

'True West' traces strained interactions of 'civilized' and 'savage' brothers: theater review

By Richard Wattenberg For The Oregonian/OregonLive
on November 09, 2014



Nick Ferrucci (left) and Ben Newman perform in "True West," the 1981 play by Sam Shepard at the Profile Theatre. (David Kinder, courtesy of Profile Theatre)

So, what and where is America's "real" West, the "true West" that provides the title for Sam Shepard's dark family play, which is currently receiving an energetic, well-shaped and surprisingly humorous production as the closing offering in Profile Theatre's 2014 Sam Shepard season?

Is this true West the wild untamed deserts, mountains, and forests that form the background of classic Western movies and pulp fiction? Or is it the New West of broad boulevards, crisscrossing freeways, extensive shopping malls and urban sprawl? Probably it is both and more — not a real place but a mythic region. Perhaps the late-19th/early 20th century historian Frederick Jackson Turner captured the essence of this imagined space when he described the frontier West as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization."

Certainly, savagery and civilization confront each other in Shepard's 1981 "True West." Set in a modern Southern California suburb and not a frontier West, the play traces the somewhat strained interaction of two brothers: the seemingly "civilized" Austin, an Ivy League educated, upwardly mobile family man, who is seeking an entry into the Hollywood screen-writing industry, and the more "savage" Lee, a somewhat anti-social, desert roving petty thief, who — freed from normal communal restraints -- embodies a dangerous unpredictability.

Austin is house-sitting for his mother who has gone off on trip to Alaska. Lee suddenly appears, and the two very different brothers find themselves engaged in a strange contest whereby each eventually tries to master the other's life style, but the chasm between them remains unbridgeable. In this confrontation, Shepard captures more than the unresolvable tension between the brothers, a tension that lies at the heart of the so-called true West; he conveys a sense of a conflict that lies at the heart of the nation as well as within the soul of each and every one of us.

Highlights: This production directed by Profile Theatre's Artistic Director Adriana Baer gives us a good clear sense of the contrasting natures of Austin (Nick Ferrucci) and Lee (Ben Newman). Baer nicely molds the action — keeping the play moving at a vigorous pace but also not eschewing long moments of silence. What is most refreshing about this production is the humor that the director and actors have mined from the text; the acting style as a whole is marked by a broad directness that welcomes laughter.

Most Valuable Performer: Given the play's focus on Austin and Lee's relationship, Ferrucci and Newman have to share this honor. Both actors ably track their characters emotional arcs. This is especially true of Ferrucci's work as Austin. Ferrucci lucidly conveys Austin's "civilized" restraint early on; he speaks gently and carefully and moves tentatively with a slight stoop. But as Austin finds himself forced out of his comfort zone, as he begins to try to assume a lifestyle similar to that of Lee, Ferrucci becomes more explosive vocally and physically, and his performance takes on an extremely athletic dimension. Ferrucci's Austin stumbles and trips about the stage in a broadly depicted drunken stupor or enthusiastically flits around the stage kitchen making toast in the many toasters he has stolen before the penultimate scene. Bending, hopping, flopping, he seems to have a body made of rubber. There are many possibilities for physical humor here, and Ferrucci doesn't miss them.

Newman also does a skillful job of tracking the transformation of Lee. Though considerably shorter than Ferrucci's Austin, Newman's off-the-cuff, unflappable manner still convincingly intimidates Austin during the early scenes. From moment to moment, Newman adeptly shifts gears — slipping instantaneously from a coarse charming ease to an electric volatility — and in doing so nicely personifies Lee's unpredictability, but as Newman's Lee tries to enter Austin's screenwriting world his frustrations with his inability to write give his Lee a progressively more sullen tone.

The two leads are amply supported by Diane Kondrat, who appears in the last scene as Austin and Lee's somewhat oblivious Mom, and especially by Duffy Epstein's performance as Saul Kimmer, the Hollywood producer who works with Austin and then Lee. Epstein gives what is usually presented as a rather flat caricature of a Hollywood producer an intriguing depth, which makes his seemingly sudden and whole-hearted endorsement of Lee at the expense of Austin more interesting than is usually the case.

Low Notes: Interestingly enough the strength of this production — highlighting the play's humor — may also lead to the production's weakness. There is, at times, a certain buffoonishness in Newman's Lee, which undermines the threatening danger that the character can manifest as the exponent of a savage potentiality, and Ferrucci's broadly comic physicality occasionally overwhelms the darkness of the script and distracts us from the troubling undertones. What could be a more disturbing play loses some of its sting as the balance here shifts perhaps too far in the direction of comedy.

Most Surprising Moment: When in the last scene Mom suddenly returns — a vision in white, dressed in white skirt and blouse with a white jacket -- the instant transformation of Newman's Lee and then Ferrucci's Austin into distraught, seemingly repentant sons makes for a surprisingly amusing scene. But this is a transformation of short duration; the sons are soon again literally at each other's throats.

Best Moments: There are a number of very striking moments in this production. Newman's Lee slowly beating a typewriter with a golf club and Ferrucci's Austin kneeling before Newman's Lee holding up a plate of toast as if he were making an offering to a god are effective and resonant images. One moment that is laden with intriguing Western associations comes during the climactic brawl between the sons. There is a point when one can see Austin attempting to wrestle Lee down as if he were a steer in a rodeo and to wrap a telephone wire around the snorting Lee's neck as if he were a calf in a tie-down roping event.

Take-Away: A sense of the Southern California suburban world is nicely conveyed by Alan Schwanke's set representing a kitchen with dining alcove, Kristeen Willis Crosser's evocative lighting that moves back and forth between dreamy moonlight and brutal, smoggy Southern California sunlight, Sharath Patel's suggestive sound design, and Sara Ludeman's character appropriate costumes. But as detailed and specific as these elements are, they also suggest the larger mythic patterns that underlie the play. Although a certain amount of the disturbing dangerousness of the play may be lost in this production, the blend of realism and myth is still apparent: within this Southern California suburban world we witness the unfolding of a sibling relationship that still resonates with a primal archetypal power.