REP Stage presents

TRUE WEST

by SAM SHEPARD

Directed by VINCENT M. LANCISI

From the Dramaturg

FRONTIER LIMITS

Sam Shepard made an acting career embodying the rugged macho cowboy type, most memorably as test pilot and astronaut Chuck Yeager in the film “The Right Stuff.” But in his plays, he tears at the romanticism of the macho mythos and what this fable of American male dominion has wrought in the twentieth century for the rugged pioneer hemmed in by suburban sprawl; the cowboy with no more wild horses to tame; the scarred veteran returning home but suspecting enemy threats in domestic exchanges.

Shepard has written that images create ideas in his plays; in other words, instead of writing to advance a preconceived message or theory, he uses the visual poetry of the stage to “share emotions that just aren’t personal emotions . . . not just psychological emotions that you are getting off your chest but emotions and feelings that are connected with everybody.” And certainly the overwhelming image in his plays is this release of violence and destruction. The violence in the plays occurs originally in relationships; the ties that bind whether parent and child, husband and wife, or brother and brother, both comfort and corrode. In order for the individual to find freedom, family connections must be shattered; but without these bonds, the individual cannot exist.

The brutality escalates to an external and almost apocalyptic level. In some of his other plays, cars ram motel walls, spaceships slam into ghost towns, typewriters and toasters are bashed into pieces onstage, the dead are unearthed. Characters, plots, and theatrical styles themselves are splintered as the audience witnesses how the implosion of the aggression that we as Americans idealized for taming wilderneses now pollutes that world.

—Lisa A. Wilde

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About the Playwright

BIOGRAPHY


As the son of a career army father, Shepard spent his childhood on military bases across the United States and in Guam before his family settled on a farm in Duarte, California. After a year of agricultural studies in college, he joined a touring company of actors and, in 1963, moved to New York City to pursue his theatrical interests. His earliest attempts at playwriting, a rapid succession of one-act plays, found a receptive audience in Off-Off-Broadway productions. In the 1965–66 season Shepard won Obie Awards (presented by the *Village Voice* newspaper) for his plays Chicago, Icarus’s Mother, and Red Cross.

Shepard lived in England from 1971 to 1974, and several plays of this period—notably The Tooth of Crime (produced 1972) and Geography of a Horse Dreamer (produced 1974)—premiered in London. In late 1974 he became playwright-in-residence at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, where most of his plays over the next decade were first produced. Beginning in the late 1970s, Shepard applied his unconventional dramatic vision to a more conventional dramatic form, the family tragedy. Curse of the Starving Class (produced 1977; film 1994), the Pulitzer Prize-winning Buried Child (produced 1978), and True West (produced 1980) are linked thematically in their examination of troubled and tempestuous blood relationships in a fragmented society.

Shepard returned to acting in the late 1970s, winning critical accolades for his performances in such films as Days of Heaven (1978); Resurrection (1980); The Right Stuff (1983), for which he received an Academy Award nomination; and Fool for Love (1985), which was written by Shepard and based on his 1983 play of the same name.

Shepard’s other plays include La Turista (produced 1967), The Unseen Hand (produced 1969), Operation Sidewinder (produced 1970), Seduced (produced 1978), A Lie of the Mind (produced 1985), Simpatico (produced 1994; film 1999), The God of Hell (produced 2004), Ages of the Moon (produced 2009), Heartless (produced 2012), and A Particle of Dread (first produced 2014). In addition, he published several collections of short stories, such as Day out of Days (2010). In 1986 Shepard was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. While struggling with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Shepard wrote his final work, the novel Spy of the First Person. It centers on the reflections of a dying man. The book was published in December 2017, some five months after Shepard’s death.
A CONVERSATION WITH SAM SHEPARD

Amy Lippman contributed this Q&A, which was first published in the March '83 issue of the Harvard Advocate

AL: Critics of your plays, such as Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, and True West have often referred to them as chronicling the break-up of the American family. To what extent is that a legitimate reading of those plays?

SS: I’m not interested in the American social scene at all. It totally bores me. I’m not interested in the social predicament. It’s stupid. And the thing you bring up about the break-up of the family isn’t particularly American; it’s all over the world. Because I was born in America, it comes out as the American family. But I’m not interested in writing a treatise on the American family. That’s ridiculous. I mean, that’s not fair or unfair to read that into my plays. It just seems an incomplete, a partial way of looking at the play. People get off on tripping out on these social implications of the play and how that matches up to contemporary America. And that’s okay. But that’s not why I’m writing plays.

AL: So, why are you writing plays?

SS: I have to. I have a mission. (Laughs.) No, I don’t know why I do it. Why not.

AL: Do you consider your work to revolve around myths?

SS: Well, so many people have different ideas—of what the word means.

AL: What does it mean to you?

SS: It means a lot of things to me. One thing it means is a lie. Another thing it means is an ancient formula that is expressed as a means of handing down a very specific knowledge. That’s a true myth—an ancient myth like Osiris, an old Egyptian myth that comes down from antiquity. The thing that’s powerful about a myth is that it’s the communication of emotions, at the same time ancient and for all time. If, for instance, you look at Romeo and Juliet as a myth, the feelings that you are confronted with in a play like that are true for all time. They’ll always be true.

AL: What relationship does that have to your plays?

SS: Well, hopefully in writing a play, you can snare emotions that aren’t just personal emotions, not just catharsis, not just psychological emotions that you’re getting off your chest, but emotions and feelings that are connected with everybody. Hopefully. It’s not true all the time; sometimes it’s nothing but self-indulgence. But if you work hard enough toward being true to what you intuitively feel is going down in the play, you might be able to catch that kind of thing. So that you suddenly hook up with feelings that are on a very broad scale. But you start with something personal and see how it follows out and opens to something that’s much bigger. That’s what I’m interested in.

AL: Should one then be able to project his own experience onto what has occurred on stage?

SS: Yeah, you can do that if you want to. But it doesn’t have any real value. The only time it has value is when you hook up with something that you don’t know. Something that you can’t pin down. Something where you say, “I feel something here that’s going on that’s deeply mysterious. I know that it’s true, but I can’t put my finger on it.” I’m not interested if it reminds you of your mother, or your sister, or your cousin, or anything like that. So what? Everybody has something like
that. But if emotions that come up during a play call up questions, or seem to remind you of something that you can’t quite put your finger on, then it starts to get interesting. Then it starts to move in a direction we all know, regardless of where we come from or who we are. It starts to hook up in a certain way. Those, to me, are mythic emotions.

**AL: What ties do you feel to the American West?**

**SS:** Well, it’s all subjective. I just feel like the West is much more ancient than the East. Much more. It is. I don’t know if you’ve traveled out here at all but there are areas like Wyoming, Texas, Montana, and places like that, where you really feel this ancient thing about the land. Ancient. That it’s primordial.

**AL: There’s a very disorienting element in some of your plays. In certain places the dialogue is very realistic but the situation seems very surrealistic, and this dichotomy is never resolved.**

**SS:** I think it’s a cheap trick to resolve things. It’s totally a complete lie to make resolutions. I’ve always felt that, particularly in theatre when everything’s tied up at the end with a neat little ribbon and you’re delivered this package. You walk out of the theatre feeling that everything’s resolved and you know what the play is about. So what? It’s almost as though, why go through all that if you’re just going to tie it all up at the end? It seems like a lie to me—the resolutions, the denouement and all the rest of it. And it’s been handed down as if that is the way to write plays.

**AL: What’s the alternative?**

**SS:** Well, there are many, many alternatives. But I think it’s all dependent again on the elements that you start with and what your interest is in those elements. If you’re only interested in taking a couple of characters, however many, and having them clash for a while, and then resolve their problems, then why not go to group therapy, or something? So you take two characters and you set them in motion. It’s very interesting to follow this thing that they’re on. It’s a great adventure—it’s like getting on a wild horse.

**AL: But aren’t you, the playwright, controlling everything? You’re creating it, aren’t you?**

**SS:** I’m not creating that.

**AL: It doesn’t happen by itself, does it?**

**SS:** No, but in a way, it’s already in the air. I really believe that’s true. These things are in the air, all around us. And all I’m trying to do is latch onto them. I don’t feel like it’s a big creative act, like I’m inventing all of this. I mean, I’m not putting myself in the same category as Mozart at all, don’t get me wrong, but the story with him was that he heard this music. It was going on, and he was just open to it somehow, latched onto it, and wrote it down. *True West* is like that. *True West* is following these two guys, blow by blow, just following them, trying to stick with them and stick with the actual moment by moment thing of it. I mean, I wrote that thing—it took me a long time to write that play.

**AL: Why?**

**SS:** Because I went down a lot of blind alleys. I tried to make them go in one direction, and they didn’t want to go that way.
A CONVERSATION WITH SAM SHEPARD

**AL:** How did you know when it was right, then?

**SS:** I just know. Just like you know it’s right when you’re with somebody. You don’t know it through the head—you have a feeling.

**AL:** Do you write for an audience?

**SS:** Well, you know, that’s an interesting question because, here again, the question comes up, what is the audience? Who is the audience? In a way, you must write for yourself as a certain kind of audience. In the midst of writing, it always feels as though I’m writing for the thing itself. I’m writing to have the thing itself be true. And then I feel like an audience would be able to relate to it. The theatre’s about a relationship.

**AL:** Between the actors and the audience?

**SS:** If there’s no relationship onstage, there’s not going to be any in the theatre. But that has to be answered first in the writing. If you and I sit down on stage as two actors, and we don’t have a relationship, what’s the point? A relationship’s both invisible and tangible at the same time, and you can see it between actors. You can also see the absence of it. If it’s there, the audience is related immediately.

Structure and Themes

THE FAMILY DRAMA

The Family Drama is a staple of realism from the late 19th century and a form that Americana drama has been attached to, even defined by, for much of the 20th century in works by Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Beth Henley. As in most realistic well-made plays, these dramas are marked by constrained time and space, a long held and now unearthed family tension or secret, and a scene of confrontation, often triggered by a seemingly objective outsider. Sam Shepard’s plays *Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child* (produced at Rep Stage in 1993 and directed by Vincent Lancisi), and *True West* have been called his “family trilogy.” One could easily add *Fool for Love* (produced at Rep Stage in 2003 directed by Jackson Phippin) and *A Lie of The Mind* (produced at Rep Stage in 2009 directed by Xerxes Mehta). All five plays are loosely stitched together with their motifs of often absent or mysterious fathers, toweringly mythic sometimes violent figures that infect through their distance; non-maternal matriarchs; and damaged siblings linked through shifting identities and transgressed boundaries. Shephard lures us in through seemingly realistic settings and dialogue, even setting up the conventional revelation of skeletons in the closet and the subsequent confrontation, only to have the narrative take a distinct left turn into the abyss.
The Play

FATHERS

In 1979, Shepard wrote of his father: “his prize is an original Al Jolson 78 with the jacket taped...all his walls are covered with pictures...each picture is a point of view. Like peering out through different windows into intricate landscapes. He spent all the food money I’d given him on Bourbon. Filled the ice box with bottles. Had his hair cut short lie a World War II fighter pilot. He gleamed every time he ran his hand across the bristles. Said they used to cut it short like that so their helmets would fit. Showed me how the shrapnel scars still showed on the nape of his neck. My Dad lives alone on the desert. He says he doesn’t fit with people.”

Shepard’s father was a pilot during World War II who had trouble readjusting to peacetime. He would disappear for long periods, then suddenly reappear, without explanation. In the play Fool for Love, a character called the Old Man says he was once married to Barbara Mandrell “in my mind,” and “that’s realism.” At the time, Mr. Shepard said, his father was “off in the middle of the desert living in this little house with a picture of Barbara Mandrell on the wall.”

Only once did Rogers see a play written by his son, Buried Child, at a theater in Santa Fe. “He was stoned drunk,” Mr. Shepard said, “and he started yelling at the actors, telling them that what they were depicting was untrue. He knew because he was in the play. And they kicked him out of the theater.” In 1984, Rogers, coming out of a bar, was run over by a car and died.
BROTHERS

Shepard had no brothers. In explaining his focus on siblings, he said: “You feel yourself to be in a dual identity. Rather than making a psychological issue out of that, I’ve divided it into brothers. You have these two forces that are in fact part of one entity. To externalize this into brothers seems plausible for fiction or theater. Also, I think there are friendships that are akin to brotherly feelings.” In *True West*, the two brothers represent two aspects of the author. Mr. Shepard admitted that he identified more with Lee, “the rougher brother.”

WHAT IS THE “TRUE WEST”?

In the United States, the West has always symbolized new beginnings, expansiveness, the untamable wilderness, in manifestations as diverse as Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn*, the denizens of the territory of Oklahoma in the musical of that name, or the countless cowboys and pioneers populating that national mythmaker, American film, particularly in the hands of John Ford, William Boyd, John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and James Stewart, rugged men all with a strong sense of right and wrong, of establishing the heroes in the white hat.

Ironically, in real life, the national impulse has been to domesticate these desert wildernesses, to create permanent mirages through the artificial channeling of massive amounts of water in order to establish lush gardens and golf courses—a “Paradise” supported by Botanists and houseplants. The result has been an environmental disaster leading to disintegrating and unstable landscapes.

The last untamed wilderness is often considered to be Alaska where the character of Mom has been travelling but she returns disappointed saying that it made her feel desperate.
References

**Hoppalong Cassidy:** a fictional cowboy hero created in 1904 by the author Clarence E. Mulford, who wrote a series of popular short stories and twenty-eight novels based on the character. The character has been the center of films, television programs, radio programs, and comic books.

**Lonely Are the Brave:** a 1962 film written by Dalton Trumbo and starring Kirk Douglas in which an independent cowboy arranges to have himself locked up in jail in order to then escape with an old friend. He discovers the friend does not want to escape and then breaks out on his own pursued by sheriff Walter Matthau with jeeps and helicopters.

**Al Jolson (1886-1950):** an American singer, comedian, and actor in the 1910s through the 1940s. He was known as “The World's Greatest Entertainer.” Best remembered today as the star of the first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), in which he infamously performed in blackface.

**Lee Trevino:** A Mexican American professional golfer from Texas, who won six major championships during his career.

**The Grapevine:** A portion of the Ridge Route part of Interstate 5, a two-lane highway, from Los Angeles, California to the San Joaquin Valley. The Ridge Route was the first automobile highway linking the Central Valley with the Los Angeles Basin.

It was laid in a sinuous fashion through the ridges and gullies of the Sierra Pelona Mountains to the Tejon Pass around 1910. The northern portion of this highway, which became a part of U.S. Route 99, was known as “The Grapevine.”
Mojave: a U.S. desert that occupies a portion of southeastern California and smaller parts of central California, southern Nevada, southwestern Utah and northwestern Arizona.

Geronimo: “the one who yawns”; (June 16, 1829 – February 17, 1909) was a prominent leader and medicine man from the Bedonkohe band of the Chiricahua Apache tribe. From 1850 to 1886 Geronimo joined with members of three other Chiricahua Apache bands—the Tchihende, the Tsokanende and the Nednhi—to carry out numerous raids as well as resistance to US and Mexican military campaigns in the northern Mexico states of Chihuahua and Sonora, and in the southwestern American territories of New Mexico and Arizona. Geronimo’s raids and related combat actions were a part of the prolonged period of the Apache–United States conflict, which started with American settlement in Apache lands following the end of the war with Mexico in 1848.

During Geronimo’s final period of conflict from 1876 to 1886 he “surrendered” three times and accepted life on the Apache reservations in Arizona.

Handicap (in regards to golf): a numerical measure of a golfer’s potential playing ability, based on the tees played for a given course. It allows players of different skill levels to play against each other on somewhat equal terms. The higher the handicap of a player, the poorer the player is relative to those with lower handicaps.

California coyotes: the coyote is a member of the dog family and is native to California. They are one of the three different types of wild dogs found in North America. The coyote resembles a small German shepherd dog with the exception of the long snout and bushy, black tipped tail. Its high pitched, yodel-like yapping can frequently be heard at night and the sound can travel up to 3 miles or more.

Their name comes from the Aztec word for species, coyotl. The coyote was called “song dog” by American Indians and the scientific name Canis latrans means “barking Dog.”
From the Director

BIO

Vincent M. Lancisi founded Everyman Theatre in October of 1990 and has directed over 35 productions including Aubergine, M. Butterfly, Noises Off, Dot, Death of A Salesman, Under the Skin, Blithe Spirit, Deathtrap, Tribes, The Glass Menagerie, The Beaux’ Stratagem, August: Osage County, You Can’t Take It With You, Stick Fly, All My Sons, Two Rooms, Rabbit Hole, The Cherry Orchard, Doubt, Much Ado About Nothing, The Cone Sister, And a Nightingale Sang, The School for Scandal, A Number, Amadeus, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Buried Child, The Last Night of Ballyhoo, A Delicate Balance, Hedda Gabler, Proof, Uncle Vanya and The Last Five Years. In addition to his work at Everyman, he has taught acting and directing at Towson University, University of Maryland, Catholic University, Howard Community College, and at Everyman Theatre. He is a member of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers. Vincent sits on the boards for the Bromo Tower Arts & Entertainment District and the Market Center Merchants Association. In the past, he has sat on the boards of the Baltimore Theatre Alliance and the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance as well as panels for the Maryland State Arts Council. Vincent holds his undergraduate degree in Theatre from Boston College and his master’s degree in Directing from The Catholic University of America.
Design

SET DESIGN, By Nate Sinnott

DIRECTED BY: VINCENT LANCISI
SET DESIGN BY: NATE SINNOTT

REPORTS/REVIEWS
EDUCATIONAL VERSION

12. True West AUDIENCE GUIDE
TRUE WEST

The Production

TRUE WEST Cast

Tim Getman* (LEE)

Daniel Corey** (AUSTIN)

James Whalen* (SAUL KIMMER)

Valerie Lash (MOM)

AEA Member  EMC
Questions for Discussion

1. Identify some images or symbols that you connect with the idea of the American West. Next, identify from where these images or symbols originate and how they are or have been used. Is there historical accuracy to them? Have they been created to promote an ideal or product?

2. Austin and Lee are extremely different; that’s one of the reasons they fight. But they are also very similar—that’s another reason they fight. Create a Venn diagram of the two characters. On the outer circles write the things that make them different. In the inner circle, write the things that make them the same. Now, think of someone with whom you don’t see eye to eye (parent, sibling, cousin, peer at school, etc.) and create your own Venn diagram for you and that person.

3. The Mom character is only in the play for a short time. She comes back to her house expecting one thing and finds another. Using the evidence from the lines below, write two inner monologues for the Mom: one inner monologue about what she expected to see when she came back and one inner monologue about what she actually sees. Make these very descriptive.

   Mom: What happened in here?
   Mom: What’re all these toasters doing here?
   Mom: (To Lee) what happened to your shirt?
   Mom: I just started missing all my plants...Oh, they’re all dead aren’t they.
   Austin: Stay here, Mom. This is where you live.
   Mom: I don’t recognize it at all

4. What do the terms home and family mean to you? In what ways have these concepts been supportive or destructive for you? For the characters in the play?

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Theater Etiquette

Attending the theater will be a positive experience for everyone if you observe a few simple courtesies:

- Turn off and put away all electronic devices prior to entering the theater.
- Taking photographs and video recording in the theater is prohibited.
- Do not place your feet on the seat in front of you.
- The actors onstage can see and hear the audience just as well as the audience can see and hear them. Please refrain from talking or moving around during the performance as it can be distracting to the actors, as well as to other audience members.
- Feel free to respond to the action of the play through appropriate laughter and applause. The actors enjoy this type of communication from the audience!
- Have fun! Attending theater should be an enjoyable experience.