

ARTS

Sheppard's *True West* thoroughly enjoyable

by Karen L. Redford

"Sibling rivalry has never been so funny," claims the brochure on Northern Light Theatre's first play of the season, *True West*. Director Sam Sheppard's wit, combined with artistic director Jace van der Veen's impeccable sense of comic timing certainly had an enthusiastic Thursday night audience shouting with laughter and applause after each scene.

Sheppard, however, seeks to do more than merely entertain his audience in this exciting new play. He presents us with the American success story embodied in two brothers, who meet at their mother's house after a long absence.

Austin, the younger brother, has found success through the respectable academic route - Ivy League schools, writing, Hollywood, a wife, two children, a house in the suburbs of California, and a car. His older brother Lee has succeeded and survived in the tradition of the Old West - on sheer guts and gall. His world revolves around gambling, fighting, and dealing with nature on its own terms.

The scene is set for the dredging up of childhood animosities and love, dissatisfactions and longings; and Sheppard weaves all these

tensions and struggles into a brilliantly intricate plot, rich with irony, humour and foreshadowing.

The richness goes beyond the loaded dialogue, however. From the moment that Austin lights a candle in the black theatre, and we are enveloped by the sound of crickets and coyotes, the possibility for something more dark and exciting is opened up.

Wendell Smith portrays Lee with consummate sleaze - from his slouch and gravelly voice, down to the texture of his skin. Animalism and latent violence read subtly but convincingly in every move and gesture. Austin and we, the audience, feel safe in our bright cheerful suburban setting; but as the play progresses something menacing and mysterious begins to take over, erupting in the final violence.

Jace van der Veen uses a strong and precise hand in his direction. His influence is evident in each studied pause and look. The reversal of two brothers' positions and their prowling around each other like beasts in a cage, are all carefully choreographed so that nothing is lost on the audience.

Robyn Ayles' set conveyed not only the cheerfulness and sterility of suburbia, but also the elements of a jungle to indicate the underlying element of animalism.

I felt that there was a genuine effort made in the direction of another level, the undercurrent of savagery and violence that lurks just beneath the American consciousness, but I'm afraid I didn't feel it so much as I saw indications of the possibility of it being there.

I didn't feel the tension in the brothers' initial encounter, and Robert Clinton's empty gestures of frustration did nothing to enhance this. He has a wonderful sense of timing, but gave a surprisingly weak performance. Our interest in the opposition of the two brothers relies on a confrontation between two equal and opposing forces. Austin was no match for Lee from the word go. He brought onto the stage no sense of his wealth and success, his wife and family; and because he didn't come from a position of strength his frustration at having the rug slipped out from under him by Lee became necessarily forced. He should also watch his voice, which has a tendency to be high pitched; and constant mugging simply destroyed the believability of his character.

Greg Rogers gave a very competent performance as the Hollywood producer, Saul. He was much more successful at establishing a position of strength, to be eroded by fast-talking Lee.

The capacity for tension in this play is so great that the audience should be squirming in their seats, and laughing not because of the witty repartee, but because an awareness that something dark and unknown *beneath* the dialogue is making them so nervous they don't know what else to do with themselves.

Sam Sheppard has been described as a shaman of the American theatre, for his ability to take an audience and lure them into another world, forcing them to transcend ordinary things and see them from another plane of existence. If that sounds mystical, that's the way he intends theatre to be.

I never got lost in Sheppard's world until the final scene, and even this moment was undercut by the arrival of Lee Royce as the mother, who didn't seem to know what she was doing on stage, and consequently neither did the audience.

Northern Light Theatre has given us a thoroughly enjoyable show, and a rare and exciting opportunity to see one of America's greatest playwrights; but I missed the other level, the one that transforms theatre fun into theatre *magic*.

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