

And yet understand every sound that he made

Another time, he wrote: "I thought as I saw a drunken, streetwalking man mutter and spit and curse into the wind out of the café's plate glass, that maybe, if I looked close enough, I might hear some more of my voice."

That someone else's voice might be his own, Guthrie felt, was more testimony to the grand union. Beyond that, it created an imperative to fight—"for more justice, less oppression, less racism, less hatred period," as Springsteen said. Or, as Woody himself put it in "Tom Joad," his most militant ballad:

Everybody might be just one big soul
Well it looks thata way to me

Everywhere that you look in the day or night
That's where I'm gonna be...

Today, Guthrie's legacy is alive and as daring as ever, thanks to the infusion of energy from the new generation. Wait till you hear "Union Love Juice," by the rapper Michael Franti of Spearhead, formerly known as the Disposable Heroes of Hip-Hoprisy, on the upcoming Wasserman record. "Some people want to put Woody in a crusty old box," DiFranco sums up. "They want to treat him as more of an icon and less of an artist. But Nora does his work justice by keeping it living and growing."

As Guthrie once signed off on a letter, "Not the End. Just Resting. Give Me Time. I'll Hit 'em Again. Your Time Now." ■

THEATER

Decline of the West

DAVID YAFFE

TRUE WEST. By Sam Shepard. Circle in the Square.

"I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided," said Sam Shepard, explaining his motivation for writing *True West*. "It's a real thing, double nature. I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can reveal. It's not some little thing we can get over. It's something

we've got to live with." Shepard has been living with his dual nature for quite some time. A reclusive, cryptic writer and Oscar-nominated movie star, he has mastered the art of dodging the limelight while soaking up just enough of it for fame and fortune. *True West* (1980) presents dual nature in the characters of Lee, a burglar living off the land in the Mojave Desert, and his brother, Austin, an Ivy League-educated screenwriter. Lee cons a Hollywood producer into making his seemingly ridiculous idea for a "true life western." Austin, retaliating, steals his brother's trade by shoplifting twenty-six toasters. The producer "thinks [they're] the same person," so they attempt to collaborate on Lee's story but end up in a beer-drenched re-enactment of Cain and Abel. Battling over authorial identity and aesthetic authenticity, the two brothers attempt to reclaim the American western in a Southern California suburban kitchen.

It would be all too easy to read the play

as autobiography, with the two brothers symbolizing the playwright's bifurcated self. The facts are somewhat different: Shepard, a native of Illinois, dropped out of Mount San Antonio Junior College to embark on a frontier known as East Village experimental theater. With the cheap rents and newly broadened sensibilities of the 1960s on his side, venues like La MaMa and Theatre Genesis allowed Shepard to learn on the job. *The Rock Garden* (1964), which consists of Beckettian non sequiturs that inexplicably lead to a boy's gratuitous monologue explaining his preference for "short" vaginas, is representative of the journeyman Shepard of the period. After about a decade of such excursions (later characterized by the playwright as "impulsive chronicles representing a chaotic, subjective world"), Shepard realized that there was actually nothing more absurd than pondering the hermeneutics of the American family. With a newfound Ibsenian naturalism, Shepard told tales of incest, drunkenness and secrets that were as plausible as they were outrageous. Almost a decade be-

fore Oprah went on the air, *Buried Child* (1978) literally excavated family skeletons with chilling pathos and unsettling humor.

True West, the third play of Shepard's so-called family trilogy (following *Curse of the Starving Class*), is also about family secrets and the impossibility of fleeing one's origins. Lee essentially states Shepard's point about naturalist unnatural acts when he informs Austin about the plausibility of fratricide: "You go down to the L.A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most. What do you think they'd say?" The answer is, of course, "family people," and, as the play unfolds, we are shown American domesticity giving way to barbarism. As if calling Shepard at his bluff, director Matthew Warchus, in the current Broadway revival at Circle in the Square, puts Shepard's "two-sided" proclamation to work by casting actors Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly in both roles, with the two actors alternating the parts every three performances.

Hoffman has none of the qualities—good looks, a dynamic voice or physical prowess—that tend to make stars but is on his way to becoming one anyway. As a pathetic obscene phone caller in Todd Solondz's *Happiness*, a lovesick techie in P.T. Anderson's *Boogie Nights* or an obsessively loyal caretaker in Anderson's *Magnolia*, the doughy, pasty-faced Hoffman humanizes his roles and somehow makes his un-charisma oddly compelling. The night I went he was typecast as Austin, and he made poetry out of his awkward whining, evoking embarrassed, slightly frightened laughter. Ridiculing his brother's idea of "the real West," which has seduced his producer (and placed his own love-story pitch in jeopardy), Hoffman gleefully mocks the producer's preference for a script about "grown men acting like little boys," turning the phrase into a maniacal singsong. Reilly, who played a well-meaning but hapless cop in *Magnolia*, had the more daunting task of following up John Malkovich's breakthrough performance in the 1982 Cherry Lane production, in which Malkovich burned up the stage simply by, well, being John Malkovich. With his gut arrogantly protruding over his belt, Reilly comes on with Gregory Peck affectations and over-the-top outbursts that rankle at first. What made Malkovich's performance great was its unexpectedness—a mixture of effeminate swishes, atavistic flashes of homicidal machismo and signs of ADD. Reilly's Lee is more of a stock beer-swilling shit-kicker.

Reilly's Lee seems at first like a sham,

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but then we find that, however entranced Shepard has been by the American West, he thinks it's a sham, too. In "Brownsville Girl," a song Shepard co-wrote with Bob Dylan, Dylan attempts to remember a scene from John Ford's *The Gunslinger*, fetishizing "something about Gregory Peck and the way people moved," and elegizing that it "was a long time ago, long before the stars were torn down." When the scenery is actually torn down in *True West*, the American home, brotherhood and the idea of masculinity are eviscerated: "I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar," says Austin, who wonders if his memories are mere artifice.

It's a difficult balancing act to stage a play that is about unreal perceptions that still feel real to the characters. The play's metafictional aspect—it is, after all, about writing a contrived western—only magnifies these "illusions of characters" (a critical term of Austin's) until you are not sure whether you don't buy it or whether that isn't the whole point. Surely one of the evening's greatest disappointments came with a Euripides-worthy recognition scene

in which Mom, walking in on a kitchen littered with stolen toasters, dead plants and scattered debris, informs the fratricidal brothers that "Picasso's in town." As written, the line sends up artistic commodification, sibling rivalry and cultural literacy in one fell swoop. Played with maternal blandness by Celia Weston, the joke nearly nose-dives, saved only by its textual ingenuity. The handful of other flat spots (most notably Reilly's reliance on drawling cliché) are likewise saved by the play's near-indestructibility. The standing ovation was justified: Two men knocked themselves (and nearly each other) out, and Hoffman went to impressive lengths to flesh out a character usually relegated to the sidelines—which is, after all, his claim to near-fame. Sitting in the audience, dodging flying toast and sputtered beer, we were reminded that Shepard's true persona was neither the collegiate Austin nor the swaggering Lee but that of the spectator, wondering why that John Ford film had come unspooled. It's hard to skewer one's own childhood myth-making, but Shepard rises to the occasion. Seldom has fraudulence been expressed with such truth. ■

would be disappointed if they didn't get to meet a Bohemian. He's just as willing to gratify a more sophisticated audience, *The New Yorker's* readers, to whose amused curiosity Mitchell delivers him in a wrapping of glossy paper.

The movie's energy goes into Gould, and in him it goes bad. As played by Ian Holm, he's the squat, dirt-darkened shadow of Joe Mitchell: hat comically battered, coat and all other surfaces ragged, beard overgrown in the time-honored style of the Cynic (though no previous Diogenes has been in the habit of dumping an entire bottle of ketchup into his soup). To Mitchell's embarrassment, this shadow won't disappear, once the *New Yorker* profile is published. Gould continues to cling to him, growing more rather than less desperate in his needs. It's as if he's become a weight that Mitchell has to drag along; and the movie drags with him, until we finally see what Mitchell can be when he lets the good manners slip.

For an actor of Ian Holm's boundless skill, the character of Joe Gould might be almost too easy. Lesser performers have been known to shuffle along and mumble at one moment, throw back the head in a Shakespearean roar the next and at the end voice a few lines of pathetic self-knowledge, with eyes misty but sharp and fingers atremble. That said, if you've watched other impersonations of the cracked Diogenes, you will be grateful to Holm. He does not charm; he refuses to twinkle. His Gould is perhaps least vital at precisely those moments when he's being the life of the party—forcing the randy-old-goat routine, misplaying the classic wild-dance-on-a-table. Unlike, say, Alec Guinness's Gully Jimson in *The Horse's Mouth*, Holm's Gould has to strain to be a rascal—to do anything, it seems—as if the strange inertia hanging over the movie had its center in his heart.

As Mitchell remarks in voiceover, "It was not the only thing we had in common."

Tucci's direction, from a script by Howard Rodman, relies more than a little on this sense of slowed or stopped time. The first shots come from archival footage of New York City, given a postcard tint and periodically arrested, so that actors in the passing scene don't pass. From there, the film opens into Maryse Alberti's softly focused, delicately colored cinematography. The overall impression is of a nostalgic glow, at odds with a time period and theme that might have called for black-and-white. Here, too, pauses are embedded. The people who cross Mitchell's path have a way of posing, as if allowing him to take their portraits; and his wife, Therese (Hope Davis), is a photographer, whose black-

FILMS

He Took a Village

STUART KLAWANS

JOE GOULD'S SECRET • THE ROAD TO EL DORADO

In the role of *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell—source and subject alike of *Joe Gould's Secret*—Stanley Tucci adopts the hesitant drawl of a displaced Southern aristocrat, who goes through the New York City of the early forties wearing his politeness like a second raincoat and hat. He needs the protection.

To his editor, Harold Ross, he speaks in apologetic stammers, even when receiving a compliment. ("Thank God you don't write the way you talk," Ross grumbles.) Before a daughter who is no more than 9, he visibly recoils when told that Daddy's new story sounds boring. That's how vulnerable Tucci's Mitchell can seem, even among friends and family—let alone while plunging into the Village's lowest bars, sifting through rubble-strewn pits or eyeing strangers in the subway. Sleek and long-faced, Tucci carries himself down to all these places with a slightly stiff modesty and emerges with equal decorum, having undergone little visible alteration.

As producer and director of *Joe Gould's*

Secret, Tucci behaves with similar reticence. His movie is as withdrawn, as quizzical—I'm tempted to say as inert—as its point-of-view character. All the film's energy has gone into the character who is Mitchell's chief object of study, the well-educated and grandiloquent Village bum Joe Gould: cadger of meals, drinks and dollars, stray pet of artists and poets, author of a purported million-word *Oral History of Our Time*. Here, at the opposite pole from Mitchell, is a man so exhibitionistic that Alice Neel gives him three penises when she paints his nude portrait, feeling "He didn't seem to have enough." A living tourist attraction, Gould makes a pittance by displaying himself to Village sightseers, who

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