriarch's seat on the sofa, and in one of the play's most noted speeches, Vince recounts driving to buy liquor for his grandfather, and envisioning his face transforming into the face of his ancestors and finally disappearing. Even though he tried to run away from them earlier in his life, Vince's family and lineage lures him back, and he assumes the vacated role of patriarch because he has no other choice.

In *True West*, no physical figure exists, but both Austin and Lee continually reference their "Old Man" throughout the play. Much like Shepard's own father prior to his death in 1984,[33] the "Old Man" of *True West* lives a secluded life in the desert, choosing to forgo the obligations and responsibilities of society. Both Lee and Austin have a tenuous relationship with their "Old Man," and as scholar Leslie Kane notes, the "Old Man" need not have a literal presence onstage to influence both of his sons: Paralleling Godot in *Waiting for Godot*, the father, a central figure in Shepard's drama, is absent, but made dramatically present by their continual reference to him.[34] Austin

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[33] John M. Clum, "The Classic Western and Sam Shepard's Family Sagas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, ed. Matthew Roudané (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 172.

[34] Leslie Kane, "Reflections of the Past in *True West* and *A Lie of the Mind*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, ed. Matthew Roudané, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 143.

harbors intense resentment of his "Old Man" and explicitly states his desire to stay away

from him: "I don't want him out here! I've had it with him! I went all the way out there!

I went out of my way. I gave him money and all he did was play Al Jolson records and

spit at me!"[35] Nevertheless, Lee's presence compounds Austin's disdain for his "Old

Man" because, as Kane theorizes, Lee own lifestyle mirrors that of their father:

> …an interpretation of sibling rivalry and split personality that neglects the crucial
> factor that Lee is at home in the desert…fails to recognize the older brother as
> rival *and* extension of the father…increasingly, the effect of Lee's will and booze
> is observed in Austin's behavior and drunken singing.[36]

Instigated by Lee's connection to the "Old Man's" lack of socialization and alcoholism,

Austin begins to also assume the behaviors of the "Old Man." Again, Kane notes textual

examples of this role reversal and how it alters Austin's previously established character

traits:

> Lee's catalytic presence… "inevitably brings the buried past back to the surface,"
> a device by which Shepard calls direct attention to the connection between the
> alcoholic father and his sons. Thus, when Lee remarks that Austin sounds like the
> old man, Austin snipes, "Yeah, well we all sound alike when we're sloshed" (39),
> a far cry from his earlier defensive stance that he bears no resemblance to his
> father.[37]

Kane's analysis points to Shepard's interest in biological determinism and its

inevitability. *True West* suggests that sons will eventually become like their fathers, no

matter the physical distance they establish from them. At the play's conclusion, Austin

nevertheless declares that he and Lee will "[go] to a different desert" than their father,

though he has no way of differentiating one desert from another, or moreover,

distinguishing himself from Lee and the "Old Man." Though Lee sympathizes with the

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[35] Shepard, *True West*, 52.

[36] Kane, 144.

[37] Ibid.

"Old Man" and wishes to help him, he resents that he has become just like his father: a feckless, derelict drifter who is unwelcome in society and unable to live up to its standards.[38] Though only spoken of and never literally seen, the "Old Man" of *True West* undoubtedly influences his sons' behavior and further locks them into a cycle of disillusionment with their own lives and flight from society and social responsibility.

In *Fool for Love*, the spectral Old Man figure literally appears onstage, at first as a detached commentator, and eventually as a sounding board for Eddie and Mae. The Old Man provides additional context for the complex relationship between the two. Eddie initially seeks to serve as Mae's protector, and their relationship turns mutually abusive as accusations of deceit fly between them. The Old Man finds himself shaken by the play's revelations, claiming to have no knowledge of his own influence over Mae's mother's suicide. In *Fool for Love*, though the Old Man manifests physically in front of the audience and eventually interacts with the play's main characters, it is his perpetual absence which damages Eddie and Mae, problematizes their relationship with one another, and mystifies the context of the play's action. Bottoms notes about *Fool for Love*'s conclusion:

> …while [the Old Man] is still not an actual character in the "realistic" frame of the play (Martin remains completely oblivious of him), he remains onstage even after May and Eddie exit (rather than disappearing in a puff of memory), and supplies the final lines to round the play off. This is a trompe l'oeil effect not dissimilar to that which ends *Angel City*, which suggest the possibility that everything preceding it has been a fantasy of the Old Man's.[39]

Bottoms theorizes that Shepard's absent fathers do not ever fully relinquish their influence over the present characters, and furthermore, we may even view some of these

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[38] Shepard, *True West*, 64.

[39] Bottoms, "The Real Thing: *True West* and *Fool for Love*," in *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 210-211.

plays through the lens of the absent father himself. Much like Shepard's father

influenced him and passed down some undesirable traits (such as alcoholism),[40]

Shepard's characters also cannot escape the maladies they inherit from their fathers, and

remain inextricably connected to these patriarchs despite attempts to cast off their

legacies.

Violence and Civilization

Shepard's plays teem with violence and vicious, hazardous interactions between

his characters; moreover, Shepardian violence serves as a means of communication

between his characters and a primary source of generating dramatic action. In a critique

specifically directed toward *Fool for Love*, Bottoms touches on the central motive of

Shepardian violence and how it functions within his dramatic texts:

> This newly concentrated emphasis on the characters' moment-to-moment
> interaction is also an important factor in relation to Shepard's concern with
> pursuing a greater consistency of motivation for his characters. For he realizes
> this not by creating conventional, "well-rounded" psychological portraits with
> clearly detailed histories, but by focusing instead on maintaining a consistent
> overtone of tension in the characters' immediate confrontations. The dominating
> factor in the central characters' behavior is always the immediate need for them
> either to forcibly command the attention of, or to survive the assaults of, their
> opponents.[41]

Bottoms characterizes violence as a primary mode of communication and interaction

between Shepard's characters, and furthermore, draws attention to the immediacy of

action which stage violence engenders. When characters engage in brutality, audiences

pay less attention to previously established characteristics, and instead focus on the threat

of the characters' vociferous exchanges.

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[40] Two days before this production of *True West* opened, Sam Shepard was arrested for DWI near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

[41] Bottoms, "The Real Thing: *True West* and *Fool for Love*," 185.

Shepard ties his characters' violent urges to their ontological crises and subsequent collision of identity. *New York Times* writer Michiko Kakutani quotes Shepard's thoughts on violence, why he employs it in his dramatic texts, and where it originates from in American culture:

> "I think there is something about American violence that to me is very touching," he explains. "In full force, it's very ugly, but there's also something very moving about it, because it has to do with humiliation. There's some hidden, deeply rooted thing in the Anglo male American that has to do with inferiority, with not being a man, and always, continually having to act out some idea of manhood that is invariably violent. This sense of failure runs very deep – maybe it has to do with the frontier being systematically taken away, with the guilt of having gotten this country by wiping out a native race of people, with the whole Protestant work ethic."[42]

Shepard makes a razor-thin distinction between romanticizing masculine violence and empathizing with the plight of broken men. Importantly, Shepard posits that male violence arises out of the failure to fulfil one's own traditionally defined duties and roles as a "man." Shepard empathizes with the American male's embarrassment and understands that his violent tendencies arise out of this embarrassment, though he does not excuse them.

In addition to the American male's violence, Shepard explores violence within the family unit. As Clum notes: "…family is every bit as violent in Shepard's plays as it is in Edward Albee's work."[43] Shepard's families do not function as havens of warmth and compassion within harsh societies; instead, Shepard's family members have the most dangerous and vehement interactions in his plays. They cannot escape one another or avoid becoming like one another. Shepardian violence stands in direct opposition to the

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[42] Michiko Kakutani, "Myths, Dreams, Realities – Sam Shepard's America," Arts, *The New York Times*, pg. 24, January 29, 1984

[43] Clum, 186.

idea of civilization within his dramatic texts, destroying not only individuals and families but also worlds. Violence defines the actions of the majority of Shepard's characters, and extends beyond the corporeal to the destruction of a society's basic architecture. Clum expounds on the violence enacted on and within Shepard's physical spaces and elevates it to metaphorical and metaphysical levels: "The violent destruction of domestic space is the visual counterpart of the damage done to basic familial relationships."[44]

Shepardian violence permeates all four of his family plays, and punctuates some of the most important and memorable moments of dramatic action. For example, *Curse* commences with Wesley having to clean up a violently broken door, the aftermath of another one of his father's rampages, and culminates with Weston and Emma's demise in a car bomb. *Curse* straps its audience into a figurative ride on a roller coaster of violence that includes a dead lamb, urination, nudity, fisticuffs, riding a horse through a bar while firing a weapon, and the consequences of owing money to dangerous men. In *Buried Child*, Bradley serves as the most overtly violent character, engaging in a moment of sexualized violence and domination when he puts his fingers in Shelly's mouth. Later, Shelly exacts revenge on Bradley when she steals his prosthetic leg. Interestingly, this moment of violence serves to bring Shelly further into the family fold, as the most violent acts in Shepard's plays often occur between family members. In a moment which echoes *Curse*, Vince tears the screen door off of the house when he returns near the play's climax. Vince's surrender to violence coincides with his ascension to head-of-household, cementing the family unit as a locus of violence.

In *True West*, the violence of the "Old Man" passes to Austin and Lee through their heredity, as Clum illustrates in this example: "As hard as Austin may try to be

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[44] Ibid., 187.

different from his father, Austin and Lee, like other Shepard sons, have been 'infected.' Both are essentially loners who avoid even the human interaction demanded by their familial roles."[45] As far as Lee's violence, Bottoms illustrates and tracks its escalation, positing that violence goes hand-in-hand with discovering one's own powerlessness: "It is significant that Lee's violence seems to heighten and accelerate with his growing awareness of the futility of his position…Lee's malicious lashing out results from the stifling of his most basic personal desires for freedom and fulfillment."[46] Lee, who outwardly embodies the roughness of his father, becomes increasingly belligerent as his failure to achieve success and independence becomes more apparent. Even Austin, who exhibits passivity antithetical to his father's violence, flies into a murderous rage when Lee welches on his promise to take him to the desert, making Austin's own powerlessness more apparent to him.

Fool for Love has a series of violent acts perpetuated throughout the play, perhaps most notably the moments in which sexual desire becomes juxtaposed with deadly violence, such as the moment when Mae leans in to kiss Eddie, only to viciously knee him in the groin at the last second. More significantly, as in *Buried Child*, the revelation of damaging information also serves as a form of violence, such as Eddie revealing to Mae's date Martin about Eddie and Mae's blood relationship and the Old Man learning of his role in Mae's mother's suicide. No matter the form the violence takes, be it physical, psychological, or metaphorical, Sheparidan violence serves as the primary communicative device between characters in his plays, and it does so because these

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[45] Ibid., 186.

[46] Bottoms, "The Real Thing: *True West* and *Fool for Love*," 202.

characters live with a brokenness and pain that can only be expressed through

destruction.

American Mythology

Throughout the family plays (and indeed, the rest of his canon), Shepard

frequently investigates the mythologies and cultural tropes that create American identity,

often including references to classic pieces of Americana, and playing with and

evaluating the metanarratives and myths that make up the story of American experience.

Shepard treats on the tropes of different myths and makes judicious use of them in his

texts because he no longer believes in their power as a conduit of cultural connectivity:

> The traditional meaning of myth, the ancient meaning of myth, is that it served a purpose in our life. The purpose has to do with being able to trace ourselves back through time and follow our emotional self. Myth served as a story in which people could connect themselves in time to the past. And thereby connect themselves to the present and future…it acted as a thread in culture. And that's been destroyed…It doesn't exist anymore. All we have is fantasies about it.[47]

Myth, in the Shepardian world, has no power as an agent of cultural linkage or lineage,

and thus we are left with fragmentary bits of culture that reference an imagined time.

Because these cultural fragments have no unitary, mythic resonance, the individuals who

still treat them as metanarratives find themselves irrevocably damaged by their blind faith

in them. Clum connects the damage wrought from the classic American myth of "the

West" to the Shepard characters it affects most:

> I want to suggest that Shepard's feckless fathers are failures because the dream of the West, as depicted in Westerns, is dead. The conflict between the natural man and the social man continues to be played out in their crippled sons. Critics have noted the autobiographical aspects of Shepard's work, who himself embodies the split between domesticity and waywardness.[48]

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[47] Bigsby, 11.

[48] Clum, 172.

Clum asserts that broken myths ultimately break the men who invest themselves in them. The vestiges of these myths exist in fragmentary form, but the fragments, like glass shards, cut into the individuals who believe in them and damage their identities. Clum also addresses the most prominent myth which Shepard's male characters buy into:

> [Shepard's male characters] are compelled to connect with ideals of masculinity for which there are no real models and with myths of the American land that are no longer relevant. One important expression of those ideals was the classic American Western with which Sam Shepard grew up with and on which, to some extent, he built his persona.[49]

Though the American Western exists as the most prominent fragment of Americana within Shepard's dramaturgy, Shepard explores many other ineffectual and obsolete American metanarratives in his plays.

For example, in *Curse*, which may be more aptly titled *Curse of the Middle Class*, Shepard skewers the Horatio Alger "rags to riches" myth that states that anyone in America can become wealthy through hard work, elbow grease, and a little bit of luck. *Buried Child* deals with an agrarian setting, and the American desire for self-sustainability and living off of the land. *True West* deals in small part with the alluring myth of Hollywood success and stardom, and the economic mobility that it promises to the exceptionally talented, but more importantly, it pertains to an idea of the "real West," a mythic construct of cowboys, outlaws, and limitless. *Fool for Love* plays on American individualism, isolationism, and the classic American boy-meets-girl, boy-gets-girl love story.

Shepard's three major thematic threads—absent fathers and shifting familial roles, violence and its effects on civilization, and the remnants of American mythology—all

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[49] Ibid., 173.

point to an overarching concern which Shepard addresses throughout his dramaturgy: the conflation and confusion of image and reality. Here, Bartels quotes Shepard about his thoughts on the tenuous, fractured nature of contemporary American identity:

> I really think that we are not just one person. We are a multiplicity of beings, if you want to call it that. Not to get too philosophical about it, but it's very easy for me to see character in the shifting, myriad, ever-changing tableau rather than one part. We're used to looking at character in a traditional sense, of being something we can define by behavior or background. You know what I'm saying?
>
> But it may not be like that; it may be much more interesting. For me, anyway. It may not be so interesting to lock down the character with specifics. What I'm interested in is this shifting of the character, you know, not the exactness of definition.[50]

Shepard's three most prominent themes function alternately as causes and effects of fragmented identity, and this overarching theme plays into the dramatic focus of *True West*, a focus which productions of this play have explored and wrestled with since its premiere.

Production History and Critical Assessment

Since its premiere on July 10, 1980 at San Francisco's Magic Theatre, *True West* has enjoyed numerous productions and revivals all over the world. Professional, academic, and community theatres still regularly produce this play, and productions have been mounted in locations as varied as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Turkey. Three particular productions of *True West* stand out as particularly important because of their aesthetic merits, critical assessments, and theatrical choices: the play's 1980 premiere at the Magic Theatre (which unsuccessfully transferred to New York), the 1982 revival produced by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre

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[50] Bartels, 75.

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(which had a well-received run in New York), and the 2000 Broadway revival directed

by Matthew Warchus, starring Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly.

True West's initial production at the Magic Theatre received a plethora of critical

praise, including a scholarly assessment written by Wendy Lesser in *The Threepenny

Review*:

> *True West*, Sam Shepard's latest drama, is certainly a play about plays - but it is
> many other things as well. The danger with *True West* is that if you take it on only
> one of its many levels, it appears simple-minded. As allegory alone, the play
> seems pompous. As illusion, it's transparent. And as mere mockery, it aims at too
> easy a target. But to bring all of these efforts successfully together in one play,
> without allowing us to hear the creak of authorial machinery or the squeak of
> tonal transition, is in fact a remarkable achievement.[51]

From the outset of her review, Lesser specifically notes the deceptive outward simplicity

of *True West*. As a play, it requires a layered interpretation and production to bring out

its many colors and textures, and any interpretation that treats it as straight realism or

symbolism misses the point of its constantly fluctuating state of identity and possibilities.

Perhaps most significantly, Lesser addresses the problematic nature of illusion versus

reality in Shepard's text and how this is realized in Woodruff's initial production,

writing:

> A theater audience, almost by definition, is asking to be fooled by illusion for the
> duration of the play; it wants to regard the false as true, to judge the pre-arranged
> on the basis of authenticity. What Shepard's play does, finally, is to give us that
> sense of illusion and at the same time undermine it. By enlisting us in his mockery
> of Hollywood, his parody of communion ("What is all this bullshit with toast?
> You make it sound like salvation or something," Lee says at one point to Austin),
> his dissection of cliché, Shepard makes us see how much we really depend on the
> illusions created by art, by ritual, by language. For he understands-as do all good
> playwrights-that those illusions may well be our only access to reality.[52]

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[51] Wendy Lesser, review of *True West*, by Sam Shepard, directed by Robert Woodruff, Magic
Theatre, San Francisco, *The Threepenny Review* 4 (Winter 1981): 18.

[52] Ibid., 19.

Here, Lesser notes the difficult tightrope of reality versus illusion that the play must walk, and how ultimately the play richly succeeds by presenting us with a story that becomes so "real" that the audience becomes once again reminded of the theatre's artificiality. A dual pleasure of character identification and aesthetic distance permeates Shepard's text, and a competent production of the play must unlock these dramatic potentials. Writing for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Stewart McBride notes that thus far in Shepard's dramatic canon, *True West* "is thought by many critics to be the best play Shepard has ever written."[53] Even when productions of *True West* do not necessarily succeed, Shepard's text is consistently praised, even amidst performances that do not do it justice.

Later in 1980, *True West*'s critically acclaimed Magic Theatre production moved to New York's Public Theatre, and thus began an ill-fated process which found Woodruff quitting his position as director during previews and Shepard ultimately disavowing the show. In a review of this problematic production for *The New York Times*, Frank Rich notes the clunky, awkward, and tragically unrehearsed look of the product: "…the 'True West' at the Public amounts to little more than a stand-up run-through of a text that remains to be explored. This play hasn't been misdirected; it really looks as if it hasn't been directed at all."[54] Nevertheless, Rich cites Shepard's playwriting prowess and blames this production's failure on the rest of the artistic team: "Mr. Shepard doesn't graft symbols onto his plays. He's a true artist; his best works are organic creations that

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[53] Stewart McBride, "SAM SHEPARD," *The Christian Science Monitor,* Dec 26, 1980, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1039003026?accountid=7014 (accessed February 26, 2015).

[54] Frank Rich, review of *True West*, by Sam Shepard, directed by Robert Woodruff, Public Theater, New York, *The New York Times*, December 24, 1980, pg. C9.

cannot be broken down into their constituent parts."[55] Rich's critique points to another

common problem when productions of *True West* go awry: the text remains significantly

underexplored, too quickly declared "figured out" or "solved" by the artistic team. In this

case, it seems that the artists working on the production didn't have a chance to do so

thanks to issues between producer, director, and playwright. Public Theatre Producer

Joseph Papp encountered major conflicts with Woodruff, and the biggest conflict

stemmed from replacing the original actors with more renowned and bankable names:

actors Tommy Lee Jones as Austin and Peter Boyle as Lee. Woodruff went as far as to

state that the Public Theatre's production "[wasn't] my vision of the production or

[Shepard's]."[56] *True West* was not seen in New York for another two years, until a

burgeoning theatre company from Chicago transferred their production to the East Coast.

   Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre mounted a 1982 revival of *True West* starring

Gary Sinise as Austin and John Malkovich as Lee, and this production eventually

transferred to New York to thunderous critical acclaim. In another review for *The New

York Times*, Mel Gussow notes how "…this is the true 'True West.'"[57] More

importantly, Gussow pinpoints a specific problem which other unsuccessful productions

of *True West* have fallen victim to: "The main problem with the first New York

production was that the actors cast as the brothers were too similar in type and

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Qtd. in Ray Conologue, "Sheppard Disowns Papp Production." *The Globe and Mail,* Dec 18, 1980. http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/386789697?accountid=7014 (accessed March 1, 2015).

[57] Mel Gussow, review of *True West*, by Sam Shepard, directed by Gary Sinise, Cherry Lane Theater, New York, *The New York Times*, October 18, 1982, pg. C18.

temperament."[58] Though Austin and Lee switch roles and identities in the course of the

play, if the audience initially sees that they are similar (or even the same), the play's

journey does not prove nearly as effective. Gussow praises both Sinise and Malkovich,

though gives special commendation to Malkovich's Lee, noting how he accomplishes

"menacing and amusing in the same instant."[59] Perhaps most importantly, Gussow cites

how this production of *True West* "is acted for its reality even when the events are

surreal."[60] The importance of playing *True West* for its reality is evidenced by this

production's successful run, even amidst the play's overarching critiques about the traps

and failings of reality. If the illusion of reality is not established by a given production,

there is ultimately no illusion to shatter by the play's end.

The most recent, significant New York production occurred in 2000, with

acclaimed actors John C. Reilly and Philip Seymour Hoffman playing both brothers,

switching off every three performances; it was directed by acclaimed British director

Matthew Warchus. This production also received a plethora of critical praise, and the

production's overt doubling of both brothers emphasized the role and identity switching

which the play explores. Besides the virtuosity of Reilly and Hoffman's performances,

Warchus' directorial interpretation highlighted the play's fundamental ambiguity that

lesser productions attempt to crystalize or define too easily. As Bruce Weber of *The New

York Times* states: "Shepard has written in the play that random, arbitrary events have

caused the schism in [the brothers'] lifestyles. The role switch is an echo of that

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[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

arbitrariness, the idea that it could have gone another way."[61] The arbitrariness of

identity formation which Warchus emphasized echoes the fragmentary, non-cohesive

nature of American identity and the inability of American individuals to connect with

their mythology. Weber also notes how the visceral conflict between Austin and Lee

becomes elevated to mythic levels within this particular production:

> The brothers' battle, an increasingly antic squabble over whose idea for a
> screenplay describes a more authentic Western story, sends up Hollywood's
> appropriation of Americana. Though it devolves into a mutual primal scream, the
> conflicts that live within each of them – intellect versus loins, dream versus actual
> experience, obedience to the code of civilization versus impulse to rebel – live
> within the culture as well as the individual.[62]

Warchus' production achieves this transcendence of meaning through his directorial

interpretation and the prowess of Hoffman and Reilly in both roles. Once Hoffman and

Reilly left this production and were replaced by Josh Brolin as Austin and Elias Koteas as

Lee, the show immediately took a negative turn, much like when *True West*'s original

cast was replaced in 1980. Scathingly, Ben Brantley writes: "You loved the play. Now

see the cartoon!"[63] Brantley elaborates on this assessment, and points to the lack of

realism within the performances as its failing: "The actors seem stuck on these

heightened surfaces, composites of traits applied from the outside rather than arrived at

from within."[64] Brantley also notes how though the blocking and outward appearance of

the production has remained the same, the failings of the actors ultimately doom the

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[61] Bruce Weber, "An Unusual Case of Role Reversal," Arts, *The New York Times*, pg. AR10, February 27, 2000.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ben Brantley, review of *True West*, by Sam Shepard, directed by Matthew Warchus, Circle in the Square, New York, *New York Times*, July 18, 2000, pg. E1.

[64] Ibid.

production: "That the staging remains essentially the same generates an impression of neophyte dancers following a chart of ballroom steps before they have found their own rhythms."[65] Brantley's critique points to a more important consideration when staging *True West,* and it pertains to allowing the actors to find their own interpretations and voices within the play organically without attempting to graft ideas onto their instincts. The more "real" the audience perceives the play's events, the more shocking and satisfying the ambiguous, nonrealistic ending will prove.

Conclusion

Though many playwrights have tackled the cultural issues surrounding the "American family," few have mined and dissected these problems like Sam Shepard. His unique ability to critique the broken promises of American mythology and depict the violence that these broken promises provoke signifies him as one of the most influential and prominent American dramatists of the twentieth century. Shepard's plays mourn the falsity of the "American Dream" without sentimentalizing it, creating disillusioned, yet identifiable characters who must cope with the constructed artificiality of the world around them. In *True West,* Shepard creates two of his most complex and familiar characters in the brothers Austin and Lee, and the battle for authenticity that takes place between them has resulted in numerous productions of this play and generated a varied set of critical interpretations.

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[65] Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

In the Desert of the Real, No One Can Hear You Scream: *True West* as Hyperreality

Introduction

While Chapter One gave a basic overview of Sam Shepard's life and major

works, Chapter Two delves further into the text of *True West*. This chapter commences

with a plot synopsis and thematic assessment of the play as well as the application of

relevant critical theory and its influence on directorial interpretation. The following

study interprets *True West* as a hyperrealist play as theorized by postmodern philosopher

Jean Baudrillard; it is a play which demands strident verisimilitude in production while

simultaneously drawing attention to its own artifice, and by extension, the artificially

constructed nature of the American postmodern landscape.

Plot Synopsis

Austin and Lee, two brothers leading drastically different lives, encounter each

other at their mother's home in suburban Los Angeles. Their mother has entrusted the

care of her house to Austin, an aspiring screenwriter with a wife and children living

somewhere presumably in the Pacific Northwest. Lee, a wanderer and thief,

unexpectedly turns up and questions his brother about his business in Los Angeles, all

while remaining oblique about his own reasons for coming to their mother's home.

The next morning, Austin reluctantly tells Lee about his impending meeting with

Saul Kimmer, a slick Hollywood producer. Later in the day, Lee interrupts the meeting

by barging in with a stolen TV set, and then plants the seed of his idea for a "Western

that'd knock your lights out"[1] with Saul. At the producer's behest, Austin helps Lee write an outline for his story, and the first act concludes with both brothers working on this project, while they allude to their longing for different parts of each other's lives: Austin wants Lee's freedom, and Lee wants Austin's societal standing.

Following a golf outing with Saul, Lee insinuates that the producer has agreed to take on Lee's project at the expense of Austin's, and has insisted that Austin serve as his brother's screenwriter. In a meeting with both brothers, Saul confirms Lee's allegation, and an enraged Austin refuses and insists that he is "…the one who's in touch! Not [Lee]!"[2] The next scene finds Austin drinking profusely and Lee struggling to eke out his story on Austin's typewriter, a role reversal for both brothers. Each provokes the other to delve further into their newly assumed identities: Austin vows to steal and commit increasingly perilous crimes, while Lee asserts his newfound prominence as a hot Hollywood commodity. Lee tries to bribe Austin to help him with the screenplay, but Austin refuses, and both men commiserate over their unfulfilling lives.

As the play builds toward its climax, Lee destroys his brother's typewriter while Austin polishes a multitude of stolen toasters. Stumbling over drunk, Lee calls the operator to get a woman's number, and trashes the kitchen while looking for a pencil to write it down. Looking at his mother's destroyed kitchen, Austin has an epiphany about his unsatisfactory life, and begs Lee to take him to the desert. Lee agrees on the condition of Austin finishing the screenplay for him. In the midst of writing, their mother arrives to find her home decimated. As their mother witnesses the destruction they have wrought, both brothers try to revert to their previously held identities, and Austin

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[1] Shepard, *True West*, 21.

[2] Ibid., 47.

prevents Lee's attempted escape by choking him with a telephone cord. Disgusted with

her home, their mother leaves, and Austin releases Lee's limp, lifeless body.

Inexplicably, Lee springs to life, and both brothers stare each other down and circle each

other ominously.

<p align="center">*The Mythology of the Western and the Myth of the Frontier*</p>

Thematically, *True West* explores how Hollywood and American cultural memory

constructed the American West and the cowboy archetype. The play points to these

images as vestiges of an imagined American past that is incessantly represented in

simulations and mythologies. First, we will examine how *True West* comments on and

employs the devices of the "Western" film genre, including the mythos of the cowboy

and its influence on American conceptions of masculinity. This segment concludes with

an analysis of the play's thematic textual devices, including Lee's "contemporary

Western" screenplay and the play's "real" versus "imagined" geography.

Reaching its zenith in the mid-twentieth century, the Western film genre depicts

romanticized visions of the American cowboy and the western frontier of the United

States. Centering around roguish, hyper-masculine figures such as John Wayne, Lee

Marvin, and Kirk Douglas, the Western sentimentalizes the archetypal cowboy, his

disconnection from civilization, and his ability to simultaneously conquer and commune

with nature. As John M. Clum describes, the Western puts the American cowboy at odds

with civilization, idealizes the cowboy and the untamed frontier, and constructs the West

as simultaneously temporal and geographical:

> The Western was a nostalgic genre in which the West was a time as well as a
> place. Its subtext was that men can only be men in a pre-industrial America
> where men fight for what they want and believe in. When the cabin door shuts on

John Wayne's Ahab-like Ethan Edwards at the end of *The Searchers*, it also shuts on the rough frontier he represented. The future is inside, domesticated, feminized. But something important has been lost. The patriarch is gone. The inside is dark, perilous without that protector. Yet the West of the Western was also a geography; arid, beautiful, yet hostile land. In *The Searchers*, as in so many classic Westerns, the land itself is a crucial character.[3]

The Western genre constructs the West as a place both geographically and conceptually. Westerns also assert that the patriarchal, masculine cowboy cannot live within contemporary society because he has a fundamental connection to the undomesticated, feral wilderness. If this wilderness ceases to exist, the cowboy also fades into memory, and vice versa. Clum also describes how the cowboy cannot grow into civilization's expectation of a domesticated man, yet he has lessons to teach about American individualism, exceptionalism, and courage:

> The Western hero may be a case of arrested development in his inability to conform to norms and institutions of society and conventional heterosexual domestic partnerships, but he is also something of a sage, a remnant of an earlier age with wisdom and knowledge young men still need.[4]

The cowboy is ultimately a scoundrel who will never completely grow up or do what society expects of him, and yet his qualities of roguish independence are admired in American culture.

These qualities of the cowboy and the West have deeper roots in American mythology than the Western film genre. In fact, the Western itself draws from American conceptions of Manifest Destiny, westward expansion, and the limitless potential of the frontier. As theorist J. Chris Westgate demonstrates, these notions of the West have become entrenched in American mythos:

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[3] Clum, 175-176.

[4] Ibid., 176.

In this vision of the frontier, which characterizes American thinking more than a century removed from the age of free land and westward migration, the West is more than merely an antidote to a moribund society; it approximates a Platonic ideal. It is a world intrinsically accessible to Americans yet entirely distinct from the vagaries of American industry, urbanization, or institutions. It is a world where they can start over, can renew or recreate themselves – a world without sin or history or death.[5]

Importantly, Westgate connects conceptions of the West as a venerated, unspoiled paradise with conceptions of the West as a place that can provide potential for rebirth or new beginnings. Both Austin and Lee seek rebirths, though they seek these self-recreations in the two conflicting conceptions of the West that the play presents. Austin longs for the freedom and limitless potential of the desert, and Lee desires the monetary gains and riches of Hollywood, or the new, "built-up/wiped out" West.

True West presents the archetypal cowboy of the Hollywood Western in the form of Lee, an individualistic wanderer and philanderer. When the audience first meets him, Lee swills beer, appears slovenly and feral, and coolly assures his brother that he will not have to worry about him; Lee is a self-described "free agent."[6] When Austin refuses to let Lee borrow his car, Lee asserts that he will "just take the damn thing,"[7] harkening to the cowboy's lack of concern for civilization's legal or moral constraints. Just like the Hollywood cowboy, Lee exists outside the typical bonds of society, lives in the nondescript, vast expanse of the desert, and ultimately cannot exist within society because he remains unwilling (or unable) to grow up and assimilate. Late in the play, Lee finally admits his own inability to function within society: "I'm livin' out there

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[5] J. Chris Westgate, "Negotiating the American West in Sam Shepard's Family Plays," *Modern Drama* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 727.

[6] Shepard, *True West*, 10.

[7] Ibid., 11.

'cause I can't make it here! And yer bitchin' to me about all yer success!"[8] Lee's

screenplay idea itself falls into the lineage of the American Western and the

mythologized West it constructs, and furthermore, he defines it as a "Contemporary

Western. Based on a true story."[9] By setting up his script as a successor to the classic

Western and emphasizing its connection to real events, Lee situates himself as a marker

of "authenticity." He is a "real outsider" who has invaded the construction of

Hollywood.   Saul suggests that Lee dictate the story to Austin, and while the brothers

attempt to write the outline, Austin disparages Lee's story as "contrived."[10]

Nevertheless, Saul champions Lee's story as having "the ring of truth…Something about

the real West."[11]

This imagined "real West" hearkens to the play's title, and different scholars have

offered various definitions of this elusive concept, including Tucker Orbison in his essay,

"Mythic Levels in Shepard's *True West*." Here, Orbison offers a series of images that

supports the play's allegorical construction of the "real West" and why Saul latches onto

Lee's story, pertaining to a more primal battle contained therein:

> True West, like true North, is not a magnetic point on the compass; it is the
> geographical center on a mythic map - the West of Geronimo, one of the most
> courageous and fiercely independent of the last Apache chieftains, betrayed and
> then forced to surrender in the Southwestern desert to the forces of the United
> States Government in 1886. As trite and simple as Lee's scenario is, his plot does
> attempt to capture a similar kind of elemental conflict in his story of betrayal and
> revenge.[12]

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[8] Ibid., 59.

[9] Ibid., 23.

[10] Ibid., 27.

[11] Ibid., 42.

[12] Tucker Orbison, "Mythic Levels in Shepard's *True West*," *Modern Drama* 27, no. 4 (Winter
1984): 510.

Orbison casts the unadorned and unvarnished nature of Lee's plot as its source of power, identifying it as a struggle nearly as old as storytelling itself.

Other critics have remarked on the mythically heightened nature of the play's fratricidal clash, even going as far as characterizing Austin and Lee as a contemporary Cain and Abel. Jeffrey D. Hoeper draws this exact correlation in his article "Cain, Canaanites, and Philistines in Sam Shepard's *True West*," and more pointedly, draws a different, more dichotomously moralistic view of the "real West:"

> *True West* is, of course, Shepard's attempt to synthesize the characteristics of the 'true West' - a West that is represented neither by the love story of Austin nor by the implausible chase sequence of Lee, but rather by the play itself, in which good is warped until it is indistinguishable from evil and craftsmanship of any kind is scorned in the pursuit of popularity.[13]

Though I do not believe the play concerns a struggle between conceptual forces of "good" and "evil," the nebulousness that Hoeper attributes to the "West" within the play underscores the two competing mythic constructions of the "West" that the play presents and problematizes.

During a heated confrontation with Lee and Saul, Austin paints his brother as disconnected from the realities of contemporary society and thus unable to assimilate into the "here and now" of Hollywood:

> AUSTIN: He's been camped out on the desert for three months. Talking to cactus. What's he know about what people wanna see on the screen! I drive on the freeway every day. I swallow the smog. I watch the news in color. I shop in the Safeway. I'm the one who's in touch! Not him!
> SAUL: I have to go now, Austin. (*He starts to leave.*)
> AUSTIN: There's no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue! It's dried up, Saul, and so are you.[14]

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[13] Jeffrey D. Hoeper, "Cain, Canaanites, and Philistines in Sam Shepard's *True West*," *Modern Drama* 36, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 81.

[14] Shepard, *True West*, 42-43.

Austin declares Lee's "West" of endless desert, cowboys, and outlaws as deceased but later begs to join his brother in venturing "out there." Conversely, Saul represents contemporary Hollywood and its hollowness, and Austin also proclaims Saul's career (which, for the play's purposes, comprises Saul's entire identity) as finished. With this dual pronouncement, Austin invalidates the tangibility of either the mythological "West" of the country or of Hollywood.

With a lack of a concrete geographic place in which to root their identities, Shepard's characters must seek out other means of making themselves feel more "real." In scholarship examining Shepard's loosely categorized prose writing in comparison with his dramatic texts, Gary Grant has correlated Shepard's conception of place with performance of self, theorizing that the tangibility of a particular location matters less than how it affects a character's self-perception.

> In the…family plays, the sense of place provides one of the strongest influences on the characters' observation of their own performance. A sense of place exposes a condition of the self in a complex of associations with the roots of family tradition, in the dimly perceived vestiges of ancestral ties with the American landscape. The generational conflict among the characters in the later plays could be seen biographically as an expression of Shepard's discovery while in England of two polarities in his consciousness - a European intellectual tradition (Shepard's "Irish Phase," his admiration for Beckett and Joyce; in a notebook, Shepard calls Joyce the "Charlie Parker of language"), and a deeply felt, primal germination in the American soil.[15]

Grant notes how the "West" and the "American landscape" only exist within the characters' perceived connections to their inherited pasts, further denying the concreteness of geographic locales within Shepard's dramatic worlds.

David Jortner expands Grants thoughts about the "West" as a constructed landscape to Los Angeles itself, and furthermore, identifies Los Angeles as a postmodern

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[15] Grant, 555-556.

entity which has swallowed the "real West" and mediates the identities of both Austin

and Lee:

> The physical city of Los Angeles, of course, calls the idea of geographical specificity into question. Spread out across the LA basin, LA has become a sprawl of suburban landscape that has devoured much of the desert and chaparral surrounding the northern and eastern edges of Los Angeles and the surrounding counties.[16]

Jortner cites James Kunstler's description of Los Angeles as a consumptive power which

has taken over and obliterated the American frontier. Kunstler's theory connects readily

to Jortner's final conclusions about the "desert" existing only as a simulated entity:

> The desert and its promise of authenticity hold a powerful sway on the two brothers in *True West*. Unlike Silko's Pueblos mentioned at the start of this paper, Austin and Lee fail to see themselves within the landscape and its construction and instead are trapped in mediatized simulacra, searching for identity from both each other and the outside world. By the end of *True West*, both Lee and Austin desire to escape the deadening suburban landscape for an authentic "western" experience. Yet it is here that Shepard plays his final geographic trick. The brothers want to go west (echoes of manifest destiny) and live in the "True West." Yet from L.A., there is only one direction which takes one to the American desert: east.[17]

By constructing the desert as an imagined landscape within Shepard's play, Jortner

makes the case that the search for "real" identity is futile amidst the constructed

landscape of postmodern Los Angeles.

Prominent theorist Jean Baudrillard also makes the argument for Los Angeles as a

quintessential simulacrum and defines it as an entity which distracts from its own artifice

by being surrounded with other more obvious simulations. In his text *Simulacra and*

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[16] David Jortner, "Coyotes to Contend With: Examining the Linkage of Geography and Identity in Sam Shepard's *True West*," Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment Symposium, Big Bend, TX, January, 2001, 4.

[17] Ibid., 8.

Simulations, Baudrillard points out how purposeful simulations (such as theme parks)

direct attention away from the unreality of a simulated landscape such as Los Angeles:

> …Disneyland is not the only one. Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine
> World: Los Angeles is encircled by these "imaginary stations" which feed reality,
> reality-energy, to a town whose mystery is precisely that it is nothing more than a
> network of endless, unreal circulation: a town of fabulous proportions, but
> without space or dimensions. As much as electrical and nuclear power stations,
> as much as film studios, this town, which is nothing more than an immense script
> and a perpetual motion picture, needs this old imaginary made up of childhood
> signals and faked phantasms for its sympathetic nervous system.[18]

According to Baudrillard, the make-believe geographies of theme parks such as

Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm cover up the bigger lie of Los Angeles as a "real

city," and the latter lie proves more dangerous because simulacra have no concern for

"reality" as a basis or a reference point, even though individuals perceive the simulation

as the real.

Furthermore, Baudrillard expounds on the danger of mistaking the simulated for

the real, and how humans can experience crises of identity when presented with the

artificiality of their own existence:

> Transgression and violence are less serious, for they only contest the *distribution*
> of the real. Simulation is infinitely more dangerous since it always suggests, over
> and above its object, that *law and order themselves might really be nothing more
> than a simulation*.[19]

While violence may cause damage to bodies and property, Baudrillard contends that

exposing one to the postmodern landscape's simulated nature proves more threatening

because by exposing social orders, structures, and even geographies as artificial they may

easily collapse. When confronted with the preponderance of simulation, individuals

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[18] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings,* ed.
Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 175.

[19] Ibid., 180.

often seek "real" experiences to counteract their absorption in simulacra, much like

Shepard's characters when they come face-to-face with their own lack of authenticity.

Thus, Shepard presents dramatic worlds and characters constantly searching for "the real"

where none has ever existed, only simulated performances of what they believe to be

"real." The resulting conflation of image, "reality", and identity connects Shepard's

work, especially *True West*, to Baudrillard's theories and his writings on the

omnipresence of simulation in postmodern experience. The following section traces

Baudrillard's development of thought to better understand his conceptions of

postmodernity and more deliberately link them to *True West*.

<center>*Baudrillard and Simulation*</center>

Jean Baudrillard, one of the most significant postmodern theorists of the twentieth

century, began writing theory on Marxist thought and later directed his attention toward

technology, media, and their effects on postmodern life. Through a socio-historical lens

that he terms "The Orders of Simulacra," Baudrillard traces how reality and its surrogates

morph and evolve throughout history. Baurdillard characterizes our current landscape as

a period in which reality has ceased to become a viable metric for the assessment of

human life. Within this theoretical framework, Baudrillard traces an oversaturation of

images that defines the postmodern condition.

Before delving into Baudrillard's Three Orders of Simulacra, a brief explanation

of what Baudrillard precisely means by the terms "simulation" and "simulacra" will

illuminate the application of his terms to *True West*. Here, scholar Glenn Ward briefly

outlines the breadth of Baudrillard's definition and use of the term while alluding to its

current realization in postmodernity:

<center>44</center>

Dictionaries link simulation to the fake, the counterfeit and the inauthentic. Baudrillard retains these meanings to a certain extent, but pushes them considerably further, so that simulation can no longer be seen clearly as the opposite of truth. We might naturally assume that simulation either duplicates or is emitted by a pre-given real. In this sense we might think that simulation and reality have a necessary attachment to each other. But for Baudrillard, this connection has long since snapped, so that simulation can no longer be taken as either an imitation or distortion of reality, or as a copy of an original. In Baudrillard's dizzying cosmos there is no firm, pure reality left against which we can measure the truth or falsity of a representation, and electronic reproduction has gone so far that the notion of originality is (or ought to be) irrelevant.[20]

Ward emphasizes how Baudrillard's conception of simulation is not just an antithesis to concepts such as "truth" or "reality." Rather, Baudrillard completely discards these facets of human existence as moot points in postmodernity.

Baudrillard traces Three Orders of Simulacra throughout human history, and the first begins during feudalism. In Baudrillard's reading of feudal societies, a rigid fixity existed between reality and its symbolic representations. He illustrates how the feudal world operated with specific symbols (or simulations) with explicit links to tangible (or at the time, considered irrefutably tangible) realities or ideas. For example, the gestures of courtly love between noblemen and women exist not only as symbols, but as literal, tangible representations of love. If a knight wears a woman's handkerchief into battle, he carries a real piece of her with him, and the woman's presentation of this token does not just represent love, it was love personified.

During the First Order of Simulacra, artists produce representations one at a time with their own hands. When the Industrial Revolution begins and mass production becomes the Western standard of existence, Baudrillard theorizes that the First Order of Simulacra gave way to the Second. By-hand manufacturing becomes passé; even objects which humans take for granted as done by hand, such as artworks, become assembly line

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[20] Glenn Ward, *Understand Postmodernism* (Blacklick: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 83.

generated, thus the simulations of reality become further detached from the "real"

antecedents which they represent. Mass production increases the cultural saturation of

simulacra to unprecedented levels. During the Second Order, simulations become an

increasingly common fixture of life across nearly all strata of society. As industry ramps

up, furniture, dwellings, and even art is mass produced. The widespread preponderance

of simulacra paved the way for the Third Order of Simulacra, when simulations

completely blur the distinction between "reality" and simulacra. Here, Baudrillard

problematizes the significance of "reality" and "the real" and draws our attention to the

barrage of postmodern images and representations.

In the Third Order of Simualcra, Baudrillard posits that images have become such

a ubiquitous feature of contemporary life that we can no longer tell the difference

between an image and our perception of "the real." Moreover, as Ward points out, we do

not need to.

> On its simplest level, Baudrillard's work suggests that all this representation has
> saturated reality to such an extent that experience can only take place at a remove.
> We can experience the world only through a kind of filter of preconceptions and
> expectations fabricated in advance by a culture swamped by images. How,
> Baudrillard might ask, can you visit, or even live in, New York City without that
> experience being informed by all the New York Cities you know from movies,
> TV shows and news reports?[21]

Simulations of reality have no basis in tangible commodities, experiences, or individuals.

Simulation exists as reality itself, and the simulations themselves appear so real, that they

become "more real than real," or hyperreal. As Baudrillard writes:

> Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is
> the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The
> territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it…It is the real, and not the

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[21] Ibid., 82.

map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. *The desert of the real itself.*[22]

In Baudrillard's Third Order of Simulacra, simulations have no ties to tangible "territory;" the simulations create ontological reality through their preponderance and perpetual replication. The simulacra have taken over, and any chance of locating "the real" or having an "authentic" experience has withered in what Baudrillard terms "the desert of the real." The real exists only as a mirage, and simulations have become more real than what humans previously conceived. Therefore, we may say that simulations have not just become real, but hyperreal. Baudrillard defines hyperreality as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality."[23] Hyperreality has no concern for "the real" or referentiality to "authentic" origins. Nevertheless, because hyperreality is modeled on our perception of the "real," hyperreal entities appear more real than "reality" itself.

While hyperreality manifests in many forms and experiences, its primary function as defined by Baudrillard pertains to diverting a society's attention away from the simulation that saturates it. The preponderance of simulacra and its guiding influence over a society rapidly fosters disillusionment and states of crisis amongst its citizens. Ward describes how humans respond to the simulacra's omnipresence by seeking hyperreal experiences:

> As far as [Baudrillard] is concerned, we are always already caught up in the workings of simulation: "the social contract has become a pact of simulation, sealed by the media and information," so we are always already part of the network. For Baudrillard, nothing is outside of the flow of signs, codes and simulations. How are we to react to this scenario? What impact does it have on

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[22] Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," 169.

[23] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

the lives we lead and the artifacts we make and use? Baudrillard's answer is that it generates panic. We desperately try to get out of simulation by producing events, activities, images and objects which assure us of their (and our) own reality. In an attempt to compensate for the fading of the real, we make a fetish of the supposedly authentic.[24]

Ward's description of the hyperreal illustrates how individuals seek out not only heightened simulations and representations (such as Disneyland) and also seemingly super-real experiences such as extreme sporting (sky diving, bungee jumping), reality television, virtual reality platforms, and "based on a true story" or "true-to-life" narratives. Ward specifically outlines the trap of the hyperreal and points to how it only serves to heighten our own inculcation with simulacra:

> [The examples of hyperreality] all illustrate Baudrillard's claim that "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second hand truth, objectivity and authenticity" (*Simulations*). That is, they all attempt to deter, or provide alibis for, the disappearance of the real at the hands of simulation. The Baudrillardian irony, however, is that these attempts to increase the feel of reality are themselves simulations. Their authenticity is a special effect. They are *hyperreal* rather than *really* real.[25]

Both Ward and Baudrillard assert that the more we struggle against the tightly wound coil of simulacra, the stronger its grip becomes; nevertheless we will continue to struggle against it in search of the most true or authentic possible experience when no such thing exists within the Third Order of Simulacra. Ward summarizes this ceaseless loop of simulation and our struggle with it: "We manufacture the real because of simulation."[26]

True West depicts a crisis of identity and authenticity experienced by two brothers who appear to be polar opposites. Both Lee and Austin find themselves unsatisfied with

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[24] Ward, 95-96.

[25] Ibid., 96.

[26] Ibid., 97.

the lives they lead; they perceive their own identities as false and the identity of their brother as "real." In their ensuing struggle to assume the identity of the other, they come to recognize the terrifying artificiality of the world around them, and become swallowed whole in its stream of simulacra. With *True West*, Shepard has written a Baudrillardian, hyperreal Western: a simulated replication of that filmic genre that appears strikingly real—so real that it eventually draws attention to its own artifice.

<center>True West *as a Baudrillardian, Hyperreal Western*</center>

Shepard's *True West* world is hyperreal and draws attention to its own pretense. In the play's context hyperreality initially appears in Shepard's stage directions which demand rigorously realistic scenography. In Shepard's "Note on Set and Costume" which precedes the acting edition of *True West*, he explicitly instructs directors and designers to avoid obvious abstraction or straying from verisimilitude:

> The set should be constructed realistically with no attempt to distort its dimensions, shapes, objects or colors. No objects should be introduced which might draw special attention to themselves other than the props demanded by the script. If a stylistic "concept" is grafted onto the set it will only serve to confuse the evolution of the characters' situation, which is the most important focus of the play.[27]

From these stage directions, Shepard has presented an outwardly realistic playground which draws the audience into an immersive illusion. At first, Shepard establishes the realism of the world because it must pull the audience into the illusion of reality so it can be undermined later.

If we accept Baudrillard's preponderance of simulation in the world of *True West*, identities must also exist as simulacra, and Austin and Lee's starting "real" identities prove no more real than the identities they attempt to assume. Austin and Lee attempt to

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[27] Shepard, *True West*, 5.

osmose into each other's roles, and they do so because neither feels comfortable in his

own life and existence. For example, Austin laments of his life and current environment:

"There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!"[28] Austin's blatant declaration of

his own inauthenticity calls attention to the play's artifice. Shepard writes a realistic

setting and realistic characters not to ultimately cement the play's illusion, but to

undercut it; Austin's declaration serves to break the scenography's theatrical deception,

remind the audience they are watching a play, and render a world that has seemed so

inexhaustibly real into a disturbing fantasy.

Many scholars have expounded on the Baudrillardian connections contained in

True West, including Nicholas Crawford in a 2003 comparative study between Shepard's

play and Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land*. In this essay, Crawford posits the focus of

True West as the all-consuming nature of simulacra. Crawford's work draws attention to

the futile pursuit of originality and lack of substantial agency within the postmodern Los

Angeles the play constructs:

> In the case of *True West* one could again assert that Shepard made too good use of
> Pinter's material. *True West* was written after *No Man's Land* and is deeply
> similar, though by no means obviously so. However, to call *True West* a clever
> copy of *No Man's Land would* be to miss completely the point of Shepard's play,
> which I take to be the absolute inescapability of simulation, the seeming
> impossibility of true authorship.[29]

In Crawford's context, authorship and the ability to possess agency over one's own

narrative closely correlates with how an individual constructs his or her identity.

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[28] Ibid., 59.

[29] Nicholas Crawford, "Staging Authorship: Pinter's *No Man's Land* and Shepard's *True West*,"
The Comparatist 27 (May 2003): 140.

Austin's writing career and the "…simple love story"[30] that he attempts to sell to Saul

become completely intertwined with Austin's vision of himself, and when Austin loses

both of these to Lee, he inevitably comes to see his lack of substantiality. Conversely,

Lee sets up his own script as "[b]ased on a true story"[31] though other than Saul's

endorsement, the audience receives no definitive adjudication of its authenticity. Indeed,

the authenticity of either brother's screenplay matters little as both scripts only exist as

simulations. Initially, both brothers believe their ideas spring from "true" sources, but

Crawford illustrates how the postmodern landscape has abandoned the possibility of

"original" material:

> The desire for authentic recall and rootedness connotes a wished-for personal,
> private, and perhaps unique connection to the past that would provide the raw
> material for individual creation. When the integrity of recollection is called into
> question, this connection no longer holds; hence both the raw material and the
> creative process have become compromised as purely personal operations. The
> debate surrounding authentic recall becomes crucially related, then, to the self-
> conscious abdication of originality of postmodern authors.[32]

If there are no authentic stories then Austin and Lee are both ultimately pursuing false

promises: when one of them gets close to what appears to be a true story or a true thought

it reveals its own artifice.

Language within *True West* also points to the play's ultimate undermining of

authenticity as both brothers try to define their identities through language; however

language also proves insufficient in providing "true" experience or reality. Crawford

describes the collapse of binaries contained within the play, beginning with the most

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[30] Shepard, *True West*, 38.

[31] Ibid., 23.

[32] Crawford, 149.

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obvious of Austin and Lee and reverberating out to the play's geographic and

metaphorical conceptions of the West:

> These plays elide the distinction not just between actor, character, and author, but between presentation and representation, between past and present, between memory and invention, and between the private mind and the consciousness of the culture. All of these collapsing oppositions spring from the unanswered question of author/ity, from the question of whether the creation originates with the author or whether it is language that speaks and creates not only the work but, in some sense, the author, too.[33]

Language as a means for constructing identity connects to performativity, identity as

performance, and Baudrillardian theory; symbols that comprise language and words as

symbols themselves exist as simulacra. If simulacra have become "the real" in

postmodernity, then language itself makes up what we may term "real life."

Crawford's collapsed binary of Lee and Austin as simultaneously characters and

stories illustrates the potential traumas that arise from loss of agency and submission to

simulation:

> What seems original turns out not to be so. They can find no beginnings or clear demarcations between life sources and movie sources…The source of the story is a memory from a picture or from life, and it is no longer clear which is which, as each refers back to the other in a confusing, troubling closed circuit of reflexive referentiality.[34]

In *True* West, the "confusing, troubling" nature of having no "original source" and not

being able to find one becomes physically manifest in violence and destruction. When

Lee fails at writing, he takes out his rage on Austin's typewriter with a golf club. When

Lee refuses to take Austin to the desert, thereby invalidating Austin's chances to have an

"authentic" life, Austin retaliates by strangling him with a phone cord. The panic over

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[33] Ibid., 143.

[34] Ibid., 153.

the perceived lack of originality extends beyond corporeal violence and causes arguments

between Austin and Lee about clichés in the latter's screenplay. In scene four, Austin

dismisses Lee's plot point about one man running out of gas as trite, and in scene nine,

Lee belittles Austin for the inclusion of a cliché in his screenplay: "'I know this prairie

like the back a' my hand.'"[35] Any clichés, words, or ideas that smack of contrivance are

met with hostility in this world, and this hostility originates from the brothers' desire to

preserve the authenticity of themselves and their stories.

Turning back to "Negotiating the American West in Sam Shepard's Family

Plays," Westgate examines how the text systematically dismantles the binaries it

previously established. Westgate also notes how Shepard's characters fail to recognize

the play's collapsing of tangible identities until they have bound themselves up within

one of those perceived constructions of "the real."

> When Los Angeles and Hollywood succumb to hyperreality, and Austin comes to
> doubt not just his identity but also his existence, he conceptualizes the desert
> frontier as the "real," as the antidote to the simulacral city. But Shepard's play
> dismantles this binary, which would afford Austin some stability, most notably
> through Saul's praise for Lee's screenplay…The "real" that he so desperately
> seeks (that all Shepard's characters seek) is no longer defined with reference to
> originals. Copies without originals have created their own "real" through the
> circulation of images – in this case, through Hollywood images of the West, such
> as Lee's favorite Western, *Lonely Are the Brave* (*True West* 18) or Shepard's: *Bad
> Day at Black Rock* and *Vera Cruz*. In Shepard's Los Angeles, which offers a
> holographic snapshot of America, Lee's rejoinder to Austin's criticism is right
> (and wrong): "It's too much like real life!" (21). Austin's contention that
> "[t]here's no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue!" is equally right
> (and wrong) (35).[36]

Within the context of the play, Westgate points to Hollywood's image-construction for

oversaturating the world in simulacra. The given circumstances of *True West* present

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[35] Shepard, *True West*, 61.

[36] Westgate, 737-738.

contradictory and mutually exclusive conceptions of the American West. The American

frontier cannot exist because Hollywood has paved over it with freeways, smog, and

Safeway supermarkets, all three of which Austin mentions when he claims to be more "in

touch" with contemporary culture than his brother.[37] However, the Hollywood image-

machine perpetuates Western nostalgia by reproducing simulations in cowboy movies—

such as the film Lee identifies with, Kirk Douglas' *Lonely Are the Brave*—and kitschy

replicas of the "real thing." Thus, both Austin and Lee lose their connection to

referentiality (and history), trapped in the stream of simulacra. Austin's attempted flight

to the desert and Lee's unwritten screenplay have no hope of satiating either brother's

desire for "the real." As both brothers reach a compromise to attain their goals (Lee

agrees to take Austin out to the desert with him because Austin agrees to write Lee's

screenplay), their mother's reappearance makes them both regress to a frightened,

infantilized state.

At first, Mom's arrival makes Austin and Lee aware of the tangible destruction

they have wrought on her home, though as she continues to speak, the awkwardness they

feel about their environmental destruction gives way to a panic about her (and their)

mental cogence. As William Kleb describes, Mom suffers from having no tangible

connection to the world around her or "reality" itself: "…Mom is infected with what

Shepard considers the most serious new-western sickness—alienation from the land. No

wonder she seems flat, remote, lifeless, unreal."[38] Mom's disconnection from "the real"

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[37] Shepard, *True West*, 46-47.

[38] William Kleb, "Worse Than Being Homeless: *True West* and The Divided Self," in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York: PAJ Publications, 1981), 122-123.

reflects back on Austin and Lee, and brings their own fragmentation and brokenness into sharp focus. Kleb points to a theory of ontological division to help explain the final breakdown in both Lee and Austin:

> It reflects what R.D. Laing, in a book that seems remarkably apposite to Shepard's play, *The Divided Self*, calls a state of "primary ontological insecurity." In such a state, the individual lacks a firm, central sense of his own and other people's reality and identity; he doubts the permanence of things, the reliability and substantiality of natural processes, even the tangibility of others.[39]

As their mother insists they go meet Picasso (who has long been deceased) at the museum, Lee and Austin come face to face with the un-truth of their experience, and the unreality of both the world around them and the goals that they seek, surrendering to the dominance of Baudrillard's Third Order of Simulacra. Lee attempts to counteract his crisis of ontology by stealing his mother's bone china: "What I need is somethin' authentic. Somethin' to keep me in touch."[40] Austin reacts to his intangibility by physically restraining and choking Lee when he reneges on his promise to bring him to the desert.

Finally, another main effect of saturation in Baudrillardian simulacra is identity conflation and confusion. Austin and Lee remain fundamentally unsatisfied with their current positions in and out of society and ultimately attempt to trade with one another. Lee wants Austin's position as a screenwriter and stability with a family and Austin wants the freedom of Lee's drifter lifestyle. By the end of scene eight, Austin has agreed to write Lee's screenplay for him, and Lee has agreed to take Austin to the desert. By this point, Lee and Austin have traded identities with one another. With Mom's arrival,

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[39] Ibid., 124.

[40] Shepard, *True West*, 67.

Lee attempts to shirk this identity swap and put himself and Austin back into their

original positions:

> LEE: *(To MOM)* I don't really think Austin's cut out for the desert, do you?
> MOM: No. He's not.
> [...]
> LEE: We're just gonna have to postpone the whole deal.
> AUSTIN: I can't postpone it! It's gone past postponing! I'm doing everything
> you said. I'm writing down exactly what you tell me.
> LEE: Yeah, but you were right all along see. It is a dumb story. "Two lamebrains
> chasin' each other across Texas." That's what you said, right?
> AUSTIN: I never said that.[41]

Several scenes earlier, Austin uses these exact words to describe Lee's story when Lee

announces that Saul has chosen his idea. Austin's disavowal of his previous statement

serves as an example of one of many identity contradictions which the play conflates.

The implosion of these binaries manifests in both the destruction of Mom's home, and as

critic Megan Williams describes, in Lee's desire to take his mother's antique plates with

him out to the desert. As Williams states, Lee has always easily skated between different

roles and identities, and along the way, he decimates the vestiges of "real life" that

connect others to their own perceived substantiality:

> Austin thus becomes a role Lee adopts to continue to build a world cluttered with
> surfaces, fragments, and meaningless objects. Like the stories he told Austin,
> Lee's removal of the antiques from his mother's house perpetuates a world of
> alienation and placelessness. When Lee takes the plates, he deprives his mother of
> the objects that she believes tie her to the present; he becomes an active part of the
> force which drives his mother into the void where she feels that "[t]his is worse
> than being homeless" (59).[42]

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[41] Ibid., 66-67.

[42] Megan Williams, "Nowhere Man and the Twentieth-Century Cowboy: Images of American
Identity and American History in Sam Shepard's *True West*," *Modern Drama* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 69.

Though Williams seems to underplay or underrepresent Lee's trauma and his disillusionment with postmodernity, she hits on a noteworthy concept in her description of how violence is mediated within the hyperreal, simulated landscape of *True West*.[43]

Immediately after Lee backs out of his promise to take Austin to the desert, Austin retaliates by strangling his brother with a phone cord. When he chokes Lee, Austin attempts to destroy his other, or the individual who contradicts his identity. Austin believes that killing his rival will finally validate his own existence, and for a moment, we believe that Austin has "really" killed Lee because he has gone lifeless and limp. Austin eventually decides to release his brother, and miraculously, Lee springs up and the brothers engage in a standoff worthy of a high-noon duel in a classic Western film:

> (*Pause.* AUSTIN *considers, looks toward exit, back to* LEE, *then makes a small movement as if to leave. Instantly* LEE *is on his feet and moves toward exit, blocking* AUSTIN's *escape. They square off to each other, keeping a distance between them. Pause. A single coyote heard in distance, lights fade softly into moonlight, the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape. They are very still but watchful for the next move. Lights go slowly to black as the after-image of the brothers pulses in the dark, coyote fades.*)[44]

Shepard's stage directions for the end of the play purposefully reflect Lee's description of the two men locked in a chase in his screenplay. Perhaps most critically, Lee reminds us of the men's mutual fear: "What they don't know is that each one of 'em is afraid, see."[45] The fear generated in both Lee's characters and the "real life" brothers soon manifests in violence, and violence becomes the only way to express oneself in the desert of the real.

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[43] Lee demonstrates his own dissatisfaction in scene eight when he states "I'm livin' out there because I can't make it here!" Lee lives in the desert because he has failed to assimilate into society, not because he consciously chooses to do so.

[44] Shepard, *True West*, 71.

[45] Ibid., 33.

Austin and Lee have an insatiable thirst for "the real" and they attempt to destroy each other not due to mutual enmity, but because the existence of the other threatens the validity of their own experience. The brothers' inability to eradicate both their shared space and each other points to the purely simulated nature of their environment and their own lives, and proves the dominance of Baudrillard's Third Order of Simulacra. The ineffectuality of the violence at play's end links to Baudrillard's assertion about "real" violence as less deadly than simulated violence. When Lee springs up after Austin has choked him to "death," both brothers' worst fear is confirmed: there is no hope for authentic experience in the desert of the real. The more ardently and viciously Austin and Lee pursue what seems like "authentic" experience, the further into simulation they descend.

<div align="center">

The Insatiable Characters of True West

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Austin and Lee

I choose to analyze Austin and Lee under a single heading because neither brother emerges as the play's sole protagonist. Rather, the brothers' mutual search for authenticity and their attempts to consume each other in the process generates the play's action and primary themes. Austin and Lee wrestle control from one another at different moments in the play's progression, but neither achieves ultimate dominance. Violence functions as the epitome of hyperreality within *True West* and the only way to know if something (or someone) really exists is to destroy it. Ultimately, even violence proves inadequate as a reliable metric of reality amidst the simulations of *True West*, as both Austin and Lee discover, "the real" cannot exist within a world composed of simulacra.

The backstory and personal details for both Austin and Lee remain sparse and only manifest in dialogue when they have direct bearing on the play's action. Brief details, such as Lee's fighting dog and Austin's wife and family (presumably in northern California or the Pacific Northwest), serve as mechanisms through which the brothers catch up to and evade one another in their common quests to consume one another. In the play's second scene, the audience learns a few more details of each brother's life, but nothing through which one may construct a detailed character history.

At play's rise, we find Austin, the seemingly stable and mature family man pecking away at his typewriter while his interloping, small-time thief brother Lee attempts to demean Austin's position as guardian of their mother's home. Ultimately, we learn very little about Austin or Lee and their history with one another. Austin had an Ivy League education, and has a family somewhere in northern California or the Pacific Northwest, and Lee is a drifter who lives alone in the desert. Lee had a fighting dog once, and once had some sort of relationship with a female botanist. Also, at the start of the play, Lee and Austin have not seen each other in five years. Each brother's specific biography is of little importance because the play establishes these two as both individuals and representative types: Austin stands for society and order while Lee stands for freedom and chaos. We know all the history we need to know about the two of them through these few details.

Austin and Lee spend much of the first scene sizing up the potential threat of the other. Lee makes sure to point out how their mother could have just as easily entrusted him with the care of her home: "I mean I know how to water plants."[46] Lee's

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[46] Ibid., 10.

proclamation of competence dually casts the choice of Austin as caregiver as inconsequential and alludes to the play's overarching idea of the arbitrariness of heredity and the confusion of identity between the brothers. Thematically, the play suggests that either Austin or Lee could have ended up in each other's position or social role; in *True West*, heredity does not function as a final determinant of an individual's persona, thus setting up the brothers' attempted role/life switches later in the play.

In the early scenes, it seems that Lee has more interest in assuming Austin's life than vice versa; however, both brothers eventually confess to coveting the other's life as if it will fill some otherwise irreparable void in the other's:

> LEE:…I always wondered what'd be like to be you.
> AUSTIN: You did?
> LEE: Yeah, sure. I used to picture you walkin' around some campus with yer arms fulla' books. Blondes chasin' after ya'.
> AUSTIN: Blondes? That's funny.
> LEE: What's funny about it?
> AUSTIN: Because I always used to picture you somewhere.
> LEE: Where'd you picture me?
> AUSTIN: Oh, I don't know. Different places. Adventures. You were always on some adventure.[47]

Austin and Lee each hold onto an idyllic perception of the other's life, and conflate their perspectives on their brother's life with how he actually lives. Even after they have taken on each other's roles, neither brother finds satisfaction. Over the course of scenes seven and eight, both brothers slip deeper into the identity of the other, as Austin drinks heavily and Lee attempts to write. Nevertheless, they both realize that they cannot fully transition into the other's role without his help: Austin cannot begin a life in the desert without Lee's guidance, and Lee must rely on Austin to write his screenplay.

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[47] Ibid., 32.

Thus, Austin and Lee are paradoxically exclusive and dependent upon one another. Neither Austin nor Lee can fully achieve what he wants with his brother's continued existence, and yet they need each other to attain their objectives. This contrast sets up and fulfills the play's action.

Austin and Lee each see their brother as a sort of salvation, like a tall glass of water just sitting in the middle of a vast desert. They both begin drinking this water to consume and become their other; suddenly, they realize this glass is full of salt water, but it is too late: they are already thirsty for more, and thus they keep drinking. This process of attempting to consume a dangerous facsimile of the "real thing" leads to their mutual undoing and their destruction from the inside-out. For Lee and Austin, while the hyperreality of Hollywood and the fetishization of the "real West," may seem to offer the promise of authenticity, they prove as artificial as the theatre itself, a convention of supposed "reality" which is exploded at the play's conclusion.

Saul Kimmer

Saul, the slick, underhanded movie producer, serves the dramatic function of upsetting the balance of power between Austin and Lee and in part, spurring the identity swap that happens between them. Thematically, Saul exists as a character that has completely assimilated into the simulated landscape of Hollywood. He serves as a facsimile for the film industry and a representation of individuals that pay no mind to "authenticity" when it comes to their own experience. Alternately, Saul has no problem exploiting the fetishization of "the real," and hyperreality to advance his own agenda and his pursuit of monetary gains. In short, Saul exists as a hyperreal simulacrum. His unabashed artifice draws attention to the simulated nature of the play's world, and

contrasts Austin and Lee's pursuit of "the real." While Saul's garish garb appears out of place in Mom's home, he is the only character who is comfortable in the space because he is a constructed simulation, just like everything else in this play's world.

Mom

Mom appears only in the play's last scene. In scene nine, she walks into her home to find it destroyed and her two sons half-drunk, hungover, and writing voraciously. Mom's appearance serves as the major catalyst for the final confrontation between the two brothers. Despite this seemingly unimportant role, she is a minor character that provides some comic relief and serves to heighten the brother's battle by causing them to reflect on the destruction they have wrought on her home.

Conclusion

Austin and Lee's journey through the Baudrillardian landscape of *True West* treats on the terrors and dangers of when fiction becomes too close to real life and vice versa. Staging *True West* as a hyperrealist play led to engaging and fruitful collaborations with the design team, and plenty of challenges that had to be solved along the way. Chapter Three recounts and analyzes this collaborative process, and catalogues the production team's choices, successes, and failures at critical junctures of their work.

CHAPTER THREE

Design: Making the Hyperreal Come to Life

Introduction

In January of 2015, I began collaborating with the design team for *True West*,

which opened in May of that year. Over the next several months, the production team

worked to create the Baudrillardian hyperreal landscape the play demands. From our

initial meetings to the final dress rehearsals, we made decisions that would best express

the heart of *True West*, and enable the manifestation of the play's themes and the

director's concept. Beginning with the formulation of a directorial concept, this chapter

chronologically examines the director-designer collaborations in scenery, costuming, and

lighting. Because I served as my own sound designer, the chapter concludes with an

overview of my own design process and the distinct challenges of serving as both director

and designer.

Concept

Directors often experiment with several different concepts, or guiding artistic

metaphors, for a given production before finally settling on one that will be shared with

the design team and influence their artistic choices. The directorial process for *True West*

proved no different. My first concept choice explored *True West* as a mirage: an illusion

of a paradisiac oasis that emerges in the midst of a sweltering desert, only to vanish when

one gets too close to it. While this concept captured the deceptive, illusory nature of

hyperreality, it proved too stationary for a play that contains such rapidly escalating

dramatic action. Once I moved away from "mirage" as an artistic metaphor, I next interpreted *True West* as a chase, an inspiration drawn explicitly from Lee's speech at the end of scene four. While this concept better articulated the play's rampant, intense action, it failed to encompass its hyperreality and destructive, corrosive nature. Moreover, while this concept had an explicit connection to the play's action, it did not viscerally engage me as an artist; additionally, it did not fully express the spiraling self-destructiveness of both brothers. As a concept, "chase" would have proven too general and not provided enough specific imagery, metaphorical language, or storytelling patterns to draw from. Just the term "chase" is too broad and does not specify what kind of chase, how long of a chase, or any other specific information to use. Ultimately, "chase" did not fully express the spiraling self-destructiveness of both brothers, and thus I looked for an action-based concept that would encapsulate the idea of destroying oneself from the inside-out. Lee and Austin become increasingly damaged shells of their former selves in their struggle to become one another, and this struggle is proven futile as neither fully achieves the transformation he seeks.

When neither concept worked, I searched for a metaphor that would better encapsulate the action, tone, and themes of *True West*, taking into account the play's inherent destructiveness and fatalism. I finally landed on the concept of drinking salt water, an action that appears to help at first, but ultimately leads to one's own undoing from the inside-out. When an individual suffers from extreme dehydration, they may attempt to drink salt water out of pure desperation. While the act of drinking provides a false sense of satiation, it only serves to make one even thirstier, and in turn, one drinks more salt water, creating a vicious cycle with increasingly caustic results. Lee and

Austin's journey is like drinking salt water because they both believe that assuming the mantle of their other will provide satiation, when it actually causes the "reality" of their existence to break down in a deluded fit of destruction. Most importantly, this concept sufficiently sparked my creativity, and linked with the play's deceptiveness, violence, and terror. This concept guided my own decision making as a director, and steered my interactions with the design team as they made their own artistic choices to create the hyperreal world of *True West*.

Scenery

Introduction

I worked with a faculty scenic designer and a student properties master for *True West*, two individuals largely responsible for creating the strident verisimilitude the play requires. In this section, I chronologically trace my collaborations with the scenic designer and the prop master from initial conversations to technical rehearsals, giving additional scrutiny to the orientation of the playing space and the audience, the specific property demands and limitations of the production, and the choices we made to elevate realism to hyperrealism.

Conceptualization and Initial Discussions

Per Shepard's instructions in the foreword to *True West*, the scenic designer and I quickly decided that we would not attempt to graft an external concept onto the scenic design or stray from rigid verisimilitude. *True West* calls for a one-location unit set: Mom's kitchen in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Since *True West* first premiered in 1980, I decided to maintain its setting in the late 1970's for both practical and artistic reasons.

Practically, the script would have required many updated references which would have likely changed the intentions and overall feel of Shepard's work, such as the addition of cellular phones (Saul and Austin would likely have them) and a justification for why Lee calls the operator instead of performing an internet search on a smartphone. Artistically, a slightly historicized setting lent itself to the creation of a hyperreal setting because when a historical setting is "authentically" created or recreated, it cannot help but ultimately draw attention to itself as a simulation. The more "real" a setting appears and the more the audience finds themselves drawn into the illusion of the setting, the more the hyperreal elements will ultimately undermine and deconstruct the scenery's realistic artifice.

The scenic designer quickly determined that Mom's house itself would be older than the 1970's, and lend itself to the home stylings and décor of the 1950's. His choice was justified through one of Lee's observations in scene two about where his mother's furniture and home trappings came from: "Antiques? Brought everything with her from the old place, huh. Just the same crap we always had around."[1] From this portion of dialogue, we determined the furniture in the home is not necessarily current to the 1970's, and the designer chose the 1950's for the historicization, nostalgia, and sense of classic Americana that those particular trappings would bring. We also determined that the home would be well-kept to contrast it with the sullied state it reaches by play's end. According to the scenic designer's choices, the kitchen would include countertops, a sink, a refrigerator, cabinetry to store set dressing, a kitchen table, a freestanding "island" countertop with additional storage space, and a writing desk. While these major scenic

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[1] Shepard, *True West*, 13.

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pieces changed in arrangement and shape throughout the design process, they remained as the main units throughout the process.

In terms of color, the scenic designer chose a drab green that stood out against the black walls of the theatre, but would not prove so neutral as to completely wash out. Austin's writing desk would be a dark brown, with one of the kitchen table chairs pulled up to it to serve as a desk chair. Pulled from stock, the kitchen table and chairs had chrome framework and yellow Formica-style tops and plastic upholstery. This Formica-style yellow would be echoed in the kitchen countertops, including the sink, adjacent cabinet, and freestanding island piece. The refrigerator and stove we pulled from stock were white and we would keep them that way to maintain period accuracy.

The shapes and lines in the set alternated between squared edges and hard angularity (for the doorframes, upper cabinets, and most other lines separating the inside of the kitchen from the rest of the house and outdoors), and rounded edges and soft curvature (for the kitchen table, kitchen chairs, refrigerator, stove, freestanding island, and other mostly internal pieces). For the floor, we decided on an instantly recognizable burnt-orange and yellow tile pattern from the time period. The scenic designer wanted to find real tile flooring; ultimately, he could not find it, thus we enlisted the help of a scenic artist to paint this design on the floor. We also determined that we did not want a hard edge on the floor design; instead, we wanted it to do a soft fade into nothingness to draw the audience into the kitchen instead of abruptly cutting them off from it. Finally, we chose to hang a kitchen practical lamp with a slightly "Western" feel to add more weight to the downstage left corner and give the lighting designer an additional option.

Orientation of the Playing Space and the Audience

Once we had determined the major scenic elements, the scenic designer and I had to make a choice about the audience orientation and seating arrangement for the play. Theatre 11, the black box space at Baylor University, was the designated playing space, and this space is known for its intimacy, versatility, and ability to accommodate any audience arrangement. The space is small and only accommodates a maximum of 125 audience members; it does not include a fly gallery like the Jones, Baylor Theatre's proscenium space, or extreme height like the Mabee, Baylor Theatre's thrust space.

In our discussions about spatial arrangement, the scenic designer and I went back and forth between two primary choices: proscenium and thrust. In our discussions about these seating configurations, we had to weigh practical and aesthetic considerations against time, labor, and budget concerns. Both options presented different advantages and challenges, and after some deliberation, time, and mock-ups, we made the choice we felt would most benefit the production and the concept. When I began conversations with the scenic designer, we both offhandedly mentioned our inklings to stage the play in a thrust arrangement with the audience on three sides of the performance space. However, when had our first official design meeting and discussed my first conceptual idea for the play (mirage), we shifted our thinking to a traditional proscenium model and made artistic choices springing forth from that idea. This model would have resembled a realistic "box set" arrangement with literal walls and a large kitchen window upstage left. At a glance, a proscenium arrangement appears beneficial to the creation of a hyperreal setting. Unlike in a thrust or arena setting, the audience all faces one direction and the illusion of a detailed, realistic world is unencumbered by audience members looking

across the performance space at one another, and stage violence also proves easiest to hide in a proscenium arrangement because punches and other strikes can be easily masked from an audience sitting together on one side. As we discussed the potential for a proscenium arrangement with literal walls, our technical director brought up some important concerns about his ability to build literal walls with only himself and the scene shop foreman working on them, and affording them on the relatively small budget we possessed for the production. Our final decision came down to three major considerations: how to best present hyperrealism, how to make the space conducive to believable stage violence, and how much could be physically built with a limited technical staff and production budget.

Initially, I shied away from the thrust setting because I had reservations about our ability to stage "hyperrealism" when at least half of the audience would be looking at each other for the play's entirety. Nevertheless, I reconsidered this seating option, and made a discovery that had not previously occurred to me: with a thrust arrangement, we could place more of the audience closer to the action, and partially surround the kitchen and treat it as a real room. I would also be able to stage actors' backs to the audience more frequently, a practice which inherently feels less "stage-y" and presents a greater series of staging options and challenges. Upon closer examination, the thrust arrangement lent itself better to hyperrealism than the proscenium arrangement because of its ability to create naturalistic blocking choices, its ability to foster increased proximity to more of the audience, and its ability to create a "more real than real" setting without need of walls or other major scenic elements.

In our thrust arrangement, we only needed to construct two doorframes, a set of windows and shelves above the existing lower cabinetry and sink, a knee-level wall which housed Mom's plants, and the freestanding "island" kitchen counter that created a division between the main kitchen and breakfast nook/writing desk areas (Figure A.1). As far as the stage violence, we decided to extend a small portion of the upstage area beyond the risers so the audience on either side would not be able to look directly into it. This choice would make hiding non-contact strikes more feasible in a thrust setting, a traditionally problematic arrangement for stage combat. In summation, the scenic designer, the technical director, and I were pleased with this choice, and I felt confident in my ability to stage my concept within it and achieve the hyperrealism demanded by the play.

Set Dressing and Properties

True West is unique in that it demands an eclectic and extensive set of properties, many of which must be replenished after each performance. I worked with a student prop master for this production who joined our team later in the process. Perhaps most notably, *True West* calls for many toasters which Austin steals from neighboring homes to materialize onstage at the beginning of scene eight. Because of my commitment to hyperrealism, I wanted the toasters to function, and additionally, the toasters needed to look like they could have existed in the late 1970's. The next major prop challenge concerns Austin's typewriter, a prop which needs to function, or at least look like it actually functions through the majority of the play, and then gets destroyed when Lee brutalizes it with a golf club in scene eight. The production did not have the budget or the resources to purchase enough typewriters to last through technical rehearsals and

performances, and thus we solved this problem by selecting one typewriter that would consistently function and one typewriter that would be profusely beaten, both from Baylor Theatre's existing prop storage. The essential props for *True West* are rounded out by many consumables such as cigarettes, beers, whiskey, champagne, and bread. The tracking of properties proved a major task throughout the rehearsal process, and as technical rehearsals approached and began, the production team made their final artistic choices, adjustments, and compromises.

Late Process and Technical Rehearsals

As technical rehearsals began, the production team had to solve several unforeseen prop and scenic challenges. The issues arose around four major elements: the toasters, the consumables, some anachronistic prop choices, and a trash can fire. The production team compromised and found solutions to each of these problems while attempting to maintain the play's verisimilitude, the integrity of the concept, and hyperreality of the world. The lattermost priority became the director's highest prerogative, and I attempted to gear compromises and concessions to choices that would maintain and not detract from the production's established hyperrealism.

As we began to use the nine or ten toasters, we had to deal with the pertinent problems of where to hide them before scene eight, how to power them, and how to get them onstage and plugged in quickly to avoid an unduly long scene change. The scenic designer and I initially thought we could hide the majority of the toasters in the freestanding island, but when we checked the sightlines from the upstage portion of the house right bank of seats, all of the toasters were visible and there was no subtle or simple way to conceal them in that location. Next, we tried hiding them behind the two

upstage banks sets of cabinetry, and then during the scene transition, the run crew could get them onstage through the lower set of windows. We would then run the toasters' power cords out of the windows to plug them in, and cover the running power cords with a set of curtains to preserve verisimilitude. Our lighting designer informed us that our remaining dimmers in Theatre 11 could only handle six plugged-in toasters, and thus I asked the prop master to choose the six best functioning toasters, and have the actor playing Austin cover "plugging in" and using the remaining toasters with some stage business. Even with the toasters already plugged in backstage and just having to place them on the counter through the lower windows, the transition into scene eight still took entirely too long and hindered the play's momentum. Our lighting designer came up with a great solution that involved placing the toasters on music stands directly below the windows to minimize fumbling around for them in the scene transition's dim lighting. This quickened the transition considerably and achieved the desired effect of actually making toast onstage and wafting the hyperreal sensation of the toast smell throughout the theatre. This solution came about through collaborative means and several individuals finding the best answer as a cohesive unit. Furthermore, the placement of the toasters onstage, the masking of their power cords, and their functionality all contributed to the play's hyperreality, generating the real smell and look of real toast in an intimate space.

As far as the consumable props, I had to place more strident limitations on my list of requests, especially as late rehearsals passed and tech rehearsals arrived. I wanted the actors to begin drinking unopened "beers" and using all of our consumables during our first technical rehearsal. Unfortunately, our properties budget did not allow for us to

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purchase enough of the required properties and enough contingency properties in case of emergencies, and thus we began using all of the props during the first dress rehearsal on the Saturday before opening night. I had reservations about the actors not having enough time with all of the properties, but I had no other choice with a limited production budget. Nevertheless, we did add dry consumables (such as the corn flakes that Lee scatters in scene eight) earlier in the technical rehearsals and then waited to add wet consumables (such as beer and berries) until the first dress rehearsal. These compromises, fueled by necessity, allowed the actors to gradually incorporate new elements as opposed to dealing with a litany of new properties and scenic elements all at once. Moreover, by waiting to add the messiest and most expensive consumables until the latest possible rehearsals, we were able to use all of the consumables we wanted, not having to sacrifice any of the real food or real liquids we desired.

Because our scenic designer had a conflict with a simultaneous set of technical rehearsals, our prop master made most of the set dressing choices including cookbooks, kitchen appliances, food storage implements, and various tchotchkes. The prop master also gave the actor playing Lee specific instructions about which items he could and could not throw as he destroyed the stage while looking for a pencil in scene eight. Ultimately, when our scenic designer did return to our technical rehearsals, he pointed out a few items (such as a trash can and a few food storage items and plates) that did not fit the period of the late 1970's, and they were replaced. The prop master's choices about which props to keep as non-projectile set dressing allowed for the use of many period-specific set dressings such as vintage cookbooks, kitchen appliances, copper molds, and other implements which the actor playing Lee did not throw or destroy. Vintage

properties contributed to the believable illusion of a 1970's kitchen, and thus contributed to the world's hyperreality. More importantly, the prop master took on a monumental task in procuring all the items necessary for this production, and not only got the required props, but truly heightened the play's hyperrealism through her meticulous selection of authentic, period set dressing.

Finally, the last major concession made during the process concerned a trash fire that Lee is supposed to light at the start of scene eight. The stage directions specify that Lee should throw pages of his script into a trash can with a fire inside of it. We procured a metal trash can from prop storage and had the intention of lighting a fire in it at the start of Scene Eight; before testing this in the theatre itself, our technical directors requested an outdoor burn test two days before the start of technical rehearsals. During the burn test, we realized that the amount of smoke that even one burning page produced would cause the audience extreme discomfort in such an intimate space. Moreover, our technical directors had legitimate concerns about the safety of the audience in close proximity to a large open flame. We made the decision to ignore the stage direction about a fire in the trash can, and instead just place the trash can onstage and have the actor playing Lee tearing up pieces of his script and throwing them away. This choice, while not the ideal moment that the script called for or that I wanted as a director ultimately was more viable; the excessive smoke and fire danger would have pulled the audience completely out of the play, thus destroying the hyperrealism we had worked diligently to create. In this instance, hyperrealism was better served by making a choice to deviate from the stage directions. Though many concessions and compromises were

made throughout the technical rehearsals, the production opened with a level of scenic hyperrealism that satisfied the scenic designer, the prop master, and the director.

Costuming

Introduction

Baylor Theatre's Costume Shop Foreman served as the designer for *True West*, and our discussions and collaborations centered on finding authentic (or authentic looking) clothing from the 1970's, creating wardrobes for all four characters with extreme specificity and detail, and reflecting the identity and role shifts for Austin and Lee in their clothing. The costume designer's choices played into the production's attempted hyperrealism through her focus on authenticity, specificity, and malleability. In this section, I catalogue our discussions and process for each of the four characters, focusing on production choices which played into the three aforementioned desired effects and their contribution to the play's hyperreal landscape.

Lee

In our discussions of Lee, the roguish, mysterious drifter, the costume designer and I looked to images of frontier cowhands and Hollywood cowboys alike, hoping to pay homage to both in his attire while constructing a specific, unique vision of him particular to a hyperreal vision of this play. Throughout our collaborations, we continually returned to a 1970's image of Robert Redford on the set of one of his films (Figure A.2). This photograph captured the rakishness, charm, and relaxed power we sought to depict in Lee, and the remainder of the costume designer's research pointed to the dirt, grit, and danger that a desert drifter would possess (Figure A.3).

In an effort to preserve verisimilitude and to keep Lee from becoming a literal, archetypal cowboy figure, the costume designer made choices with allusions to the rough-hewn, real cowboy and the romanticized, filmic cowboy. The designer wanted Lee to have a pieced together, hodge-podge arrangement of clothing, and keep him in one base outfit with removable layers throughout the play. Using Austin's warning to Lee in Scene One as a justification, "You're going to get picked up if you start walking around here at night,"[2] she imagined that Lee pieced together an outfit from his petty thievery that would still prove functional in a harsh environment such as the desert, and contain tones of its rusty, sandy color palette (Figure A.4). Working from the ground-up, the designer chose a pair of scuffed, red dress shoes that possessed the angularity and pointedness of cowboy boots without being boots themselves. For his trousers, Lee wore a pair of bell-bottom, rust-colored Corduroys that typified the line and silhouette of 1970's attire while mirroring the earthy, rocky colors and textures of a desert. Lee's boisterous Silver Star belt buckle and leather belt became the most obvious nods to the cowboy figure on his person, and his other accessory, a pink and blue handkerchief with a quasi-tribal design served as both a handkerchief and bandana. Lee had a total of four layers for his upper body, consisting of a white, wife-beater sleeveless undershirt, a well-worn and sullied long-sleeve Henley, a striped flannel button-down shirt, and a green army surplus jacket with the patches removed so as not to draw needless attention to the name, rank, or insignias originally on the jacket. For his make-up and hair, Lee had a scraggly, matted beard and a shaggy, unkempt hairstyle. For a personal touch, the actor playing Lee requested a somewhat upscale cigarette case which he had stolen in a burglary, and the designer happily obliged.

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[2] Ibid., 10.

Per the designer's wishes, Lee consistently removed layers and subtly altered his appearance throughout the play. For example, in the beginning of scene one, Lee wore all four layers as he had just arrived at his mother's home. When Austin asked Lee how long he would hang around, the actor playing Lee made a choice to remove his jacket, signifying his claim over the house. As Lee began to write with Austin in scene four, he opened his button down to reveal the dirt and grime on his Henley. At the beginning of the second act (scene five) after his golf game with Saul, Lee fashioned his handkerchief into a bandana to foreshadow and resemble Saul's attire in scene six. As Lee became drunk and disheveled in the play's final scenes, he stripped to his wife-beater and eventually went shirtless in the middle of scene nine. In a final nod to the play's role switch, when Mom commented on Lee's bare upper torso, he found Austin's discarded button-down shirt and donned it, suggesting his attempted identity change. The slight incorporation of hints of one brother into another became important as the designer and I collaborated on Austin's wardrobe.

Austin

When we began discussing Austin, the reserved, outwardly rational family man and screenwriter, the costume designer and I did not have the archetypal images of the frontier and Hollywood cowboys to research. Despite Lee's claim in scene one that Austin "stick[s] out like a sore thumb,"[3] we had a more difficult time pinning down his exact style and aesthetic. I began to think back to identity construction and the persona that Austin chooses to make public. Upon further character analysis, we determined that Austin dresses to not draw attention; his clothing matches his public guise: safe,

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[3] Ibid.

unassuming, tidy, and meticulous. When searching for a comparative pop culture figure, I landed on the father figure from the sitcom *Full House* (1987 – 1995). This analogy led to the comparison of another television dad, this one more appropriate to the 1970's: Mike Brady from *The Brady Bunch*. These individuals have none of the coolness, roguishness, or dangerous mystique of the cowboy and instead possess respectability, wholesomeness, and settled domesticity. With this as a starting point, the costume designer looked to 1970's advertisements and fashions to find suitable analogues to these inspirational images (Figure A.5).

Unlike Lee, Austin changed costumes at different points in the play because he has societal status. Austin put on new shirts with new days (such as between scene one and two and between acts) and wore calm, reserved tones of blue and blue jeans of the period. For his shoes, the costume designer found a pair of contemporary sneakers that matched the style of the late 1970's and Austin's only accessory became a simple gold wedding band to signify not only his marriage, but also his adherence to social conventions. At the beginning of the second act when Austin begins taking on characteristics of Lee, the costume designer attired Austin in a brown-toned plaid button-down shirt, alluding to the western feel of his brother's clothing (Figure A.6). As Austin became increasingly drunk and manic, his shirt became untucked and by the time he had stolen the neighbors' toasters, he removed his plaid button-down shirt and wore only his white undershirt, thus donning Lee's attire and becoming him. By the play's final scene, both Austin and Lee had become drenched with sweat from the heat seeping into Mom's house, and thus the costume designer chose to have them swap their previous undershirts for stained, sweat-drenched equivalents. Ultimately, the transformation of both men and

their interdependency became reflected in this moment of shared attire, a moment that also reflected the production's sensory hyperrealism.

Saul Kimmer

For the fast-talking, boisterous movie producer Saul, the costume designer looked to the more ostentatious fashions of the 1970's, including polyester leisure suits, bold patterns, and handfuls of gaudy jewelry. From the outset, both the costume designer and I wanted Saul to stand out against the modest kitchen of Mom's home. While Saul's clothing made him look out of place amidst the scenery, the ease and power of his character still made him look comfortable and in control of the space. In the costume designer's renderings, Saul had two completely separate outfits for both of his scenes: a pink polyester leisure suit with a silk button-down shirt for the first, and a brown sport coat, white button-down shirt, brown slacks, and green patterned ascot for the second (Figures A.7 and A.8). Saul's costumes emphasized his complete absorption into the simulated landscape of Hollywood, and signified his status as a member of the powerful Hollywood elite.

During our collaborative process, a potential color palette conflict arose between the costume and scenic designers. As the costume designer searched for authentic leisure suits, she became increasingly nervous about finding one that would fit our particularly tall actor playing Saul. When searching through Baylor Theatre's costume storage, the designer located a green leisure suit that fit the actor perfectly. I was happy with the look, line, and color of the suit, but when we discussed our intent to use it, the scenic designer brought up an important concern: he had already chosen a similar green for the color of the kitchen cabinets, and none of us wanted Saul to blend into the cabinets. In

the end, the costume designer cut the green leisure suit and located a workable pink

leisure suit at a vintage store in Dallas, solving a potentially major issue.

Mom

Because she is the oldest character in the play, the costume designer and I wanted

Mom to look a little out of date, out of touch, and out of style. In her research, the

costume designer looked to Coco Chanel dresses and silhouettes from the 1960's, and in

her design for the realized costume, the designer sought to make Mom's outfit look

slightly dilapidated, frumpy, and like it was not necessarily a Chanel dress, but a

department store knock-off (Figure A.9). Mom served as the only feminine presence in

the production, and the design looked to emphasize her matronly quality and her

ineffectuality in a world dominated by, as the play states, grown men acting like little

boys.

Lighting

Baylor Theatre's Master Electrician served as the production's lighting designer,

and most of our collaborations and discussions happened toward the end of the process

and the technical rehearsals. In our initial design and production meetings, the lighting

designer did a lot of listening, especially as the scenic designer and I decided the spatial

orientation and audience seating arrangement. Once we settled on a thrust setting and

chose the major color palettes for the scenic and costume designs, the lighting designer

and I then began discussing the overall mood, color, and tone of lighting in this world.

For most of the play, the lighting designer wanted to adhere to verisimilitude as closely as

possible and accomplish time of day and atmosphere with his choices. The play's mood

is ultimately dark and mysterious, and thus our lighting color palette used a range of dark blues, deep ambers, and a bit of purple, especially in the night scenes. For the daytime scenes, we chose to skew these scenes a little warmer in tone than pure naturalism to allude to the heat of the desert. In an effort to make use of real, natural light and contribute to the production's hyperrealism, I requested to have the first two scenes begin with the lighting of matches (Austin lighting a candle in the first scene and Lee lighting a cigarette in the second), and the lighting designer agreed to these choices, and added to the candlelight in the first scene by creating a slight halo of light around Austin's desk where the candle was positioned. Furthermore, he cued this particular light to quickly fade when Austin ultimately blew out the candle. The designer made two more significant choices to bolster verisimilitude: a long sunrise in scene eight that happened over the course of ten minutes, and the addition of frost gel on the kitchen windows to help catch this light.

When the play breaks its hyperrealism in scene nine, we discussed several possibilities for how lighting could contribute to the moment when Lee springs up from his "deceased" state. The script calls for Lee and Austin to appear caught "*in a vast desert-like landscape*,"[4] and at first, the lighting designer wanted to illustrate this moment by bathing the theatre's entirety in stars, a lighting effect achieved with one wide-angle light and a gobo, or cutout which carves a particular design into a light's beam. Upon further review, we decided that this may make the moment a bit too literal.

The designer then went a different direction with this choice, creating an abstract landscape with deep, saturated colors and a spinning, abstracted gobo to reflect Lee and Austin's endless chase in circles. He chose tones of violet, dark blue, and pink, examples

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[4] Ibid., 71.

of some of the most vibrant colors that one may see in a desert sunset. While we both

liked the aesthetic of this choice, I went through several iterations of sound design

choices to pair with this lighting moment, and thus the lighting designer changed the

quality of the light with each new sound choice. Once I had settled on a final sound

choice, the lighting designer had arrived at a variant of the saturated, abstract landscape

with reds serving as the dominant colors as opposed to the violets and dark blues (Figure

A.10). Initially, the preponderance of red in this lighting choice came from my previous

sound choice, and the lighting designer chose to carry it over to the final iteration.

During our technical rehearsals, the lighting designer and I continually

collaborated to find the appropriate light levels for each scene and light sources. More

often than not, these changes proved to be very subtle, but nevertheless necessary in

hitting satisfying levels of verisimilitude and visibility.   For the ten-minute sunrise cue

in scene eight, the designer and I made two major adjustments to these choices, one

concerning the color scheme of the sunrise and the other about the positioning of lights

behind these windows. Over the course of scene eight's ten-minute sunrise, the lighting

palette went from a dark blue to signify the middle of the night to various tones of purple,

pink, and finally amber to indicate the sunrise. The first time I saw the cue, my focus

was pulled by the duration and intensity of the purple tones, betraying a bit of the scenic

verisimilitude the play still demanded at that point. When I first saw the frosted

windows, the center windows got much more of the light than the ones to the side, and

thus I asked the lighting designer if we could do anything to counteract that problem.

The designer responded by hanging two additional lights on booms behind the set to get

direct exposure (or as much as possible) to the frosted[5] windows, and this cleared up a bit

of the problem. Ultimately, the lighting designer and I had shorter and fewer discussions

than I had with the scenic and costume designers, but our work together proved mostly

effective as we maintained open lines of communication and an understanding of the

other's design process.

Sound

I served as my own sound designer for this production, and doing so while

directing posed a unique set of challenges at different stages of my process. Designing

the sound myself meant that I retained creative control over the choices, and yet this

meant not having another collaborator with a fresh perspective. As much as possible, I

attempted to separate the two processes in theory and practice, and I did not always

succeed at achieving this dichotomy. Luckily, I had outside help from Baylor Theatre's

sound design professor, and he gave me feedback on my choices from the beginning of

the play through intermission (I only had the first half of the design completed before this

professor had to go out of town).

In conceptualizing the sound for *True West*, I considered how I could adapt my

directing metaphor of drinking salt water into a viable and designable sound concept.

Drinking salt water, while a workable metaphor for the onstage action of *True West*, does

little to evoke particular sounds or the overall quality of sound for the play. I began to

think about what the process of drinking salt water does to the human body and cells

within it. In effect, a human's cells become hollowed out after drinking salt water, and

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[5] In this context, frost refers to a lighting gel which diffuses light and does not refer to any
indication of the external scenic weather.

the idea of being "hollowed out" evoked many possibilities for the production's aural atmosphere, both in terms of sound theming and sound effect/music choices.

Beginning with the production's music choices (for pre-show, intermission, and scene changes), I looked to country music of the 1950's, 60's, and 70's, particularly songs that deal with longing, emptiness, and dissatisfaction. Artists such as Buck Owens, Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn, Roy Acuff, and the Statler Brothers populated the pre-show music list. Moreover, each song underwent heavy processing in audio editing software to reach the concept of "hollowed out." Using a tool called equalization, I took most of the mid-range frequencies out of each of the songs and boosted the high and low frequencies, causing the songs to feel like they were missing a mid-range of tones and consequently feel hollowed out. I also used a few "vintage" and "flange-wah" processors to make the songs sound distorted and like they emitted from vinyl records which had become worn with age and many spins in a record player. For intermission, I chose storytelling songs by Marty Robbins such as "Big Iron" and "El Paso" because the first act concludes with Lee and Austin working on Lee's outline (these songs underwent the same kind of audio processing as the preshow songs). The songs played during the scene changes attempted to highlight the mood of the coming scene and the transition in between the two. For example, Porter Wagoner's "A Satisfied Mind" played in between the first and second scene to highlight the mystery and discomfort between Lee and Austin, while Hank Williams' "Move It On Over" served as the transition from scenes two to three because in scene three Lee attempts to edge his way into a relationship with Saul. For the later scenes in the play, the songs became increasingly processed and otherworldly, concluding with Buck Owens' "Act Naturally" before scene nine, a song

about aspiring to Hollywood fame and how one only needs to act naturally to accomplish this goal. For the curtain call, I chose a contemporary bluegrass song to bring the audience back into a contemporary setting without sacrificing the mood or tone established by the classic country.

The stage directions and dialogue specifically call for sound effects of coyotes and crickets, and the text makes a few mentions about the quality each one needs to possess. In his stage directions, Shepard mentions the Southern California coyote's distinct howl, and in scene two Lee describes how the coyotes were "[y]appin' their fool heads off. They don't yap like that on the desert. They howl. These are city coyotes here."[6] Lee and Austin also both discuss the almost ubiquitous presence of crickets outside their mother's home, implying that the crickets underscore the action in several scenes. For the coyote sounds, I pulled sounds of pet coyotes barking and howling, and for the crickets, I pulled a standard cricket sound effect, and did nothing to process either of these natural noises in the first half of the play, only adjusting the volume for audience comfort and audibility. Additionally, I chose other sounds of the suburbs such as sprinklers, lawn mowers, and cars starting and passing to indicate life happening around Mom's home. In the second act, these sounds also became increasingly strange and processed as the action of the play grew continually more out of control and absurd.

For the play's final moments, I tried three different sequences to find a workable underscore for when Lee springs up and the brothers face off. First, I tried a heavily processed and almost unrecognizable sound to truly make the moment as strange as possible. With the combination of lighting and sound, it seemed as if the brothers were suddenly abducted by aliens, and thus I moved to a different, much more recognizable

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[6] Ibid., 14.

sound choice. For the second attempt, I used the iconic theme music from the iconic 1966 Western *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. I tried this music choice during the final dress and preview, and it was poorly received by the faculty mentors who observed those rehearsals. When combined with the vibrant, red wash the lighting designer chose, the moment became too easy to figure out and write off as merely the end of a Western, and thus the mystery was sapped from the play's conclusion. Finally, on opening night, I went back to the crickets and the coyotes, and I justified these sounds because they had become familiar to the audience throughout the course of the play, and the addition of the lighting and the anti-realistic standoff made them strange, and hopefully made the audience question the stability of the hyperreal world they saw before them.

Finally, in serving as both director and sound designer, I had to share my focus between both roles, especially during technical rehearsals. Before bringing all of the design elements into rehearsal, it was easy to compartmentalize these jobs as I solely focused on the actors in rehearsal, and worked on the sound elements outside of it. Once technical rehearsals began, my focus consistently drifted away from the sound because I had to pay attention to the whole of the show, and not just one design element. It would take me sometimes two rehearsals to fix problems or even hear problems with particular sound cues, and once technical rehearsals began, I had little time to reevaluate my sound concept or assess where it was not working. Most of all, I spent copious time working on the cue for the final standoff, and had little time to adjust other sound choices. Ultimately, the sound design was unified and complete, but I did not have the ability to give my full, undivided attention to it.

Conclusion

The design process for *True West* was mostly characterized by open communication, the free sharing of ideas, and a unity among the team for creating a hyperreal world that would break down by the play's conclusion. I experienced especially fruitful collaborations with the scenic designer and costume designer, and my work with the lighting designer caused me to reevaluate and revamp my own work as a sound designer. Ultimately, our work resulted in a unified and well-researched landscape of Los Angeles in the late 1970's, a world created through not one design department alone, but through collaborative choices and compromises made by each.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hyperreality, Status, and the Rehearsal Process

Introduction

Effective, collaborative rapport with actors and evocative, varied visual

storytelling comprises the bulk of a director's work during the rehearsal process.   The

following chapter chronicles my process of working with the acting company of *True*

West, including casting, blocking rehearsals, working through the play, and final

adjustments before and during technical rehearsals. I pay special attention to character

development, clarifying the story arc, and finding subtlety within *True West*, facets of

directing that have previously caused my theatrical endeavors to suffer.

Casting

Choosing the right people from the available talent pool always proves an early

and critical part of a director's work. If a director casts well, finding actors with an

innate sense of their roles and the appropriate skills to depict their characters, then the

production has an exponentially increased chance of success. However, if a director

miscasts even one actor, this can throw off the rhythm, balance, and even collaborative

spirit of the rehearsal process. Prior to casting *True West*, my only trepidation came in the

form of getting enough actors to audition for the roles of Lee and Austin, two

challenging, tour-de-force characters for even experienced actors, let alone

undergraduates. Because *True West* fell in an unusual slot at the end of May after

graduation and before the beginning of the summer term, I had concerns about finding

sufficiently experienced actors to fill the two lead roles. Moreover, the Theatre

Department has fewer male actors than female actors, further limiting the available pool

of talent. Baylor Theatre scheduled *True West* auditions in January of 2015, concurrent

with the auditions for the last mainstage production of the 2014-2015 season.

In casting the two small, supporting roles of Saul and Mom I sought older

individuals from Baylor Theatre who could more convincingly look the roles. For Saul, I

approached an acting professor and he graciously accepted the part. Casting this actor for

Saul made abundant sense because Saul should both look older and have more power

than Austin or Lee, and because of this seasoned professional's experience, age, and

presence, he would instantaneously bring the desired gravitas and weight. For Mom, I

asked one of my fellow graduate students if she would step into the role, and she also

happily obliged. I had a sense that this actor could portray the bewildered, off-kilter

quality of Mom and appear sufficiently older than any of the potential undergraduate

actors who would audition for Austin and Lee.

By pre-casting the supporting roles, I only had Austin and Lee to cast when the

audition date came around. *True West* general auditions took place simultaneously with

auditions for Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and the actors prepared only comedic

Shakespeare monologues for the general call. I looked for actors who were comfortable

with themselves, with handling challenging material, and with comedic timing. Twenty

men auditioned for *True West* and I called back eleven. I asked them all to prepare both

roles with the assigned sides. I wanted to see all the actors read both roles to demonstrate

their versatility and range.

At the callbacks, I began by allowing each of the eleven men to read both of the roles, and then attempted different pairings. I had a clear sense of which actors did not have the particular qualities I sought in either role after everyone auditioning had a chance to read both roles in different arrangements. Some of the actors did not have the coolness and power of Lee or the fussiness and frustration of Austin, and some of them simply did not mesh well with any of the major contenders. I narrowed the field to five actors and gave them ten minutes with a new side (not available prior to the audition) so I could see their spontaneity, ability to make bold choices quickly, and ability to connect with challenging material in a short period of time.

As I observed the last set of readings, I synthesized more of what I wanted out of the pairing of Austin and Lee and what they had to accomplish in their character development. I needed to find two actors who could stand toe-to-toe with one another, give and take focus, and alternate driving the play's action (because the play does not have a sole protagonist). Furthermore, I needed to find actors who had the right quality for each of their roles and who had the necessary skills to develop their characters and incorporate aspects of the other into his persona. Finally, I needed a pair that would prove both fun to watch and able to elicit vulnerability and pain from each other.

From the outset, one of the senior actors emerged as a potential Lee and another stood out as a potential Austin. This pairing worked well and brought an intriguing blend of humor, terror, and pain to both of the roles. The senior standout for Lee had rakishness, charm, a muscular build, and the potential to develop menace; the senior standout for Austin radiated pathos, frustration, and discomfort in his own skin. I had concerns that because each of these men fit these roles so well, they may not

convincingly accomplish the identity switch the play demands. Ultimately, the two senior

men proved more skilled than any of the younger actor finalists, and I chose the seniors

for their quality, enthusiasm, teamwork, and capacity for growth throughout the process.

With the play fully cast, I began collaborating with designers while I eagerly anticipated

the start of rehearsals in April.

The First Two Weeks

True West rehearsals had an official start date of April 20, 2015, though I received

permission to have two unofficial "cast meetings" before delving fully into the play.

During the first meeting, the actors read through the play and I briefly explained my

vision for the process and production. I asked the actors to always keep in mind that

though this play has lots of darkness and oddness, we should never take it or ourselves

too seriously when rehearsing it. The title *True West* ultimately proves ironic because no

"True West" really exists, in either this play or in our contemporary postmodern society.

I also addressed what I believed to be the most important theme of the play: the

conflation of image and reality, and I did not explicitly mention my director's concept as

it would have only served as excess information. Moreover, I emphasized that we would

discover and rediscover this play all throughout rehearsals, and I, even as the director,

certainly did not have all the answers. I also expressed my desire for artistic

experimentation in rehearsals. I have never faulted an actor for trying something new in

rehearsal, and I wanted open communication and free expression of ideas to characterize

our process. After the reading, I asked the actors to come in with clear objective and

tactic choices for each of their scenes, especially the early scenes where the overall action

proves more elusive to pinpoint. Ultimately, the company left the first meeting with palpable enthusiasm and an eagerness to get the play on its feet the following Monday.

On April 17, the actors playing Lee, Austin, and I met for a screening of the 1962 Kirk Douglas film *Lonely Are the Brave*. I scheduled this activity primarily as bonding time for the two leads, but also because Lee waxes poetic about this film in scene three, putting it on a pedestal as the last worthy Western film he had seen. Like any diligent director, I wanted the actor playing Lee to have an abundantly clear picture of this film and why his character enjoys it so much, but I also wanted both actors to see the romanticized, nostalgic vision of the cowboy and the "true west" the film presents. The actors and I had a brief conversation about this juxtaposition after the film, and it gave them a clearer understanding of how *True West* treats the cowboy and the frontier ironically instead of romantically.

On the Monday following our arranged screening, we promptly put the play on its feet and launched headfirst into blocking. From the first blocking rehearsals, I worked with Austin and Lee on their power dynamics and frequent status swaps. For the majority of the first act, Lee remains in power while Austin gains some ground at the end of the first act and in the later scenes of the second act. In the play's second scene, I see the brothers trading small status swaps and wresting little bits of power from one another, and thus I gave them the direction to "know where they get their dings in on the other," or in other words, find where they take status and where they cede it to their scene partner.

Throughout the first two weeks, we blocked and ran each scene of the play, and I focused on giving broad shaping notes and not worrying about polishing small moments

or fixing tiny details. I endeavored to listen more than I spoke, and as a result, the actors explored their characters with uninterrupted runs of scenes and solidified the play's skeletal blocking. Our typical structure during a blocking rehearsal consisted of establishing the scene's major movement patterns, doing a stop-and-start run for major movement fixes and character notes, and then running the scene uninterruptedly while I took a few notes. We almost always engaged in a short discussion of the scene's trajectory, the characters' objectives, and any ideas the actors wanted to bring to the table before blocking. The phrase "to the table" became literal because our set happened to include a kitchen table which we gathered around. These short table work sessions allowed us to have more time on our feet and generate fruitful directions for each character. For example, the actor playing Saul and I discussed possible angles and the character arc of his role, and he found himself intrigued with Saul's complete reversal of loyalty and how it occurs in such a short period of time. We then discussed Saul as a simulation and an individual who typifies the pervasive simulacra of Hollywood. This line of thought coalesced with one of the actor's main conceptions of Saul: he always wants people to like him because he always wants to be able to use them to his advantage. This interpretation fostered an affable, yet cunning manipulator with high status and human magnetism.

By the second Monday of the rehearsal process (April 27), we had blocked the entire play and worked our stage violence with Baylor Theatre's resident stage combat instructor. The actors playing Lee, Austin, and I had finished an unarmed stage combat course one week prior, and the actors frequently worked with each other during this semester-long class to build trust and physical communication. Like many of Shepard's

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plays, *True West* demands violence in its staging, including short moments such as Austin's attempted strike at Lee in scene seven and the extended fistfight and phone cord strangulation in scene nine. We set aside an entire evening to choreograph, learn, and set the sequences of violence; stage combat, above all else, must create safe, repeatable actions and clear storytelling. We addressed the play's smaller moments of violence first, such as Austin's aforementioned punch and Lee's forceful shirt-grab in scene one. We then moved to the longer sequence at the play's end, and slowly worked through the fight's paces in a contact improv style. Our combat instructor suggested we choreograph this way because the moves then come from the actors' own instincts of physical altercation and defense. The actors' prior combat experience with one another helped us put together a sequence quickly, and then spend the rest of the night troubleshooting it and looking for potential problems.

Though the actors developed intense trust in one another, the combat instructor, and the director, actor safety remained a sticking point because of the fight's unique demands and spatial circumstances. Per the stage directions, the fight ends with Austin choking and appearing to kill Lee with a phone cord. Before staging the fight's ending, the choreographer and actors discussed how to safely and effectively allow Lee to control the tightness and placement of the cord around his neck (Figure A.11). In the previous scene, Lee ransacked the kitchen while searching frenetically for a pencil, and thus a litany of kitchen implements, utensils, and golf clubs were strewn about the floor in his rampage. When Mom entered scene nine, I blocked Austin and Lee to embarrassedly clean a bit of the floor, particularly the area used for the fight.

With the safety parameters established, we blocked the final bits of destruction, including Lee's path around the stage and how he would flail and fight against his strangulation. In this last sequence, I wanted to escalate the violence as much as possible, and thus we choreographed Lee knocking various kitchen implements to the floor, turning over chairs, and Austin dunking his head in the sink, soaking Lee's head and creating a cascade of water when he unsubmerged himself. Ultimately, we had to mitigate the rampant, mounting destruction with a clear movement path for the actors and a concern for the audience's safety.   Next, I had to direct Lee to restrain the power and distance of his object tosses as kitchen implements frequently spilled either too close to or into the audience itself. With stage combat, we want the audience to fear for the characters, not the actors, and certainly never for themselves in a situation of escalating violence. Eventually, we struck a workable balance of brutality and containment, ending the fight with Lee incapacitated on the kitchen table, gasping for breath while Austin appeared to put increasing torque into the cord and pressure on Lee's neck (Figure A.12). Our collaborations with the fight choreographer resulted in a volatile, cruel, gut-wrenching climax to the play, pushing it to an almost unbearable hyperreality.

After the first two weeks of rehearsal, we had to hold the process for nine days due to finals week, and before the break in the process, I felt mostly pleased and confident in the progress and discoveries the company had made. The actor playing Austin found and developed a fun, ridiculous sense of mania in his second act drunken scenes. His choices brought oddness, humor, and energy to the play's rising action. As a counterpoint to Austin's absurd mania, the actor playing Lee developed an ownership of the kitchen and a bullish, controlling energy that allowed him to drive the first half of the

play and then struggle to maintain his control in the second. Lee's spatial ownership also resulted in some of the most dynamic and varied staging choices in the production, such as sprawling across the kitchen table, pulling a chair up to the freestanding island when calling the operator, and standing on the island to rail at Austin (Figures A.13, A.14, and A.15). Mostly, I found myself tremendously pleased with the sense of fun and energy the cast brought to the play. The simple infectious enthusiasm of the actors clearly came across, and their enjoyment helped foster the atmosphere of trust, play, and collaboration I wished to cultivate.

Upon returning to rehearsal, we began to tweak the play's detail blocking and add specificity and detail to the characters. For example, since the brothers had established their base behaviors and modes of operation, we began to see how we could incorporate behaviors and mannerisms from one sibling into the other later in the play. The actor playing Lee cultivated a sly sneer that he frequently exhibited in the play's first scenes, and when Austin devolved into drunkenness in scene seven, he incorporated flashes of this mannerism into his own performance.

Nevertheless, the production still had plenty of room to grow, and I identified several large problems to address. Most significantly, the play's first three scenes had not consistently worked as individual units or as a beginning arc of the whole play. From the first rehearsal, I cautioned the actors about taking the play too seriously, and at that moment in the process those first scenes tonally established the play as a serious family drama. I recognized that these scenes needed both a sense of fun and danger to them, and thus I gave the actors the note to make the play "peel out at sixty-five miles per hour," ramping up both the energy and the tempo of the first scenes. With this note, I had the

intention of increasing the fun and piling more tension onto the relationship, as the brothers did not have sufficient precariousness or connection between the two of them. When watching these scenes, it appeared as if the play did not even begin until the moment in scene two when Austin announces his meeting with Saul and tries to get Lee to leave the house. Like many of Shepard's plays, I believed *True West* should begin with a kinetic, physical pop to draw the audience into the world immediately.

Though she only appears at the end of the play, the actor playing Mom had trouble finding a clear direction for her character or making viable acting choices. At first, she attempted to make too much sense out of Mom's actions, and admittedly, I did not steer her away from this direction as quickly as I should have. Instead, I gave her circumstantial notes such as "you really don't understand what's happening," or "your character is in the beginning stages of dementia," and notes on how and where to build the energy at the end of the scene. Without a clear action to latch onto, the actor continually made incongruous or inexplicable choices that derailed the action of the scene. I found myself reluctant to do too many stop-and-start runs of Mom's scene for two primary reasons: first, I did not think stopping and starting such an intense sequence of action would serve the actors in finding the climax, and second, I had more pressing scenes to work on, such as developing Austin and Lee's relationship in the first three scenes. Finally, I gave a more succinct note which helped her make a few new choices and have more of a through-line: Mom does not have to make sense. As soon as I gave this note, during the next run, the actor found a wide-eyed, wounded quality that worked better for the circumstance Mom had to walk into, though her performance still lacked energy, age, and a clear arc.

At the end of our first two weeks, I noticed that though the play proved action-packed and entertaining, Austin and Lee's relationship did not yet possess the depth, complexity, and vulnerability it needed to fully round out their characters. Though the play only provides snippets of the brothers' backstories and shared history, we should sense a deep, yet volatile connection between the two. While the brothers found explosiveness and, in a few select places, developed a sense of fun in their relationship, we had yet to root their relationship in a more significant human connection. To counteract this problem, I began to ask specific questions about character details and reminded the actors to pay attention to the loaded quality of superficially mundane comments. For example, at the end of scene one, Austin invites Lee to stay at his home in the vaguely described "north" for a few days, and shortly thereafter, Lee says innocuously "Oh, that's right, you got the wife and kiddies now don't ya'. The house, the car, the whole slam. That's right."[1] While benign on the surface, Lee desires Austin's social position, and this line should resonate with sub-textual jealousy.

As I looked back at my notes and rehearsal journals, I realized I had given too many contradictory directions to the actors. I had told them to find a familiarity and shared reminiscence with each other and shortly thereafter, also asked them about what the violence of someone unexpectedly coming back into your life looks and feels like. While not mutually exclusive directions, they proved too broad and contradictory for the actors to incorporate all at once, and thus I needed to tackle these problems in a different way following the break. Nonetheless, with the major staging and character work in place, we had a few days off to regroup, and then continue to build the play.

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[1] Shepard, *True West*, 12.

The Latter Two Weeks

Coming back after nine days off, I knew the actors would be rusty, and we would require at least a night to regain our prior quality of work. After our first night back, we encountered an unanticipated spatial challenge: our scenic artist required more time to finish painting and sealing the kitchen tile design on the floor, and thus we needed to stay off of it for several days. Luckily, we had a backup theatre to rehearse in, albeit a significantly bigger space than Theatre 11. The addition of a new space on top of coming back from a long break caused the actors to take a step back in their specificity and character development, but their resiliency and focus ultimately prevailed.

Halfway through our first week back, my directing advisor came in to watch a run, and I felt excited to receive feedback on our work thus far and have a fresh pair of eyes examine the production. As soon as the run began and I watched my advisor's reactions, I could tell that the production was not working.

My advisor's biggest notes pertained to the play's first act, especially the first three scenes, a portion of the play which I had yet to figure out or pin down. As I sensed, these scenes lacked the tension and clarity of relationship needed; moreover, my advisor noted the scenes' lack of variety and the un-likeability of Lee. In these first scenes, he came off as a boorish, loud, and irritating bully. Because of the way the actor played Lee, my advisor did not understand why Austin (or anyone) would want to spend any time around him. Thinking back to my prior notes, I told the actors that they needed to have more fun, find the tension, and experience the danger within these scenes. While I intended for these notes to produce a lighter tone in these scenes, the actors, especially the actor playing Lee, interpreted this as having to do more onstage, play bigger actions,

and push themselves to an unnatural level of loudness and argumentativeness. As a director, I have received consistent critiques about causing actors to overplay scenes to the point where their performances are too unbelievably large to pass for human behavior. I received a similar note at this juncture of the process, and I worked with my advisor and actors to fix this forced, overblown quality.

The solution to this problem came into focus when I stopped thinking about what we could add to these scenes to make them better; instead, I shifted my attention to getting the actors to do less in the scenes. Because the first two scenes came off as loud, fast, and brash, the actors had no room to build when the play needed to reach its fever pitch of violence and destruction. Because I directed the play to "peel out at sixty-five miles an hour," the play had one consistent speed and rhythm, and my advisor became especially bored by Lee. Lots of action ceases to be interesting to an audience when it stays at one level and has nothing to break it up or change it. My direction drained the beginning of the play (and especially Lee) of mystery, intrigue, and silence, and I needed to direct the actors to rediscover and implement these elements.

Luckily, when a director has given his or her actors too much to do, it typically proves easier to dial back big choices than ramp up the energy of small choices. My advisor had a suggestion for how to frame this feedback for the actors, and I readily took this guidance. To the actors playing Lee and Austin, I said that we found so many choices and so much detail about their characters, and at the moment, we revealed all of them in the first couple of scenes. I framed this direction as preserving the mystery of the play, finding the silence, and taking our time with telling the story. The next night, I worked with these actors again and gave these exact directions. Almost instantaneously,

the scene became much simpler, cleaner, and much more interesting to watch. My advisor reminded me to trust in my own taste; my taste inspired me to choose this play, these actors, and now I needed to let these elements shine without trying to add too many flourishes around them. Working from this place, the actors found the tension and stillness the scenes required without having to push for it or force it out. Lee became mysterious, playful, and much more likeably rakish instead of bullish, loud, and obnoxious. The pace of the first few scenes slowed tremendously, and I realized that I did not need to push for bigger actions or a louder, faster, funnier play. I had to trust that the actors and the material were interesting enough on their own, and as soon as I did this, it solved many of our problems without having to restage or reimagine the entire play.

The patience the actors brought to scene two fostered a familiarity and affability between Austin and Lee, and it finally made sense why the brothers would want to spend more time together. We also discovered more stage business (such as cutting and eating fruit) that increased the realism of the first scenes and made the play resemble kitchen sink drama. In speaking to my advisor, I expressed my confidence in directing stylistic, theatrical pieces, but a lack of confidence with straightforward realism. My advisor suggested thinking of these scenes as having style, as kitchen sink drama that is not what it appears to be. This tonal shift gave the play's first act a discomforting, disturbing quality, gave the actors more room to grow and build their characters, and helped us find more fun in the piece without trying to force it to happen. As in life, "fun" onstage is rarely fun if it is pushed or we try too hard to achieve it.

The major adjustments we made to the play's first two scenes highlighted both effective and ineffective choices we had made in the play's later scenes. During Saul's first appearance in scene three, I realized I had disempowered him and given the highest status to Lee. This power imbalance drained the scene of conflict and forced the actor playing Saul to ignore his own instincts. I directed Lee to frequently touch Saul as if they had known each other for years, wear Saul's sunglasses during the scene, and get close to Saul's face for an extended period of time during the Kirk Douglas monologue. A man in Saul's position of power would not tolerate any of these behaviors, and Lee has enough savvy and coolness to inure himself to Saul, not irritate and offend him. I told the actor playing Saul that I thought I had taken too much power away from him, and I directed Lee to cut taking Saul's glasses and bring the comfort he found in the first two scenes into this scene. As soon as we adjusted this status imbalance, we discovered more humor, conflict, and did not give away the surprise of the second act. After reworking scene three, we looked at Saul's second scene because it had also been lacking levels, believability, and coming across as forced. Almost miraculously, nearly all of these problems vanished once we had fixed the pecking order in scene three. Suddenly, Austin had a more powerful figure to push against, and Saul had a chance to show an unapologetic viciousness at the scene's conclusion, dropping his Hollywood smile and affability for one moment to, as the actor put it, "let the demon out." We staged the end of the scene to resemble a high-noon standoff in a Western, with Saul nearly clearing the front door, and Austin shouting after him: "There's no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue! It's dried up, Saul, and so are you."[2] Saul slowly turned around, took off his sunglasses, stalked up to Austin, and threatened him at point blank range (Figure

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[2] Ibid., 43.

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A.16). This moment served as a turning point in the play because it started the downward

spiral of characters revealing their "true" desires and intentions.

Finding believability in the first four scenes revealed another big problem in act

two: the lack of believability in Austin's drunkenness. As I first worked with the actor on

these scenes, I drew inspiration from my concept and directed him to constantly support

himself on solid structures, as if severe dehydration had almost completely taken over his

body and it became increasingly difficult to remain upright. The actor playing Austin

was six-feet-four-inches tall, and had trouble maintaining control of his body onstage. As

a result, many of his movements became too big for an intimate space and completely

betrayed the honesty he discovered in the first act. I worked with the actor on finding

more stillness within these scenes and differentiating his drunken states in the last three

scenes. We decided he would incorporate a bit of Lee's initial ease in scene seven, play

mostly mania in scene eight after he had stolen the neighbors' toasters, and reveal the

extent of his violence in scene nine. While the actor worked on pulling back the size of

his performance, I did not reign in much of the blocking or the sloppiness of his

drunkenness, as I wanted the violence to perpetually increase and build consistently

toward the climax.

Technical Rehearsals

Technical rehearsals always prove additionally challenging for actors as all of a

sudden, they have full costumes, properties, lighting, and sound choices to contend with

in addition to all they have been working on for the majority of rehearsals. Our actors in

particular had a plethora of properties to contend with, and the handling of these

properties and the destruction of them became our first major issue during technical

rehearsals. As soon as we procured all of the props and consumables during tech week, the actor playing Lee got a better idea about the exact path of his rampage and how he had to manage the mess he created. The biggest issue concerned bashing the typewriter with a golf club, as we only had one broken typewriter to work with, and we could not make the audience feel threatened by flying debris in a confined space. Initially, I had directed Lee to wail incessantly on the machine and get in at least eleven or twelve hard strikes. My advisor pointed out how endangered she felt sitting in the audience, even though she knew the play and trusted the actor. We cut the actor down to two or three large strikes on the typewriter per night, and this helped maintain the audience's safety and preserve the prop through the production's entire run. To justify the switch in his character, I asked the actor to increase his drunkenness and have it limit his mobility and ability to stand. Here, the actor brought some of the bullish, lumbering quality he had previously played in the first act, and put it to use in act two.

As we completed tech rehearsals and moved into our dress rehearsals, I still did not think Austin and Lee had found enough vulnerability or pain in their relationship, and on the Sunday prior to opening night, the actors discovered a powerful moment at the end of act one. Throughout the play, the "Old Man" serves as a point of severe contention between the brothers, and I knew the actors needed to find more significance in those sequences, particularly after the first three scenes. In scene four, as Austin persuades Lee to keep working on the outline, Lee mentions the possibility of helping their father with the money earned from this hypothetical screenplay. After this suggestion, I had Austin walk away from Lee, move to the high chair in the downstage left corner of the stage, and grab it so as not to physically lash out at his brother. Prior to that Sunday's rehearsal, this

moment had lacked weight and investment; however, during this rehearsal, the actor

playing Lee reacted to Austin's harsh admonishment to "…leave the old man out of it,"[3]

with a layered, vulnerable outburst teeming with resentment and hurt. The actors

discovered this moment through their time living with these characters and their

unwillingness to settle for an incomplete moment. Their emotional rawness added

another viscerally engaging layer to the production, and I made sure to acknowledge and

praise the actors' success in making such an uninhibited and risky choice. It took a few

more rehearsals to replicate and set this moment, and luckily we still had the time to do

so before opening the play that Wednesday.

Conclusion

As a director, I have always brought a spirit of collaboration and open

communication to my rehearsal processes, though I have not consistently produced

believable, clear dramatic arcs or subtle performances in my finished productions. For

True West, I cast four actors who I trusted, fit their roles, and embodied a similar ethos of

discovery, experimentation, and cooperation to my own. The collaborative attitude of the

cast fostered an environment in which we had the ability to mine Shepard's text for its

idiosyncrasies, nuances, and overall arc. We made missteps during our journey, and most

of these errors occurred as a result of my own lack of trust in the play itself and the

stillness and subtlety that the first act demands. Once we made these adjustments, the

actors achieved simplicity, power, and command of the space, qualities which have not

always served as hallmarks of my work. I attribute the success we had during rehearsals

to the actors' patience, openness, and ability to take direction. Additionally, the work

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[3] Ibid., 31.

with our combat director also typified the effective and direct communication that I wish to permeate every theatrical venture I undertake. My own ability to give concise, clear directions grew during this process, and though I did not succeed at every juncture and with every interaction, this rehearsal process provided new benchmarks for merging the collaborative spirit I inherently possess and the leadership qualities I have worked to cultivate.

CHAPTER FIVE

Evaluating the Hyperreal: Post-Mortem and Self-Critique

Introduction

True West opened on May 27, 2015 and closed on May 30, 2015, enjoying a four

performance run. Overall, the production elicited positive reactions from audience

members with acting performances and design elements both drawing praise. Audiences

expressed varied reactions to the play itself and commented frequently on its oddness and

its lack of coherent answers or explanations. Happily, though audiences left not having

fully pinned down the play, it did not seem to hamper their enjoyment of the product or

cause them to dismiss the text. The production team sought to preserve the mystery,

danger, and fun of *True West* while emphasizing its hyperreality and its commentary on

identity construction and conflation. Though the performances proved successful overall,

my directorial interpretation of *True West* and the production itself did not succeed on

every front, and I garnered many constructive critiques alongside positive

commendations. This final chapter addresses the production's strengths and

shortcomings, both in terms of its design/rehearsal process and performances for paying

audiences. As a director, *True* West afforded me the ability to improve several of my

weaknesses, bolster a few of my strengths, and discover a new set of challenges in

moving onward to a professional career.

Prior to beginning rehearsals for *True West*, I studied my previous rehearsal

processes in graduate school, the critiques I received from them, and my own self-

evaluations I wrote at their respective conclusions. In each self-evaluation, I noticed a prominent theme of self-flagellation and an inability to accept successes gracefully and treat failures as opportunities for growth instead of signs of overwhelming incompetence. I also examined my directing journals, and even when I made progress or had a particularly good rehearsal, I still consistently beat myself up for something I did not do well or could have done better. Because of theatre's inherent subjectivity, I have worked diligently to quash my innate perfectionism and self-doubt, and through graduate study, I have become more acutely aware of these directorial issues, though not always able to successfully rid myself of them. Even though directing a play has no inherent right or wrong answers, I have spent entirely too much time looking for the "right" answer in rehearsals, and this has only stymied my artistic sensibilities and creativity. For *True West*, I set goals to never take my work or myself too seriously, trust more in my actors' abilities, and eliminate my omnipresent specter of self-consciousness. In the moments when I let go of my self-criticism, the production had the ability to flourish, and the actors' and designers' work drew acclaim from Baylor Theatre audiences and faculty alike.

Successes and Strengths

Many aspects of the production proved gratifying and entertaining to a significant portion of audience members, including the scenic and costume design elements, the actors' performances in the first act, and the staging which highlighted the play's themes and physically depicted the story. More importantly, many audience members left with questions about what they had just witnessed: was Mom really there? Are Lee and Austin real? Is one real and not the other? What happened to them at the end of the

play? Questions such as these demonstrate the multivalence of meanings contained in

True West, a multivalence that the production team managed to attain without leaving

audiences feeling disconnected or alienated by the play's peculiarity. In order to take the

audience on this journey from reality to hyperreality, the production lulled the audience

into a false sense of security through familiar surroundings and appearances.

Much of the familiarity the audience recognized came about through the scenic

and costume designs, two widely lauded elements of the production. Many people

commented on painted kitchen-tile floor, recognizing the pattern from homes they or

their family members had lived in or owned. One audience member even commented on

the curtains hanging over the kitchen windows, exclaiming that she had once redone her

own kitchen with those exact curtains. Though the scenic design did not feature literal

walls or the complete architecture of a fully fleshed out kitchen, the detail and

verisimilitude of each scenic element (including the stove, refrigerator, cabinetry, and

kitchen table) allowed the audience to treat it as a "real" setting and regard its theatrical

illusion as "truth." The audience also recognized set dressing elements and commented

on their period accuracy; in another case an audience member commented that her

grandmother had three copper molds just like the ones displayed on the freestanding

island. The authentic 1970's attire designed by the costume designer added much to the

production's antiquarianism and effectively expressed the characters' personas through

texture, line, silhouette, and color. One of Baylor's acting and directing professors

remarked that she enjoyed seeing Lee stay in one base costume with multiple layers while

the other characters changed entirely. She stated that it indicated his character's limited

access to societal resources while Austin enjoyed the privileges of a full wardrobe.

Furthermore, Saul's costumes proved especially well-received, including his pink leisure suit, loud fabrics, and tinted aviator sunglasses that evoked the sleazy, artificial, and opulent aspects of Hollywood.

The actors not only looked authentic in their costumes; many who saw the show commended their performances for honesty, patience, and character depth. The actors' work in the first act received almost unanimous approval. The extra attention we gave in the first scenes, especially to finding stillness, pauses, and taking our time with the story paid off, and the actors produced work that spoke to the truth of Shepard's text. One professor observed how the first act really "felt like Shepard," and embodied the tension, foreboding, and poetry contained in his plays. In the first act, the text and the actors had little to get in their way, and I accomplished the directorial goal of enabling a text and actors to bring forth truth, mystery, and vulnerability without hindrance. To paraphrase avant-garde director Anne Bogart, directors do not create moments of great theatre; they may only create situations in which effective theatre may occur. An apt blend of circumstances aligned in the production's first act, creating a Lee with coolness, resentment, and affability, and an Austin with dissatisfaction, frustration, and uneasiness, and enlivened a deceptively realistic text teeming with poetry. Audience members also praised the interpretation of Saul, citing our actor's interpretation as different from the typically jaded, grizzled treatment the role receives. Though a seasoned professional, the actor playing Saul brought his natural youthfulness and energy to the stage. Another professor commented on how he really did not like Saul by the end of scene six, framing this characterization as an achievement because the actor exudes such inherent likability.

Finally, much of the staging and visual storytelling also garnered positive feedback, highlighting creating a world grounded in apparent realism with touches of theatricality and elevation to hyperrealism. Some of the more successful staging moments referenced by observers included Lee and Austin alternately sprawling on the kitchen table in act one and two, the literal chase between the brothers that erupts as they discuss the chase in Lee's outline at the beginning of scene four, and the subtle switch of positions between Austin's writing desk and the island near the end of scene four. These moments, while not indicative of my usually broad and theatrical style, proved effective because they merged the play's realism with its hints at poetry, creating a theatrical landscape that looks like real life, but feels distorted beyond it to a place of discomfort. One audience member remarked on how she enjoyed the play's humor, though felt she could never become too comfortable laughing and feeling relaxed by her laughter, the play always felt right on the verge of something more sinister. I also enjoyed watching the audience's reactions to other moments of heightened tension or theatricality. The end of scene six, when Austin insulted Saul and Saul turned slowly back toward him, frequently drew gasps from the audience, and the final sequence of violence in scene nine was often met with dropped jaws and terrified gazes. Ultimately, I managed to achieve several directorial objectives I had yet to consistently attain in my previous work: subtlety, patience, stillness, and a clear story arc with character development.

Weaknesses and Shortcomings

Though I grew tremendously as an artist and directed a mostly successful production, *True West* had its share of problems and challenges, both in terms of the process and final product. Directing this play also uncovered new issues with my own

artistry to address as I transition into a professional career. In this section, I will discuss

difficulties with the sound design and the conflation of my own design and directorial

processes, acting complications in the second act, and the incomplete realization of my

directorial concept. Though I came away from the process and product happy with the

results, I ultimately learned more from the production's less successful elements,

beginning with the sound design.

Though the sound served its purpose in adequately covering the scene transitions

and providing the effects demanded by the script, the design as a whole did not achieve

its desired effect of making familiar songs and atmospheres sound strange. One professor

commented on how, after a few scene changes, she just wanted to hear the songs

unencumbered by the extra processing I put on top of them. In working with

"hollowness" as a concept, I had the goal of making the selected songs sound old, grainy,

and empty, and in the process, I detracted from the quality of the songs themselves,

which sounded aged in the first place because of the period in which they were first

recorded. I failed to take into account the familiarity which the other design elements

established and perhaps the production would have been better served with the sound

design also playing into this familiarity before the play's final moments. Additionally,

though I have training in sound design, I am not primarily a designer, and having to

divide my attention between directing and design did not allow me to give my undivided

attention to the play's aural atmosphere. Furthermore, I gave more of my focus to

directing the entire production instead of addressing sound design as a separate element.

If I had another production team member to complete this task, I could have more easily

divided my focus, but because I did not, the time split between sound and the

production's whole did not allow for a thorough reevaluation or in-process assessment of my sound concept.

Overall, I never found a successful solution to the problem of Austin and Lee's antirealistic face-off at the play's climax. The moment lacked cohesion, impact, and a sufficient break with the play's established hyperrealism. The otherworldly sound I first tried had no basis in the play or earlier design, the *Good, Bad, and the Ugly* theme evoked the imagined "West," but ascribed too explicit a meaning to the moment, and while the crickets and coyotes I finally settled on had a basis in the play, they did not possess the world-shattering weight or impact I sought for that moment to have. All the hyperrealism the play established should have been completely exposed for its artifice, and playing these frequently-used sounds did not make the moment as strange and unfamiliar to the audience as it should have been. Perhaps the moment would have been better served by stark, colorless lighting and a lack of sound to strip away the theatrical illusionism the production had established for nearly its entirety.

Moreover, I directed the actors to do a somewhat involved, elaborate circling of one another that moved from the freestanding island to the upstage corner of the kitchen and around one another again. Perhaps I should have blocked Lee to spring up and then kept both brothers completely still, almost freezing the moment in time and making it a deliberate, dramatic tableau. The saturated red lighting, while deepening the play's strangeness, did not explode or transform the reality to the extent I wanted. In short, the final moments of the play proved elevated and different, but did not achieve the complete inversion of reality I sought.

After additional time for reflection, I discovered a bolder and more appropriate pattern of choices for the play's climax. I would have made the previously suggested adjustments, including implementing stark, colorless lighting, removing the final sound cue entirely, and cutting Lee and Austin's final movement down to a simple standoff. Once Lee sprang up from the table, I would have asked the brothers to face off momentarily, and then the stage manager would have yelled "hold!" from her position in the grid. Immediately after this audible cue call, I would have turned off all of Theatre 11's theatrical lighting equipment and turned on all of the space's fluorescent lights. The garish, unforgiving fluorescents would have unflatteringly illuminated both the audience and the playing space, instantly breaking the illusion the production had worked to established. With the audience in plain sight, I would have had Lee and Austin stare sheepishly at the spectators, acknowledging their presence and confirming the brothers' fear about the inauthenticity of their own existence. From there, the fluorescents would have shut off to signify the production's end, and the fluorescent lights in this particular theatre make an ungraceful, metallic "thud" when turned on and off, providing a note of detachment and finality.

This choice would have purposefully exposed the play as an artificial construct, and pointed to Austin and Lee as two individuals (real or unreal, we ultimately never get an answer) trapped in an unreal landscape. This ending would have given the production's trajectory a more satisfying, yet still ambiguous conclusion. The ending I staged with saturated red lighting, processed cricket and coyote sounds, and elaborate staging only distorted the play's illusion instead of shattering it. Exposing the scenography as artificially constructed and the characters as individuals caught in a web

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of simulation would have better fulfilled the production concept and exposed hyperrealism for its falsity instead of confusing the audience or allowing them to drift further into the simulation itself. In summation, I became wrapped up in the constructed simulacrum of my own production, and unable to fully explode it by play's end. My own attachment to concept and metaphor also disadvantaged the actors' performances, especially in the second act.

Though the actors' performances in act one garnered critical acclaim, act two proved less successful and had problematic elements which hampered the play's believability. In the final dress rehearsals, the actor playing Austin and I worked to tone down his drunkenness and simplify his movements, but I chose to not push the actor too heavily on it for two reasons: our proximity to opening night and my fear of giving too big of an adjustment right before performances, and my own conceptual attachment to this drunken movement. The actor playing Austin did not know how to effectively and organically produce drunkenness, and thus much of it read as contrived, dishonest, and forced, especially in the tight confines of our performance space. I should have directed him to maintain even more stillness, but conceptually, I wanted the drunkenness to somewhat resemble drowning, and thus I had the actor maintain most of it even though it did not work on his body. One professor brought up an important suggestion for me to consider as I move forward to other projects: if a conceptual idea does not work with a particular actor's body, I need to adjust my concept to work with what (and who) I have so as not to betray the actor's believability and capabilities. I became so attached to my concept that I could not see past it to recognize the lack of honesty in the scene. Again, I

needed to simplify, and because I did not do that, the play became too big and out of control as it built toward its climax.

As for the rest of the second act, because I allowed the play to keep building to a frenetic, out of control place, by the time we reached the final fight choreography, it also appeared false. The elaborateness and movement at the end of the fight also became so out of control that a good chunk of the audience detached from the play when they should have had the most investment in it. One professor noted how if I had kept the actors still at the end, it would have drawn the audience into the action more instead of distancing the audience with constant action and forceful imagery. If an audience never has a moment to breathe, moments of stillness within chaos, or variety within a constant build, they have the potential to disconnect from the material, and I allowed exactly this to happen by choosing to stage purely rambunctious, explosive action instead of tension and menace. Another professor noted how I need to work on letting tension sit and build instead of just bouncing from one explosion to another. For an example, she noted how it is not nearly as exciting to see characters pointing guns at each other onstage for a long period of time than it is for the audience to realize that everyone onstage has a gun and anything could happen at any given moment. Whereas I found a great deal of mystery, stillness, and menace in the first act, the second act proved far too kinetic and bombastic, and although I believed I was consistently building tension, I actually dissipated it by having such a constant flow of one strong action to another.

Throughout the process, Mom's characterization proved problematic for both the actor and me, and we never found a satisfactory solution to the problem. Early on in the process, I could have been much more decisive about what I wanted the actor to play and

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explore; instead, I left her to her own devices and decisions more than I should have. Furthermore, I did not address her lack of characterization as soon as I should have or spend enough time on it in rehearsal. My collaborative spirit worked against me with regards to this character, and I should have guided this actor with a more heavy hand. Ultimately, I chose to underplay her character as much as possible to focus attention on Austin and Lee, and thus the play missed having a different energy in scene nine that could have contributed in building to the climax.

Finally, I received one more piece of feedback crucial to understanding my directorial process. A professor noted how I have good instincts for stage business and human behavior, but I do not always follow through with my choices. For an example, he cited Lee and Austin eating berries in scene two. The business I staged appeared incomplete because I allowed things that seemed incongruous to real life to remain in the scene, such as uncovered berries in the refrigerator, a plastic cutting sheet that would not have existed in the 1970's, and plastic bowls that looked a little too new to be feasibly of the period. While this professor acknowledged the production's budgetary concerns, he did note how I would have been able to fix the moment if I had completed the choice I made and demanded a higher degree of reality and believability from the actors and designers. My collaborative spirit also causes me to be too nice, and not always speak up when I know something for a scene is not completely working. Decisiveness is an important quality in a director and in a leader in general, and I have to continue to cultivate this quality if I wish to continue growing as an artist.

Another professor cited a staging example of this problem: Lee's standing on the counter in scene four did not work because he simply jumped on the counter and did not

do anything to alter his body position afterward. The choice needed something else to complete the moment, and for fear of negating the actor's choice or stymying his own discoveries, I did not add anything else to it. If I had directed the actor to spread his arms and stomp on the counter, this would have completed the choice instead of just making it feel odd. As I continue to work on my decisiveness, I know it will not hinder my collaborative spirit but bolster it, as my colleagues will have a more clear sense of what I seek out of particular moments within a theatrical production and the entirety of a production alike.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this process, I set out to create a hyperreal, Baudrillardian interpretation of *True West* that would draw the audience into its illusion, only to make them aware of its falsity by the play's end. While I achieved successful moments of hyperrealism, such as the end of the first act between the brothers and the smell of real toast wafting through the theatre in scene eight, the production as a whole fell short of attaining the complete immersion in hyperreality which I sought. Nevertheless, my work on *True West* helped me achieve subtlety onstage, practice patience with material, and learn that I am most successful when I trust not just in the artists around me, but in the material of a given script. My most successful moments in this production came as a result of pairing down excess choices and superfluous staging.

From conceptualization to realized product, I wanted to build an interpretation of *True West* that would draw attention to the constructed, manufactured nature of postmodern existence. In examining Baudrillard's theory of the Three Orders of Simulacra, I discovered ready links between his philosophy and Shepard's text, links

which I believed I could apply in a fully realized production of his play. Ultimately,

Baudrillard's conception of hyperreality proved beneficial and elucidating in creating a

theatrical viable, contemporary vision of this play. Through my interactions with the

designers and actors, we sought to establish a "more real than real" landscape for our

production, though my own struggles with making specific decisions and stripping away

excess staging worked against creating the realism that must form the basis of this

hyperrealism. During *True West*, hyperreality existed in the simplest and most

uninhibited moments, moments which required tremendous craftsmanship, and then the

knowledge on my part to sit back, listen, and let that moment appear just as real (if not

more real) than real life.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Selected Design and Production Photographs

Fig A.1. The scenic designer created a digital rendering of his vision for the set showcasing the major scenic elements, their placement within the space, and the proximity of the audience to the set.

Fig A.2. This is Robert Redford on the set of his 1970 film *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*. The costume designer and the director wanted to capture Redford's effortless, roguish qualities in this photograph for Lee's costume design.

Fig A.3. The costume designer also looked to archetypal cowboy figures to draw inspiration for Lee's attire. These gentlemen personified the grit and rough-hewn quality that the designer wanted Lee to embody (without making him a literal cowboy type).

Fig A.4. The costume designer's color selections included many rusty, sandy tones that one may find in a desert atmosphere, and these tones became dominant for Lee.
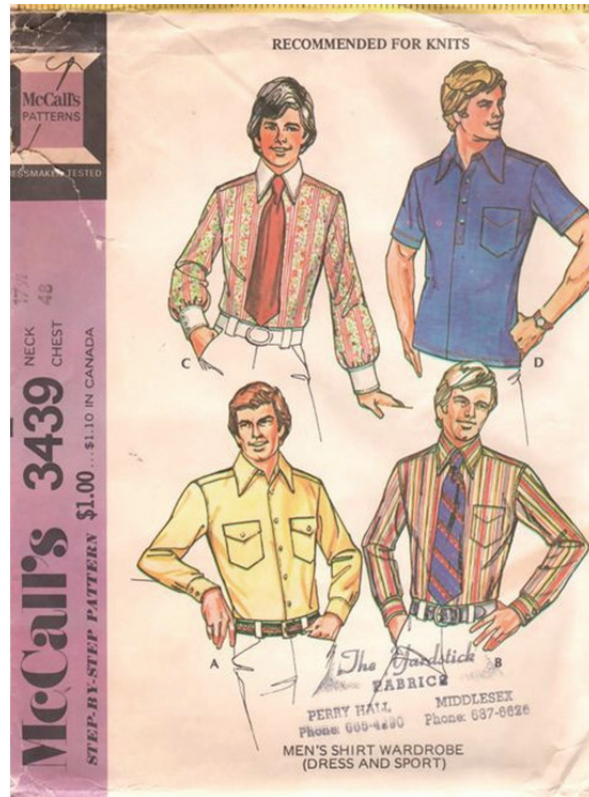
Fig A.5. Unlike his wild, untamed brother, Austin has been thoroughly domesticated, and thus the costume designer looked to popular styles of the 1970's that would convey his position in society and respectability.

Fig A.6. In the second act, Austin donned a plaid, button-down shirt with some of Lee's sandy tones, alluding to his assumption of Lee's role while maintaining his own respectability.
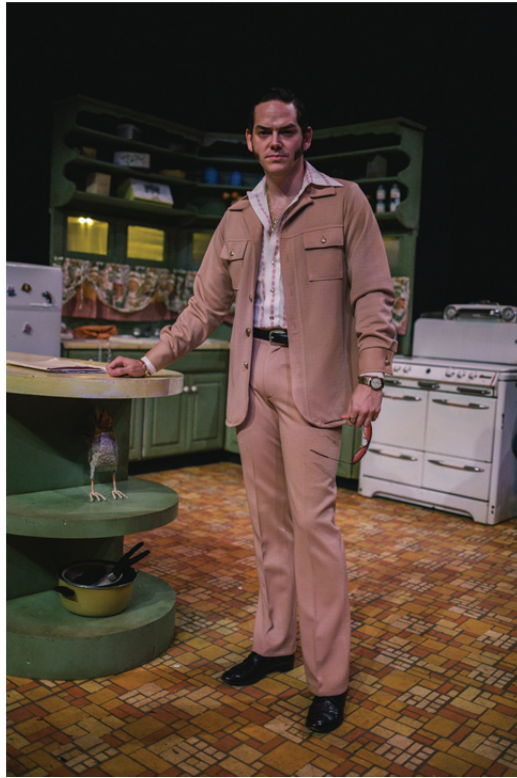
Fig A.7. Saul Kimmer's costume in scene three was a pink leisure suit and a patterned, silk button-down shirt. With Saul's costumes, the designer emphasized the garish, artificial quality of Los Angeles and the film industry.

Fig A.8. Saul's costume for scene six, while not as loud as the pink leisure suit, still captured his status and opulence.

Fig A.9. Mom's costume spoke to her age and how she is out of touch with the fashion trends of the 1970's. Though her attire was feminine, it possessed a matronly quality.

Fig A.10. The lighting designer chose a deep, saturated red to convey the play's antirealistic ending when Lee springs to life after Austin has apparently killed him.

Fig A.11. Our fight choreographer instructed Lee to position the cord around his neck in a comfortable place and give Austin enough slack to pull on and create illusory tension.

Fig A.12. The fight in scene nine concluded with Austin brutally "killing" Lee on top of the kitchen table.

Fig A.13. Lee established his ownership of the kitchen and flouting of social norms by laying across the table.

Fig A.14. Lee pulls a kitchen chair to the freestanding island to call the operator.

Fig A.15. Lee stands on the island to intimidate and threaten Austin as they write Lee's outline for a screenplay.

Fig A.16. Saul gets in Austin's face as Austin insults his prowess and position in Hollywood. This moment served as a major turning point in the play's dramatic action.

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