

## Review: Lab Theater's 'True West' finds laughter in the desert

By CHRIS SILK

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FORT MYERS — If you've ever wanted to see a typewriter demolished with a golf club, drop in on the Laboratory Theater of Florida's production of Sam Shepard play "True West." Come for the destruction, stay for the superb show.

Shepard, nominated for an Academy Award for portraying Chuck Yeager in "The Right Stuff," uses his work to explore the psyche of the American family through an off-kilter lens. "True West" features two brothers, writer Austin and drifter Lee, who fall apart, individually and as a family, while trying to create a screenplay in their mother's California home.

Director Stuart Brown plucks the strings of this crazy-person fiddle with deliberate care. Watching the neat, organized Austin (Shawn Genther) come unglued while dealing with unhinged, unkempt Lee (Michael Dunsworth) proves riotously funny. The verbal and physical boxing match includes such props as golf clubs, reams of paper, telephones, car keys and most amusingly, a stack of toast that flies through the air in a fountain of bread, butter and crumbs.

"True West" digs into the fraught relationships of family - jealous brothers, absent fathers, missing mothers - and drills for understanding of how dreams get derailed. Brown highlights the absurdist nature of Shepard's script, with the focus on comedy allowing the bubbling tension between the siblings to build in a natural fashion. Audiences won't realize they're watching a play with serious themes until the set lies in ruins and the coyotes start howling for the long-lost American West.

Dunsworth's ferocious, feral portrait of lonely wanderer Lee propels the play forward. Lean and hungry doesn't begin to describe a character that stalks the mild-mannered but successful Austin like a wolf sniffing weaker prey. Lee might be insane, but he also utters most of the truths in the play - in between mountains of delusional ramblings. He's torn between wanting a tiny bit of normalcy and his freedom - and Dunsworth captures that in all its screaming, pounding, kicking, tantrum-throwing glory.

Genther plays the mild-mannered yin to Dunsworth's angry yang. His slow unraveling

proves equally fascinating, as Austin tolerates Lee's demands, then watches in mute fury as his brother derails a deal with producer Saul (Al Richman). Genther's boozy, second-half breakdown is executed perfectly; he first warms himself by the light of a flickering television (it's a fire - Western metaphors fill the script), then feeds himself with the output of a raftload of toasters stolen from neighboring homes.

The physical space of the square kitchen set, built in just 48 hours and which has to be taken apart and put back together over the weekend, resembles a boxing ring. Faded yellow cabinets (full of the most amazing collection of junk), overstuffed shelves of curios, breezy window curtains and a cheery sink mat suggest domestic bliss - until it all comes apart.

Part of what Brown and his cast does so well is use the space as a metaphorical squared circle - with the brothers pushing each other's buttons back and forth across the stage like two battered prize-fighters. One of the play's funniest moments comes when the unnamed Mom (Louise Wigglesworth) returns from vacation to see her house a shambles, the plants dead and beer bottles strewn everywhere. Dunsworth and Genther crouch by the refrigerator like cornered rats and go "Mom!" with a shocked look on their faces.

A constant, authentic hum of crickets and coyotes rises and falls throughout the background of the play. A wall-sized projection of a Western landscape filled with cacti fills the wall behind the set; the trick kind of works, but isn't needed - it yanks the audience attention away from the set into "out there." In addition to an indecisive moment with the lights during the first few minutes of the play, audiences missed Lee's first titanic swing at the typewriter.

"True West" heads off into the desert in search of some crumb of meaning in modern life. It returns with a howlingly funny two hours of comedy wrapped in a mediation about family, frustration, coyotes, crickets and creativity. Don't miss Michael Dunsworth and Shawn Genther smashing each other and the stage to pieces each night. This one is a must-see.

*I've had the same pop-up toaster since 1995. E-mail me, [csilk@naplesnews.com](mailto:csilk@naplesnews.com), find me on Twitter at [@napleschris](https://twitter.com/napleschris) or read my [Stage Door theater blog](#). You can also sign up to [receive the Stage Door blog via email](#).*



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