

Bats in the belfry: ‘True West’

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It’s a batty sort of show, Sam Shepard’s *True West*, and I mean that in the best possible way: a loony surreal flight in the night, a mighty swing of the situational bat, a whack upside your headbone hard enough to take your breath away – as happens to brother Lee, although the choking mechanism’s an old-fashioned telephone cord, not a bat.

Profile Theatre’s new production of Shepard’s swift 1980 cage fight of a play is a fitting capper for its season of Shepard plays, which gives way come January to a fresh season of plays by Sarah Ruhl (*Dead Man’s Cell Phone*; *In the Next Room*, or *The Vibrator Play*; *Passion Play*; *Orlando*).



Ferrucci and Newman in “True West: brotherly hate. Photo: David Kinder

But first, *True West*. In spite of a couple of anachronisms – that wall phone, a manual typewriter that gets bashed within a keystroke of its life with a golf club – Shepard’s viciously comic tall tale holds up well, because its truculent heart is pretty much timeless: brawling brothers, as old as Cain and Abel; intellect versus instinct, as old as humanity itself. Shepard tinkered with these themes throughout his career, from his early experimental plays to his mature family dramas and in-between projects such as 1972’s musical horn-locker *The Tooth of Crime*, which in certain ways feels like a primer for *True West*.

Adriana Baer directs Profile’s *True West* with an eye for its swaggering comedy and a major assist from fight choreographer Kristen Mun, who knows a body tackle from a headlock and isn’t afraid to let the plates and foodstuffs fly. The tale is elemental: reason versus passion, or, in ring terms, boxer versus slugger. Austin (a nicely clipped and eventually unraveling Nick Ferrucci) is an aspiring screenwriter, an Ivy League grad with a deal he’s close to sealing as he bats away at a final draft in his absent mother’s home in Southern California, near the desert, where the coyotes yap in the breeze. Trouble is, his shiftless brother Lee (Ben Newman, all reflex and ooze) has shown up unannounced, hellbent on casing Mom’s neighborhood for a few easily snatchable TVs to fence, and pretty much throwing Austin completely off his game.

At first the brothers merely annoy each other: competing and divergent chips off the same block. That changes when the movie agent Saul shows up (Duffy Epstein, in a broadly funny performance dripping with SoCal charm and smarm), ready to ink the deal with Austin until Lee horns in, spinning an outrageous tale about “two lame-brains chasing each other across Texas,” and Saul does a one-eighty. He always goes with his gut, he says. Suddenly Lee’s in, and Austin’s out in the cold.

You can read this tale a lot of ways, and I like to think it has something to do with the creative process: Austin the craftsman, the careful builder, the rationalist, the erudite smith who knows how to put things together; Lee the wild man, the imaginative dreamer, the guy who picks something elemental out of the ether and follows it where it dangerously leads. The two detest each other, and they need each other, because art requires both wildness and craftsmanship: complementary sides of an uncomfortable whole. Like Harold Pinter in pretty much all of his plays, and John Fowles in his novel *The Magus*, Shepard eschews the notion of the elevating “niceness” of art, arguing instead for something more basic, and roiling, and awe-ful: art as terror, perhaps, but also art as necessary expression of the duality of the human beast.

With Alan Schwanke’s open yet intimate set, Sara Ludeman’s sly costumes (check out Epstein’s Vegas cocktail-bar duds) and Shareth Patel’s yawping, chittering sound design, Profile’s True West looks and sounds good. Dad’s an unseen character, referred to repeatedly in absentia, a drunken wastrel whose impact on his sons remains intense, if in very differing ways. And Mom (Diane Kondrat) shows up late in the game, acting somewhere between befuddlement and pure matter-of-fact.

I’ve seen more psychologically vicious productions of the play. In spite of the strenuous calisthenics, there’s an amiability to this one: neither brother seems truly bent on killing the other. Like Oedipus and his dad, Lee and Austin never quite figure out they’re in this thing together. But they do feel the stirring of a common blood: they lack the viciousness for that final killer blow. If you consider the play as a tall tale, an eternal playing-out of the struggle between reason and the heavy bear who goes with it, that works: same song, billionth verse. And as it’s a song close to the mysterious heart of the human predicament, we sing it over and over again.