

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: TAP's 'True West' shoots from the hip

By: Warren Gerds

Posted: Mar 20, 2017 06:07 AM CDT



(Photo by Heidi Hodges) Jonathan Wainwright, left, and Doug Mancheski star in Third Avenue Playhouse's production of "True West."

STURGEON BAY, Wis. - Guaranteed: See "True West," and you will always remember "True West."

There's something about two brothers – stoked to the gills with booze – weaving and thrashing around their mother's trash-strewn house (caused by the brothers), spewing threats and accusations while trying to write a Hollywood movie script that goes miles beyond an average night at the Thea-ATE-ter.

Have a couple of practiced pros doing the thrashing, and the intensity level is cranked up to make the viewing All Systems Alert. Even frightening and worrisome: Is that one guy killing the other?

Third Avenue Playhouse's website is billing its production of "True West" as a comedy, with toast. The play is a comedy in the sense of the Grim Reaper writing a knee slapper. Dark turns abound. And there is plenty of toast – and more toasters than you've ever seen outside of an appliance store. Shhh, somebody in the play has stolen all of these.

Performances of the roundhouse punch-filled play continue through April 9 in Studio Theatre of Third Avenue Playhouse.

Starring are Doug Mancheski and Jonathan Wainwright as the disastrous duo of brothers, Lee and Austin, respectively. The two are among the respected acting professionals in Wisconsin. Their names are inducements to see this production, directed by the astute Robert Boles, co-artistic director of the playhouse.

The sly script by Sam Shepard is somewhat a 1980s period piece in its need for a wall telephone and a typewriter, but the stuff with the brothers goes back to Cain and Able.

Tension starts in the first minute. Austin is house-sitting his mother's place near the desert in California while she is off on vacation in Alaska and his brother, Lee, is somehow on the scene. Lee is essentially a scorpion in Austin's underwear in the present – and, it becomes apparent, going back forever.

On the surface, Lee horns in on Austin's territory of propriety and an established career as a trained writer. This happens when a movie producer (Mark Moede) meets with Austin to put a script by Austin into the pipeline for production, and Lee returns from pinching a neighbor's TV set and wheedles his way into an obligation from the producer.

Under the surface, all sorts of machinations are at work in the way the shady Lee insinuates himself into what he thinks he wants. Shepard's lines for Lee are rife with multiple meanings and subtleties.

All the finessing of the psychological nudging and jostling is a field day for the skills of the likes of Mancheski and Wainwright. And then when the mind games get physical, it's Katy bar the door for theatrical fire. Here's just one glimpse of that: Lee – stone drunk – “types” on an upside down typewriter with a golf club.

Wainwright makes a rather majestic drunk (if there is such a thing) when things go way wrong for Austin. Mancheski deftly dons an attitude of a guy you prefer to cross the street for when you see him coming.

One of the biggest dark jokes of Shepard is dropping Austin and Lee's mother in somewhat out of the sky. Laurel Brook more or less deadpans the role of Mom, possessor of a boys-will-be-boys blind eye.

Sound plays a role. Crickets and coyotes drive Lee into some of his outbursts with their nagging insistence. (You kind of side with the critters).

Being that the theater is an up-close-and-personal type, all angered heat in the play warms the tootsies, so to speak. This is in-your-face theater that makes you feel like you are a fly on the wall in somebody else's kitchen/dining room where two guys are letting a lifetime of hostilities all hang out in mean, comical and comically mean ways.

Contact me at warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com. Watch for my on-air Critic at Large editions on WFRV-TV at 6:20 a.m. Sundays.