A Production Analysis of

True West

a play by Sam Shepard

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

Guy Booher

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title was important. On the surface, it refers to the story that Lee is trying to write, a story about “the true west.” But beneath that it represents the search of the two brothers for meaning in their lives.

Sam Shepard frequently attacks contemporary American culture in his work. He emphasizes Man's spiritual relationship to the world through images and actions and shows how the superficial and temporary nature of the American tradition cuts Man off at his roots. Vivian Patrick and Mark Siegal write that “Through the image of the cowboy, Shepard examines America's failure to find comfortable roles, self-images, and modes of action in a traumatic, contemporary world.” My concept for the show is that Lee and Austin are two people that collide in their search for a true west that no longer exists.

Lee is the cowboy who has “spent a lot of time out on the desert” because he can't make it in the city. The only way he can get the things he needs is with money, and the only way he can get money is by stealing other peoples' appliances. This is unsatisfying, so he goes out to the desert to try to find peace and winds up getting even more out of touch with himself. He returns to the city in desperation to see if he can make it again only to find that he doesn't belong. His crude and gross mannerisms, such as wearing the same clothes for days on end and carrying a knife, don't fit into Society's'
acceptable norms of behavior. Lee has become violently sick of Society and the way people judge others on appearance. In a word, he is dangerous. Austin is the one who has been accepted into Society and has become a purveyor of its culture: a screenwriter. He has an Ivy League degree and a wife and kids. He has everything that a person could want, but he isn’t happy. He too feels that something is missing from his life. He has spent his life acquiring material things and still feels empty inside. He becomes a screenwriter because in dreams he can try to find a better life. After Saul drops his script for Lee’s, he learns how little his dreams mean. In Act II, the brothers seem to reverse roles with Lee trying to write and Austin breaking into people’s houses and stealing their appliances. Each brother thinks that the other is leading the “real” life and in switching roles they hope to find it for themselves. In the end they each find that neither is better off than the other and Austin tries to stop Lee from taking Mom’s things by strangling him.

The Father represents the life that Lee can expect from living on the desert. Like Lee, he has rejected Society, and suffers as an outcast. He resents his son Austin for being successful in a culture he despises. Austin describes his father’s sorrowful, alcoholic existence in his monologue at the end of scene seven.

Whereas the Father is drawn to the desert, Mom goes to
Alaska. This is a surface indication of their contrasting attitudes on life. Beneath the surface, we find that each parent has treated the family differently. Mom tries to give her sons everything, but her husband gives up on them. Mom represents the parent who tries to give her children everything but doesn't know what they need. To her, Lee is the bad child and Austin is the good boy. She never understood Lee's restlessness and punishes his behavior. Since Austin excelled in school and in Society, she encouraged his development in these areas. However, Mom never gave Lee and Austin instruction on living and surviving. When she discovers her plants are all dead her response is: "Well, that's one less thing to take care of I guess." This shows that life is not special to her, and that she never had any values to instill in her sons.

Saul represents the exploitation of the American dream. In his role as a producer, he is actually buying and selling people's dreams. The only thing that has meaning to him is money. Therefore, his word means nothing because he will say anything to make a profit. He is the slick manipulator, the used car salesman, who would cheat his own grandmother and never feel remorse. He has no rules to live by except those that deal with acquiring more money.

In staging the play my goal was too produce an ultra-realism where action occurred at a heightened intensity. Sam Shepard writes
adjusting intensity levels. Since there was no sound designer, audio elements will simply be the sounds of crickets and coyotes that are called for in the script.

Props were the most technically challenging since this play requires a large number of props, especially plants and toasters. We got about fifteen toasters and about twenty plants. Also enough appliances and accessories were needed to suggest a kitchen that someone actually uses. As with the set pieces, whatever could be found or borrowed was used. Knickknacks to suggest Mom, such as pictures of her children, kitchen magnets, and plant stands, were used since it is in her house that the action occurs.

III.

Casting was very difficult because I could honestly have cast everyone who showed up. March 11 and 12 were the two nights of auditions for True West. The first night three men and five women showed up to audition. I had them all read selections from two scenes and had each man read all of the male parts. I then had everyone re-read and asked them to play things differently than they had before because Dr. Yordon explained that this was a good way to see if the actor was flexible and directable. Everyone read well, so I called them all back for the next night.
On March 12, only one new person showed up and I read him in all the parts. By this time, I had a good idea that I wanted to use Shane Patterson as Austin because he was reading very well and, more importantly, he was listening to the other actors and reacting to them rather than just reading lines. He also seemed very directable. I re-read everybody with Shane in the part of Austin and tried to determine who would make the best Lee. I finally decided on David Frank because he was directable, and he seemed able to express Lee’s volatile shifts of emotions better than the other men. Between the remaining two actors, Jay Becker was the most directable and I felt he could play the part of the slickster, Saul, the best. I think that any one of the actresses who showed up could have easily played the part of Mom. They were all funny and very directable. I finally decided on Amy Rafa because she had a good sense of comic timing, she fit well with Shane and David physically, and because Dr. Yordon said that she was someone who needed a chance.

Finding a production staff was basically finding anybody who had time to spare. Liane Shaul, BSU’s Production Stage Manager, suggested I ask Diane Singer to be my stage manager, so I did and she accepted. I jumped at C.C. Conn’s offer to find my props. The rest I did myself and with help from members of the cast.
End Notes


IV. Scene Diagram

This section shows the process of blocking and analyzing motivation in a script for a dramatic production. For purposes of brevity, I have included only one scene with blocking and motivational notes. This is an example of the information necessary to direct a show. The numbers indicate blocking, and the letters indicate motivational units.
SCENE 1: night, sound of crickets in dark, candlelight appears in alcove illuminating Austin seated at glass table hunched over a writing notebook, pen in hand, cigarette burning in ashtray, cup of coffee, typewriter on table, stacks of paper, candle burning on table, soft moonlight fills kitchen illuminating Lee, beer in hand, six pack on counter behind him, he's leaning against sink, mildly drunk, takes slug of beer

Lee. So, Mom took off for Alaska huh?
Austin. Yeah.
Lee. Sorta' left you in charge.
Austin. Well, she knew I was coming down here so she offered me the place.
Lee. You keepin' the plants watered?
Austin. Yeah.
Lee. Keepin' the sink clean? She don't like even a single tea leaf in the sink ya' know.
Austin. (Trying to concentrate on writing) Yeah, I know.

(Pause)
Lee. She gonna' be up there a long time?
Austin. I don't know.
Lee. Kinda' nice for you, huh? Whole place to yourself.
Austin. Yeah, it's great.
Lee. Ya' got crickets anyway. Tons a' crickets out there. (Looks around kitchen) Ya' got groceries? Coffee?
AUSTIN. (Looking up from writing) What?
LEE. You got coffee?
AUSTIN. Yeah.
LEE. At's good. (Short pause) Real coffee? From the bean?
AUSTIN. Yeah. You want some?
LEE. Naw. I brought some uh—(Motions to beer)
AUSTIN. Help yourself to whatever's—(Motions to refrigerator)
LEE. I will. Don't worry about me. I'm not the one to worry about. I mean I can uh— (Pause) You always work by candlelight?
AUSTIN. No—un—Not always.
LEE. Just sometimes?
AUSTIN. (Puts pen down, rubs his eyes) Yeah. Sometimes it's soothing.
LEE. Isn't that what the old guys did?
AUSTIN. What old guys?
LEE. The Forefathers. You know.
AUSTIN. Forefathers?
LEE. Isn't that what they did? Candlelight burning into the night? Cabins in the wilderness.
AUSTIN. (Rubs hand through his hair) I suppose.
LEE. I'm not botherin' you am I? I mean I don't wanna break into yer uh—concentration or nothin'.
AUSTIN. No, it's all right.
LEE. That's good. I mean I realize that yer line a' work demands a lot'a concentration.
AUSTIN. It's okay.
LEE. You probably think that I'm not fully able to comprehend somethin' like that, huh?
AUSTIN. Like what?
LEE. That stuff yer doin'. That art. You know. Whatever you call it.
AUSTIN. It's just a little research.
ACT I

TRUE WEST

LEE. You may not know it but I did a little art myself once.

AUSTIN. You did?

LEE. Yeah! I did some a' that. I fooled around with it. No future in it.

AUSTIN. What'd you do?

LEE. Never mind what I did! Just never mind about that. (Pause) I was ahead of its time.

(Pause)

AUSTIN. So, you went out to see the old man, huh?

LEE. Yeah, I seen him.

AUSTIN. How's he doing?

LEE. Same. He's doin' just about the same.

AUSTIN. I was down there too, you know.

LEE. What d'ya want, an award? You want some kinda' medal? You were down there. He told me all about you.

AUSTIN. What'd he say?

LEE. He told me. Don't worry.

(Pause)

AUSTIN. Well—

LEE. You don't have to say nothin'.

AUSTIN. I wasn't.

LEE. Yeah, you were gonna' make somethin' up. Somethin' brilliant.

(Pause)

AUSTIN. You going to be down here very long, Lee?

LEE. Might be. Depends on a few things.

AUSTIN. You got some friends down here?

LEE. (Laugh) I know a few people. Yeah.

AUSTIN. Well, you can stay here as long as I'm here.

LEE. I don't need your permission do I?

AUSTIN. No.

LEE. I mean she's my mother too, right?

AUSTIN. Right.
LEE. She might've just as easily asked me to take care of her place as you.
AUSTIN. That's right.
LEE. I mean I know how to water plants.

AUSTIN. So you don't know how long you'll be staying then?
LEE. Depends mostly on houses, ya' know.
AUSTIN. Houses?

AUSTIN. Lee, why don't you just try another neighborhood, all right?
LEE. (Laughs) What'sa' matter with this neighborhood? This is a great neighborhood. Lush. Good class a' people. Not many dogs.
AUSTIN. Well, our uh—Our mother just happens to live here. That's all.
LEE. Nobody's gonna' know. All they know is somethin's missing. That's all. She'll never even hear about it. Nobody's gonna' know.
AUSTIN. You're going to get picked up if you start walking around here at night.
LEE. Me? I'm gonna' git picked up? What about you? You stick out like a sore thumb. Look at you. You think yer regular lookin'?
AUSTIN. I've got too much to deal with here to be worrying about—
LEE. Yer not gonna' have to worry about me! I've been doin' all right without you. I haven't been anywhere near you for five years! Now isn't that true?
AUSTIN. Yeah.
LEE. So you don't have to worry about me. I'm a free agent.
AUSTIN. All right.
ACT I

TRUE WEST

Lee. Now all I wanna' do is borrow yer car.

Austin. No!

Lee. Just fer a day. One day.

Austin. No!

Lee. I won't take it outside a twenty mile radius. I promise ya'. You can check the speedometer.

Austin. You're not borrowing my car! That's all there is to it.

(Pause)

Lee. Then I'll just take the damn thing.

Austin. Lee, look—I don't want any trouble, all right?

Lee. That's a dumb line. That is a dumb fuckin' line. You git paid fer dreamin' up a line like that?

Austin. Look, I can give you some money if you need money.

(Lee suddenly lunges at Austin, grabs him violently by the shirt and shakes him with tremendous power)

Lee. Don't you say that to me! Don't you ever say that to me!

(Just as suddenly he turns him loose, pushes him away and backs off)

You may be able to git away with that with the Old Man. Git him tanked up for a week! Buy him off with yer Hollywood blood money, but not me! I can git my own money my own way. Big money!

Austin. I was just making an offer.

Lee. Yeah, well keep it to yourself!

(Long pause)

Those are the most monotonous fuckin' crickets I ever heard in my life.

Austin. I kinda' like the sound.
LEE. Yeah. Supposed to be able to tell the temperature by the number a' pulses. You believe that?

AUSTIN. The temperature?

LEE. Yeah. The air. How hot it is.

AUSTIN. How do you do that?

LEE. I don't know. Some woman told me that. She was a Botanist. So I believed her.

AUSTIN. Where'd you meet her?

LEE. What?

AUSTIN. The woman Botanist?

LEE. I met her on the desert. I been spendin' a lotta' time on the desert.

AUSTIN. What were you doing out there?

LEE. (Pause, stares in space) I forgot. Had me a Pit Bull there for a while but I lost him.

AUSTIN. Pit Bull?

LEE. Fightin' dog. Damn I made some good money off that little dog. Real good money.

(A pause)

AUSTIN. You could come up north with me, you know.

LEE. What's up there?

AUSTIN. My family.

LEE. Oh, that's right, you got the wife and kiddies now don't ya'. The house, the car, the whole slam. That's right.

AUSTIN. You could spend a couple days. See how you like it. I've got an extra room.

LEE. Too cold up there.

(A pause)

AUSTIN. You want to sleep for a while?

LEE. (Pause, stares at AUSTIN) I don't sleep.

(LIGHTS TO BLACK)

—End Scene 1—
The first rehearsals were spent reading and discussing the play and the characters. I asked the actors questions about their characters, and they asked me what I wanted. I always tried to respond with a question that would make the actor find the answer himself/herself. I felt this was the best way for the actor to understand the character and not try to emulate some idea of mine. I felt that no matter what happened, the actor should be playing a character he or she created and could believe in. When an actor was doing things that I didn't understand or didn't agree with, I would ask the actor to explain what he/she was doing and why. Often the actor wasn't aware of his/her intentions and this made him/her examine what was going on in the character's mind at that moment. This happened a lot during the early rehearsals and less frequently as the performances drew nearer.

After the first couple of rehearsals I began the process of blocking the show. This process took about a week. After that we began running scenes with me offering suggestions and asking the actors questions. In the very beginning I made sure the cast understood that I was open to suggestions and asked them to tell me when they felt uncomfortable doing something or if they had another idea. Cast members made some very useful suggestions.
Next, we concentrated on characterization and ways the actor could transform himself/herself into the character. If I could go back I would have started this from the beginning because I didn’t realize as much success from this as I would have liked. I do not in any way mean to insult my actors because I think that each one did a fantastic job, but I waited too long to force them to become the character physically. As I look back, I’m not sure why I waited so long. Actors memorizing their lines was a problem almost up until the performances, and I think that I worried about that more than characterization. Running more line rehearsals -- where actors sit and just say their lines -- would have solved that problem. I think I also waited because I could see the actors understood their characters, and I expected transformation could just happen. I know better now.

They did become the characters physically, David especially, but not as much as they could have. I know Dr. Yordon doubted whether David could be as gross and intimidating as Lee should be. This was a major problem going into the final week before performance. I had been working on Lee being more physical with Austin and having Austin’s frightened reactions larger, but I was not able to accomplish this. Dr. Yordon suggested that I videotape them and have the actors watch the tape. Once David saw the tape, there was a 100%
improvement in crudeness and intimidation. It was like magic. Once he saw for himself how small his reactions were, he knew what to do. Shane also improved dramatically at being scared and the result was satisfying.

Since Amy Rafa and Jay Becker were only in one scene and two scenes, respectively, I didn’t spend as much time on them as I did on the brothers. Yet the time we did spend together was well spent, and both actors worked hard and were willing to try new things and experiment. Both would come to rehearsals with new ideas and Amy played especially well off of the other actors. They were both very funny.

The final week before performance was spent running the scenes over and over to make the actors pick up the pace and get a feel for what the performance would be like by making them fix their own mistakes. For example, if an actor dropped a line or skipped a page in dialogue, the actors had to get back on track without prompting. Much time was also spent trying to integrate the technical elements. If I could do it again I would have spent more time before the rehearsal process trying to find props. Not having props and running around at the last minute was the most frustrating aspect of my whole experience. If it weren’t for the cast and myself getting toasters and plants, the show wouldn’t have had all of the
props we needed. I decided to use only the sound of crickets for audio enhancement because the coyote sounds I had did not sound authentic and detracted from the entire production. Lights were set in one day and worked smoothly throughout the technical rehearsals.

As I waited for the opening performance to begin, I realized that I was more nervous than I would be if I were performing. It was a funny feeling because I knew that there was nothing I could do. The show was out of my hands now. The actors would either succeed or fail and there was nothing I could do about it. As I watched the performance I was thrilled. Everybody played well off of the audiences' reactions and the audience was very vocal in their response. I could tell that everyone was enjoying themselves and I knew that all the work was successful.

The ID 499 course has allowed me to grow tremendously as a director, and I am now anxious to direct another show so that I can apply the things I learned. I feel that I have learned as much about the craft as I did in any directing class I've taken here at Ball State University. Getting the show together was hectic, frustrating, stressful, but, more then anything, enjoyable. The most frustrating aspect is looking back and thinking about how I should have done things, but this also the most enjoyable because I realize what I have learned. If I could do it all over again there are many things I would
have done differently, but all in all, I am extremely pleased with my results.

From the beginning, I decided to make rehearsals very informal so that everyone would feel as comfortable as possible. I did this because Shane is a freshman, and I hoped it would help him to relax and get to know the other cast members. Also, I hoped that it would build a trust among the cast members, especially Shane and David, and that a camaraderie would carry over into the actual rehearsal.

We always spent a few minutes talking at the beginning of a rehearsal and took a few minutes to discuss what happened in between scenes. At all times, a cast member was free to stop and ask a question about what he, or she, was doing. This worked well in the beginning and I feel that the actors benefited from the time spent getting to know each other because outside of rehearsal they never came into contact. However, as the rehearsal process was drawing to a close the cast was unused to getting to work right away and still wanted to talk when we were running out of time. If I could do it again, I believe that I would call extra rehearsals on the weekend, or during some free time, so that the cast could become friends and yet not waste time allotted to rehearse scenes. All in all, though, I think the time spent was well worth the result.

Every Spring the Theater and Dance Performance department
holds a banquet for theater majors and minors. Towards the end, they hand out Willy awards for actors, directors, and technicians. They are voted upon by a small committee of faculty and students and the categories are similar to the Oscars. True West received nominations in Best Props, Best Male Lead (David Frank), Best Student Director, and Best Student Production. We didn’t win any awards, but just the nominations were sweet reward for very hard work.

Finally, I want to thank my actors and crew again for some very hard work. I also want to thank Judy Yordon for her suggestions and assistance.