

Brothers battle regrets, each other in Sam Shepard's 'True West'

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(Photo: Heidi Hodges)

STURGEON BAY - Whether he's playing a [lumberjack in love](#) or one of the [guys on ice](#), Doug Mancheski has always been so much more than his prodigious gifts as a comic actor.

Like all great clowns, Mancheski's laugh-inducing ability to morph into what he's not underscores his characters' often melancholy yearning to be other than they are. He's therefore ideally cast as Lee, one of the two brothers in Sam Shepard's "True West." Under Robert Boles' direction, [Third Avenue Playhouse](#) opened a strong production Thursday night.

As the lights come up, Lee and Austin (Jonathan Wainwright) are in their mother's nondescript suburban California kitchen. Set designer James Valcq has faithfully reproduced what Shepard prescribes, right down to the wall of house plants that Mom (Laurel Brooks) has charged Austin with watering while she's away.

It's the sort of domestic task that appears to suit Austin, a tidy and quiet writer who plays and writes by conventional rules; he's working on a screenplay involving a Hollywood love story.

Or trying to work, anyway: the unkempt, beer-guzzling Lee continually interrupts, with passive-aggressive comments underscoring his envy of Austin's Ivy League education, settled family life and meetings with a hotshot producer (Mark Moede), each going well beyond what Lee himself has accomplished in a life of drinking and drifting in the desert.

But it soon becomes clear that even as he looks down his nose at Lee, Austin is similarly envious of his ne'er-do-well brother. Austin sees Lee as an embodiment of an older and more primitive West, filled with adventures Austin himself has missed by living his buttoned-down, blueprint life – in a West where, he bitterly notes, he swallows the smog and shops at Safeway.

This being a Shepard play, it's no surprise that each brother gradually becomes his opposite – or, more accurately, begins indulging his long-repressed urges and dreams. Lee reaches for the posh life he's never had; Austin indulges fantasies of the wild man he never was. Both men's efforts are ridiculous, and this production doesn't miss a humorous beat in Shepard's script.

But for all the laughs, Wainwright and Mancheski also suggest the tragic undertones in a play about two men feeling trapped by who they've become and unsure how to break free.

Wainwright is an old hand at playing characters furiously tamping down smoldering inner fires; when Lee finally erupts, Wainwright covers the waterfront, capturing what's sublime, silly and scary about a man admitting to himself that he's wasted his life.

Meanwhile, Mancheski serves up the most poignantly bittersweet Lee I've seen. This Lee is more than his frightening anger; he's also a long-buried and hopelessly lost child, trying to feed a hunger he can't understand. Yes, it's funny. It will also break your heart.

PROGRAM NOTES

Mark Moede and Hollywood: As noted above, Mark Moede plays Hollywood hotshot Saul Kimmer. What at first seems wooden and nearly affectless in his performance gradually emerges as designed: Boles' idea, apparently, is to present Saul as a dried-up husk of a human being, who might be blown away by the slightest gust of wind. This Saul is never genuinely enthusiastic; even when insulted, he doesn't get angry. He's a non-entity, and that's the point, in a script where Shepard (who knows a thing or three about Hollywood, as both an actor and a writer) is ruthlessly skewering the soulless vacancy of America's dream factory.

Prisoners of the American Dream: Speaking of dreams, this play is not only among Shepard's most accessible. It may also come closest of all Shepard's plays to dramatizing a recurring theme in his prose: A love-hate relationship with an idealized image of the American West that's emblematic of the American Dream, coupled with a recognition that this dream is a mirage.

The mythological West of freedom and rugged individualism is also the West of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism; the unregulated freedom to live free and do what one wants also explains why we paved paradise and put up a parking lot. Both brothers lament the passage of an older West; Shepard simultaneously makes clear, repeatedly, what Austin at what point states explicitly: such a West is really a fantasy allowing grown men to act like boys. And those overgrown boys are the ones who trashed the land and smothered it in smog.

Laurel Brooks as Mom: Underscoring the brothers' arrested development, the last of nine scenes features the unexpected arrival of their mother, returned early from her trip. She's powerless to stop the fighting unfolding around her; as is often the case in Shepard plays, the women are living in a man's world, where they're ignored and ineffective. Like Moede as Saul, Brooks plays down rather than up, giving useless commands rendered in a flat tone that heightens the disconnect between who she is and the world within which she now finds herself. "True West" may unfold in her home, but it's no surprise that she exits by observing "I don't recognize it at all."

Sins of the Father: As is also repeatedly true in Shepard's work, the father plays a huge role in "True West"; even though we never meet him, he looms larger than their barely present mother. These love-starved boys are still fighting for his affection; he's the biggest prize in this play, even though we learn he's now destitute and toothless (subject of a funny but depressing anecdote that Shepard has told elsewhere, in semi-autobiographical fiction suggesting it really happened).

The Gunslinger: Yes, this play's famous toaster scene (I won't say more, so that those of you seeing "True West" for the first time can enjoy it without filters) is a stitch, while also calling attention (like the vegetables in Shepard's "Buried Child") to the meager sustenance available for Shepard's spiritually starving characters.

But I'd trade in every toaster in this play to watch Wainwright's staggeringly drunk Austin, when armed by Boles with both a spray bottle and a bottle of booze. Shepard's directions prescribe Austin holding one or the other at various points. Here he wields both at once, imagining the spray bottle as a six-shooter. The contrast between glorified image and mundane reality highlights the gap separating Austin's image of himself as a gun-toting cowboy of old and the reality that his "gun" is a humdrum domestic tool, through which he fulfills his mother's orders to keep her house neat and her plants watered.