

Westward Bro

Destruction Is the Real Subject of Profile Theatre's True West

By Megan Burbank



THE PROVERBIAL GUN on the wall in Sam Shepard's *True West* is a loaf of bread, and it goes off in the play's second act, when a stack of toast becomes the unlikely embodiment of years of rage and animosity between brothers. There are other casualties—dead plants, chairs knocked over, a phone cradle ripped from the wall, a typewriter bludgeoned apart, kitchen drawers upended and their contents strewn across the set, and there's even a (tiny, contained) fire.

There's something uniquely satisfying about watching a stage get trashed in the name of theater—it's a welcome disruption from the feeling of stasis that hinders more staid plays—and *True West* is very much a fuck-up-the-stage production. Profile Theatre's version, the finale in its season-long exploration of works by Sam Shepard, doesn't shrink from the playwright's violent physicality.

If you haven't seen it, *True West* is 100 minutes spent mostly with only two characters: Austin, a straitlaced, successful screenwriter (Nick Ferrucci's Austin is, by turns, amiable and desperate), who, while housesitting for his mother, finds himself thrown together with Lee, his deadbeat older brother (Ben Newman, last seen playing a hard-drinking man in *Third Rail Rep's Middletown*). Through Lee's expert conning—this is a man who casually steals televisions as a hobby—he manages to wrest an advance for an awful-sounding Old West-inspired script from a Hollywood producer, and enlists Austin's reluctant help writing it. Their tenuous agreement launches a series of surprising and terrible role reversals, building toward a conclusion that, while seemingly inevitable, is no less shocking when it arrives. Throughout, Shepard's dialogue is spiked with bleak humor, which may be what makes the critical difference between melodrama and something more nuanced.

I had some qualms about reviewing *True West*. Its world is one where women don't really exist, and in the wrong hands, I could see it turned into something like Lee's awful cowboy script. I shouldn't have worried. Profile's new artistic director, Adriana Baer, directs *True West*, and she keeps the play focused on Shepard's original intention that it be an exploration of the self, of "what it feels like to be two-sided."

Lee and Austin are fatally two-sided. They are flawed people capable of awful things. But it is their capacity to surprise even themselves that *True West* needles over again and again, and as an audience member, real surprise may be one of the best things live theater has to offer.