

BROADWAY: CHARLES ISHERWOOD

True West

(Circle in the Square; 622 seats;
\$67.50 top)

A Ron Kastner presentation of a play by Sam Shepard in one act. Directed by Matthew Warchus. Sets and costumes, Rob Howell; lighting, Brian MacDevitt; music, Claire van Kampen; sound, Jim van Bergen; fight director, Rick Sordelet; production stage manager/associate director, William Joseph Barnes. Opened March 9, 2000. Reviewed March 2 and March 5. Running time: 1 HOUR, 50 MIN.

Austin/Lee Philip Seymour Hoffman
Austin/Lee John C. Reilly
Saul Kimmer Robert LuPone
Mom Celia Weston

Amere 30 years or so after joining the front rank of American playwrights, Sam Shepard looks to have his first Broadway hit courtesy of Matthew Warchus' blistering new revival of "True West."

Make that Broadway hits, plural. Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly, actors who've garnered acclaim in indie films — they've both appeared in all three of Paul Thomas Anderson's — take their double act a step further here. They're alternating in the play's leading roles, taking turns playing each of Shepard's combative siblings in his corrosive 1980 comedy. Broadway is thus actually hosting two new productions of "True West," with distinctly different temperatures, even if the enthusiastic (and young!) audiences at the Circle in the Square seemed equally excited by both versions.

Although it has the air of a headline-grabbing acting stunt, this conceit, which Warchus also used in his 1994 production of the play for London's Donmar Warehouse, is a stylistic riff on classic Shepard themes: the insecurity of identity and the rootlessness of the self. Shepard's Austin and Lee, straight-arrow screenwriter and beer-swilling bottom feeder, respectively, may spar with the ferocity that only brothers can bring to the field of battle, but they're also attracted by the allure of each other's life.

In the course of a few sodden days spent in their mother's Southern California kitchen, the upstanding family man Austin goes to seed with a

Shepard's plays are strange, likably mangy things, full of loose ends, flights of rhetorical fancy and elusive symbolism.

giddy recklessness that's matched by the zeal fueling Lee's desperate grab at the good life. By the play's end they've merged into a single, self-destructive entity, a mad dog chasing its own tail. It's not altogether surprising that a writer of Shepard's stature has only made it to Broadway once before, in the short-lived 1996 production of "Buried Child." His plays are



From left, Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly star in the Broadway revival of Sam Shepard's "True West" with Robert LuPone.

strange, likably mangy things, full of loose ends, flights of rhetorical fancy and elusive symbolism. They're willfully grotesque, and anything but "well made" in the manner of the leather-bound classic revivals that Broadway usually welcomes.

"True West" is no exception — its structure is languid and elliptical, its mysteries are many. Nevertheless, it may be Shepard's most accessible play. It's simply scaldingly funny, and firmly grounded in a recognizable time and place, not to mention the primal territory of family dysfunction. And Shepard's jiggers of absurdity and nihilism come in naturalistic flavors here — the enervating monotony of crickets and lawn sprinklers, vividly evoked by Jim van Bergen's excellent sound design, and a memorable pileup of that most humble of kitchen appliances, the toaster.

The great strength of Warchus' production is its sensitivity to the play's ragged mixture of styles and tones. It's vitally comic, staged and spoken with sly wit and feverish slapstick grace, but Warchus and his actors are also attuned to its anguished silences, moments when only the crickets chirp — nothing seems to be happening, and yet everything is. Brian MacDevitt's lighting, moving from excessively murky to blindingly bright, lends a contrasting edge of theatricality to Rob Howell's studiously realistic kitchen set.

Are both versions on offer equally compelling? Not really — I'd confidently give the upper hand to Hoffman as the junkyard dog Lee and Reilly as mama's boy Austin. But that may simply be because I saw this ver-

sion first, and it made an indelible impression that subsequent exposure to the other had trouble erasing.

As Lee, Hoffman has a permanent sun-squint and a paunch that gives a performance of its own. He's riotously funny in the play's late scenes, as Lee struggles miserably with the screenwriting assignment he's unaccountably snatched from Austin's grasp. Peering suspiciously at the typewriter, one leg hoisted onto a chair for extra leverage, he picks gingerly at the keys, one at a time, watching the machine's workings with fear and awe, like a barbarian facing an unknown idol.

But his Lee is also infused with the slow-burning menace of a schoolyard bully dogging the hated teacher's pet, and a plaintive sort of pathos, too. When he's dictating to Austin the chase scene from his screenplay — "the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him. And the one who's chased doesn't know where he's going" — Hoffman's mournful drawl captures all Shepard's sad layers of meaning.

Reilly, meanwhile, seems most naturally to inhabit the good-natured, buttoned-down Austin. His jolly, aw-shucks voice perfectly suits Austin's status as the kid who always played by the rules, and he naturally exudes a juvenile enthusiasm that's marvelously right for the scene in which Austin gleefully produces a loaf of toast from the fleet of appliances he's stolen from neighborhood houses, trying to prove his mettle as an outlaw. This loping boyishness

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FILM: TODD McCARTHY

Mission to Mars

A Buena Vista release of a Touchstone Pictures presentation of a Jacobson Co. production. Produced by Tom Jacobson. Executive producer, Sam Mercer. Co-producers, David Goyer, Justis Greene, Jim Wedda.

Directed by Brian De Palma. Screenplay, Jim Thomas, John Thomas, Graham Yost, story by Lowell Cannon, Thomas & Thomas. Camera (Technicolor, Panavision widescreen), Stephen H. Burum; editor, Paul Hirsch; music, Ennio Morricone; production designer, Ed Verreaux; art directors, Thomas Valentine, Andrew Neskoromny; set designers, Peter Clemens, Janice Clements, John Dexter, Gary A. Lee, Kathleen Morrissey, Richard Reynolds, Marco Rubio, Domenico Silvestri, Carl Stensel, Chris Stewart, Suzan Wexler; set decorator, Lin Macdonald; costume designer, Sanja Milkovic Hays; sound (Dolby Digital/SDDS/DTS), Rob Young; supervising sound editors, Lon F. Bender, Maurice Schell; visual effects supervisors, Hoyt Yeatman, John Knoll; special visual effects and animation, Industrial Light & Magic; visual effects, Dream Quest Images; additional visual effects, CIS Hollywood; associate producers, Ted Tally, Chris Soldo, Jacqueline Lopez; assistant director, Soldo; second unit director, Eric Schwab; second unit camera, Steven Poster (Jordan), Michael Lonzo (Vancouver); casting, Denise Chamian, Stuart Atkins (Canada). Reviewed at Walt Disney Studios, Burbank, March 6, 2000. MPAA Rating: PG. Running time: 112 MIN.

Jim McConnell Gary Sinise
Woody Blake Tim Robbins
Luke Graham Don Cheadle
Terri Fisher Connie Nielsen
Phil Ohlmyer Jerry O'Connell
Maggie McConnell Kim Delaney
Debra Graham Elise Neal
Sergei Kirov Peter Outerbridge
Renee Cote Jill Teed
Nicholas Willis Kavan Smith

If they ever decide to revive "Mystery Science Theater 3000," "Mission to Mars" would be the perfect movie with which to launch the return. In

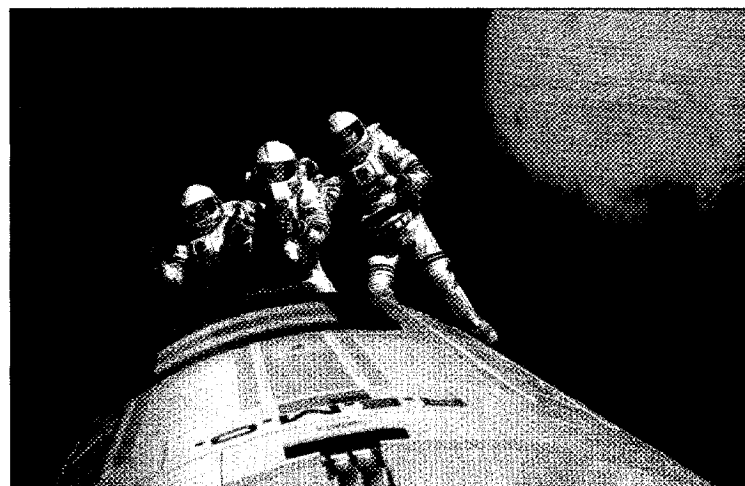
this elaborate, highfalutin space opera, Hollywood proves just as inept as NASA has been lately in coping with our neighboring planet. Dull and eventually ludicrous while trying to be moving and profound, Brian De Palma's first venture into the airless void aspires to join the small but distinguished club of spiritually inspiring sci-fiers that includes "The Day the Earth Stood Still," "2001: A Space Odyssey" and "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," films in which human contact with otherworldly intelligence is benign and hopeful rather than hostile and horrific. But the vacuum created by the elimination of normal genre elements, including thrills and suspense, hasn't been filled with adequate substitutes, leaving the film floating through dead space; most accurate ad line for this one would be a riff on a previous sci-fi come-on: "In outer space, no one can hear you scream ... of boredom." Pre-teen kids rep the group most likely not to gag, but pic's ponderousness will put them off as well. Grim reviews and word of mouth will put the word out quickly, resulting in precipitous falloff from whatever opening weekend biz it manages to do.

Long-standing concern over the competition between this Disney title and Warners' similarly themed "Red Planet" should quickly subside, as "Mission to Mars" long will be forgotten by the time the al-

legedly more youth-oriented entry arrives in November. In fact, "Mars" will no doubt go down as one of the all-time bad movies. Wisecracks can begin with alternate titles — "Unevent Horizon" and "Close Encounters of the Shallow Kind" will do for starters — and continue through some of the effects sequence, which resemble those in "The Mummy" more than those of any other sci-fi film you could name and in which the actors sometimes stand there with obvious ignorance of what's going on around them.

There was probably a hopelessly irreconcilable conflict of sensibilities from the beginning, as the script by Jim and John Thomas ("Predator") and Graham Yost ("Speed") has an emotional sincerity and philosophical optimism utterly at odds with De Palma's flamboyant determinism. As if emboldened stylistically by all the meditative downtime in "2001," De Palma is content to let not much happen during much of the middle-going, which involves a long trip to Mars, and that's just when the picture starts burning up.

First half-hour is divided into expository preliminaries: In Texas in the year 2020, the camaraderie of the about-to-depart Mars crew is established at a nocturnal barbecue during which it's also revealed that the best and the brightest of the bunch, ace pilot and designer Jim McConnell (Gary Sinise), bowed out of training after his wife (Kim Delaney, seen in stickily sentimental flashbacks) became terminally ill. Thirteen months later, on Mars, mission commander Luke Graham



A trio of astronauts attempts to save their drifting colleague with a life line while hanging onto a rescue vehicle in "Mission to Mars," directed by Brian De Palma.

(Don Cheadle) and three colleagues encounter mysterious, tombstone-like formations and an enormous mound that would seem to indicate the one-time presence of a higher intelligence.

But immediately upon making their find, the earthlings fall victim to an intense, swirling sandstorm, which whisks all of them but Luke to their doom. Revealed in the residue is a giant humanoid face sculpted into the top of the mound, peering with vacant eyes into space.

Luke's fractured communications are received by mission control aboard a World Space Station presided over by an uncredited Armin Mueller-Stahl. In short order, a recovery mission is dispatched to attempt a rescue of Luke from whatever may be menacing him. On board are Commander Woody Blake (Tim Robbins), his

wife and the crew's medic, Terri Fisher (Connie Nielsen), scientist Phil Ohlmyer (Jerry O'Connell) and McConnell, who's reckoned to be the only guy to pull off such a difficult flight. Given the lack of conflict among this group of old friends, the only engaging things about their journey are the very effectively rendered moments of weightlessness (nothing new to Sinise after "Apollo 13"), especially a sensual little airborne dance initiated by Terri.

When the group arrives in range of Mars, the engines blow, forcing them to abandon ship and attempt a perilous space-walk transfer to a small Mars orbiter. In a sequence that should have been harrowing but instead invites near-derision because of some hokey details and contrived logistics, Woody floats

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FILM REVIEWS

Soft Toilet Seats

A Phaedra Cinema release of a Shirley Craig production. Produced by Shirley Craig. Executive producer, Dave Stauffacher.

Directed, written by Tina Valinsky. Camera (FotoKem color), Stephen Timberlake; editors, Lynel Moore Cioffi, Nancy Rosenblum, John Refoua, Robbie Adler; music, Louis Durra, Jeffrey R. Gund; production designer, Gabriella A. Goor; costume designer, Maral Kalinian; sound (Dolby), Pat Toma; supervising sound editor, Jossi Tegelman; assistant director, Michael Holm; casting, Aaron Griffith. Reviewed at Raleigh Studios, L.A., March 1, 2000. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 112 MIN.

Arne Steinberg David Alex Rosen
Tilly Rensley Alexa Jago
Annie Ashland Sammi Davis
Joey Carpini Jonathan Aube
Det. Colson Michael Greene

By ROBERT KOEHLER

Some titles say it all, and "Soft Toilet Seats" says more than enough. As pathetic an excuse for a feature as has appeared in release in some time, this ersatz comedy-mystery is not stuffed with bathroom humor as title suggests, but it is undeniably soft and leaves a foul order of careless, cheapo filmmaking. De-

finitive proof that any pic can get a distrib, project is being four-walled by Phaedra, but those walls will be tumbling quickly, with a respectable ancillary future highly doubtful for this utterly misguided venture.

Amid a needless barrage of voice-over narration by hapless hero Arne (David Alex Rosen), he hints that a Los Angeles Police Department assault on his San Fernando Valley home would have never happened had he not bought the place from broker-pal Joey Carpini (Jonathan Aube), whose sleaziness is apparently obvious to all but gullible Arne.

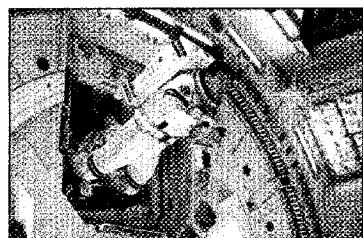
Inexplicably trading in cool Venice digs for suburban tract boredom, Arne finds he has also bought an abode marked by apparent suicide of former owner Annie Ashland (Sammi Davis). When Annie's vagabonding friend Tilly (Alexa Jago) barges in on Arne expecting to see her comrade after a long absence, trouble is clearly on the horizon.

Dreadful staging and pacing by scribe-helmer Tina Valinsky make it impossible to warm up to charac-

ters who lack any inner core, and thespians appear from the start to be up a creek without a compass. Feeble whodunit plot is driven by Tilly, who's positive that Annie — despite signs of depression as seen in innumerable flashbacks — didn't off herself and as sure as O.J. that the killer is out there. As barely credible romance warms up between Arne and Tilly, she gets him sexually fired up by revealing her love fling with Annie, and more awkward revelations follow with long-absent Joey, who holds the key to Annie's tragic demise.

Pic's comic impulse is amateurish to begin with, but third act focus on Annie's death yanks down a morosely black weight that crushes any remaining laughs. Even a thesp with solid creds like Davis brings not one special moment to threadbare project, and Rosen is the acting equivalent of a zygote.

Jago puts across some of Alexa's wild nature, but it's hardly enough to add flesh to a character that is nothing more than a narrative device. Louis Durra and Jeffrey R. Gund's score is a model of how not to write music for comedy, and presence of four credited editors indicates a production in deep disarray.



Gary Sinise plays a commander attempting a dangerous rescue mission to the red planet in the BV sci-fi epic "Mission to Mars."

and beyond. Unfortunately, the dramatic package that it arrives in is so flimsy, unconvincing and poorly wrought that it's impossible to be swept away by the illustrated version of creationism on offer.

In addition, this is a film that needed real heart to have a prayer of making viewers overlook its fundamental shortcomings and just go along for the ride. Unfortunately, De Palma is one of the most baroque and dispassionate of American directors, and he cheats this story not only through his coldness but by purposely jettisoning sequences that could at least have provided visual thrills, such as takeoffs and landings, which under the tame circumstances here would have been high points.

Pictorially, the film is smooth and pristine looking. De Palma and

his frequent cinematographer Stephen H. Burum go for their patented swooping and twisting camera moves whenever possible, and there are some very nice ones on board the recovery ship. But the confined quarters and, elsewhere, the many special effects shots keep the director's approach quite restrained by his standards, and the PG rating serves a parallel function in keeping a cap on his penchant for violence and raw language.

Thesping by the talented leads is inoffensive but generally bland, although on more than one occasion the actors seem to have only the barest clue as to what special effects they're acting with or against. Spacecraft interiors have a strong "2001" look, the Martian surface has been aptly rendered by red-filtered second unit shots of the Jordanian desert around Petra, and Ennio Morricone's score goes straight for the story's intended emotional impact via alternately wistful and majestic motifs.

CONCERT REVIEW

Steve Lacy/ Roswell Rudd Quartet

(Jazz Standard; 130 seats; \$18 top)

Presented inhouse. Musicians: Steve Lacy, Roswell Rudd, Jean-Jacques Avenel, John Batsch. Opened and reviewed March 8, 2000. Closing March 12, 2000.

By DAVID SPRAGUE

The idea of a piano-free homage to jazz giant Thelonious Monk might sound as unlikely as a mime tribute to Ethel Merman — but both on disc and in live performance, this concept takes flight with amazing elegance, thanks to the clever, intuitive nature of co-leaders Steve Lacy and Roswell Rudd.

Soprano saxophonist Lacy and trombonist Rudd, who first played together 35 years ago in a Monk-centric combo called School Days, have revived their partnership on the just-released Verve disc "Monk's Dream" — which formed the basis for the riveting, sometimes Byzantine set delivered Wednesday.

Although they share a similar avant-garde background, Lacy and Rudd couldn't be more different in style — the saxophonist's cerebral musings standing in marked con-

trast to the trombonist's impulsive, often prankish blowing. The pair tested each other's limits — much like "The Odd Couple's" Felix and Oscar — on "The Bath," which saw Rudd unleash some of his most piquant solos with all the zest of a school kid hitting a water slide.

The front men meshed more readily on a rendition of Duke Ellington's "Koko," which took on a pseudo-Eastern tone during Lacy's laconic solo. The quartet closed ranks even further for "Wake for Tomorrow," a rhythmic tour de force redolent of the mournful-yet-brisk vibe of a New Orleans funeral march.

Credit drummer John Batsch with holding together some of the set's more disparate elements. With his light touch and oddly configured kit — an upended snare served as his kick drum — Batsch smoothed over rough patches with panache, gently guiding his band mates in the proper direction.

Although both Lacy and Rudd have spent much time on the fringes of the jazz scene, they're equally conversant in traditional playing — as borne out by their parrying on the trombonist's "Bamaco," a sunny, Iberian-tinged number that closed the set on a jovial note.

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also lends an apt tenderness to his admiration for his brother's unfettered life, unleashed by liquor and his humiliation by movie producer Saul Kimmel (Robert LuPone, in white patent leather shoes and matching smile), who pulls the rug out from under Austin's bourgeois security.

Playing the opposite roles, both actors seem a little less colorful. Reilly's Lee even looks neater than Hoffman's, and lacks his slow-burning edge, while Hoffman can't quite match the endearing goofiness that so appealingly characterizes Reilly's Austin. The laughs are sure but sparser, the emotional tensions more

subdued. The contrasts that lend the play much of its humor are less sharp overall. But even this slightly lesser of two "True Wests" is welcome on Broadway, where, at age 20, it is the only "new" American play on the boards right now. (Its storied Gotham history includes a famous misfire at the Public Theater in 1980 and a smash revival in 1982 starring John Malkovich and Gary Sinise.)

That's not the only odd irony at work here. It's not by chance that "True West" is set on the fringes of Hollywood. Among other things, Shepard's play is a mordant meditation on the power of myths to warp lives. Whether they're manufactured by Hollywood or our own restless souls, Shepard suggests, we're always chasing some dream or other, and it's always disappearing over the horizon. How ironic, then, that it's the fresh-minted Hollywood allure of its two stars that's helping to fill the house with laughter at the Circle in the Square.

BIRTHS

Eli and Ken Selden, a boy, Mark Fields Selden, Feb. 11, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles. Mother's a manager for Artists Management Group; father's a writer-director.

Carey Nelson-Burch and Chris Burch, a boy, Hunter Cale Burch, Feb. 11, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles. Mother's an agent in the television department of the William Morris Agency; father's the music supervisor for MTV's "The Real World."

McElroy sues Oz's Star

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"The Panel" is a satirical news chat show, which often uses clips of other web's shows to lampoon them. Nine accuses Ten of illegally pilfering footage from such Nine programs as "The Today Show," "A Current Affair," "Australia's Most Wanted," "Wide World of Sports" and "Days of Our Lives," although observers suggest the issue is more Nine taking offense at "The Panel's" humor.

Oz's copyright rules allow web's to use snippets from other net's shows for "fair dealing" in news stories, but Nine lawyer Mark O'Brien told reporters, "The Panel" is an entertainment program, not a news program. What we say is no, you are taking too much and going too far."

"The Panel" is a news, current affairs and criticism program and the copyright act sensibly provides a defense for that sort of activity," Ten lawyer Robert Todd said outside court. "I would have thought Australian news can be both entertaining and informative."

The suit comes just two months after Nine lost a case trying to stop ABC from filming Sydney New Year's Eve fireworks celebrations to feed into a global telecast by the U.K.'s BBC (*Daily Variety*, Dec. 28, 1999).

'13' chosen for IFP's Visions

By K.D. SHIRKANI

The Independent Feature Project and the Film Society of Lincoln Center have selected David Williams' "13" as the next film to screen in American Independent Visions, their quarterly series co-sponsored by Time Warner and the Sundance Channel.

"13" — which features a cast of mostly newcomers — is Williams' sophomore effort. The coming-of-age pic centers on the disappearance and subsequent experiences of a teenage girl from the perspective

of her mother. It screened at Toronto and picked up the International Federation of Film Societies Jury Award at Berlin in 1998.

Williams received the Someone to Watch Award at the Independent Spirit Awards in 1999. His first film, "Lillian," won the Special Jury Award for Distinction at Sundance in 1993.

The American Independent Visions series is dedicated to presenting films without domestic theatrical distribution. All screenings take place at Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater.