



# TRUE WEST

STUDY GUIDE

BY **SAM SHEPARD**  
DIRECTED BY **TONY ESTRELLA**

**GAMM**  
EDUCATION 

**GAM**  
theatre

SEASON  
2018 - 2019

**34**

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**GAMMTHEATRE.ORG**

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WARWICK, RI

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*This study guide was prepared by Beth Pollard, Kate Hanson, Susie Schutt, and Jon Del Sesto*

# ACT I

# WELCOME

Dear Educator,

The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre is pleased to offer you this study guide to prepare you and your students for our production of *True West* by Sam Shepard. In this guide you will find background information about the play and playwright, an inside look at our production, as well as activities for your classroom and questions for discussion. We recommend using this study guide before your visit to The Gamm, as well as after to debrief with your students.

We would like to offer a pre-show visit with your classroom/school before your visit to help prepare your students for the play. This will whet students' appetites for the performance and encourage them to question and explore the themes of the play. This visit will last about a half an hour and is offered to your classroom free of charge. Most student matinees are followed by a talkback with the production team and offer students the opportunity to debrief the performance immediately and ask questions of the actors, director, designers or playwright. Talkbacks range in length but we encourage you to stay and participate in the dynamic discussion.

We also offer longer workshops that will get students out of their seats and up on their feet engaging in the motifs and the language of the play. Kinesthetic engagement with language and literature ensures students deep comprehension and text-to-self connection that encourages students to invest in reading and literacy-learning.

Attending a production addresses several Common Core Standards in Theatre Arts Standards in Aesthetic Judgment, Cultural Contexts, and Communication, as well as many of the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. Below, we have included a list of standards that align with attending a performance and using our study guide.

We would love to hear from you about your experiences using this study guide. It is a great help to us as we build on our education program from year to year. We look forward to seeing you at The Gamm!

**Susie Schutt,**

Education Director, [susie@gammtheatre.org](mailto:susie@gammtheatre.org)

**Kate Hanson,**

Associate Education Director, [kate@gammtheatre.org](mailto:kate@gammtheatre.org)

# THEATRE AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

What is so exciting about attending the theatre - especially in a smaller space such as The Gamm - is that it is live! Live theatre is different from other forms of entertainment; unlike film and television you are encouraged to pay close attention and actively engage your imagination.

You, the audience, are mere feet (and sometimes inches!) away from the actors; therefore, you play an active role in the experience. **The actors can see and hear any distracting behavior such as talking, text messaging, unwrapping candy, the ringing of cell phones, etc.** This can affect the actor's concentration, disrupt the performance, and ruin the experience for other audience members. So we ask that you refrain from talking or making any noise during a performance. *Thank you!*

## TIP:

*Discuss with your students the particular demands and benefits of attending a live performance. Perhaps have them brainstorm how theatre is different from film, television and sporting events.*

## COMMON CORE GUIDE . . . . .

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2] *See Themes and Questions for Discussion*

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3] *See Themes and Questions for Discussion*

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4] *See our Activity for the Classroom*

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7] *See examples throughout our study guide.*

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9] *See our Resident Scholar's essay.*

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3] *See our Activity for the Classroom*

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1] *See Themes and Questions for Discussion*

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2] *See examples throughout our study guide.*

# ACT II

## PLAY & PLAYWRIGHT



### ABOUT SAM SHEPARD

Samuel Shepard Rogers III (1943-2017), known professionally as Sam Shepard, was an American actor, playwright, author, screenwriter, and director whose career spanned half a century. He won 10 Obie Awards for writing and directing, the most won by any writer or director. He wrote 44 plays, as well as several books of short stories, essays, and memoirs. Shepard received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979 for his play *Buried Child* and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his portrayal of pilot

Chuck Yeager in the 1983 film *The Right Stuff*. He received the PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Award as a master American dramatist in 2009. *New York* magazine described Shepard as “the greatest American playwright of his generation.” Shepard’s plays are known for their bleak, poetic, surrealist elements, black comedy, and rootless characters living on the outskirts of American society. His style evolved from the absurdism of his early off-off-Broadway work to the realism of later plays like *Buried Child*, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *True West*.

### ABOUT “TRUE WEST”

In suburban California, estranged brothers Austin and Lee reunite unexpectedly in their mother’s home. Austin, a family man and budding screenwriter, is at work on a new script. Lee, a drifter with a plan to rob the neighborhood of household appliances, drops in and stays. Soon he is pitching his own idea for a trashy Western to Austin’s Hollywood agent . . . and the battle is on. Challenges are issued, drinks are downed, and the seemingly opposite brothers find they are more alike than they want to admit. Brutal and hilarious, this modern-day Cain and Abel story tackles the absurdity of archetypal America head on.



# ACT III

## OUR PRODUCTION

DIRECTOR  
Tony Estrella

SET DESIGN  
Michael McGarty

COSTUME DESIGN  
Jessie Darrell Jarbadan

LIGHTING DESIGN  
Jeff Adelberg

SOUND DESIGN  
Charles Cofone

FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHY  
Normand Beauregard

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT  
Jessica Hill

STAGE MANAGEMENT  
Julia Perez\* & Sara Sheets\*

### THE COMPANY

Lee **Anthony Goes\***  
Austin **Steve Kidd\***  
Saul Kimmer **Richard Donnelly\***  
Mom **Rae Mancini**

### CREATIVE TEAM

Technical Director **Max Ramirez**  
Technical Production Supervisor **DJ Potter**  
Assistant Stage Manager **Annalee P. Cavallaro**  
Production/Wardrobe Assistant **Allyson Schiller**  
Electricians **Patrick Boutwell, Mike Cline, Alex Landers,  
Chris Marshall, Andrew Russ, Cam Waitkun**  
Construction Crew **Michael Araujo, Justin Carroll, Alex Eizenberg,  
Renee Fitzgerald, Reka Moscarelli, Cody Reed**

### TIP:

*Before coming to the theater, discuss with your students the various professions in the theater. It takes more than just actors! When they arrive, ask them to notice evidence of those professions at work.*





# GAMM EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT



*While actors, directors, and playwrights are the most well-known, there are many jobs and careers that make theater successful. Each of our study guides focus on a different theater career by highlighting a Gamm employee.*

## **KATE HANSON** | ASSOCIATE EDUCATION DIRECTOR

### **What does your job entail?**

A big part of my job is working with students to create plays based on books and stories they read in their classrooms. I also organize our in-house teaching, hire teaching artists, and co-run our summer camps!

### **Why is your job important to The Gamm's success?**

My job is important because a big part of The Gamm's mission is to do work in our community. Theater is not an insular art form. It is important to collaborate, teach, and learn from the people and communities around us.

### **What led you to your position at The Gamm?**

I saw all of The Gamm's plays while I was in high school. I looked up to a lot of the actors and even had some of them as teachers and mentors. Throughout college, I interned for The Gamm's summer camp (Gamm Summer Intensive). When I graduated, a full-time position opened up and I applied. The moral of this story is, you never know when a connection or relationship could lead to something important in your life. (also, take your internships seriously!)

### **Why theater?**

Because theater is magical.

### **What, if any, other professions are you curious about?**

I am really into fashion and makeup so I would love to do something in the beauty or fashion industry.

### **What special skills does your position entail?**

Organization, leadership, public speaking, teaching, writing

### **What is your favorite flavor of ice cream?**

Cotton Candy



# DRAMATURGICAL NOTES

BY RACHEL WALSH



*Shepard is the great poet of wounded masculinity, of men who would be cowboys if the world would only offer them territories, frontiers, wildernesses. Instead they ride in circles, tearing up their own internal turf.* – Alexi Soloski (*The Guardian*)

When playwright, actor, and screenwriter Sam Shepard died in July of 2017, he left behind a body of work unmatched by almost any American writer. Although popular culture may remember him for his film and television credits (*The Right Stuff*; *Paris, Texas*; *Bloodline*) or his famous love relationships (Patti Smith, Jessica Lange), a serious examination of his theatrical output reveals an artist unparalleled in his ability to animate the darkest influences on the modern American psyche.

Figures like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood exert such hold over the American imagination because they perpetuate a comforting, thrilling narrative that, in his soul, the American male is fiercely independent, violent, and governed by a deep suspicion of outside authority—in short, an outlaw. Shepard’s plays feature men who are tortured by that mythology. “I think we’re split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal,” Shepard observed.

“Split” men set against the landscape of a real or figurative desert dominate many of Shepard’s most famous plays. Both *True West* and *Fool for Love* take place on the edge of a desert. *Buried Child* is set in the American Midwest, and *A Lie of the Mind* in the Northwest wilderness. In each of these major works, Shepard erodes the romanticism inherent to frontier literature and exposes it as false narrative. Writing about Shepard’s legacy, critic and playwright Charles McNulty notes that “he transformed the wounds of the male psyche into concrete theatrical sounds and images that could cut through the habitual untruths that deaden not only our theater but our lives.”

Shepard’s plays give language and shape to the despair of men failing to become the God-fearing, country-loving, cowboys packaged and sold to them by their fathers and grandfathers. But to see the playwright’s work exclusively as a wrestling match with male machismo misses the triumph of poetry and form that his plays achieve. While Shepard looked the part of a cowboy, his plays are existentially curious and formally complex, drawing upon a theatrical tradition reaching back to the Greek myths. His writing reverberates with the high counterculturalism of the 1960s that rejected the suburban dream sold by Madison Avenue. He derided that landscape in *Curse of the Starving Class*: “[C]ement pilings, prefab walls, zombie architecture owned by invisible zombies, built by other zombies for the use and convenience of other zombies.” In his fiercely American narratives we can also locate the high tragedy of the Greeks. There is much of Phedre to be found in *Fool for Love* and its story of incestuous love. Antigone haunts *Buried Child* as a family tears itself apart over of the fate a child’s corpse.

Many critics glibly claim that Sam Shepard made the American theater “cool.” Although that observation is not without merit, such a characterization oversimplifies the political and psychological investigations his plays conduct. Plays like *True West* interrogate the ways in which the myth of the wounded cowboy dominates the American imagination, revealing an America at war with itself—at once feral and domesticated, free and bound.

# ACT IV

## THEMES AND QUESTIONS

### TIP:

Assign these questions for homework or in-class writing and then discuss your students' answers before and after the show.

### THEMES AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING

1. How did the set design aid in the telling of the story? What would you change and why?
2. What sort of atmosphere was created with the lighting, sound, and music?
3. What does the Gamm poster (also the cover of this study guide) tell you about the play? What sort of poster would you design for this play and why?
4. Why do you think the playwright chose this title? How does the title relate to the story?

### SAM SHEPARD NOW AND THEN

*True West* was written by Sam Shepard, a prominent playwright within 20th century American literary culture. Many of Shepard's plays share similar themes with *True West*, such as family conflict, the search for success, and independence. Shepard has been a playwright since dropping out of an agriculture degree program in the 1960s. In an interview with Laura Barton (from *The Guardian*), he described his motivation to begin writing as, "back then [in the 60s], there was a death of American theatre... American art was starving." In response, Shepard emphasized his personal experience with America, and particularly California, as he lived his life.

### Questions

- This story focuses on Austin, a screenwriter working to find success in Hollywood. Considering Shepard's life as a playwright probably shared key similarities with Austin's career, what can we deduce about Shepard's life? Do you think he drew characters or plot elements from his own life? Why or why not?
- Nearly all of Shepard's plays include a complicated father-son relationship. Shepard describes his own father as a "dedicated alcoholic" with whom he did not share much of a relationship with once he reached adulthood. In what ways does this show up in *True West*? How does Shepard's relationship with his father influence his writing?

(Questions continued on page 10)

- *True West* was written in 1980 following a heavy economic recession and low employment rates. This led in part to the rise of Ronald Reagan and wealth disparity as the job market attempted to rearrange itself. Why do you think Sam Shepard chose to write this play at that time? What is its reflection on the society Shepard?

## AN HONEST LIVING

The characters in this story frequently discuss authenticity and their frustrations with trying to find truth in their world. In the stories that they create, like Lee's ambitiously cheesy western movie, Austin and Lee constantly disagree on their interpretations of what is an accurate reflection of their world. While Lee feels justified stealing from strangers, Austin sees an honest living selling his screenplays. However, each brother also sees some refreshing truth in the other's life. Austin wants to try living in the desert like Lee did, while Lee expresses jealousy over Austin's education. In a play so caught up in the search for truth, why do the characters create so many layers of deception and lies?

### Questions

- Why do you think Sam Shepard chose the title of this play?
- Austin, Lee, their father, and their mother all move around the country in search for truth and success. What are the places and spaces to which each of them are drawn? Why do they want to go there? What do they want to find?
- Make a venn diagram of Lee and Austin. Fill it in with their interpretations of the world. Think about what they define as success, honest work, meaningful life goals, and authentic stories. Do they ever agree? Why do they differ? Can they both be right?
- Why is truth so important? How is it important for the individual? How is it important to share perspectives on truth with other people? Do you think that every situation has only one truth? Why or why not?
- Can performance art be more truthful than regular life? How so? Think about both the stories told within the play and your own experiences.

## THE WEST IS BEST FOR SUCCESS

Throughout most of American history, there has been an idealist drive to move west. Advertised by early settlers as a place of independence, freedom, and rugged self-sufficiency, the west has been painted for almost three centuries as a haven for those seeking to redefine themselves. From the ideas of manifest destiny to the rags-to-riches Hollywood stories, the American West has been shaped and reshaped by cultural narratives. However, this idealization has been mainly developed to support the ambitions of personal success. In particular, the west has been the place where one can achieve thriving financial independence, fame, and/or innovative glory. In *True West*, the characters have chosen to be in Los Angeles in order to try to create their own ideal lives. Yet in 1980, a time in history where the west was no longer as clouded with the rhetoric of exotic opportunities and wild potential, Shepard wrote that the characters are eventually forced to come face to face with their imperfect expectations of western success.

## Questions

- What is your perception of the American West? Make a mindmap or write down the first things that come to your mind in a brainstorm. Where do you think these perceptions came from? Do you think that they are accurate for California today? Living in Rhode Island, how does your experience on the east coast change your attitudes or ideas about the west?
- Lee's screenplay idea is a classic western movie. What does his movie, and the rest of the country/western genre, reveal about Lee's ideas about this part of the country? How have mass media and entertainment sculpted outsiders' perceptions of the west? Does this play challenge or align with the stereotypes? How so?
- What sacrifices do the characters make for success? Are they personal sacrifices, or do they sacrifice the well being of people around them? How and why?
- How do you define success? Chat with a friend about your answers.

# ACT V

## ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

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### ACTIVITY 1: BE A PROPS DESIGNER

Sam Shepard is extremely specific about all of the tools, knick knacks, household appliances, and food that the characters interact with on stage. As such, the props designer for this show has their work cut out for them. A props designer has to figure out how to make all of the props as realistic as the playwright demands, as accurate to the director's specific vision as possible, and must still find creative solutions to make sure the props can be safely reused throughout the run of the show. Furthermore, one of the fun things about props design for *True West* is that many of the central props get destroyed every single show. How can a props designer face this challenge?

For this activity, choose one or two props from this list below:

**TYPEWRITER, GOLF CLUBS, TOASTERS, THE PHONE (INCLUDING THE CORD AND ATTACHMENT TO THE WALL), THE MOTHER'S PLANTS.**

Do a google search or create your own product design for your chosen prop. When, where and how is your prop going to be used in the show? Remember to consider what would be accurate for the time and location of the story. Think about the characters that will interact with your prop. Why would these characters have chosen this specific prop to satisfy their action (is it pricey, convenient, highly fashionable, etc.)? How is your prop going to be destroyed or broken in the show? What adjustments can you make in order to make sure dangerous pieces don't hurt anyone? Is there a way to put your prop back together? Is there a cost efficient way to do so?

## ACTIVITY 2: SOUND DESIGN

While Sam Shepard is very explicit at the beginning of the play that cricket sounds and coyotes compose the sonic backdrop of this play, there are many elements of sound and music that one can add to create a rich and dynamic show. In this activity, put yourself in a sound designer's shoes. Using any creative internet resources, search for the sounds that Sam Shepard demands according to his instructions:

*"The coyote of California has a distinct yapping, doglike bark, similar to a hyena. This yapping grows more intense and maniacal as the pack grows in numbers, which is usually the case when they lure and kill pets from suburban yards. The sense of growing frenzy in the pack should be felt in the background... In any case, the coyotes never make the long, mournful, solitary howl of the Hollywood stereotype.*

*The sound of crickets can speak for itself."*

If you were a sound designer for this show, consider how you might find or create these sounds and grow them throughout the play. Additionally, though Shepard gives explicit instructions concerning what must be included, he does not give restrictions on what may not be included. As a sound designer, you have the freedom to add in any other sounds or music that may be fitting to your vision. Find 4-5 songs that you think would go well with this play, in terms of setting, period, and style. Are there specific times when you would want to play this music? Could you put music at the beginning, end, or intermission of the show? Is there a time that you might want music playing on the radio for the characters? Why or why not? How would the presence of music change this show, considering especially that Sam Shepard has not included anything in particular?



# ACT VI

# EPILOGUE



## THANK YOU!

Thank you for joining us for *True West* and for working with this Study Guide to ensure the best, most comprehensive theatrical and educational experience. Please be in touch if you would like us to visit your classroom before or after you attend *True West*.

Our Education Department provides classes for students of various grade levels, as well as a month-long Gamm Summer Intensive for summer time theatre fun. We hope you will join us for more student matinees at The Gamm!

To book a matinee, contact Drew at [drew@gammtheatre.org](mailto:drew@gammtheatre.org) or 401-723-4266 ext. 112. To learn more about Gamm Education, find us on the web at [www.gammtheatre.org](http://www.gammtheatre.org) or reach Susie Schutt at 401-723-4266 ext. 121.



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