

Third Avenue Playhouse Explores Sibling Rivalry, The American Dream in 'True West'

By [Alyssa Skiba](#), [Peninsula Pulse](#) – March 16th, 2017



Doug Mancheski, left, and Jonathan Wainwright star as estranged brothers in Sam Shepard's dark comedy *True West*, on stage at Third Avenue Playhouse through April 9. Photo by Len Villano.

Third Avenue Playhouse (TAP) opens its 2017 season with an exploration of volatile sibling rivalry and the ever-elusive American Dream with Sam Shepard's dark comedy, *True West*.

As the plot progresses, mutual envy throws fuel on the growing fire of contention and the brothers reckon with their personal dreams, their similarities and a longing to escape into the other's life.

TAP co-artistic director Bob Boles describes the play as a “character study” of brothers Austin and Lee, and an exploration of volatile family dynamics – in this case, sibling rivalry that flares up when Lee encroaches on Austin’s dream.

“Lee meets the producer that Austin is working with and manages to pitch a screenplay to the producer and sort of takes away from what his brother is doing,” Boles explained. “So Lee is working with the producer and the two of them (Austin and Lee) are trying to hash out a screenplay based on his ideas which are not really well thought out and not a very happy writing arrangement. Austin gives up, Lee tries to do it on his own and it all disintegrates into madness, hence a lot of drinking and a little bit of violence and shenanigans ensue.”



Jonathan Wainwright, left, and Doug Mancheski star as estranged brothers in Sam Shepard’s dark comedy *True West*, on stage at Third Avenue Playhouse through April 9. Photo by Len Villano.

True West pairs that family dynamic with another often-contentious element of American life: the quest to secure the American Dream. Although Shepard’s play debuted in 1980 at the tail end of President Jimmy Carter’s administration and heading into that of President Ronald Reagan’s, its contemporary approach to civilization and identity make it a modern classic that is especially thought-provoking as the world watches the early days of President Donald Trump’s tenure.

Actor Doug Mancheski, who returns to TAP as *True West*'s Lee, pointed to the emotion invested in the current state of affairs in American politics when drawing comparisons between *True West* and modern life.

"There is a lot of anger in this play, there is a lot of frustration, there is a lot of 'I haven't gotten my share of the dream,' so there's this frustration riding against 'Why didn't I get what I want? Why didn't I get what I deserve? What happened? What's wrong with you? Why are you getting it?'" Mancheski said. "[My character] is not college educated, he (Wainwright's character) is college educated so that whole Trump dynamic, middle-class whites, so there's just a lot of anger so it's really appropriate because this country is so angry right now."

"This play is in a way similar to *Death of a Salesman* which covers a lot of the same territory about the American Dream," Boles said. "You work hard and you should be able to achieve this and this and this and this and yet that doesn't always happen."

The biggest dynamic at play with the idea that the American Dream is unattainable, Mancheski explained, is Americans' inability to articulate exactly what they want, a point driven home in *True West* when the brothers end up abandoning their own dreams for each other's.

"The American Dream, we think we know what we want but ultimately we don't," Mancheski said. "We want money, we want all these things but when we have them, it's really not what we have. That's the first impulse, we want everything but then you get that and what? It goes into sort of an existential thing too. Ultimately it is the American Dream...I want money, I want success, I want a family, I want the house, the whole slam and then the other person who has the whole thing, that's what my character wants, and then he reverses...no, he wants to go out into the desert so we're always seeing the grass is greener on the other side."



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While *True West* has often been a staple for men in their 20s, Boles opted to cast middle-aged actors as the brothers, a decision he felt "raised the stakes of the play" by drawing on the feelings of desperation that often accompany years of trying to achieve a lifelong dream.

Mancheski echoed those sentiments.

"If you look at it closely, it really is meant for middle aged men like us with a dream that's either destroyed or they've lost hope, which a lot of guys who are middle aged feel," he said. "It's very typical of that age and that's where the anger really comes from, of years trying to figure out and nothing's happening. I'm not getting any further and it's a very desperate situation. Now that's different from guys in their 20s who are feeling that way, there's usually something else going on there. It's not so unlike what a lot of middle-aged people in the audience are feeling. It's extreme, we've heightened it."

Though built on a foundation of darkness, it is precisely in that foundation that *True West's* humor can be found – as Mancheski pointed out, “like life, the most serious situation is funny.”

“It is a very funny show. It’s like *The Odd Couple* on steroids,” he explained. “The laughter comes from a very tense situation, not that this is like a funeral but how many times are you laughing at a funeral and you’re not supposed to laugh but it’s just too serious, you just gotta laugh. That’s what this play does. You’re laughing because it’s just too tense or too serious sometimes or it’s too absurd.”

“I like intimate settings for theater especially for plays like this,” Wainwright said. “I can’t see doing this play in a big theater necessarily. I like the intimacy of it. There’s more danger to it. You can’t lie, although it’d be very hard to lie in this play in general.”