



PLAYHOUSE
THEATRE COMPANY

GLYNIS LEYSHON
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



TRUE WEST
March 29-April 19, 2008



PLAY GUIDE

CONTENTS

Information and Etiquette	3
For Students at the Playhouse	4
At a Glance	5
Synopsis	6
About the Playwright	9
Director's Notes	10
Themes and Allusions	11
The West on Film	14
Notes on the Design	16
Glossary	17
What the Critics Said	23
Notable Quotables	25
Further Exploration for Students	29
Recommended Reading & Viewing	30
Internet Sites of Note	30

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Cover photo of Vincent Gale and Brian Markinson by David Cooper.

Various websites, online encyclopaedias, and textbooks were used in the collation of information in this guide. Some of the most relevant sites are included in the section "Internet Sites of Note"

WELCOME

This booklet was created to help audience members explore the play beyond the actual performance. If you have any questions, comments or suggestions for the guide please contact Meredith Elliott, Outreach and Education, at 604.629.2097 or by email at melliott@vancouverplayhouse.com.

About the Company

The Playhouse Theatre Company is dedicated to producing live theatre of the highest quality – to presenting a stimulating and challenging repertoire of plays that speak to today’s audiences. This year the Playhouse presents a five-play mainstage subscription series running from October to April.

The Playhouse was founded in 1962 to provide the people of British Columbia with their first professional, live theatre. Since then it has grown from a core of volunteers operating out of basement offices into one of the country’s leading regional theatre companies, presenting an outstanding selection of plays produced by the very best actors, directors, designers and craftspeople from across the country.

INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

- The actors can see and hear the audience just as the audience can see and hear them!

Talking during a show (even in a whisper), fidgeting, rustling papers or candy wrappers all disturb the actors’ concentration and disrupt the performance.

Audience responses like laughing or clapping can inspire the actors to do their best work. This interplay is the essence of live theatre.

- Objects of any kind thrown on stage pose a serious hazard to actor safety and are also extremely disruptive to the performance.
- Each school group is assigned specific seats. Please remain in your designated area.

DID YOU KNOW? MORE ABOUT THE PLAYHOUSE'S EDUCATION INITIATIVES

Talkbacks

Following every student matinee and select evening performances, students and teachers are invited to remain in their seats to ask questions of the actors. *How does an actor prepare for a role? Do actors rehearse every day? How do the actors personally handle a play's difficult issues?*

***True West* runs approximately 90 minutes. There is no intermission. Please plan to stay for approximately twenty minutes after the end of the performance.**

Artists and the Classroom (*Exclusive Benefit to Series Subscribers*)

A theatre artist from one of several disciplines will come and speak to your class for approximately one hour. Your students will have the opportunity to converse with a professional actor, playwright, designer or director and find out how they are preparing for current Playhouse productions.

Production Centre Tours

Students can take a guided tour of the 25,000 square foot Production Centre where they will explore scenery and prop shops, the wardrobe department and rehearsal halls. The Playhouse recently moved into a new facility on East 2nd Avenue, which will be the company's home until 2010.

Salon Saturdays

The second Saturday matinee of each production features our Salon Saturday pre-show chat. Explore the issues and ideas at the heart of each production with speakers who provide in-depth knowledge about the play, the playwright or the design. The talk begins at 1pm, one hour prior to the matinee performance, and takes place in the salons just off the main lobby.

The Salon Saturday for *True West* takes place on Saturday, April 12.

For information about any of our education programmes, please contact Meredith Elliott, Outreach and Education at 604.629.2097 or by email, melliott@vancouverplayhouse.com.

True West AT A GLANCE

NUTS AND BOLTS

True West premiered at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco on July 10, 1980, where Sam Shepard was playwright in residence. It subsequently transferred to the Public Theatre in New York, where it starred Tommy Lee Jones and Peter Boyle.

Setting

The kitchen of an older home in a Southern California suburb, circa 1981.

Running time

Approximately 90 minutes with no intermission.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Doppelgangers

Austin and Lee are as different as two brothers can be. Or are they? Each one admits that they've envied the life the other leads. As the play develops, the two men gradually switch roles and attitudes, until the distinction between them becomes blurred and finally meaningless. At their essential core, Austin and Lee are not so different, after all.

Devolution

At the beginning of the play, Austin is attempting to write his screenplay in the quiet suburban kitchen of his mother's home. The room is outdated, but neat. As the play progresses, the kitchen becomes more cluttered and untidy, mirroring the brothers' descent into destruction and base violence. By the time their mother returns home early from her vacation, her home is no longer recognizable. Nor is her younger son, but that seems to be less of a concern.

WHAT IT'S ABOUT

Austin is a buttoned-down writer, hoping to make his first big movie deal. Lee is his ne'er-do-well older brother, who breezes back into Austin's life like an ill wind off the desert. At first Lee is only interested in a little larceny, but when he interrupts a meeting between Austin and producer Saul Kimmer, he takes the opportunity to pitch his own idea for a movie about the real West. He convinces Saul to back his story instead of Austin's, but needs Austin's help to write the actual screenplay. As Austin sees his own life and dreams being usurped by Lee, he reacts by attempting to prove that he can survive in Lee's world as well.

WORDS TO REMEMBER

"So ya' think there's room for a real Western these days? A true-to-life Western?" Lee

"There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!" Austin

"What I need is somethin' authentic. Somethin' to keep me in touch. It's easy to get outa' touch out there." Lee

SYNOPSIS

Austin is a college-educated, married screenwriter, who is staying at his mother's house just outside Los Angeles while she's vacationing in Alaska. He is about to close an important movie deal with producer Saul Kimmel, when his older brother Lee blows in like a bad wind off the desert. Lee is a drifter and a thief, who is casing out the neighbourhood for places to rob.

Lee has just visited their father, who abandoned the family years before to slowly drink himself to death in the desert. Austin has visited recently as well, giving his father money, which only went to buy booze.

Lee wants to borrow Austin's car, but Austin refuses. He doesn't want his larcenous brother driving around in his car, even though Austin promises to stay within a twenty-mile radius. He does invite Lee to come live with him upstate, but Lee refuses, saying it's too cold up north.

That night, Lee walks out into the foothills, one of the few places that haven't changed from his childhood. He enjoys the solitude, even spent three months living alone in the Mojave, while Austin can't stand being alone in a motel room for three days. On the surface, the two brothers couldn't be more different.

Austin needs Lee to be out of the house for a few hours. Saul is coming by to discuss their deal and he doesn't want his brother around to jeopardize the situation. He finally agrees to lend Lee his car on the condition that he's back by six. Lee tells him that if Saul doesn't like Austin's "period piece" he's got plenty of interesting "true-to-life" stories.

The meeting seems to go well. Saul claims to have full confidence in the project, as long as they can get a television deal and a major star. They're just wrapping things up when Lee walks in, carrying a stolen television set. He apologizes for arriving early, but Austin tells him it's all right and introduces him to Saul.

When Austin tells Saul that Lee has been living out in the desert, Saul thinks he's talking about Palm Springs. He raves about the golf there and Lee says he's been looking for partner. Saul suggests politely that they should play sometime and Lee talks him into a game the next morning.

He tells Saul that if he's looking for good stories, he's got a real Western scenario for him. He's not a writer like his brother, but he knows the subject. Saul tells him that he should get Austin to write him an outline. Lee takes him seriously and says he'll call him about the golf game.

That night, Lee tells his story to Austin, who tries to turn it into a proper outline. The tale involves two men chasing each other across Texas with saddled horses in their trailers (just in case they run out of gas). Austin thinks the story is absurd, but Lee insists that it's "true-to-life." He's adamant that Austin writes it before he leaves town, claiming that he's not going to stick around just leeching off other people.

But when he starts to lose interest in the project, Austin encourages him to stick with it, telling Lee that he could make enough money off the screenplay to turn his life around and buy a ranch. Lee wonders if he could make enough money to turn their father's life around, but Austin thinks it would take more than money to help their father.

Austin just wants to help his brother, whatever he chooses to do, but he doesn't want Lee to give up now that they've started working together. Lee considers it – he'd always wondered what it would be like to be Austin. Austin admits that he'd always envied Lee. The two brothers settle down to finish the story.

The next morning, Lee returns from his golf game with a new set of clubs and a movie deal. Austin is happy for his brother, until he realizes that Lee got the deal by suckering Saul into a bet. "He liked the outline already so he wasn't risking that much," he explains. "I just guaranteed it with my short game."

Austin pulls out a bottle of champagne and says they should celebrate. Lee assures him that he'll get a good fee for writing the screenplay, but Austin protests that he doesn't have time to write his own script and Lee's story. It doesn't matter, though, because Saul is dropping Austin's project.

Austin protests that Saul can't just drop his deal without talking to him, particularly for a crappy story like Lee's. He wonders if Lee threatened Saul, but Lee protests that it was a fair deal (while threatening Austin with a golf club). Austin is devastated; he had everything riding on this project, and now his brother has usurped his livelihood, his living space and his car. He demands the keys back so he can drive out into the desert and think, but Lee pops a bottle of champagne to celebrate.

Later that afternoon, Saul drops by to visit and Austin demands to know why he chose Lee's story over his. Saul defends his decision with producer doublespeak, but Austin isn't buying it. Saul insists that they can still do his project, but Austin can't take on two screenplays simultaneously.

Saul doesn't understand what Austin's problem is. It's an easy \$300,000 for a first draft that the studios are already fighting over. He knows about their father and is arranging to set up a trust fund to give him money that he simply can't drink away. Lee has volunteered to make sure he uses the money for groceries, but Austin refuses to be blackmailed into working on Lee's story.

That being the case, Saul won't be proceeding with Austin's story either. His gut instincts tell him that Lee has tapped into a true-to-life story. He's telling a story about the real West. Austin protests that there's no such thing as the real West any more and that Saul is making a mistake. Saul tells him that he's always gone with his hunches and he's never been wrong. He leaves, inviting Lee to lunch the next day.

That night, Austin sits on the kitchen floor, cheerfully emptying a whiskey bottle, while Lee tries to type out his story. Between the crickets chirping, the coyotes howling, and Austin drunkenly singing, Lee is having trouble concentrating. He tells Austin to get lost and leave him in peace, but Austin is finally enjoying his brother's company.

Now that Lee is a legitimate screenwriter, Austin decides that he should take a shot at Lee's former occupation. Lee doesn't think he could steal a toaster without getting busted, and Austin decides to take that challenge. Unfortunately, he's not capable of walking in a straight line at the moment.

Lee offers to call Austin's wife, but she's five hundred miles to the north, and unlikely to talk Austin out of doing anything rash. Lee wants the two of them to work together on the screenplay and then get their father settled somewhere they could both look after him. Austin wants nothing more to do with their father, however. The last time he visited, his father took his money and spat at him.

But Lee needs Austin's help writing his characters. He knows what he wants them to say, but he doesn't know how to translate it from his head to the paper (he's not much of a typist, either). He tells Austin he'll give him half the money and then leave him alone. He'll disappear into the desert like their father.

Austin doesn't think aspiring to be like their father is a good idea and he wonders if Lee ever heard the story about how their father lost his real teeth and his false teeth. His teeth were starting to fall out on their own, so he decided to get them all pulled. He didn't have the money, however, so he applied to the government, but they didn't send him enough money to have the job done properly. Instead he hitched across the Mexican border and had his teeth pulled and money taken.

When Austin visited him, they went out to dinner, but his father wouldn't eat, just drank martinis. His father took his false teeth out and put them in the doggie bag when they left in the restaurant. But after a night of pub-crawling down the highway, he left the doggie bag and false teeth behind in one of the bars. That, he tells Lee, is a true-to-life story.

Early the next morning, Lee is furiously destroying the typewriter with a golf club and burning all the completed pages of his script. Austin has lined up a row of stolen toasters on the counter, and both men are completely drunk.

Lee can't understand why Austin only stole toasters when there were houses full of valuables for taking. Austin can't understand why Lee's destroying the typewriter, not to mention a perfectly good nine iron.

Lee wants to call a woman in Bakersfield he knows. Austin doesn't think a woman will solve anything. He'd rather make toast and judge the various merits of his stolen goods. Lee calls the operator to find out the area code for Bakersfield and the number for a Melanie Ferguson. There are ten Melanies in Bakersfield, however, so he asks for them all. Surprisingly, the operator doesn't wait while he tears the kitchen apart looking for a pencil or pen. Austin points out that Lee wasn't likely to hook up with Ms. Ferguson anyway, given that they were in two different cities.

The toast is ready, so Austin butters each piece carefully, musing about the smell of toast and the promise of a new day. He wants to go live with Lee in the desert. He's tired of civilization and living in a world that he no longer recognizes. Lee tells him he couldn't cut it in the desert, and says that he's not there by choice; he's there because he can't cut it in the city. Finally, he snaps and tells Austin that he'll take him to the desert, but only if Austin writes the screenplay for him, exactly the way he wants it written.

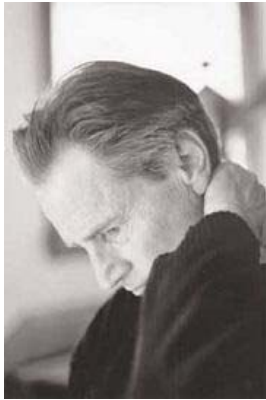
By noon, their mother's house is a disaster zone. The plants are all dead, the kitchen has been trashed, and both men are drunk and dishevelled. Austin is taking notes by hand, while Lee paces around dictating. They're making some form of perverse progress when their mother walks in, home early from her vacation.

She's surprisingly calm about the destruction of her house and the death of her plants. She does seem sceptical that Lee has sold a screenplay and Austin is planning on moving to the desert. She's more excited, however, by the news that Picasso's in town. Austin tries to explain to her that Pablo Picasso is dead, but she wants the boys to go to the museum with her to meet him. They don't have time, Austin explains. He's eager to finish the script so that he and Lee can head out.

But Lee is having second thoughts. He's tired of the screenplay, he's tired of Austin, and he just wants to steal what he can and leave town. Austin tries to stop him, but Lee pushes him away. Austin grabs a phone cord and wraps it around Lee's neck, trying to force him to stay. Their mother tells them to fight outside, and tells Austin to let his brother breathe.

But Austin just wants enough of a head start to get away from Lee and out into the desert. Their mother leaves, dismayed by what has become of her home. When Lee stops struggling, Austin tentatively loosens the phone cord. Lee appears to be dead, but when Austin makes a move to the door, Lee leaps up and blocks his exit. The two men face off, as the lights fade and the curtain falls.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Sam Shepard (né Samuel Shepard Rogers, Jr.) was born November 5, 1943 in Fort Sheridan, Illinois. A successful playwright, actor and director, he began his career in theatre as a member of a touring theatre group. He began writing plays in 1963 for an off-off-Broadway theatre company, Theatre Genesis. His first plays, *Cowboy* and *The Rock Garden*, were produced as a double-bill in 1964. He was championed by the theatre critic of *The Village Voice*, Michael Smith, and he won a trio of Obie Awards in 1966 for *Chicago*, *Icarus's Mother* and *Red Cross*. His first full length-play, *La Turista*, earned him a fourth Obie Award in two years for Distinguished Play, and he won two more in 1968 for *Forensic and the Navigator* and *Melodrama Play*.

From 1968 to 1971 he played drums and guitar for the Holy Modal Rounders, a psychedelic folk group whose music is described by biography.com as “too strange, idiosyncratic, and at times downright dissonant for mainstream listeners to abide.” He spent three years in England in the early 1970s, when he collaborated with Patti Smith on the rock opera *Cowboy Mouth*, but he returned to the States in 1974 and relocated to San Francisco. He became Playwright in Residence at Magic Theatre, where he premiered most of his plays between 1974 and 1984, including *Buried Child*, which won the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and *True West*.

He revived his acting career in 1978, appearing in Bob Dylan’s surrealist concert film *Renaldo and Clara* and Terrence Malick’s *Days of Heaven*. Other film roles include *Frances* (in which he met his current partner Jessica Lange), an Oscar-nominated performance as Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff*, *Crimes of the Heart*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, *The Notebook*, and most recently as Frank James in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*. He also directed and wrote *Far North* (1988), which starred Lange.

He is a prolific writer, with more than 45 plays to his credit and 20 screenplays. Among his most notable plays are *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *True West* (1980), *Fool for Love* (1983), *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), *States of Shock* (1991), *Simpatico* (1993), *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), *The God of Hell* (2004) and *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007), which premiered at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. He has directed the premieres of many of his own plays since the 1970s.

In 1986 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 1992 he received the Gold Medal for Drama from the Academy. In 1994 he was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame. He has one son from his marriage to actress O-Lan Jones and two children with Lange.

True West was first performed at Magic Theatre, premiering on July 10, 1980. It was directed by Robert Woodruff and starred Peter Coyote as Austin and Jim Haynie as Lee. The play had its New York debut at Joseph Papp’s Public Theatre in New York on December 23, 1980, starring Tommy Lee Jones as Austin and Peter Boyle as Lee. It was revived at Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre Company in 1982, where it was directed by Gary Sinise, who also starred as Austin with John Malkovich. The production transferred to the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York and ran for 762 performances. In 2000, it was revived on Broadway at the Circle in the Square Theatre. Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly alternated the lead roles and campaigned to be nominated for a joint Tony for their performance – they both received nominations, however.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES



I'm sitting in the rehearsal hall, writing these notes on my laptop. Beside me sits a Smith-Corona typewriter, possibly vintage. Does anyone ever use these any more? For sure, the typewriter is a nostalgic writing tool, and I love nostalgia. I love to imagine Sam Shepard sitting at an old kitchen table, hunting and pecking out *True West* on such a typewriter, twenty-nine years ago. Did he contemplate, could he have known, the impact this play would have on his career or the influence it would have on so many theatre folk?

True West is my favourite Shepard play. Beyond being a great American mythic tale, it holds particular personal meaning to me as a theatre artist. I worked on the play while a student at Studio 58 – and that process was a turning point for me in that it was a seminal moment of my liberation as an actor. It was then that I experienced how rewarding it is as an actor to give myself over to the character –and the story – and how emancipating it is when a masterful storyteller *just gives you such great stuff*.

My experience is not unique. Shepard is a gift for actors for he finely crafts his text to include a certain ambiguity, and in doing so resists superficial interpretation. By allowing multiple possibilities, he creates the necessary and luxurious space in which we, the theatre artists, can explore the deeper layers of the story. Much of our discussion in the rehearsal hall has been unravelling what each of us believes is Shepard's "true" intent. I thrive on (just as much as I struggle with) the journey of discovery of the deeper complexities beneath the simple story. All this, in turn, allows personal experience to inform the story, thereby enriching the process as well as the product. This shared dialectic is the stuff that feeds our creative souls. Through the eyes of artists, we see our humanity with all its glorious flaws.

This process has been – indeed, always is – fulfilling to me for these very reasons, and made more so with intelligent, courageous and insightful artists such as these. I am deeply grateful to Glynis and the Playhouse Theatre Company for the opportunities I've had over the years to continue learning my craft and to work with so many incredible artists.

Dean Paul Gibson

THEMES AND ALLUSIONS

Family

True West portrays a family – or the remnants of a family – shattered by unknown circumstances into individuals isolated in their inability to understand and express their feelings for one another.

Austin and Lee are a decade apart in age and haven't seen each other for five years. Although Austin has a family of his own, they seem to be only an abstract concept to him, and he's prepared to walk away from them at the end of the play.

The connection with their parents is just as tenuous. The father abandoned his family to live in the desert at some point in the past. He is never seen in the play, but his presence is still stronger than the mother, who does appear in the final scene, and whose house the brothers have appropriated. She is present only through her plants and possessions, which are neglected or destroyed by her sons. When she does return, at the end of the play, she is a virtual stranger, who parents in a perfunctory way, asking the boys to fight outside. She appears to have no real interest in what has happened or why Austin is strangling his brother, other than on a superficial level.

Ultimately – and inevitably – their relationship descends into violence. Although Austin protests that people aren't driven to murder over a dumb movie script, Lee points out that most killings happen between family members.

The Desert

Although the play is set in a suburban house in Southern California, the desert permeates *True West* like a hot wind. The Mojave is just beyond the mountains, a place of freedom and desolation and destruction. The sounds of coyotes and crickets fill the night air, and while Lee claims they are city coyotes, they are still wild desert creatures, luring domesticated pets from the safety of their home.

The desert is as much an idea as it is a place, and its geographic location is unimportant. The Arizona desert where their father lives, the Texas prairie where Lee's story is set, the wide open spaces Austin wants to visit with his brother: they're all one. "You'll probably wind up on the same desert sooner or later," the boys' mother says when Austin tells her of their plans.

At first Austin doesn't understand how Lee could wander the desert alone for three months with nothing but a pit bull for company. But Lee is in his element in the desert. In the city he can't even find a pencil when he needs one. "It's easy to get outa' touch out there," Lee says, which is the danger he recognizes and the possibility Austin desires.

Ultimately, both Lee and Austin are drawn to the desert, just as their father was before them. The desert is clean, with a cool breeze in the evening, while the suburbs are oppressive in both heat and pressure. When Austin learns that his screenplay is going to be dropped in favour of Lee's story, his first instinct is to drive out into the desert to think.

When Austin bets Lee that he can steal a toaster without getting caught, he refuses to gamble for shared credit on the screenplay, saying he wants something of value. He suggests instead a tidbit of desert wisdom. He becomes obsessed with the idea of

escaping to the desert, agreeing to help Lee write his screenplay if he'll only take him with him when Lee leaves again.

Identity

Austin and Lee are, on the surface, two completely different individuals. Austin is an Ivy League-educated writer, while Lee is a larcenous and barely literate drifter. Yet they are brothers, and blood will tell. They have led disparate lives, but when they are thrown into close quarters and soaked in copious amounts of alcohol, their differences are diluted. "We all sound alike when we're sloshed," Austin says. "We just sorta' echo each other." He recognizes that there is no real distinction between the two brothers in Saul's mind.

During the course of the play, they switch roles and attempt – consciously or unconsciously – to assume each other's lives. Lee hijacks Austin's movie deal and attempts to become a serious writer. His own life and purpose usurped, Austin decides that he can be just as good a thief as Lee. While Lee is desperately trying to transfer his story ideas onto paper, Austin prowls the neighbourhood in search of toasters. Even his language begins to reflect Lee's drawled speech patterns.

"I always wondered what'd be like to be you," Lee tells Austin. His brother admits that he used to imagine where Lee was. "I used to say to myself, 'Lee's got the right idea. He's out there in the world and here I am. What am I doing?'" In the end, though, Lee rejects the life that Austin leads, leaving Austin desperate and lost, with no identity of his own.

The Hollywood Hustle

At the heart of *True West* is Austin and Lee's attempts to achieve a kind of immortality through the production of a screenplay.

Although Austin has been working in the industry and negotiating a deal for months, it is Lee who instinctively knows how to play the Hollywood system. "Yer tryin' to hustle him? Is that it?" he asks, when Austin tells him he has an important meeting with a producer. Seeing a chance to have his own story produced, Lee does exactly that, hustling – and perhaps threatening – Saul on the golf course. And since Saul is the master of Hollywood illusions, he convinces himself that he truly does like Lee's story. Of course, he had said the same thing about Austin's screenplay earlier.

Saul senses authenticity in Lee's story – at least the kind of authenticity that will sell tickets. "It has the ring of truth, Austin," he says. He tells Austin that nobody is interested in the kind of love story Austin is trying to write. Lee has tapped into something real, something true-to-life.

"It's not like real life!" Austin tells Lee, frustrated by the implausibility of Lee's story. "It's not enough like real life. Things don't happen like that." He tells Lee that he doesn't have characters; he has illusions of characters born from the fantasy of a long lost boyhood.

In the end, the story that Lee dictates to Austin might not be a true Western, but it is true to the brothers' situation and their struggle with each other. "What they don't know is that each one of 'em is afraid see. Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And 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."

Belonging

The one thing Lee and Austin have in common from the beginning is a sense of dislocation; a longing for a place to belong and a connection with another person or home. Neither is satisfied with the life he leads, but the alternatives are no more suitable.

Lee doesn't belong in the city. He certainly doesn't belong in front of a typewriter, despite his best efforts. "I'm living out there 'cause I can't make it here!" he tells Austin. Yet he senses that something is missing from his life. He wanders about the neighbourhood at night, casing homes for burglaries, but also peering into the lives of other people, looking for that elusive sense of home. "Blonde people movin' in and outa' the rooms, talkin' to each other," he tells Austin. "Kinda' place you wish you sorta' grew up in, ya' know."

Austin doesn't belong in the desert. Both his mother and his brother realize that he isn't suited for that existence, but Austin becomes captivated by the idea of escape, rather than the reality of a hard-scrabble life. Even within his supposed milieu – suburban life – Austin doesn't truly belong. "You stick out like a sore thumb," Lee tells him. "Look at you. You think yer regular lookin'?"

Austin comes to the realization that he doesn't belong anywhere, that the home he thought he had is just an illusion. "There's nothin' down here for me," he says. "There never was. When we were kids here it was different. There was a life here then. But now – I keep comin' down here thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin'. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar." He can no longer tell the difference between his memories and his imagination. "There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!"

Abel and Cain

There are several allusions to Biblical stories and ideas in *True West*. Austin refers to the safe suburban life that he's lost touch with as a Paradise – and Lee tells him he sounds like their father. Similarly, Austin alludes to a sense of salvation in a new beginning, while Lee has been wandering the desert in search of meaning and belonging.

The most explicit parallel, however, is the story of Cain and Abel. Austin and Lee's rivalry centres on their connection – however fractured – with their father, a distant, remote figure. Austin feels his attempts to help his father have been rejected, while Lee implies that Austin only gave their father money out of a sense of guilt. Lee wants to help their father, but Austin doesn't believe he can change, and tells Lee the story about the lost teeth to prove that he knows more about their father than Lee does.

The producer Saul Kimmer acts as another father figure, with both Austin and Lee offering their best story ideas to him, and Austin being rejected once again. As they play out their own version of the Cain and Abel story, however, they are competing not for God's approval, but for the approval of a Hollywood producer (who likely only thinks he's god) and a toothless alcoholic.

THE WEST ON FILM

“So ya’ think there’s room for a real Western these days?” Lee asks movie producer Saul Kimmer. “A true-to-life Western?” The American West, in both a mythic or realistic form, has long been a favourite subject for Hollywood.

From the earliest days of cinema, the West provided inspiration for stories and visuals. Members of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show appeared in a series of shorts produced by William K.L. Dickson at the Edison studio in 1894. Although *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) was only 12 minutes long, it included several new film techniques such as cross cutting, double exposure composite editing and on location shooting and was one of the first films to include a narrative.



Director John Ford was famous for his Westerns. His iconic long shots against rugged, harsh terrain helped define the cinematic vision of the American West. *Stagecoach* (1939) was his first full-length Western in sound and starred John Wayne, perhaps the Hollywood star most associated with Westerns. Other Ford films set in the American West and starring Wayne include his cavalry trilogy *Fort Apache* (1948), *Rio Grande* (1949) and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1950), and *The Searchers* (1956).

The Western became a staple of B-movies – the low-budget second half of a double feature during the 1930s and 1940s. Cheaply and quickly made, they offered a comfortable formula of gunfights and fistfights, galloping horses, and clear-cut villains and (often singing) heroes.

The 1950s saw the Western take a darker, bleaker tone. *High Noon* (1952) was one of the first films to subvert some of the classic Western archetypes. The main character, Will Kane, is a reluctant hero, forced by circumstances into a solitary stance against four outlaws by the cowardice and indifference of the town he still feels a duty to protect. *Shane* (1953) ended with the eponymous character riding away from the family he’s saved, his own fate uncertain.

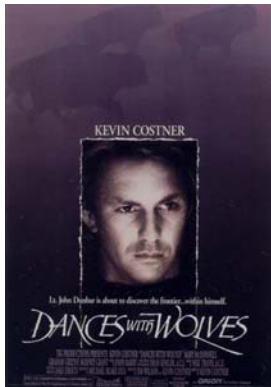


By the 1960s, the line between hero and villain had been blurred, and directors like Sam Peckinpah explored the corruption and violence of modern society through a revisionist approach to the Western. A new genre emerged in the mid-60s, the Spaghetti Western – films primarily produced by Italian studios. They were low-budget, minimalist and violent, and demythologized the Western even more. The genre was defined by a trilogy of films made by Sergio Leone: *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966). Often referred to as the “Man with No Name” trilogy, the films starred Clint Eastwood with iconic scores by Ennio Morricone. They all featured a central character, rarely named (and then only by nickname), who is an outsider of some moral ambiguity. Eastwood later continued the archetype of the Man with No Name in his films *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider* (1985).

Other films, such as Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) began to break down the stereotypes assigned to Native Americans and give more prominent roles to women.

But by then, the popularity of big-screen Westerns was waning. The days of the B-movies, when Westerns were churned out inexpensively and quickly and were a proven money-maker, were long gone. Instead, audience members got their fix of the Wild West on their TV screens at home. The TV Western was ubiquitous in the 1950s and 1960s, with shows like *Bonanza*, *Gunsmoke*, *Maverick*, and *Wagon Train* ruling the airwaves. In 1959, there were 29 Westerns on the air.

The temporary death-knell for the movie Western was sounded in 1980 (the year Sam Shepard was writing *True West*) with the spectacular failure of *Heaven's Gate*. Over-budget, over-long and over-due, the film marked the end of United Artists as a film producer and the era of director-driven movies. Only a handful of Westerns were subsequently released by the major studios over the next decade.



In 1990, however, Kevin Costner produced, directed and starred in *Dances with Wolves*, which some have credited with single-handedly resurrecting the movie Western. It became the highest grossing Western of all time, and was the first Western to win the Oscar for Best Picture since *Cimarron* won the newly renamed category in 1931. Two years later, the Best Picture award went to *Unforgiven* (1992), an anti-Western directed by Clint Eastwood that featured no "good guys," just an endless spiral of violence that consumes every character in the movie. Despite the critical and commercial success of these pictures, the period Western has never returned to the level of popularity it enjoyed during the Golden Age of Hollywood.

This past year, however, saw two celebrated Westerns vie for Best Picture at the Academy Awards: *No Country for Old Men*, based on the novel by Cormac McCarthy, and *There Will Be Blood*, inspired by the novel *Oil!* by Upton Sinclair. Add in *Brokeback Mountain*, the acclaimed HBO miniseries *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and series *Deadwood*, and the Western is making its mark in quality if not quantity. Even the quantity is back on the rise. Two Westerns – *3:10 to Yuma* and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (the latter starring amongst others, Sam Shepard) – opened in September 2007 within weeks of each other and *No Country for Old Men*.

NOTES ON THE DESIGN

Sam Shepard is extremely specific about stage directions in his plays, including detailed notes about the set, the soundscape, and other details of the production. He very often directs the premieres of his own plays, establishing from the beginning his own definitive artistic vision.

The design team have stayed faithful to Shepard's published notes in the script, while adding their own artistic interpretation to his framework.

From the published script of *True West*:

All nine scenes take place on the same set; a kitchen and adjoining alcove of an older home in a Southern California suburb, about 40 miles east of L.A. The kitchen takes up the majority of the playing area to stage left (*from the actor's point of view, facing the audience*). The kitchen consists of a sink, upstage center, surrounded by counter space, a wall telephone, cupboards and a small window just above it bordered by neat yellow curtains. Stage left of sink is a stove. Stage right, a refrigerator. The alcove adjoins the kitchen to stage right. There is no wall division or door to the alcove. It is open and easily accessible from the kitchen and defined only by the objects in it: A small round glass breakfast table mounted on white iron legs; two matching white iron chairs set across from each other. The two exterior walls of the alcove which prescribe a corner in the upstage right are composed of many small windows beginning from a solid wall about three feet high and extending to the ceiling. The windows look out to bushes and citrus trees. The alcove is filled with all sorts of house plants in various pots, mostly Boston ferns hanging in planters at different levels. The floor of the alcove is composed of green synthetic grass.

All entrances and exits are made stage left from the kitchen. There is no door. The actors simply go off and come onto the playing area.

The set should be constructed realistically with no attempt to distort its dimensions, shapes, objects or colours. No objects should be introduced which might draw special attention to themselves other than the props demanded by the script. If a stylistic "concept" is grafted onto the set design it will only serve to confuse the evolution of the characters' situation, which is the most important focus of the play.

Likewise, the costumes should be exactly representative of who the characters are and not added onto for the sake of making a point to the audience.

The Coyote of Southern California has a distinct yapping, dog-like bark, similar to a Hyena. This yapping grows more intense and maniacal as the pack grows in numbers, which is usually the case when they lure and kill pets from suburban yards. The sense of growing frenzy in the pack should be felt in the background, particularly in scenes 7 and 8. In any case, these Coyotes never make the long, mournful, solitary howl of the Hollywood stereotypes.

The sound of Crickets can speak for itself.

These sounds should also be treated realistically even though they sometimes grow in volume and numbers.

GLOSSARY

Al Jolson

Asa Yoelson (May 1886-October 23, 1950) was a singer/actor, self-billed as the world's greatest entertainer. Jolson was born in Lithuania, but his



family immigrated to the United States when he was a child. By the time he was ten, he was performing on the streets with his brother. He made his stage debut in 1899 in the play *Children of the Ghetto*, and made a name for himself in vaudeville, performing in blackface in minstrel shows. He made the transition to Broadway in 1911 and obtained his first recording contract shortly thereafter. An extraordinary performer, he often dismissed the rest of the cast from the stage and turned his shows into solo concerts. In 1927 he starred in the first full-length motion picture to incorporate sound, *The Jazz Singer*, a story based in part on Jolson's life. His popularity declined somewhat in the 1930s, but the 1946 film biography, *The Al Jolson Story* helped restore Jolson to the public's favour. He died of a heart attack on October 23, 1950.

Alaska

A state in the northwest corner of the United States, separated from the rest of the country by British Columbia. It was bought by the States from Russia in 1867 and gained statehood in 1959, the second last to join the union. It is the largest state in the union, rich in natural resources. Its capital is Juneau and its largest city is Anchorage.

Arizona

A state in the southwestern United States, bordering Mexico to the south. It was admitted as the 48th state in the union in 1912, after being ceded to the States as part of New Mexico in 1848. Its capital and largest city is Phoenix.

Bakersfield

A city in southern California, north of Los Angeles. Rich in natural resources, gold was first discovered in the area in 1851 and oil was discovered in 1865. It is a major centre for

mining, oil, manufacturing and agriculture in southern California, and one of the most rapidly growing cities in the United States.

Bob Hope Drive

A street in Rancho Mirage, California named after the famous entertainer, who made his home for many years in the area. The Eisenhower Medical Centre – a not-for-profit hospital that was built from the proceeds of the Bob Hope Charity Golf Tournament on land donated by Bob Hope – is located on the street. Bob Hope (May 29, 1903-July 27, 2003) was an entertainer and comedian, known for his road movies with Bing Crosby, and for entertaining American troops at USO shows.

Bone china

A type of porcelain popularized by Josiah Spode in England circa 1800, and used most often for decorated tableware. The addition of bone



ash to china clay and china stone makes the porcelain stronger and less easily chipped.

Botanist

A biologist who specialises in the study of plants and plant life. Botany is divided into several sub-specialities, including plant anatomy, chemistry, cytology, ecology, genetics, physiology and taxonomy. Botany as a field of study has existed since Greco-Roman times, but developed in its modern form during the 16th century through the work of physicians and herbalists studying plants for medicinal purposes.

Caddie

A person who is hired to carry a golfer's clubs and offers insights and advice on managing the course. The caddie will also clean the golfer's clubs, rake sand traps, repair divots and determine yardages. Experienced caddies will also help the golfer select the proper club and read the green.

**Champagne**

Sparkling wine produced exclusively in the Champagne region of France by the *méthode champenoise*, and using only Chardonnay, Pinot Noir or Pinot Meunier

grapes. Sparkling wine can be produced from other grapes, in other regions, and by other methods, but it legally cannot be called Champagne.

Chop Suey

An American-Chinese dish translating roughly as “mixed pieces” or more colloquially as leftovers. When not referring to Westernized Chinese food, the phrase also means cooked animal entrails. It generally consists of cubes or slices of meat stir fried with sliced vegetables and bean sprouts in a starchy sauce and served over rice. It was most likely invented by Chinese workers in American mines and railroads cooking together whatever odds and ends they had available to them.

Cocker spaniel

A breed of sporting dog, originally developed in England, known for its long droopy ears and silky coat. The English cocker spaniel is larger than its American counterpart with a longer muzzle.

**Coyote**

A species of wild dog found in North and Central America. A key figure in many Native

American creation tales and myths, coyote is often a trickster figure or a culture hero who steals fire for humans. Also known as the prairie wolf, it is found in deserts, prairies, woodlands and brush country, but has adapted well to urban environments as well. Although they have been heavily hunted for bounty, the coyote population has actually increased in recent years.

Cricket

Any one of approximately 2,400 species of leaping



insects, knowing for the chirping sound the male makes by scraping its forewings together. Cricket songs are used to attract and court females and to warn other males away. Most species chirp at higher rates as the temperature rises, making them useful living thermometers.

Duffer

In golf terms, a casual player of low competency.

Fairway

The part of a golf course that extends from a point beyond the tee to the green. It consists of closely cut grass often bounded by varying heights of tall grass (called the rough) and trees or water. Hazards can include a fairway bunker (sand trap), mounds or small lakes or streams cutting across the fairway. The length of a fairway ranges from roughly 100 to 650 yards.

Foothills

A hilly area near the base of a mountain or mountain range, not as tall as a regular hill, but smaller than the surrounding mountains.

Ford Flathead

The Flathead was the first Ford Motor Company V8 engine, first introduced in 1932. It was replaced by the Y-block engine in 1954.

Fresno

A city in central California, located in the San Joaquin River valley. It was originally settled as a station on the Central Pacific Railroad in 1872 and became an agricultural community in the 1880s.

G.I. Bill

The Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, known colloquially as the G.I. Bill, was created to provide educational opportunities for returning World War II veterans, as well as loans to buy homes or start small businesses. It also made provision for former servicemen to receive \$20/week for one year while they looked for work.

Irons

A category of golf club, designed for approach or tee shots of shorter distance, with a flat wedge-shaped head. Irons are numbered from 1 to 9, though most sets typically have clubs numbered 3 to 9. Lower-numbered irons are known as long irons and have a longer shaft and less loft on the club face. Mid irons are irons numbered 5 to 7, while short irons, generally used for short approach shots and chipping, are numbered 7-9.



Ivy League

An association of eight universities in the American northeast, made up of Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale, known for their high academic and social prestige.

Juarez

A city in northern Mexico, directly across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. Formerly known as El Paso del Norte, it was renamed in 1888 for President Benito Juarez, who headquartered there in 1865 while exiled from Central Mexico. It is connected to the United States by three international bridges and is an important shipping and rail terminus.

Kern County

A county in the Central Valley of California, ranging from the eastern Sierra Nevadas into the Mojave Desert and including parts of the Western Indian Wells Valley and Northern Antelope Valley. The county seat is Bakersfield. It is home to California's largest open pit mine and is the state's top oil-producing county.

Kirk Douglas

Issur Danielovich Demsky (December 9, 1916) was born to Russian Jewish immigrants in New Amsterdam, New York. He became interested in acting in college and, after serving in World War II, began a career on the Broadway stage. He made his film debut in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946) and became known for his portrayal of cocky, tough guys. He was nominated for three Oscars



for his performances in *Champion*, *The Bad and the Beautiful* and *Lust for Life*, and received a special Oscar in 1996 for "50 years as a moral and creative force in the motion picture community." He played a significant role in ending the Hollywood blacklist when he publicly opposed Stanley Kubrick's intention to take the credit for Dalton Trumbo's screenplay for *Spartacus*. Although his speech was affected by a stroke in 1995, he appeared in *It Runs in the Family* (2003) with his son Michael Douglas, former wife Diana Douglas and grandson Cameron Douglas.

Lee Trevino

Lee Buck Trevino (December 1, 1939-) was born into poverty in Dallas, Texas. His father abandoned his family, leaving his wife to raise three children in a four-room apartment with no running water or electricity. The house backed onto a golf course and Trevino taught himself to play golf by mimicking swings with a cut-down discarded club and sneaking onto the course at night to play. After a stint in the Marines, he got a job as a golf pro and began concentrating on his game. He joined the PGA Tour in 1966 and in 1968 beat Jack Nicklaus in the U.S. Open, becoming the first player to score under par in all four rounds of a U.S. Open. In 1971 he became the first person to win the U.S., Canadian and British Open in the same year. In all, he won 85 professional tournaments, including six majors. His winning ways were matched with a winning personality, and he was one of the most popular players on the PGA and Champions Tour.



"Lonely Are the Brave"

A 1962 film starring Kirk Douglas and Walter Matthau. Based on the novel *The Brave Cowboy* by Edward Abbey, it tells the story of a transient cowboy, Jack Burns, who refuses to join modern society. When his closest friend is jailed for aiding illegal immigrants, Burns gets himself arrested to help break him out. He ends up on the run on his own when his friend refuses to become a fugitive, and heads for the hills on horseback. The long chase ends when Burns and his horse are struck by a tractor-trailer while trying to cross a highway.

Martini

A cocktail made from gin, dry vermouth and an olive or twist of lemon.

The name likely came from Martini & Rossi, an Italian firm that sells vermouth. The standard ratio of gin to vermouth is 5:1, but many aficionados prefer their martinis even dryer (the dryer the martini, the less vermouth). The traditional idea of a martini has evolved over the years, however – most popular martinis are now made with a vodka base and an endless variety of mixes. The most famous drinker of martinis is perhaps the fictional character James Bond. He prefers his martinis to be “shaken, not stirred,” because it “bruises the gin.”



Mojave

The Mojave Desert is an arid region in southern California, southeast of the Sierra Nevada. It occupies more than 65,000 square kilometres and was once an inland sea. It is home to Edwards Air Force Base, Death Valley National Park, and the Joshua Tree National Park.



North Star

Also known as Polaris, it is the brightest star in Ursa Minor, it can be found at the handle’s end of the Little Dipper. It is only one degree from the northern celestial pole, making it useful for

navigation in the Northern Hemisphere. Because of the precession of the equinoxes, the earth’s axis will alter to the point where the northern polestar will become Vega by 12,000AD.

Palm Springs

A resort city in south-eastern California, originally known as Agua Caliente for its hot springs. A desert oasis, it was settled first by the Spanish and then became a regular stagecoach stop between Prescott, Arizona and Los Angeles. It is currently a favourite vacation spot of the rich and famous.

Panhandle

A narrow strip of territory projecting from a larger, broader area. The Texas Panhandle is the northernmost area of the state, a rectangular area bordered by New Mexico to the west and Oklahoma to the north and east. While it accounts for 10% of the state’s area, it includes only 2% of the population.

Picasso

Pablo Ruiz y Picasso (October 25, 1881- April 8, 1973) was one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. Born Pablo Blasco in Malaga, Spain, he took his mother’s surname around 1901. He



studied art in La Coruna, Barcelona and Madrid, but found formal instruction stifling. He worked in a variety of different forms and styles and his career is often divided into periods – for example, the Blue Period (1901-1904), the Rose Period (1904-1906). He developed Cubism with Georges Braque and was a forerunner of the Surrealists. Among his most important paintings are *Les Femmes d’Alger* and *Guernica*, but he left behind an extraordinary body of work that included sculptures, ceramics and graphic arts.

Pit Bull

A group of dogs sharing similar characteristics – including the American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, and Stafford Bull Terrier – and often



generalized in the media as a vicious, territorial dog. They developed as a cross between bulldogs and terriers, bred historically as fighting dogs. One of the most famous pit bulls was Pete from the *Little Rascals/Our Gang* shorts. In recent times, pit bulls have garnered unfavourable press for their aggression. Pit bulls, Rottweilers and their mixes are responsible for the majority of fatal dog attacks, though the majority of incidents can be traced to poor training or mistreatment by the owner, rather than an inherently bad dog.

Pitching wedge

A golf club designed for short approach shots over obstacles, ranging in loft from 42-49 degrees. It would be the equivalent of a 10-iron in a set of clubs and can be used for chipping onto the green from the fringe, punching out of trees, or with a full swing for distances averaging 100 yards.

Psychology

A science that deals with the study of mental processes and behaviours, it can be divided into applied and experimental fields. Research in psychology includes cognitive science, the study of consciousness, social psychology and developmental psychology. Clinical psychology deals with the treatment of psychological or neurological problems.

Sacramento Valley

A region of the California Central Valley that extends north from the San Joaquin-Sacramento Delta. It's a significant agricultural area, featuring citrus and nut orchards and cattle ranches. Almonds, walnuts, prunes and olives are significant crops in the Sacramento Valley.

Safeway

A supermarket chain and one of North America's largest retailers with approximately 1750 stores in the western, Midwestern and mid-Atlantic region of the United States and in Western Canada. It was founded 1926 when Skaggs Stores merged with Sam Seelig Company. The company headquarters is located in Oakland, California.

**San Gabriels**

A mountain range in southern California, just east of Los Angeles, it forms a barrier between the Greater Los Angeles Area and the Mojave Desert. Its highest point is San Antonio Peak. Citrus fruit are grown in the foothills

Sweetwater

A city in central Texas, it is known for its Rattlesnake Roundup each spring. A leading region for wind power generation, the community was devastated by tornadoes in 1985.

Texas

A state in the south-central United States, admitted as the 28th state in the union in 1845. Texas is the second largest state in both population and area. It was explored by the Spanish in the 16th and 17th centuries, and claimed by the French as part of the Louisiana territory. It was then acquired by the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase, but ceded to the Spanish in 1819. It became a province of Mexico in the early 19th century. Texas gained its independence in 1836 after a decisive victory in the Battle of San Jacinto, during which Mexican President Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna was captured. The territory maintained its independence for ten years before becoming part of the United States.

Ventura

A city and county in Southern California, located on the Pacific Ocean west of Los Angeles. Its founding – and official – name is the mission of San Buenaventura. The mission was founded in 1782 and the city was incorporated in 1866.

Woods

A category of golf club, named because the head was originally made from beech wood or ash. Now woods are usually made from titanium, steel or composite materials. A standard set of golf clubs include a 1-wood (or driver), 3-wood and 5-wood, though woods can be numbered from 1-9. The driver has the lowest loft and is the longest club in the bag. It is used almost exclusively off the tee, as its deep face makes for a challenging shot off turf. Fairway woods have a shallower face and are used for longer distances than an iron.

WHAT THE CRITICS SAID

The profound ambivalence of Shepard's writing, his simultaneously romantic and deeply skeptical outlook, is perhaps exhibited most clearly in his periodic tendency to draw on the imagery of traditional myth narratives. In *True West*, for example, his portrayal of complementary but eternally feuding brothers, a pairing whose genealogy runs all the way back to Cain and Abel, reads as an almost too deliberate quotation of the Jungian scheme of conscious ego and repressed shadow side which such duos supposedly represent.

STEPHEN JAMES BOTTOMS, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*

True West has ... arguably become Shepard's signature piece, the leanest, most pointed of his full-length works.

DAVID KRASNER, *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*

Although the mediated image of the mythic West is the one most apparent in Shepard, the lure of the absent "true" West – the *pre*-meditated mythic dimension – underlies his representations, creating constant semiotic conflict: the West is signified as both absent and hidden, as both irretrievable and an irrationally erupting source. There are moments in Shepard's plays when the West breaks out of its tinsel-town image to return in a flash of "authentic" dust-clogged clothes and double-barreled violence ... but despite this occasional revival, the "true West" figures lack the strength to imagine a whole past and thus to re-create a real world. They always fade and are usually replaced by textualized and unmemoried postmodern images.

JEANETTE R. MALKIN, *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama*

Shepard's masterwork.... It tells us a truth, as glimpsed by a 37 year old genius.

New York Post

True West is built on much starker aesthetic lines than *Horse Dreamer* or *Angel City*, but it is a further development of Shepard's treatment of the bifurcation of the artist into imagination and craft, and the danger of commodifying the imagination.

BRENDA MURPHY, "Shepard Writes about Writing"

There's a lot about *True West* that is explicitly autobiographical. Like Austin, Shepard himself has put in time as a would-be screenwriter, but he's also been known to share in Lee's sticky fingers: in his book *Motel Chronicles*, he describes an attempt to steal a practically worthless painting from a room in the Chateau Marmont in Hollywood. And all the stuff in the play about "the old man" clearly relates to Shepard's father.

DON SHEWEY, *Sam Shepard*

It's clear, funny, naturalistic. It's also opaque, terrifying, surrealistic. If that sounds contradictory, you're on to one aspect of Shepard's winning genius; the ability to make you think you're watching one thing while at the same time he's presenting another.

San Francisco Chronicle

In *True West*, the opposing brothers effectively act as statement and counterpoint, to be played off against each other with differing degrees of intensity in the play's nine scenes, which thus become akin to nine movements. Indeed, the brothers' "themes," which start off at diametrically opposed extremes, are eventually blended and blurred to the point where they cross over completely, in a role reversal which is as much musical device as it is character development.

STEPHEN JAMES BOTTOMS, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*

In *True West* the two brothers, Austin and Lee, represent two sides of the American present: one sophisticated, cultured, ambitious, and successful; the other alienated and outcast, raw, wild, violent. As the play unfolds, the two characters exchange places and reveal that each is the double of the other. Shepard's plays emphasize that, despite the American belief in starting anew, the past is never over but continues to intrude into the present.

MARK BUSBY, *Updating the Literary West*

Shepard himself thinks *True West* is "about double nature," and most critics read it as the old true West of Lee versus the new consumer West of Austin, but this is to underestimate Shepard's complexity and his sense of humor. As early as *Cowboys* (1964) Shepard knew that the wild West was quasi-fiction – it's cowboys and Indians, its heroism and lawlessness, its veneer of male bonding. Even as a teen-ager, he was not naively nostalgic; his stage cowboys tend to be old men, ghosts, or composites. By 1980 Shepard was well aware that cowboy fiction was fostered through rampant Hollywood commercialism, to which he himself was "immune and contaminated at the same time." By 1980 it is impossible to recall the true West, if there ever was one, but the two brothers – the wild man and the domesticated man – might join to concoct a new fiction, or they might destroy one another.

JOHAN CALLENS, *Sam Shepard: Between the Margin and the Centre*

In its dialectic, *True West* is simply following the conventions of the western, which many film critics have discussed as being focused on divided images of masculinity with the world of women or the feminine as backdrop.

CARLA J. MACDONOUGH, *Staging Masculinity*

NOTABLE QUOTABLES

"I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's a real thing, double nature. I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal." Sam Shepard, interview with Robert Coe

"Our siblings push buttons that cast us in roles we felt sure we had let go of long ago - the baby, the peacekeeper, the caretaker, the avoider.... It doesn't seem to matter how much time has elapsed or how far we've traveled." Jane Mersky Leder

"Blessed is the servant who loves his brother as much when he is sick and useless as when he is well and can be of service to him. And blessed is he who loves his brother as well when he is afar off as when he is by his side, and who would say nothing behind his back he might not, in love, say before his face." St Francis of Assisi

"I don't believe an accident of birth makes people sisters or brothers. It makes them siblings, gives them mutuality of parentage. Sisterhood and brotherhood is a condition people have to work at." Maya Angelou

"Sibling relationships – and 80 percent of Americans have at least one – outlast marriages, survive the death of parents, resurface after quarrels that would sink any friendship. They flourish in a thousand incarnations of closeness and distance, warmth, loyalty and distrust." Erica E. Goode, "The Secret World of Siblings," *U.S. News & World Report*, 10 January 1994

"But, you know there's a lot of westerns - not that they were bad - it's just that they can be remade because they're great stories that aren't indelible in an audience's mind when it comes to both the cast and the story." Tom Selleck

"You can take all the sincerity in Hollywood, place it in the navel of a fruit fly and still have room enough for three caraway seeds and a producer's heart." Fred Allen

"The people are unreal. The flowers are unreal; they don't smell. The fruit is unreal; it doesn't taste of anything. The whole place is a glaring, gaudy, nightmarish set, built up in the desert." Ethel Barrymore

"Scriptwriting is the toughest part of the whole racket, the least understood and the least noticed." Frank Capra

"Writing is a socially acceptable form of schizophrenia." E.L. Doctorow

"Most playwrights go wrong on the fifth word. When you start a play and you type 'Act one, scene one,' your writing is every bit as good as Arthur Miller or Eugene O'Neill or anyone. It's that fifth word where amateurs start to go wrong." Meredith Willson

"My chief memory of movieland is of asking in the producer's office why I must change the script, eviscerate it, cripple and hamstring it? Why must I strip the hero of his few semi-intelligent remarks and why must I tack on a corny ending that makes the stomach shudder? Half of all the movie writers argue in this fashion. The other half writhe in silence, and the psychoanalysts couch or the liquor bottle claim them both." Ben Hecht

From the play:

"That's a dumb line. That is a dumb fuckin' line. You git paid fer dreamin' up a line like that?"
Lee

"Now who in the hell wants to eat offa' plate with the State of Idaho starin' ya' in the face. Every time ya' take a bit ya' get to see a little bit more." Lee

"Kinda' place that sorta' kills ya' inside. Warm yellow lights. Mexican tile all around. Copper pots hangin' over the stove. Ya' know like they got in the magazines. Blonde people movin' in and outa' the rooms, talkin' to each other. Kinda' place you wish you sorta' grew up in, ya' know." Lee

"Ya' hear the horse screamin' at the end of it. Rain's comin' down. Horse is screamin'. Then there's a shot. BLAM! Just a single shot like that. Then nothin' but the sound of rain. And Kirk Douglas is ridin' in the ambulance. Ridin' away from the scene of the accident. And when he hears that shot he knows that his horse has died. He knows. And you see his eyes. And his eyes die. Right inside his face. And then his eyes close. And you know that he's died too. You know that Kirk Douglas has died from the death of his horse." Lee

"So ya' think there's room for a real Western these days? A true-to-life Western?" Lee

Lee: You go down to the L.A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most. What do you think they'll say?

Austin: Who said anything about killing?

Lee: Family people. Brothers. Brothers-in-Law. Cousins. Real American-type people. They kill each other in the heat mostly. In the Smog-Alerts. In the Brush Fire Season. Right about this time a' year.

"We're not insane. We're not driven to acts of violence like that. Not over a dumb movie script." Austin

"He's not gonna' change but I will. I'll just turn myself right inside out. I could be just like you then huh? Sittin' around dreamin' stuff up. Gettin' paid to dream. Ridin' back and forth on the freeway just dreamin' my fool head off." Lee

"And I used to say to myself, 'Lee's got the right idea. He's out there in the world and here I am. What am I doing?'" Austin

"What they don't know is that each one of 'em is afraid see. Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And 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." Lee

"I mean he liked the outline already so he wasn't risking that much. I just guaranteed it with my short game." Lee

"Now look, Austin, it's jest beginner's luck ya' know. I mean I sank a fifty foot putt for this deal. No hard feelings." Lee

"It's a bullshit story! It's idiotic. Two lamebrains chasing each other across Texas! Are you kidding? Who do you think's going to go see a film like that?" Austin

"They can't put a finger on me. I'm gone. I can come in through the window and go out through the door. They never knew what hit 'em. You, yer stuck. Yer the one that's stuck. Not me." Lee

"It's incredible, Austin. We've got three different studios all trying to cut each other's throats to get this material. In one morning. That's how hot it is." Saul

Saul: Your brother has really got something, Austin. I've been around too long not to recognize it. Raw talent.

Austin: He's got a lotta' balls is what he's got. He's taking you right down the river.

"You lost! That's your gut reaction. You lost a gamble. Now you're trying to tell me you like his story? How could you possibly fall for that story? It's as phony as Hoppalong Cassidy." Austin

"He's been camped out on the desert for three months. Talking to cactus. What's he know about what people wanna' see on the screen! I drive on the freeway every day. I swallow the smog. I watch the news in color. I shop in the Safeway. I'm the one who's in touch! Not him!" Austin

"Well you'd still have the crickets to contend with. The coyotes. The sounds of the Police Helicopters prowling above the neighbourhood. Slashing their searchlights down through the streets. Hunting for the likes of you." Austin

"You couldn't steal a toaster without losin' yer lunch." Lee

"Besides, I'm lookin' forward to the smell of the night. The bushes. Orange blossoms. Dust in the driveways. Rain bird sprinklers. Lights in people's houses. You're right about the lights, Lee. Everybody else is livin' the life. Indoors. Safe. This is a Paradise down here. You know that? We're livin' in a Paradise. We've forgotten about that." Austin

"I got a good story! I know it's a good story. I just need a little help is all." Lee

"Eight days it takes him. Eight days in the rain and the sun and every day he's droppin' teeth on the blacktop and nobody'll pick him up 'cause his mouth's full a' blood. So he finally stumbles into the dentist. Dentist takes all his money and all his teeth. And there he is, in Mexico, with his gums sewed up and his pockets empty." Austin

"I go out there and I take him out for a nice Chinese dinner. But he doesn't eat. All he wants to do is drink Martinis outa plastic cups. And he takes his teeth out and lays 'em on the table 'cause he can't stand the feel of 'em. And we ask the waitress for one a' those doggie bags to take the Chop Suey home in. So he drops his teeth in the doggie bag along with the Chop Suey. And then we go out to hit all the bars up and down the highway. Says he wants to introduce me to all his buddies. And in one a' those bars, in one a' those bars up and down the highway, he left that doggie bag with his teeth laying in the Chop Suey." Austin.

"There's gonna' be a general lack of toast in the neighbourhood this morning. Many, many unhappy, bewildered breakfast faces." Austin

"When you consider all the writers who never even had a machine. Who would have given an eyeball for a good typewriter. Any typewriter. All the ones who wrote on matchbook covers. Paper bags. Toilet paper. Who had their writing destroyed by their jailers. Who persisted

beyond all odds. Those writers would find it hard to understand your actions. Not to mention demolishing a perfectly good golf club. What about all the struggling golfers? What about Lee Trevino? What do you think he would've said when he was batting balls around with broom sticks at the age of nine. Impoverished." Austin

"That voice that warns you that if you'd only tried harder to find the number in the phone book you wouldn't have to be calling the operator to begin with." Lee

"Yer a writer and ya' don't' have a pen or a pencil!" Lee

"I knew she was gonna' hang up. I could hear it in her voice." Lee

"Well it is like salvation sort of. I mean the smell. I love the smell of toast. And the sun's coming up. It makes me feel like anything's possible." Austin

"There's nothin' down here for me. There never was. When we were kids here it was different. There was a life here then. But now – I keep comin' down here thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin'. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar. On the way to appointments. Wandering down streets I thought I recognized that turn out to be replicas of streets I remember. Streets I misremember. Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in a postcard. Fields that don't even exist anymore." Austin

"There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!" Austin

"Hey, do you actually think I chose to live out in the middle a' nowhere? Do ya'? Ya' think it's some kinda philosophical decision I took or somethin'? I'm livin' out there 'cause I can't make it here! And yer bitchin' to me about all yer success!" Lee

"You write me up this screenplay thing just like I tell ya'. I mean you can use all yer usual tricks and stuff. Yer fancy language. Yer artistic hocus pocus. But ya' gotta' write everything like I say. Every move. Every time they run outa' gas, they run outa' gas. Every time they wanna' jump on a horse, they do just that. If they wanna' stay in Texas, by God they'll stay in Texas! And you finish the whole thing up for me. Top to bottom. And you put my name on it. And I own all the rights. And every dime goes in my pocket. You do all that and I'll sure enough take ya' with me to the desert." Lee

"What I need is somethin' authentic. Somethin' to keep me in touch. It's easy to get outa' touch out there." Lee

"You'll have to stop fighting in the house. There's plenty of room outside to fight. You've got the whole outdoors to fight in." Mom

"I'm goin' to the desert. There's nothing stopping me. I'm going by myself to the desert."
Austin

"It was the worst feeling being up there. In Alaska. Staring out a window. I never felt so desperate before." Mom

FURTHER EXPLORATION FOR STUDENTS

Opposites Attract

Divide the class into pairs. Each pair is given two opposing personality traits (shy/outgoing; arrogant/modest; timid/brave), as well as a situation to act out/debate. Throughout the course of the scene/discussion, each person will gradually assume the other person's character trait – the shy person becomes outgoing, the modest person begins to boast. The transition should be gradual, and each partner should respond equally to a shift in personality.

What is required to assume the opposite trait? Is there a common ground that can be explored in the transition process? Can there exist in a single person the capability to be both shy and outgoing in different situations or at different times? How fluid or static do you believe personality to be?

The True Western

There are many different kinds of Westerns: spaghetti Westerns, revisionist Westerns, modern Westerns, perhaps even true Westerns. There have been Westerns set in space or in other countries. Some are parodies, some attempt to undermine the entire genre.

Select a cross-section of Westerns (eg: *True Grit*, *High Noon*, *A Fistful of Dollars*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Blazing Saddles*) and divide the class into an equal number of groups. Each group is given a movie to discuss (and view together, if possible). What are some of the elements that make it a Western? Do aspects of the movie confirm or subvert the characteristics of the genre?

Set up a round-robin debate between the groups to determine which film wins the ultimate title of the "truest" Western. Each group should assume that their film is the winner and convince the rest of the class of their reasons.

My Family and Other Animals

There have been stories about siblings in conflict since Abel and Cain first competed for God's approval. What are some examples of sibling rivalry in literature and popular entertainment? What other family dynamics have provided writers with story material throughout the ages? Are there archetypal figures or storylines that are common across cultures and eras?

On a lighter note, writers and comedians such as David Sedaris have mined their family dysfunctions for material to great success. Can you think of any family anecdotes or quirks that would translate into a story or play? Are there repeated motifs that play out in family gatherings or situations that could be twisted into humorous scenes?

RECOMMENDED READING & VIEWING

Fool for Love, A Lie of the Mind, Buried Child, Sam Shepard

A sampling of plays by Sam Shepard

The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard, Matthew Roudané

First-hand accounts and substantial critical chapters on Shepard's plays, poetry, music, fiction, acting, directing and film work.

The Zoo Story, Edward Albee

Endgame, Samuel Beckett

Six Characters in Search of an Author, Luigi Pirandello

The Homecoming, Harold Pinter

Shepard's plays are often considered absurdist comedies and he admired and studied the works of the above playwrights.

East of Eden, John Steinbeck

A semi-autobiographical novel that interweaves the lives of two families in California's Salinas Valley, one of which plays out the Cain and Able story over two successive generations.

Brødre

Danish film about two brothers who switch roles and personalities after one becomes a prisoner of war in Afghanistan.

A River Runs Through It by Norman Maclean

The story of two brothers, one studious and one rebellious, growing up in Montana in the 1920s.

The Searchers, Shane, Unforgiven, The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

A cross-section of some of the great movie Westerns

INTERNET SITES OF NOTE

Playhouse Theatre Company

www.vancouverplayhouse.com

Watch for news on the upcoming season, outreach and education programmes

The Sam Shepard Web Site

<http://www.sam-shepard.com/>

A site for information about Sam Shepard, including recent news

Sam Shepard

http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/theatre_dance/shepard/shepard.html

Links and bibliographies about Sam Shepard's work

Images – 30 Great Westerns

<http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue10/infocus/>

Overview of 30 influential Westerns with links to articles and other pages about movie Westerns

Ten Best Westerns of All Time

<http://www.soundthesirens.com/articles/index.php?id=11,332,0,0,1,0>

One writer's list of the Westerns that he'll never forget.

Cain and Abel: Happiness and Other Insights

http://www.aish.com/literacy/exploring/Cain_and_Abel_Happiness_and_Other_Insights.asp

Lessons from the Biblical story of Cain and Abel