

BACK STAGE WEST

May 16-22, 2002

THE ACTORS
TRADE
NEWSPAPER

TRUE WEST at Deaf West Theatre



Reviewed by Laura Weimert

Latently it seems when Deaf West gets a well-known play in its hands, the results are not merely competent, they are inspired. It now mounts Sam Shepard's best-known play, about two seemingly dissimilar brothers engaged in a power struggle that plays as a carefully wrought role reversal. Expertly cast with two abundantly talented actors, this production also adds a new dimension by making one brother a hearing character and the other deaf. The choice asks us to view the play through an intriguing lens: Here the brothers are not only distanced from each other by education and temperament, they are also distanced by the very way they experience the world, by the language in which they express themselves. Deborah LaVine's direction is clean and clear—her blocking balances the brothers and creates tight, tense pictures and a shifting of levels that bolsters the text. Kudos must be given as well to American Sign Language masters Linda Bove and Freda Norman, who have translated the text into expressive, often fierce signing.

To review the plot: The Ivy-League-schooled writer Austin has temporarily moved into mom's house to finish and sell a screenplay. Enter his brother Lee, a drifter, heavy drinker, and powder keg whose mere presence is enough to unsettle. Troy Kotsur gives a muscular portrayal of Lee in both a physical and psychological sense. Avoiding the merely menacing, he instills fear by imbuing his every expression—his gait, the look on his face, the manner in which he signs—with a shifting, unpredictable force. His fine, specific portrayal makes it clear that we are always just this side of violence.

If we didn't know Bill O'Brien as a versatile skilled actor, we would think he was simply very well cast in the role of Austin. His discomfort around Lee, his progressive anxiety, and his slow transformation into a weak, angry man unfold gracefully. One scene in particular fascinates: When

the film producer (played by an appropriately smarmy Jonathan Goldstein) comes to meet with the writer Austin but Lee decides to pitch his own wild stories. Austin is in the awkward position of translating Lee's signed story ideas to the producer. He maintains a level of politeness yet subtly conveys that he is monumentally irritated. O'Brien masters the tough trick of simultaneously expressing conflicting emotions: a sibling's respect for his brother and an exasperating competitiveness.

A thoroughly provocative piece of theatre.

"True West," presented by and at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hollywood. Thurs.-Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 2 & 8 p.m., Sun. 3 p.m. May 11-June 9, 315-20. (818) 762-2773.



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ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Deaf West Adds an Intriguing Layer to Shepard's 'True West'

Theater Beat

Structurally, Sam Shepard's "True West" is a deceptively simple play, essentially a long and often bitterly funny conversation between two estranged brothers, one an Ivy League educated screenwriter, the other a volatile petty criminal. But scratch the desiccated surface and unexpected depths seep up, as brackish as the puddles at Badwater.

Director Deborah LaVine takes an enjoyable if somewhat pedestrian saunter through Shepard's familiar terrain in her staging of the play at Deaf West Theatre. Typical of Shepard country, "True West" brings untamed nature into savage conflict with the dubious "civilization" of urban-sprawl suburbia. Yael Pardess' set perfectly recreates a tacky middle-class home near the San Gabriel foothills. Lighting designer Michael Gilliam evokes the glittering sunrises of the nearby desert, while sound designer Scott Alan Smith's howling coyotes disturbingly affirm the feral forces lurking nearby.

LaVine, who also directed the acclaimed production of "A Streetcar Named Desire" at Deaf West, uses a variety of ingenious techniques to bridge the divide between her hearing and deaf performers. Offstage actors "dub" the dialogue for the signing actors on stage. Captions, projected above the stage, are also employed at intervals.



ED KRIEGER

Troy Kotsur, left, and Bill O'Brien in "True West" at Deaf West Theatre.

Although thoughtful and workmanlike, LaVine's staging is a somewhat standard reissue of a play that has been produced so frequently, it is now the butt of deconstructive parodies, such as the antic and imaginative "Go True West," recently seen at the Lillian. The most novel and distinguishing conceit here is that Austin (Bill O'Brien), the "good" brother, is hearing, and that Lee (Troy Kotsur), his wastrel sibling, is deaf. It's a brilliant innovation, one that dovetails perfectly with Shepard's themes of familial alienation. After all, it is the brothers' inability to communicate on equal terms that sets the stage for catastrophe.

The hearing O'Brien simultaneously speaks and signs through-

out the play—a daunting task, heroically accomplished. However, the real point of seeing this production is Kotsur, one of the finest stage actors, hearing or deaf, to emerge in recent years. As Lee, the wild and yearning opportunist who taunts his "tame" brother past endurance, Kotsur is so electrifying, you can smell the ozone crackling in the air.

F. Kathleen Foley

"True West," Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 2 p.m.; Sundays, 3 p.m. Ends June 9. \$15-\$20. (818) 762-2773. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes.

True West

Deaf-West Theatre provides an innovative and impressive production of Sam Shepard's oft-done Cain and Abel comedy/drama

Reviewed by Dave DePino

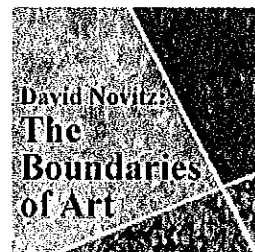
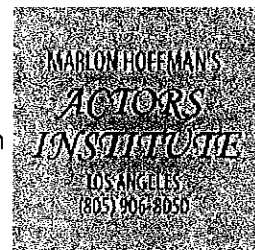
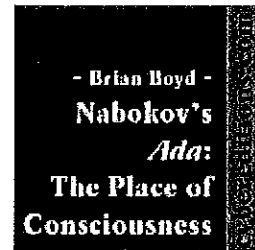
Can anyone think of a theatre company in L.A. that hasn't done a production of Sam Shepard's "True West" in the last year or so? Well, this time it's the Deaf West Theatre throwing its hat into the Shepard wind with its rendition of the twenty-year-old, dark comedy/drama. Revitalizing the good-brother/bad-brother, Cain and Abel syndrome, Shepard places age-old sibling rivalry into a south west setting as two, adult, estranged brothers come together in the working class, southern California home of their mother, who is vacationing in Alaska.

Austin (Bill O'Brien) is a squeaky-clean sort of a guy, married with kids and a fairly successful, free-lance screenwriting career. He has sequestered himself at his mother's temporarily vacated home to finish his latest script. The script, a love story, has caught the eye of a slightly oily, yet substantial producer, Saul (Jonathan Goldstein). It looks like a slam-dunk as soon as Austin puts the finishing touches on it. The humid heat and loud crickets are the least of Austin's problems in finishing the work as his long lost, brother decides to pay a visit to dear ol' mom. Lee (Troy Kotsur) is a ne'er-do-well drifter with a penchant for petty thievery. He is just slightly larger than life in a somewhat menacing way. There is an immediate disconnect of any sense of fraternal affinity, however, they do try to be cautiously cordial, Austin more so than Lee. Lee also decides to stay at Mom's for awhile. He intimidates Austin into letting him borrow his car so he can peruse and case the neighborhood. Somehow Lee manages to get Austin to work-up an outline of a lamebrain cowboy story he has in mind.

When Saul shows up to meet with Austin, Lee wangles a golf date with the producer - without Austin. Off stage and on the greens, Lee pitches his own story and steals attention away from Austin's project. Is Lee's western a "go" and Austin's love story dead in the water? This is when the Cain and Abel tee shirts get swapped.

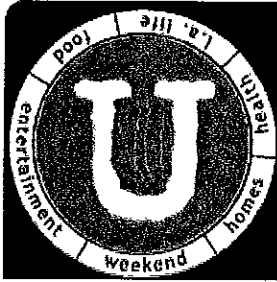
Deaf West utilizes a great many different techniques to make their productions readily accessible and totally enjoyable for the deaf, hearing impaired and hearing audiences alike. Whether it's interpreters off-stage or positioned on stage or choreographed into the action, opera-over-titles, earphones or two persons sharing the same role and actually interacting on stage - or any combination of possibilities - it's always memorable. What seems like it might be a distraction only heightens the theatrical experience. Anyway, five minutes into this (or any of their) production, you have already bought the staging process and the gravy is the wonderful performances given, both spoken and signed.

Kotsur, in this and all previous performances, has proven himself to be an interesting, exciting and dynamic actor. He signs (American Sign Language) with the same passion he embraces for the characters he portrays. His entire being is one gigantic tool that he capably uses to fully realize these characters. He has a way of dominating the stage, but relinquishing it generously by his intense focus on the drama, leaving himself as just another player of the piece. However, the eye always seems to drift in his direction. There is so much going on in his face alone. O'Brien (both speaking and signing) is also a dominant force, though through a lighter, softer character. His transition is slow and credible. As the meek,



he holds his own against tempestuous boldness. Their performances alone make this production worth seeing. Goldstein is more competent as Saul than he is as the voice of Lee. On the minus side, Freda Norman (voice by Donne McRea), as the mother, comes into the chaos and billows in ASL about the mess in her home without ever looking at it. Granted the small role is quite odd, out of place and terribly written, but Norman doesn't do much to try to make it credible. Although director Deborah LaVine does such a keenly measured job with the brothers, she must have dozed while the mom's performance squeaked by. Also a minus is the writing itself. In the last half of the second act the play falls apart completely. This may be one of Shepard's most popular plays, but it's far from his best. Real tough stuff for a deaf company, but it seems no challenge is too big for the marvelously talented folks at Deaf West. Yael Pardess's set appropriately presents the telling kind of home these boys grew up in. Michael Gilliam (lights), Young Lee (costumes) and Scott Alan Smith (sound) makes up the design team. Norman and Linda Bove do a marvelous job as ASL masters and translators.

Performing at the Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd. in North Hollywood; Thurs. through Sat. at 8 p.m.; also Sat. at 2 p.m. & Sun at 3 p.m.; through June 9. Tickets \$15-\$20, call 818/762-2773 (Voice) or 818/762-2782 (TDD).



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EMAIL ARTICLE

Published: Tuesday, June 4, 2002

Daily News

Shepard play loses something in translation

By Julio Martinez
Correspondent

Award-winning playwright Sam Shepard's sojourn into the dysfunctional relationship of two adult brothers has become a sure-fire staple on local stages. There have been a dozen productions of "True West" in L.A.-area theaters during the last two years. North Hollywood-based Deaf West Theatre has taken on Shepard's searing confrontation between well-educated but emotionally inhibited screenwriter Austin (Bill O'Brien) and his brutish, volatile low-life thief of a sibling Lee (Troy Kotsur) with mixed results.

TRUE WEST

Our rating: 2 1/2 stars

Where: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday; through Sunday.

Tickets: \$15 to \$20. Call (818) 762-2773 (voice) or (818) 762-2782 (TDD).

O'Brien, who is hearing, and Kotsur, who is deaf, certainly add a new dimension to the brothers' lifelong schism, but they seldom evoke the aura of catharsis and palpable danger that needs to exist between Austin and Lee, handicapped in part by the out-of-sync "voicing" of Lee by Jonathan Goldstein.

Set in the kitchen of their mom's Inland Empire home, the production follows the efforts of successful but monumentally insecure Austin to prepare a film proposal for movie mogul Saul Kimmer (Jonathan Goldstein) while house-sitting for his mother as she vacations in Alaska. Invading the premises -- and Austin's sensibilities -- is brother Lee, a small-time burglar and drifter who is as menacing as he is innately observant of everything happening around him.

Shepard carries sibling rivalry beyond the boundaries of civilized interaction as Lee bamboozles not-too-bright Kimmer into dumping Austin's love story idea in favor of his off-the-cuff chase yarn. By the second act, over-his-head Lee is struggling to type out a proper script outline while a near-catatonic Austin wallows in booze and self-pity.

Despite Deborah LaVine's laudably economical direction, the production is seriously undermined by Goldstein's underwhelming off-stage voicing of Lee. Goldstein doesn't communicate Kotsur's emotional intensity or mood swings, seriously undermining the subtle shifts in the dominant/submissive relationship of Lee and Austin.

What does come through in O'Brien's sharply defined reactions to Kotsur's highly communicative body language is the eventual unveiling of the psychic similarities between two otherwise thoroughly disparate personalities. This underscores the inherent humor within the ever-deteriorating attempts of Lee and Austin to come to some level of understanding.

Goldstein is much more successful in his portrayal of wishy-washy Kimmer. The same cannot be said for Freda Norman's brief but unfocused outing as Mom (voiced by Donna McRae).

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