

Seeing and Loving True West Twice

By [John Heilpern](#) • 03/27/00 12:00am



Make no mistake: The major new production of Sam Shepard's *True West*, with Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly, must be seen, and even seen twice.

The committed Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Reilly, more widely known for their movies, are alternating roles in this near-mythic battle between Lee, the white-trash drifter and small-time thief, and his brother Austin, the college-educated Hollywood screenwriter. The two stars, both in their early 30's, have performed together in *Hard Eight*, *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* (all directed by trendy Paul Thomas Anderson). They couldn't be hotter in the *Vanity Fair* sense. Too hot!

The first time I saw the fine, measured production directed by Matthew Warchus, Mr. Hoffman's scummy beer-bellied Lee had only to open his mouth to say the word "coyote" for the young audience to collapse into gales of admiring laughter. It's hip to be trash among the youthful middle class. But the Hoffman-Reilly groupies took the laugh-track strudel that night. At times I felt like the restless character in Ionesco's *Bald Prima Donna* calling out to strangers: "Stop grinding my teeth!"

So much for prissiness. Sam Shepard's screamfest is funny enough in its own weirdly schizophrenic right, with its dark, absurdist undertow of emotional murders and the death of the American family. It could have been made for these two modern actors, just as a generation ago the 1982 revival of *True West* made stars of its then unknown leads, John Malkovich and Gary Sinise.

On my second visit-and for me, the more satisfying one-Mr. Reilly was playing the slob Lee, and Mr. Hoffman the neat, meek screenwriter, Austin. It's said by admirers of both versions that you can't tell the difference when they switch roles. But if that were the case, why are they bothering? Why trouble to alternate roles to reproduce identical performances?

No, the achievement of Mr. Warchus' production is that if you happen to see it twice, you'll have no sense whatsoever of déjà vu . Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Reilly are different actors cut from the same cloth. In that sense, they're like Mr. Shepard's warring brothers on stage. They're opposite sides of the same person. But it is their exhilarating authenticity and aliveness as actors that keep each version of this True West fizzing and explosively different.

The play itself is the third of Mr. Shepard's "family" plays he wrote in the late 1970's with *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* , and for my money it's his best. It's certainly my favorite, though perhaps I'm overinfluenced by the scene in which Lee clubs a typewriter to death. Frustrated at being unable to type, or write, he smashes it to pieces with a golf club. It's one of the great theatrical moments. True West could be about writing (were it not about more important things). Lee is instinct, Austin is intellect, and caught in the middle is a writer named Sam Shepard murdering his typewriter as he wrestles with a play entitled True West .

The play concerns what develops when the two estranged brothers meet up at their mother's kitsch suburban Los Angeles home with its little Astroturf carpet. Family man Austin has borrowed the place to complete a movie script and take a meeting with Saul, a parodiabile Hollywood big shot. By the play's end, the brothers have taken over each other's identities in a lethally fraternal power game, and the cozy family home has been wrecked in a symbolic nightmare of an America trashed.

True West satirized venal Hollywood before David Mamet's *Speed the Plough* and David Rabe's *Hurly Burly* . But its central themes are bigger than that, as well as being typical of Mr. Shepard's work-the end of frontiers and the death of family; the illusion of mythic America (the true West) and its empty reality (the wild West of Hollywood cowboy movies); the suffocating need for brotherhood, for fathers, flight, solitude, sanctuary.

The spiritual death of the American Dream goes to the heart of True West . What is real anymore? Mr. Shepard's answer, I suspect, would be zilch is real, except for the stories that are too unreal not to be true. Hence the fantastic tale in True West about the destitute,

soused father of the two brothers who lost his teeth twice. His real teeth fell out, and he mislaid his false teeth in a doggy bag of chop suey.

And that great mythic invention, the American family? “We don’t even need a family anymore,” the dramatist said in a recent interview. “You can have an imaginary family. To even talk about the structure of the family anymore is ridiculous.” He meant the limitless brave new frontier of the Internet. If he’d written True West today, the confused Lee would have clubbed an I Mac to smithereens instead.

Yet the renowned drama can seem simplistic. Mr. Shepard falters when he flies his messages on a flag. “There’s nothing real down here, Lee. Least of all me,” Austin confesses (though there’s no need). “Here’s a thought for you,” Lee announces. “Saul thinks we’re the same person. One and the same!” Or even, “There’s no such thing as the West anymore. It’s a dead issue.”

Well, not quite dead when the battleground belongs to such incendiary talents as Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Reilly who act so well together. Perhaps I was unfairly influenced by the laugh-track groupies lapping up Mr. Hoffman’s every move as Lee, but I much preferred Mr. Reilly’s more corrosively dangerous version. Mr. Hoffman is the kind of Method actor who, like Robert De Niro, will gain 500 pounds to do justice to a role, if necessary. Here he actually acts with his belly-taking a little too much exaggerated pride in Lee’s own scumfest by sticking out his beery gut like a badge of trailer-park honor. In one wonderfully misguided moment, he lets out his anger on a telephone by diving headlong on top of it, belly first. He bounces up, and does it again! Which isn’t an easy thing to do. I wouldn’t try it if I were you. But Mr. Hoffman’s daring sumo moment brings down the house.

He acts well as the bullying slob, but we see him acting. In his edgy entertaining bravura, he tends to leave little hidden in reserve. Good though Mr. Hoffman is, he never truly frightens us as Lee, whereas the more mercurial, centered Mr. Reilly does. His less showy Lee possesses the crucial ingredient of menace. His ugly mood swings could turn homicidal at any moment. His “I’ve got some writin’ to do here, boy!” isn’t just a comic threat, but a

psychotic warning. Mr. Hoffman's Lee is a character; Mr. Reilly's the killer.

But, then, I thought that Mr. Hoffman's screenwriter Austin had the edge over Mr. Reilly's version both in his transformation from wimp to murderous drunk and in the wild Gothic absurdity of the play's funniest scenes. Is there a more wacko scene anywhere than when the lights go up on about 15 shiny toasters that meek Austin has stolen to prove some insane point? "There's going to be a general lack of toasters in the neighborhood this morning!"

We could smell the toast he made in them. Comforting stuff, hot buttered toast. Even to desperate people lost in unrecognizable places.

The production also has two first-rate cameos from Robert LuPone, as the smarmy Hollywood sleazeball, and from Celia Weston as Mom, who returns to her wrecked home unexpectedly with the idea of meeting Picasso who she says is visiting Los Angeles. She doesn't know Picasso's dead. But then, people believe that the true West is still alive.