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STAGE

Opinion | Shepard's 'True West' is riveting at the Staircase

Go celebrate classic theatre of the nervous, disturbing kind. This "True West" is as good as theatre gets.

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Adam Iachelli, left, as Austin and Gregory Waters as Lee in "True West." It's classic theatre of the nervous, disturbing kind, writes Gary Smith.

Fiona Duffett/Rosalind Wdowiak

By Gary Smith Special to the Spectator

Gary Smith writes about theatre and dance for the Hamilton Spectator and can be reached at gsmith42wb@gmail.com.

After success with American playwright David Mamet's hard-driving drama "American Buffalo," Kitchen Sink Collective is back at Hamilton's intimate Staircase Studio Theatre, this time with a deeper, richer and tougher play, Sam Shepard's "True West."

The good news is, it's one hell of a show. A thoroughly professional production at bargain prices, this one's a must-see if you like theatre that pulls no punches.

"True West" is a sometimes enigmatic, violent look at two estranged brothers. It's also, on a deeper level, a somewhat bleak look at a troubled America.

Like Mamet, Shepard is a bit of a hard sell. He certainly isn't the darling of community theatres, determined to program mostly audience-friendly plays.

So, those who care for more cerebral theatre ought to celebrate this stunning local production, and the chance to see a piece of first-class theatre at a bargain rate.

"True West" centres, on the surface at least, on a tense fraternal fight. Austin is a smooth Hollywood script writer. Lee is a rough and tumble drifter, with a loud voice and violent mood swings.

Along the way, Shepard's play deals with family and personal identity. But then, there is that outreach to a larger, more beguiling theme.

The play longs for the lure of the American west, tough masculinity and big outlandish dreams. Almost always, its wildly inventive and comic surface is underscored by raw and disturbing violence.

When Lee and Austin collide in a chaos of hostility, more than a fractured relationship gets battered. Chairs get toppled, dishes fly, a typewriter is demolished and blind rage is hysterically unleashed.

The well-developed hatred here is spawned by unresolved sibling rivalry. And the brothers who have a tension-racked meeting in their mother's Southern California kitchen strikes a match that inflames unfinished business.

Like cowboys meeting at high noon in old-time Dodge, these two circle each other. And during the course of their tense duel-like encounter, they steal each other's identities.

Shepard's play wasn't an instant success. In fact, it has a bit of a checkered past, with a seriously failed early production. Later, the play was championed by theatre modernists, and actors John Malkovich and Gary Sinise played the parts off-Broadway in 1982.

The play's biggest success, however, came when Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly played "True West's" star roles 18 years later. In fact, the minute they left the off-Broadway production, audiences failed to come and the show closed.

So, what of Adam Iachelli and Gregory Waters, who tackle these tough star roles in Hamilton?

Well, guess what? They're terrific. Finding all the sublimated anger, disappointment and jealous rage that lurks beneath sometimes nervous civility, these guys keep you on the edge of your seat, waiting for the time bomb to stop ticking and finally irrevocably explode.

Together, these two actors explore Shepard's look at distorted American values, brotherly distrust and psychological flashpoints under beautifully controlled and detailed direction from Carmelo Iachelli.

Everything is detailed here in Jennifer Iachelli's superbly realistic set, from its outdated macrame flowerpot hangers to its old-time wall phone and vintage kitchen paraphernalia and appliances.

Even the everyday clothes worn by the cast have authenticity, from the sweat marks under Water's armpits to the pristine white T-shirt peeking out from beneath Adam Iachelli's baby blue polo shirt.

Such detail also cleaves to strong performances that build this evening's tension toward a shattering climax as Austin and Lee strip to their undershorts in a clever metaphor that suggests casting off a surface masquerade or disguise for the naked truth.

Shepard brilliantly contrasts America's Hollywood view of once-humungous Old West skies, vast spaces and open freedom with a 1980s, even current reality of dumbed-down music, popular chain-store burgers and fancy expensive lattes that help us ignore a niggling undercurrent of political anger.

You could say without censure that Kitchen Sink's actors, and their astute director, find in Shepard's 45-year-old play something that speaks to today and our sometimes-false values and fake concerns swallowed up by shivers of declining morality and lost freedoms.

Popping in and making brief moments count are Ralph Chapman, as a sleazy Hollywood producer of dubious smarts who becomes an unwitting catalyst for serious sibling hatred, and Katie Cook as the perplexed mother of this play's Cain and Abel-like sons. Coming back from an Alaskan holiday, she finds her house shattered and her beloved window plants brown and withered.

In the background, outside the gaily decorated kitchen windows with their yellow checked curtains, we hear the constant crying of crickets, as if they know summer is nearly over. The noise is punctuated every so often by the wail of coyotes, hungry beasts who have escaped a diminishing country landscape to find refuge in the city, their barking sounds a prelude to the violence brewing in Shepard's play.

Shepard, who wrote some shocking, enigmatic plays, from "Buried Child" to "A Lie of the Mind," is served well with this riveting production. So go celebrate classic theatre of the nervous, disturbing kind. This "True West" is as good as theatre gets.

'True West'

Who Kitchen Sink Collective

Where Staircase Studio Theatre, 27 Dundurn St. N.

When Continues Sept. 27, Oct. 1-4

Tickets \$30, go to ticketor.com/kitchensinkcollective

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