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ARTS + CULTURE

REVIEW: TRUE WEST IS GRIPPING AND INSISTENT

By Allison M. Jones / Oct 3, 2025



It's impossible to look away from The Kitchen Sink Collective's take on the Sam Shepard classic, on stage at The Staircase Theatre this weekend.

A few performances remain for a production of American actor/playwright Sam Shepard's play *True West*, put on by Hamilton theatre company The Kitchen Sink Collective at The Staircase Theatre. The tense and psychological play was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize back in 1983.

On its website, The Kitchen Sink Collective is described as being "passionate about performing classic plays that explore the human psyche. What compels everyday folk to behave as they do?" This is a central exploration in *True West*, as a brittle interplay between two brothers, Austin and Lee, crackles and fractures, a veneer of uneasy civility devolving into violence and psychological disconnect. The story takes place in the kitchen of a southern California suburban home, 40 miles east of Los Angeles, circa 1980.

At least one synopsis of *True West* describes the interactions between the brothers as involving "sibling rivalry," but this seems an inadequate phrase for the barely contained hostility crackling between the estranged adult brothers, played by Adam Iachelli (Austin) and Gregory Waters (Lee). Austin is a serious, bespectacled, straight-laced screenwriter house-sitting for his mother when Lee, an unkempt drifter who sneers at conventionality while pounding back beer after beer, encroaches on Austin's peace. As the first act develops, the pair, particularly Waters, leaves the audience with a growing feeling of apprehension and unease at his hair-trigger temper and relentless manipulations.

There's a sinister dance, a predator-prey dynamic between Lee and Austin, especially in the first act. However, when Lee seemingly pushes Austin to the point of a psychotic break, Lee gets more than he bargained for in return. At first stiff and defensive, once Austin loses the polite restraint of conventional behaviour he becomes a stronger adversary for his brother in



Gregory Waters (Lee), Adam Iachelli (Austin) and Katie Cook in *True West*. Photos: Fiona Duffett and Rosalind Wdowiak

Act 2. Iachelli's physicality completely changes and it's fascinating to watch. Waters, for his part, shows a new uneasiness at this new, unpredictable version of his formerly conscientious sibling. It's impossible to get the toothpaste back into the tube. Matters are spinning out of control. Both are fully committed to their roles and quite compelling.

Supporting cast members Ralph Chapman and Katie Cook play Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer and the brothers' mother, respectively. Austin and Lee's mother, returning from vacation to the utter shambles her house has been turned into by the pair, is quiet, understated, seemingly a little disconnected, and even dreamy. She mentions a local art event with Picasso while standing shins-deep in the destruction of her kitchen, but he's been dead for years. (My mother would have incinerated me and my brother on sight had we wrecked her house that way).

Flawed family is at the heart of *True West*. The Kitchen Sink Collective, and this production more specifically, is clearly a family affair, too. Adam Iachelli plays Austin, while father Carm Iachelli directs and mother Jennifer is responsible for the set design.

True West first premiered at Magic Theatre in San Francisco in 1980, and then appeared off-Broadway at The Public Theatre with Tommy Lee Jones and Peter Boyle. Two years later, it was staged at the Steppenwolf Theatre and then at the Cherry Lane Theatre with John Malkovich and Gary Sinise. The production was also shown on public television in 1983.

It wasn't until 2000 that the play had its Broadway debut at the Circle in the Square Theatre with Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly. It received a Tony Award nomination for Best Play. *True West* was staged on London's West End several times and returned to Broadway in 2018.



Adam Iachelli (Austin) and Gregory Waters (Lee) play battling brothers in *True West*.

In all, Shepard wrote nearly 60 plays over his lifetime, beginning with three in 1964 and continuing on for the next half century. He was critically acclaimed with multiple Tony, Drama Desk, and Pulitzer nominations and wins to his credit.

His plays have been called bleak yet poetic, often involving characters living on the outskirts of respectable American society. *True West* may be thought of as quasi-autobiographical; in his director's notes, Carm Iachelli states that some see the play as Shepard's "exploration of his

own inner struggle: he felt he was a man of two identities pitted against each other ... *True West* was an exorcism of his frustration and self-loathing."

The play is a volatile, uncomfortable tableau. By its end, I felt as though I had been immersed in a kind of fever dream. Did I "enjoy" it? Maybe not, in the simplest sense, but it was gripping and insistent and impossible to look away.

The choice of Shepard's play is on-brand as The Kitchen Sink Collective is drawn to such gritty, realistic tales that feature the "darkly funny, poignant, triumphant, sad, pathetic, stupid, flawed yet lovable — the characters in these timeless stories teach us something about what it means to be alive and living in this modern, messed up world."

I would be remiss if I did not mention the incredible set, fully utilizing the performance space. The Staircase's main Studio Theatre is small and composed of simple black walls. The *True West* kitchen was chock full of era appropriate decor and details (including two sets of house plants, one thriving and one crunchy and dead — replaced at intermission). Jennifer Iachelli and her team should be proud of the impact they made. The last set that evoked the kind of admiration (and pointing out of details) I saw from this play's audience was for the Theatre Aquarius production of *Waitress*.



The Kitchen Sink Collective's *True West* runs at The Staircase Theatre Friday and Saturday.

NEED TO KNOW

True West

Oct. 3 & 4, 7 p.m.

The Staircase Studio Theatre

27 Dundurn St. N., Hamilton

Tickets: boxoffice@kitchensinkcollective.ca or
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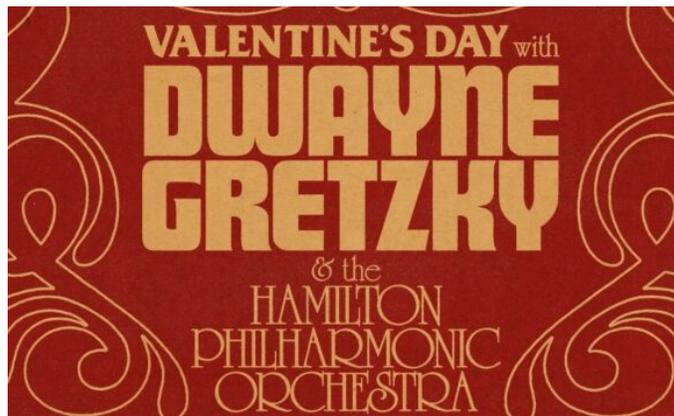
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