

Remembering Sam Shepard's Postmodern Masterpiece

True West still rings true and stands as the greatest American drama since *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

by Graham Hillard

Sam Shepard has died, and American theater has lost one of its last remaining giants.

Shepard is the author of dozens of plays, including the Pulitzer Prize–winning *Buried Child* (1978) and the oft-revived *A Lie of the Mind* (1985). But in a twist of fate that reveals quite neatly the respective fortunes of cinema and stage, he is best known to audiences as a film actor, despite a writing career that led *New York* magazine to name him “the greatest American playwright of his generation.” Shepard’s Academy Award–nominated turn as test pilot Chuck Yeager (in 1983’s *The Right Stuff*) was the role that made him famous, yet viewers cheered (or booed) him with practiced regularity in the decades that followed, watching him in *Steel Magnolias*, *The Pelican Brief*, *Black Hawk Down*, and, more recently, the ponderous Netflix melodrama *Bloodline*, which saw him cast as a violent and unknowable family patriarch.

Violent and unknowable men, as it happened, were something of an obsession for Shepard, and never more so than in his 1980 masterpiece, *True West*, an exploration of identity, isolation, and the deadening effects of the Hollywood machine (seriously). Set in the California of the day, *True West* takes as its subjects two brothers, Austin and Lee, a screenwriter and a drifter. At Lee’s threatening insistence, they while away the hours collaborating on a “true” western — one wrung not from Austin’s Ivy League–trained imagination but from Lee’s experiences in the wild, where men still settle scores, feud over women, and “take off after each other straight into an endless black prairie.” Staged correctly, the play is cramped and claustrophobic. Austin and Lee drink and stink, stumbling around in the metaphoric prison of their mother’s suburban kitchen, unable to put aside their re-created (and potentially deadly) childhood rivalry.

I first encountered *True West* in the spring of 2000, during a visit to New York in which I served as a college roommate’s scene partner. (He was auditioning for the graduate program at the Actors Studio; no thanks to me, he got in.) Though I knew nothing about the play, I had heard the buzz generated by Matthew Warchus’s *Circle in the Square* revival. John C. Reilly and Philip Seymour Hoffman were switching parts every few evenings — playing first Austin, then Lee —

and, like every theater student I knew, I was enthralled by the pair, having watched and rewatched them in the early (and now frankly excruciating) films of Paul Thomas Anderson.

As Lee on the night of my attendance, Reilly did his best to steal the show, crashing shirtless and belligerent around the set and radiating a frightened (and frightening) masculinity. Yet Hoffman as Austin was the revelation, and his performance remains the best I've ever seen in person. Seated and typing for much of the play, Hoffman managed nonetheless to convey Austin's innate decency, as well as that decency's real limits. By the time the lights went out at the show's conclusion, I understood well enough how the actor, meek and mild in appearance, could transform himself into Lee after a few more runs as Austin. The switch would merely accentuate what Shepard had embedded in the text itself.

Here, in fact, was *True West*'s most vital idea: Secluded and disconnected from any mediating force — wives, children, their absent mother — Austin and Lee begin to resemble each other in ways both predictable (Austin learns to inhabit Lee's universe of brutality) and surprising (Lee senses that a successful screenplay is his ticket out, and he commences to want it, badly). Before long, the brothers come to inhabit the very story they're telling — a tale of blind fury in which “the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going.”

Over the next several years, I sought out productions of *True West* whenever I could. One standout, at Chicago's American Theater Company, featured African-American leads, a staging that underscored the quicksilver ferocity of the brothers' banter, as well as the play's notable economic concerns — how much each man stands to gain or lose by their partnership. Another, more famous revival, preserved on film for public television's *American Playhouse* series and still available today, starred then-unknowns Gary Sinise and John Malkovich as Austin and Lee, respectively. Though my students giggle at first when I show the recording in my contemporary-literature seminar (in 1982, Sinise was still an aw-shucks goof, and Malkovich hadn't shed his essential *Malkovichness*), no one laughs for long. The play is too powerful for that, too relentless in its creeping menace. Not even campiness can ruin it.

Nor, I happen to know, can bowdlerization. In 2002, flush with undergraduate zeal, I directed a student production of *True West* at my Southern Baptist college — a choice that, in retrospect, feels as unlikely as a Jerry Falwell-directed *Showgirls*. Without even being asked, I pruned the

script of its expletives, fully aware that to permit the show at all required courage on the part of my teachers. In my recollection, the cast and I spent an afternoon peeling the labels from prop bottles of beer, but I'll concede that we might have only *joked* about doing so. In the end, it didn't matter. None of it did. The show succeeded wildly because we had exactly what we needed: a good Austin, a good Lee, and the best script to come out of American drama since *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

Who, now that Shepard is gone, will seize his mantle? Tony Kushner, perhaps? Or Lin-Manuel Miranda? Had he not ensured a lifetime of poor reviews by making explicit a conservatism that had once been merely latent, my money would have been on David Mamet, an obvious genius and a dialogist of unparalleled skill. Yet none of them can claim Shepard's *fire*. The man had something. He gnawed that bone until it broke.

Sam Shepard, dead at 73. Long may he live in repertory.