



TRUE WEST

Sam Shepard

Backgroundknowledge for teachers

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1. Introduction

Sam Shepard's play *True West* has many layers. In this material I would like to point some of these out, and give you some angles from which you can approach the play with your students. Of course you will have to decide on your line, your priorities. But *True West* is such a good play that it opens up to a wide range of discussion: you can look at family ties and fratricide, the American way of life, mythology, the Golden West - gone wrong?, civilisation and the beast in man, communication patterns, the Hollywood machine - it's all in there...

This material is meant to be an addition to what you probably have at home already. It is not a "Beginner's guide to *True West*", because I am sure that you have a rough idea what you want to do with your students anyway.

I will let you take part in my ideas and in what I have discovered while I was working through the script. Some of this might have to be adapted by you for your students. While the play progresses, the concepts and hints get deeper and deeper. Some of these ideas will probably be too complex for a GK, but they might be interesting for YOU. I present you with the material and you can see how you want to use it. I have also written a short outline of each scene, and included some additional material for you to look at; you can choose when you want to use it, but further on in the scenes I will point out suitable extracts as well. In any case I would recommend you to read some of the Indian writing and also work with some song lyrics - maybe your students can think of some songs they would like to bring in, too? If you find the material too extensive you can also just refer to it from time to time, for example to get an idea for a specific scene.

But let us start with the characters of the play, the human beings that give us a glimpse into their existence. There are of course the central characters of the play: Austin and Lee, the mother, the old man and the producer. In our production Saul Kimmer is "Eva Kimmer", played by a woman. This creates a sexual tension and an additional competition between the two brothers on another level. When I refer to "her" as the producer I use the character's version we have in the performance, so don't be confused!

It is helpful to draw up a character outline for each of those characters. Here something I found on the internet:

Austin

Austin is an ambitious screenwriter. He has accepted a cookie-cutter life for himself: he has a family, a house, a producer. He knows his place in the world. As *True West* begins Austin is doing a little "research" for a screenplay he is writing, too bashful to admit that something he is working on might approach the level of art. He thinks of himself as a simple laborer, with a simple life and a

simple family—until his brother, Lee, shows up in town. At the beginning of the play Austin and Lee maintain an affable, though slightly strained relationship. Austin is the straight man to Lee's comic relief. Austin is square and he knows it. However, there is a slow transformation in Austin's character that charts the evolution of the play as a whole. The failure of his movie deal makes Austin become more and more like his rambunctious brother, and eventually, the two effectively switch roles. Instead of the hardworking screenwriter, Austin actually becomes the drunken thief. Lying drunk on the floor, Austin screams at Lee while Lee is trying to write a screenplay. Austin also becomes obsessed with the idea of moving to the desert with Lee, as he is no longer able to take solace in his normal life. When Lee tries to go the desert without Austin, Austin strangles Lee with a phone cord, almost killing him. From a symbolic point of view, Austin can be seen as one half of the creative process. He is the methodical, diligent aspect, while Lee is the creative, inspired side. Together they form the basic ingredients of an artist and together they are able to write the beginnings of a screenplay.

Lee

Lee is the play's representative of the Old West. He is a drunk, a thief, prone to acts of violence, and generally combative in most situations. Before the action of the play he spent a few months out on the desert with a fighting pit bull. However, Lee is also the comic center of the play. His nagging is a hilarious counterpoint to stuffy Austin. At first, Lee seems to exist only to make his brother's life a living hell. He refuses to let Austin get any work done, then demands the keys to Austin's car to make the rounds of their mother's neighborhood to check out the houses he intends to rob. Furthermore, the physical threat Lee represents becomes evident when he suddenly lunges at Austin during an argument about their father near the beginning of the play. From that point forward there is almost an electric tension of the threat of further physical violence.

Lee is not only a physical threat to Austin, however. He also weasels his way into a movie deal with Austin's producer, and actually manages to pull the rug out from under Austin's project. Lee pulls this off through a bit of gambling on the golf course with the producer. After he seals the movie deal Lee begins to pull another coup, becoming more and more like his brother Austin. Night finds Lee sitting at the kitchen table pecking away at the typewriter with one finger, while Austin pesters Lee just as Lee had done to Austin. Eventually, however, Lee regresses, realizing that the respectable life is not the one for him. His decision to go back to the desert is not a surprising one. Lee is the most constantly surprising and vivid characters in the play, and the catalyst for most the action and the laugh track as well.

Saul Kimmer (Eva Kimmer)

Saul Kimmer cannot be said to be a real character as much as a plot device. He is your typical Hollywood producer: slick and manipulative, he will promise whatever is necessary to get his way. He conveniently makes house calls and breaks up the otherwise two-person drama. Saul's machinations with Lee

about producing his movie rather than Austin's are at the heart of the play's plot, and without it the play would not reach its frenzied ending. Although Saul is mostly a plot device, he seems to be genuinely taken with Lee, whose outlandish behavior is foreign to the homogeneity of Hollywood.

Old Man

Although he never appears onstage, the "old man" exerts a powerful influence over the entire play. Indeed, a case can be made that he is the most important character in *True West*, as the boys talk and fight about him throughout. Skirmishes over how to regard the old man drive the action of the play. Lee is generally much more sympathetic to the old man than Austin, as he wants to make money writing screenplays so that he can help the old man out of his financial worries. Austin, on the other hand, proclaims that the old man is of "a different ilk" and will "never change." Nevertheless, the old man plays on both of the brothers' imaginations. They both have his genes, habits, and inclinations, and feel the need to escape the traps of modern life and move out to the desert, just as he has.

Mom

Though a minor character, Mom's entrance into the degenerated kitchen in scene nine serves as one of the great comic entrances. Unfortunately for Mama, she is completely powerless over her boys, even when she is on the scene. The old man, though out in the desert and never appearing in the play, exerts a much more profound influence over the brothers than Mom does even when she is present in the destroyed kitchen. Mom is also the only absurd character in an otherwise highly stylized and mostly realistic play. She thinks that Picasso is coming to town and that she and the boys should go to see him. She has come back from Alaska because she missed her houseplants. She retreats to a motel, unable to cope with the family situation unfolding in front of her.

The play

Now I would like to take you through each scene of the play and suggest some exercises, questions you can work on with your students or textual analysis. I have developed these ideas myself, they are ideas from "an actor's" point of view mostly. In a stage production it is important that despite the mystic and mythological atmosphere in the play the characters come across as real people. Every one of them. They have to be human and are driven by certain motives, whether they are conscious or subconscious. It is the director's job to work with the overall atmosphere, with hidden analogies to mythology and such. In this material I will try to work on both levels, from a distance.

As the play is so well-written, not every bit of the characters' behaviour can really be pin-pointed – sometimes Sam Shepard leaves us deliberately in the dark – he has not written an obvious play, he leaves room for interpretation. I

would like to leave that kind of room for you, too. Room for different opinions. I am going to throw ideas and suggestions at you - and you decide how to use them. This section is mainly based on work with the characters and with how these characters could, for you and your students, spring to life.

Which version to use?

I suggest that you use the Diesterweg Version of the play as there is some useful information at the back of the book and there is a list of vocabulary on each page. While going through the play with you I will refer to the Diesterweg Version when I point out pages or lines. There is also some teaching material available from Diesterweg as you probably know, written by Prof. Dr. Albert Reiner Glaap. It would be valid to start with his teaching material as it deals a lot with America in general and overall questions on the play.

2. Work with the play – Each scene in chronological order

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

Austin looks after his mother's flat who has gone to Alaska for a while. He hopes for a quiet time to get his script – he is a script-writer for movies – on its way. But his older brother Lee also appears on the scene. They haven't seen each other for five years. The play opens in the middle of a conversation.

Notes

In the first scene of a play the playwright has to introduce us to the main characters of the play and give us an idea about their relationship, their background, the reasons why they meet, why they are there, and what they might want.

As you read the first scene, think of your impression of the two characters.

Questions

When did the brothers see each other last?

What kind of relationship do the brothers have? Do they see each other on a regular basis? Are they open with each other and are they pleased to see each other?

What do you think – will they get on in the play?

What basic information does Sam Shepard give us about them? Find the information, the facts, in the text.

Example:

Austin: screenwriter, has a wife and kids, seems well - off, has a car.

Lee: a burglar, wasn't asked to look after their mum's flat – why not?, has no car, has lived in the desert with a dog...

Athmosphere

The play opens mid-scene, that means we come into a situation that has already been established - usually in the beginning of a play someone comes in, says hello, etc.

Here we meet the brothers when they are already both there, in their world.

What effect does this have on you? Why do you think the author has chosen that kind of beginning?

(suggestion: an atmosphere of a closed room, suspense, a familiarity of the characters, no over-explanation, we are immediately taken in, a real atmosphere can develop, we are left with lots of questions, that is exciting)

Exercises/Impros

Imagine the *first* meeting of the brothers there.

(Suggestion: Austin is in the flat and then Lee comes in, then vice versa.)

Play around with this idea, act them out. *How do you think the whole situation was set up?*

(Suggestion: The Mother phones Austin to ask him to look after her flat - but how does Lee know about it? Is he there by chance or did he come there deliberately to meet his brother?)

Discuss!

Think about the athmosphere we have already examined – what kind of set would you choose to underline the situation? Try and think of a way to create the specific effect.

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

In scene two the differences between Austin and Lee become more apparent. Austin tries to establish contact with his brother, he offers him breakfast, tries to talk to him. We learn more about their lives, Lee's time in the desert, and that Austin is going to try and land a major deal with his producer. At the end of the scene the brothers make a kind of bargain - Lee pushes Austin into lending him his car and promises not to be around when the important meeting with the producer takes place.

Notes

After the “jump” into the play in scene one, the play really begins in this scene. It is morning, the two characters seem to be more at ease with the situation. The story-line is developed by introducing the producer in their conversation.

The second scene is more relaxed than the rest of the play, we get time to find out more about the characters. Not a lot of action takes place.

Characters

Try to find out more in the text. We have to examine the motives and reasons of the characters - *what do they want?*

Have they got issues they don't talk about? Issues we can perceive because of *how* they communicate? Otherwise this scene would just be talk!

Questions

What kind of drive has Lee when he talks?

He has the quality to go on about things and talks himself into some kind of aggression - why do you think he is like that? *Try and read the beginning of scene two (Idaho - decals) and get louder and angrier when you read it – what is the effect? On you and on other people?*

(Suggestion: He is obsessed with details, because they make him feel safe. Little details make your world smaller, easier to control. The effect is a heightened emotion in Lee and a strange effect on the other person, because no one can really understand why Lee gets aggressive about plates... that makes Lee a wilful and dangerous person, you never know when he might explode next.)

Improvise an argument about a silly thing, maybe a tomato, and then about a real problem, taking drugs maybe. Note the differences and draw conclusions about the characters.

(Suggestion: In the real argument, i.e. drugs, it is easier to understand why the person is agitated, we can identify with the anger. The fight about the tomato is absurd and we are left with the feeling that the person who is angry about a tomato is slightly strange or crazy.) Find similar hints about Lee in the text.

Examine the way Lee and Austin talk to each other. How does Austin try to stop Lee from being agitated or from getting obsessed with a topic?

(suggestion: He simply changes the subject! Find these points in the scene. P.12, line 29, p.13, line 20,21, p.15, lines 16 - 18)

Lee is under the constant presumption that people think he is dumb - where do you find hints of that in the text?

(Suggestion: p.13, l. 20: "I never went to an Ivy League school" – p.13, l.10: "You never had more on the ball than I did", p.16, l. 1: "You afraid I'll embarrass you, right?")

What is Austin's aim, do you think he feels comfortable around Lee? Discuss!

What does Austin want from Lee?

(suggestion: no trouble, creating a nice atmosphere so that Lee cooperates when he asks him to leave the flat.)

Atmosphere

Why do you think Sam Shepard lets the producer come to their flat? Austin could just meet her at a café. Why do we need the conflict to develop in this room?

(Suggestion: Entrapment is a way of showing the brothers that they can't escape. It is not a natural situation we have here. The brothers are forced to face up to each other and to see themselves. Being trapped in one room brings out the truth but also aggression and violence.)

Discuss. Can you think of a film in a reduced space? "The panic room", „Das Experiment", etc. What are the topics in these films?

Background research

Try to find facts from their childhood, why do you think they have developed in such a different way?

(suggestion: Lee was always the strong one, Austin the dreamer. Austin went to Highschool, Lee didn't - he is not intellectually educated, but can survive in the desert. Find more facts like these.)

*Discuss the Ying and Yang principle. One mirrors the other but is also the exact opposite. **Together they make one.***

Try to paint a first impression of the old man.

What do you know so far?

(He lives in some place in the desert, seems to drink)

Who do you think has a closer relationship to the old man?

Why is he called the old man?

(suggestion: He is the father-figure, the forefather, he is therefore a bigger figure than just a father with a name – he represents the past, the background, the roots)

When we speak to people in our family we sometimes take on roles. For instance, if I talk to my sister and she is really well-behaved I might just be wild, just to be different from her. Or the other way round.

In Lee's and Austin's talk, who is taking which part?

(suggestion: Austin is actually playing the part of the older, sensible brother and Lee plays the little stubborn, hurt child. Because Austin is so nice and well-behaved Lee can twist him into lending him his car. Also he is always playing on emotions - he is angry, blocks Austin out, or probes him, makes him feel guilty by telling him HE lent him HIS car way back - what I want to say is that Lee is playing the emotional part and Austin the head, the sensible part.)

Improvisation

Every time Austin tries to lead the scene, Lee finds a way of cutting in - find examples:

(Suggestion: p.15, l.10, 11, ff , p. 16, line 11,12,13)

Try to adapt this scheme to an improvisation.

Example: „Oh, this is a nice car!“ The other one: „NO, I don't think so, why is it nice?“ etc. What feeling does this kind of talk leave you with? Play around with this.

ACT ONE, SCENE 3

The scene opens in the middle of Austin's important talk with his producer. Everything seems to go really well, when Lee suddenly comes in. He is taking the talk into his hands and in a clever way talks the producer into meeting him for a game of golf over which Lee will discuss HIS ideas for a western with her.

Notes and questions

This is not a natural scene - why?

Lee takes the whole scene into his hands and no one does anything against it. In real life Austin could just speak up for himself, but in this scene the conversation is strangely stilted.

Why do you think that is?

Why does Austin behave like a puppet - is he afraid of Lee?

What kind of person is The Hollywood Producer? Is she a sympathetic kind of character, a real, warm person?

Discuss your pros and cons.

(suggestion to keep in mind: A big theme of the play is the inevitable twist towards the characters' doom. They are always presented with a solution, with hope, with chances to get out of a bad situation, but they don't *grasp* these chances, that is the point, they walk on, blindly – that is again a concept of the old greek theatre. Human beings are small, driven by Gods (producer, father, mother) and can't miss their fate. Keep this suggestion in mind and try to remember it for the following turn of events in the play, later read up in section 6+7, once you have gathered enough facts to support this thesis.)

Hollywood

The hollywood producer is a stereotype, representing the business and the typical etiquette of society – how you talk, how to be non-comitting, how to be interested but not straight. Find the facts behind this statement.

Where in the scene does Paula Kimmer say "Yes, sure", but probably means: "No, never."?

(Suggestion: p. 19, line 7, p. 19, line 13, p. 19, 28, p. 21, line 32 etc.)

Now you could look at section 9: Madonna "Hollywood" or Leftfield "Open up".

The wild man taking over

Of course Eva Kimmer can't get on with Lee because he doesn't follow the rules. This scene is the beginning of the wild man taking over. Austin has worked for months on promoting his script to the producer and finally, with a lot of effort, work, research and diplomacy he gets his foot in the door. Lee on the other hand does exactly what he reproached Austin of doing: He hustles Eva Kimmer.

How does he do it? Examine Lee's tactics.

(suggestion: He plays with his "surprise-moment". Eva Kimmer does not know how to place this man. He seems rough, straight-forward, a man she would normally never talk to, but there he is, prepared, and she isn't. She uses her normal way of communication. Asks polite questions without being interested in the answer. Giving out common-place statements of interest, like, „yeah, sure, let's play golf at some point". Usually, the people who want something from her would never take her up on it – *why do you think that is?*

They are too afraid of risking something, so she can always be in the grey zone of non-commitment. But not Lee. He hasn't got to lose anything.)

At the same time he is very insolent and invades people's space.

How does Sam Shepard create this menacing, invading sensation of Lee's, including stage directions, without making him downright out of order? Find details in the text.

(Suggestion: he is asking direct questions, giving out direct statements, fixes a date quickly and doesn't leave space for an escape (P. 19, l. 5), says Paula's name a lot to create intimacy, blocks their way to the kitchen (p. 20, l. 29), rambles on about a subject (p. 21, l. 12 ff). Just to get rid of him, the other characters say „yes“, because they feel he will persist, no matter what it is.)

How does Austin react to the scene?

(He tries to use the same as last scene, changing the subject, and tries to get Paula to leave.)

But it is, as soon Lee comes in, as if he sort of disappears. *How does Sam Shepard create this effect?*

Look at how many lines Austin has compared to Lee.

Who is the winner in this scene ? Why? Austin has just made a deal, he should be the successful one - why have we forgotten about his success? How does Sam Shepard make us feel that Austin is the loser?

Atmosphere

The producer is also a symbol for temptation - she is the mythological figure of the snake and the apple. Over the unwritten script and the hope of success she brings out the conflict in the brothers. She is like a test for the brothers, and both fail that test.

ACT ONE, SCENE 4

Again, it is night... Austin helps Lee with the outline of his western story. Lee gets worked up because he can't get his thoughts straight, and Austin is not convinced about the story. Lee still hangs on to Austin's car keys and won't give them back until his brother has written the outline. The atmosphere is tense. But working together brings them closer, somehow they begin to feel quite hopeful. Maybe they can both sell scripts and earn a lot of money. For the first time the brothers start opening up, talking to each other instead of at each other.

Notes and questions

In a drama there is always a point when things seem to get better, when there is light on the horizon, when the situation could be solved - before something drastic happens and throws everyone's hopes overboard: The eye of the hurricane. The positive climax before the break-down. This method is again found in classical theatre pieces. Try to think of a play or a film that has a similar structure („Sophie Scholl“, „Macbeth“, „Oedipus“, „Perfect Storm“ with George Clooney). The fall seems deeper when you have a moment of hope.

When you read this scene try to find moments in their talk that are different from the other scenes, but also find the same patterns.

(Same: Lee going on about little details, Austin changing the subject, trying not to be pushed, Lee is blackmailing him again, with his keys, Austin is a bit arrogant)

Change: from page 26 line 21 onwards.

Look at the conversation just before the change, p. 26, lines 1-20

They actually talk about the truth - about the raw facts - brothers killing each other.

„O.k.“, they both say, „This is not what we are going to do“, but they both know that there is danger in the room. The future has somehow been mentioned. So somehow they decide to make things better.

Who is the active part in that decision, who tries to give a positive input? (Austin)

What is the trigger for Lee to accept this peace-offering, do you think? („I MEAN IT“ – p. 26, l. 32)

Why do you think this „I mean it“ from Austin is so important to Lee?

(suggestion: He has a terrible suspicion of people, that people don't take him seriously, that he can't communicate with people, that people can trick him, because they have more education. This „I mean it“ shows real affection and truth. Suddenly Lee grasps this and develops this absurd, childlike hope.)

Of course this hope is so unrealistic and not like him that it won't work out in the end, we can feel that.

Why? Examine Lee's lines.

Or could Lee change? What do you think? And why do you think Sam Shepard has chosen this scene to be the scene before the interval?

Discuss.

„Everything is gonna change!“

Can you identify with this sentence - like, if I only meet the right person, everything will change, or, if I lose 10 kilos, everything will change? *Discuss.*

The feeling is so close to us, but that, of course, is the danger. *Everything* will never change! We know that, even if we feel like that sometimes, but for a person like Lee, a feeling like this is fatal, as we will see in the rest of the play.

Why? Why do you think hope like this is more dangerous to Lee than it would be to Austin?

(Suggestion: because Lee is like an animal, he is such an emotional person, and he gets disappointed so quickly. His feelings are so extreme, having a hope like that is destroying, as we shall see. Because he can't process information in a detached way, he can't put things into perspective.)

But for this scene, the hope changes their relationship. *How? What does Sam Shepard use for their bonding? Find the moment in the scene when they are closest and when they actually discover something about each other, and themselves. (Suggestion: p. 28, line 10-27)*

The script

What do you think - is Lee's idea for a script good? Does it sound like an interesting film?

Discuss.

(Suggestion: In the beginning it doesn't, but at the end of this scene it sounds quite good.)

How does Sam Shepard convey this?

(Suggestion: In the beginning of the scene Lee gets confused, Austin asks many questions that Lee can't answer, there is no flow to the plot. In the end of the scene Lee simply tells the story. And he mentions feelings. For the first time is not obsessed with detail, but drives on an idea.)

Try to write an outline for a film yourself - what do you think is important, and what do you think will be important for the producer? How would you try and draw the reader in?

ACT TWO, SCENE 5

Lee has gambled his way into the writers world, he has sold his script to Eva Kimmer after he beat her in the golf. Austin is gobsmacked when he hears

this, even more so when Lee slowly comes out with the truth: Austin is to write Lee's Western, his own project taken on hold. After this revelation Austin has to get out, he wants to take a ride, but Lee gets him into drinking champagne with him, after all, they are partners now.

NOTES

In this scene the events take a new turn, things are turned around, the events take the promised dive we discussed in the last section.

First, try to divide the scene into sections and give each a head-line. *Where are the turning-points?*

(Suggestion: Lee's Success p. 30-p. 31, line 10, The revelation of the truth p. 31, lines 11- p. 32 line 8, Austin's reaction, Lee smug, p. 32, lines 9-34, Turning-point, real talk, the facts p. 33. 1.1-31, reverting roles, the end)

By finding these little chapters you can find out how the two brothers give out information, and how they receive them, and ultimately how they react.

Now read the scene again, can you try and incorporate these turning-points in your reading, does the scene now feel more structured, does the text make more sense to you now?

The middle, the turning-point

Try to find an overall-structure for the actions in the play up to this point, and then see whether this build-up has changed or is toppling over. This is the axis of the whole play!

(Suggestion: The play has 9 scenes. The first half of the play is therefore over. *What has happened in this first half?* Austin was the successful one, we got used to the brothers' characters, we were introduced to the way they function, to who they are. They behaved within their character boundaries - Lee tramp-like, strong, wild - Austin civilised, successful, nice. We ended on a positive note with the idea in our heads that the brothers thought of each other's lives, of being into the other's boots. The next thing we know is, that exactly this has happened. Lee has landed a success, Austin's life-income is threatened, suddenly in the middle of the play their roles *are reverted.*) *How do they react to this?*

Can you find first traces of their "swapped" behaviour?

Under this aspect examine p. 31, line 11-19, p. 32, lines 16-23, p. 33, 34, lines 32-end of scene.

Who is saying what? Would they, as we have got to know them before, act and talk the way they do in these parts of the scene? Does Austin say something Lee has said before in the play?

(Suggestions: Usually Lee would just take the champagne, Austin wouldn't normally say, „it's the dumbest story I have ever heard“, and Lee wouldn't talk about french films. Then Austin does the same as Lee in the first scene, he wants to take the car and get out.)

Now what do you make of it? It's as if the play starts again, but with new roles???

Extreme situations bring out different sides in people. Sam Shepard has built us a situation up to the middle of the play, and now he is taking it apart!

Are the characters happy about this change, do they feel at home with their „new selves“?

Discuss.

ACT TWO, SCENE 6

In this scene we meet Eva Kimmer again. She is there to discuss definites with the brothers. Austin learns that the wole project is planned to be a charity project for the old man, to get him out of trouble. Austin is reticent, he is not gonna write the script for Lee. But Eva is adamant, she then cancels Austin's own project and leaves, Lee beaming with satisfaction and triumph, and Austin beaten.

NOTES

This is the first time „The West“ is actually mentioned in the play. Up to now we have had the chance to get familiar with the way life works for the characters. We have been paintend many different pictures, but all represent The West.

Look at page 37, lines 21 until the end of the scene.

Now try to describe the different attitudes towards The West in this section. *What does Eva like about Lee's story, what does she mean, "it is something about the land"?*

Now look at Austin's answer. *What is his argument?*

Who do you think is right, or is there space for both opinions?

If we look at these two concepts of The West, we can see the characters in a different light, too. Again we leave the natural situation and have to look at the bigger picture.

Compare the two statements about The West and now look at the characters in the play.

Who in the play represents which of the two statements?

By looking at the characters' personality describe the two ideas of The West more.

(Suggestion: Lee represents The Wild West, Austin the modern, civilised West. Lee has lived in the desert, is closer to the old man, looks the past in its face, is in touch with his roots, is an instinct person, can catch snakes, knows how to survive, but can't communicate well. He is lost in the city. Austin lives in the city, he has a family life, a job, can deal with the media, has tried to buy his way out of the past (scene one), has cut cords with his forefathers.)

When you have gathered all these details, try to talk about what they mean to you. *Do you think we can still find both aspects in California today? Is there a big gap between the two faces?*

Now could be a point when you can introduce some of the additional material, maybe section 5, "House made of dawn".

What does Eva Kimmer represent, under this aspect? Why do you think she goes with Lee's idea and not with Austin's?

Discuss.

(Suggestion: Paula Kimmer represents The Hollywood Machine, she uses peoples' dreams to put on celluloid - she sells peoples' emotions. She can probably feel that modern civilisation has left a void in people's hearts, that there is a wistfulness, a longing for the wild life, a primordial wish for freedom, gut instincts, and sheer existence. Life in suburbia is comparably safe, but empty - that has always been Lee's point, too, although his way of being leaves him unable to survive in society.)

Now read section 5, "Ceremony" or maybe section 8 "Stealing Horses".

What do you think about our life? Do you think we have lost touch with real emotions, nature, the past?

Discuss.

ACT TWO, SCENE 7

In this scene it becomes apparent that swapping roles is not easy for the brothers. They are both at a loss, thrown into the deep sea without having learnt to swim.

Lee tries to write his script alone, Austin is drunk and counter-productive. He decides that if Lee can be a writer, he can be a burglar instead. Lee wants him to stay, he needs Austin's help with the script. Finally Lee promises to leave and disappear, just like the old man, as soon as the script is finished. Talking to each other, Austin reveals a story about the old man that Lee wasn't aware of.

Notes and questions

First look at the stage directions on top of the scene and compare them with the stage directions in scene one, - another proof that their world stands on its head.

It is night again and we are past the point of politeness. Now the real feelings come out - scene seven is the beginning of the end.

Look at the way Austin and Lee speak with each other now. *How has their communication changed, compared to scene one? Can you find "quotes" from scene one? Look hard.*

(Suggestion: Austin has dropped his mask, he is not trying to be nice anymore, he just says what comes into his mind, provoking his brother. Lee acts civilised now, trying to concentrate. He doesn't want the trouble now, because trouble is exhausting, he has more important things on his mind. Proof: Page 38, lines 23-27, compare to scene one, page 8, lines 28-32, compare page 41, lines 1-10 to page 10 lines 3-20, and page 13, lines 23-25)

What does this style mean, what could Sam Shepard want by using these repetitions?

Discuss.

(Suggestion: Maybe we are all the same, when pushed into certain circumstances. Maybe a brother always has the other half inside - again like Yin and Yang - Lee carries Austin inside and vice versa. Maybe that's why they want to destroy the other half, because they are afraid of it, but they also would like to have it, - like two magnets, drawing each other closer and pushing each other away.)

Look at page 41, lines 23-30.

Now the two brothers don't even just sound alike, but Austin also sounds like The Old Man. *What does Lee say it comes from?*

(Suggestion: Drink. Of course the father is an alcoholic and Lee is an alcoholic, and now Austin drinks.)

That is one point. But maybe there is more. *What do you think?*

(They come from the same root, you can't change who you are and where you come from.)

Do you agree with this concept?

Discuss.

The old man

Now look at the following section. As soon as the father is mentioned, one of the brothers gets violent. In scene one, it is Lee, now it is Austin. The Old Man triggers emotions in them.

Think of what a part the father has played so far. *What does he stand for, what kind of emotions does he bring forward in the brothers? Find examples in the text.*

(Suggestion: Aggression-they lash out in physical violence when confronted with him, scene one, p. 11, lines 5, page 41, line 34. Guilt: they both still sometimes see him and feel bad about the way he lives, he is always in the back of their heads. Love: when Lee sells his script, the one thing he thinks about is how to help his father. Resignation: Austin has given up on him.)

If you assume that the Old Man represents the forefathers, the roots of the land, the guilt towards the past in the brothers head, - *how can you read the last section of this scene then?*

(Page 43, from line 3 onwards)

What does this section say about The West then? About the people who were there before now?

Read section 5, “Winter in the blood” and “Indian’s summer”.

What do decaying teeth represent?

(Suggestion: The father is unable to live in this world, he is like a relic of the olden times, he tries to disappear but then loses his persona. His losing his teeth means he is robbed of his dignity, his spirit, his existence, he is ageing and all he can do is watch, he is fading and can do nothing about it, there is no place for the ancients, the roots of the country are rotten.

Money or food from a restaurant along with false teeth can’t help him, because he has a different culture, he is like a dinosaur that is unable to survive today.)

This imprint he has left in his sons. His sons are younger, *society* is younger, but it is built on decaying ground. None of the brothers really have a chance to live a life “in touch” because a mistake was made in the past. They are driven by this past - again this is a concept of the old greek theatre.

Another example

A mistake, a murder or something similar has happened in the past - Oedipus for instance: An oracle told his father that he would die from the hands of his own son. So he threw the little baby out into the wilderness, his feet bound

and stitched together. A peasant found the little boy, raised him then as his own son.

Oedipus never knows who his real parents are. On a journey he accidentally meets the carriage of his father, a brawl emerges, the young man gets involved into the fight and accidentally kills his father. The prophecy is fulfilled. This is just the beginning of a long story about what happens when you try to run away from your destiny. Even though Oedipus is then trying to lead a good life, he can't, because his fate, the corruption in the past, carries through to the present.

It is as if Sam Shepard wanted to say that whatever you do, you can't make it right, because something happened before your days, that is eating life like a canker, even now. If the root is rotten the whole tree will die.

Read section 7 of the teaching material.

ACT TWO, SCENE 8

Lee and Austin are both drunk, it is very early in the morning. Austin has stolen every single toaster in the neighbourhood and Lee crashes the typewriter with his golf-club. Both are in almost a hysterical state. Lee desperately wants to talk to a woman, but can't remember her phone-number, Austin provokes him by toasting bread in about eight toasters at the same time. At the end of the scene they come to a sort of conclusion, a truce. Lee offers his brother a deal. He will take Austin to the desert with him, if Austin helps the script along.

Notes and questions

Read the scene, again starting with the stage directions. What can you learn from them? Without reading the scene first, take a guess from the stage directions at what has happened and what will happen in the scene. Then read it. Were you right?

The scene is quite comical and frantic, both brothers are in a complete state, nothing seems real to them anymore. *Why do you think that is?*
 (It is dead late, they have been drinking the whole night etc.)

Can you identify with the basic situation? Have you ever been in a situation like that? When you feel very clear, because you have no social etiquette to follow and because you have been awake for a very long time - and very surreal at the same time, when total nonsense suddenly makes complete sense?

It's the typical "After a party" situation, drinking up the rests, the guests gone...

Atmosphere

Find the surreal points in this scene and find reasons for why they are there.

(Suggestion: Toasters, smashing the type-writer with a golf-club, the song Austin sings, the way he keeps the situation completely light and jolly, the 10 Melanie Fergusons etc.)

Austin is in complete rebellion and very provocative. *Can you pin-point the irritating bits he comes out with?*

Lee wants a woman to save him, and Austin wants toast - of course that is absurd.

But dawn has always been a sign of hope. It is as if the time before dawn belongs to the lost souls and when dawn emerges, new plans come up to. *What is Austin's sudden plan?*

From page 50 to the end of the scene we learn a big deal more about the brothers. Read this section. *What do you think is the essence of that bit? What sums up their personalities and their lives? Why?*

(Suggestion: Lee- „I'm living out there because I can't make it here!“ Austin- „I'd cash it all in in a second. That's the truth.“)

Do these sentences make you feel different towards one or the other character? Why?

(Suggestion: They might seem more vulnerable for you, or you might think, „oh, now I understand!“, all that we have tried to find out in what they didn't admit before (subtext) comes out now – if we had known these facts from scene one, the play would have lost the tension it has)

Why do you think Lee explodes suddenly after Austin's last sentence: „You want some toast?“

And now read the end of the scene. What kind of feeling does this end leave you with? Do you think that this deal is realistic, that everything is still gonna work out? Or does it leave a bad aftertaste in your mouth? What is going to happen next, do you think?

(Austin and Lee know that going to the desert together would be death, at least for Austin.)

ACT TWO, SCENE 9

In the ultimate scene we see the two brothers working together, they seem to be on a temporary peace level, when suddenly the mother comes in, back early from her trip to Alaska. As soon as she is in the room the brothers change

completely, trying to explain their situation. Lee decides that their plan is not working out, he wants to clear off to the desert alone, but Austin hinders him by choking him with a telephone - cord. The mother watches the fight without really interfering and then leaves the house, stating that this is not her home anymore.

Notes and questions

Remember the end of the last scene and the kind of unreal feeling to the peace. Now examine the following scene up to the point the mother comes in. *Do the two brothers really work together, trying to create the best story possible? Do you think the script is going to be a good one? Be specific and find your reasons in the text.*

(Suggestion: page 52, line13: Is Luke a good name ? Page 52, 53: The thing about the cliché. Which version do you prefer: "Back of my hand" or "intimate terms"?)

Examine the way Austin deals with Lee's suggestions. At first he doesn't change anything, because he thinks Lee isn't right. When Lee insists, he does change the sentence, but obviously, in my opinion, it is a change for the worse. Then Lee says that he really likes the change. Austin does clearly not agree, but he just answers: „Sure.“

Why do you think that is?

(He doesn't care for the project, he just wants to finish everything and go?)

Does he do this deliberately to spoil Lee's script?

(suggestion: And Lee hasn't got the aptitude to realize what is being written - his script is probably going to go under when it is finished. So both brothers, though having made their deal are in a loser's situation. They have both no hope of making things work out. Austin has realized this, I think, but Lee only realizes it when he is confronted with the mother.)

Now look at the mother's entrance. *Can you see a change of behaviour in the boys?*

Describe their positions now. Again, find the details in the text.

Once you have read the scene with the mother, try to paint a picture of her - *what kind of woman is she? - and of the relationship the brothers have with her.*

Find adjectives for their relationship: superficial or caring, honest or not, tense, relaxed.

Does she treat them like adults?

Why do you think she does not really do anything when the brothers start to fight their battle?

(Suggestion: She might be used to fights, she is afraid, she knows she can't do anything, she might even be relieved if Lee gets out of the picture - all could be true...)

You have gone through the whole play now! - try and build a firm image of the family with back-up from the script.

Take all the facts you have got about the characters and their relationship and then describe the family how it was in the beginning (childhood of the brothers), the present, and maybe, the future. Play around with these ideas. Let your imagination take over after having summed up the facts.

(Suggestions: Facts we know- **The mother** lives alone, loves plants and has an urge for security (locks on all her belongings), is around 65, likes order, seems isolated - missed her *plants*, has a strong yearning for HOME, is lonely, maybe, doesn't make contact with people easily, averts true contact with her sons, falls into old patterns like treating them like children.

Lee decides he can't be with people, wants to go back to the desert, suddenly cuts all his emotions off and does the one thing he knows - takes things that don't belong to him and clears out.

Austin has lost perspective on his former life, his wife and kids are only mentioned a couple of times, he has lost his script and his respect for the old life, he has gone over the edge, nothing seems to have meaning right now – now HE is obsessing about things - going to the desert for example, toast, that he is strong and could kill Lee - he can't go back.

The Old Man lives in a desert somewhere between Needles and New Mexico, he is alone, drunk, hasn't got any teeth anymore, no money, in fact destitute, for all we know he can't get in contact with people but is o.k. about the sons visiting him, he probably has no contact to the mother.)

Nearly there...

Look at the last couple of lines of the mother and then go back to scene Two in the play, page 14, lines 5-7.

What do you make of this similarity? You can see it both ways.

The mother can't recognize her home, her home which has been built by men. It is destroyed, civilization is wiped out.

In scene two it is nature that has been "built-up" (like a suburb) as Austin says but it really has been wiped out by men too, it has been destroyed. So nature was destroyed by human-beings in order to make homes, and now homes

are destroyed by human-beings, civilisation is only temporary, the savage life-order takes back its place.

Refer to section 7 again, and also section 6 unless you have done so before.

Discuss.

What do you think is one of the "messages" in the play (I don't like this phrase, maybe we can call it „essence" instead?)

(suggestion: That civilisation, etiquette, morale and even family ties are just very frail things, learnt and developed by humans to cover the wild side up. By denying our past, - and the west was really an old wild brutal piece of the earth, - we end up lost. Lost because we can't deny who we are and where we come from, lost because we can't live with this beast side in us anymore, but can't pretend it isn't there either.)

The play ends on an open note, we don't know exactly what will happen. Of course we don't really assume that the brothers will fall into each others' arms and be sorry for what they did. They are in the natural state now. The beast, the coyotes take over...

Why does Sam Shepard not let one of the brothers win the fight?

Discuss.

(suggestion: they are equal now, both sides are relevant, we can't have one side prevail, they need each other to be whole)

The play as a whole

In this respect examine the way the play is built!

Find outward details as a statement of the play, recurrent themes.

(Sound of crickets, coyotes, the heat, the cycle of day and night, the closed space of the room)

What do these aspects mean and how could a director put them across?

(suggestion: The heat, for instance: The fire cleanses the soul, it is like purgatory. In the play the brothers are stripped down to the marrow of their bones, in the end they are naked before each other. The closed space, the absurd elements)

Now you have read and discussed the play. I hope that you will now enjoy watching our performance at Europahaus without thinking too much about what you have learnt and discussed so far! We are looking forward to seeing you and would like to welcome you to our „Chat in the theatre" after the performance with the actors.

4. “True West” - A useful site on the internet

Go to: <http://www.sparknotes.com/drama/truewest/>

This site offers a wide variety of material concerning True West. You can build whole lessons on this source – and it is for free! Check it out.

5. “Today Talks In Yesterday’s Voice” – Native indian writing

from: N. Scott Momaday: “House made of Dawn”

Everything is different, and you don’t know how to get used to it. You see the way it is, how everything is going on without you, and you start to worry about it. You wonder how you can get yourself into the swing of it, you know? And you don’t know how, but you’ve got to do it because there’s nothing else. And you want to do it, because you can see how good it is. It’s better than anything you’ve ever had; it’s money and clothes and having plans and going someplace fast. You can see what it’s like, but you don’t know how to get into it; there’s too much of it and it’s all around you and you can’t get hold of it because it’s going on too fast. You have to get used to it first and it’s hard. You’ve got to be left alone. You’ve got to put a lot of things out of your mind, or you’re going to get all mixed up. You’ve got to take it easy and get drunk once in a while and just forget about who you are. It’s hard, and you want to give it up. You think about getting out and going home. You want to think that you belong someplace, I guess. You go up there on the hill and you hear the singing and the talk and you think about going home. But the next day you know it’s no use; you know that if you went home there would be nothing there, just the empty land and a lot of old people, going noplac and dying off. And you’ve got to forget about that, too.

From: James Welch: “Winter in the Blood”

The sugar beet factory up by Chinook had died seven years before. Everybody had thought the factory caused the river to be milky but the water never cleared. The white men from the fish department came in their green trucks and stocked the river with pike. They were enthusiastic and dumped thousands of pike of all sizes into the river. But the river ignored the fish and the fish ignored the river; they refused even to die there. They simply vanished. The white men made tests; they stuck electric rods into the water; they scraped muck from the bottom; they even collected bugs from the field next to the river. Nothing worked. The fish disappeared. Then the men from the fish department disappeared, and the Indians put away their new fishing poles.

From: Roger Russell (Nasnaga): "Indians' Summer"

Anishinabe-waki didn't have an H-bomb, but it obviously possessed a very important weapon that the major powers had long since lost, if they ever had it at all. In their rush to out-civilize each other, the major countries had forgotten that basic trust and respect is the strongest bond between men. Political systems have suffered in more than one area because this simple aspect of human behavior has become all but extinct. (...) This antiquated idea of love among men is a powerful weapon.

From: Leslie Marmon Silko: "Ceremony"

The people had been taught to despise themselves because they were left with barren land and dry rivers. But they were wrong. It was the white people who had nothing; it was the white people who were suffering as thieves do, never able to forget that their pride was wrapped in something stolen (...). (...) only a few people knew that the lie was destroying the white people faster than it was destroying the Indian people. But the effects were hidden, evident only in the sterility of their art, which continued to feed off the vitality of other cultures, and in the dissolution of their consciousness into dead objects: the plastic and the neon, the concrete and the steel. Hollow and lifeless as a witchery clay figure. And what little still remained to white people was shriveled like a seed hoarded too long, shrunken past its time, and split open now, to expose a fragile, pale leaf stem, perfectly formed and dead.

6. "Educating Rita" – The tragedy of the drama – How a drama works

FRANK (...) the sort of thing you read in the paper that's reported as being tragic, 'Man Killed By Falling Tree', is not a tragedy.

RITA It is for the poor sod under the tree.

FRANK Yes, it's tragic, absolutely tragic. But it's not a tragedy in the way that Macbeth is a tragedy. Tragedy in dramatic terms is inevitable, pre-ordained. Look, now, even without ever having heard the story of Macbeth you wanted to shout out, to warn him and prevent him going on, didn't you? But you wouldn't have been able to stop him would you?

RITA No.

FRANK Why?

RITA They would have thrown me out the theatre.

FRANK But what I mean is that your warning would have been ignored. He's warned in the play. But he can't go back. He still treads the path to doom. But the poor old fellow under the tree hasn't arrived there by following any inevitable steps has he?

RITA No.

FRANK There's no particular flaw in his character that has dictated his end. If he'd been warned of the consequences of standing beneath that particular tree he wouldn't have done it, would he? Understand.

RITA So – so Macbeth brings it on himself?

FRANK Yes. You see he goes blindly on and on and with every step he's spinning one more piece of thread which will eventually make up the network of his own tragedy. Do you see?

RITA I think so. (...)

7. Euripides – Introduction to the Greek Theatre

Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theatre, from „Medea and other plays“, Euripides, Penguin Classics

For Greeks, „civilised“ life meant controlled, orderly, proportionate life, „No excess“. As a principle this applied equally to everything – politics, social habits, and arts. To them it was the only life, and the want of it a living death. Those who have died for it in the great battles or in resistance to tyranny were their most honoured heroes. (...) In the great world of the forces of civilisation are a heroic minority, and their course is simple enough: To win or die. (...) The truth is that when a community or a nation has adopted, in its political and social institutions, the quality of self-control, *sophrosyne*, it soon learns that this quality belongs only in limited measure to its citizens; that the principle of barbarous excess is predominant in most individuals, so that the constant concern of government is to deal with barbarism inside the walls and in the council-chamber, as well as in foreign lands.

Just as in the modern world democracy, desperate to resist totalitarianism, resorts to totalitarian methods, weakening its own life in the process, so the fiery Greek temperament made the menace of barbarism the excuse for its own excesses.(...)

The lesson of the plays is that civilised men ignore at their peril the world of instinct, emotion, and irrational experience; that carefully worked-out notions of right and wrong are dangerous unless they are flexible and allow for constant adjustment. And the ending of „Medea“ for example, with the Sun himself, the source of all life and warmth, vindicating the cause of passion, disorder, violent cruelty, against the cold, orderly, self-protective processes of civilised man, is a reminder that the universe is not on the side of civilisation; and that a life combining order with happiness is something men must win for themselves in continual struggle with an unsympathetic environment.

8. The new young american poets

Sherman Alexi

I would steal horses

I would steal horses
for you, if there were any left,
give a dozen of the best
to your father, the auto mechanic

in the small town where you were born
and where he will die in the dark.
I am afraid of his hands, which have
rebuilt more of the small parts

of this world than I ever will.
I would offer my sovereignty, take
every promise as your final lie, the last
point before we start refusing the exact.

I would wrap us both in old blankets
hold every disease tight against our skin.

9. Song lyrics

Madonna

Hollywood

Everybody comes to Hollywood
They wanna make it in the neighborhood
They like the smell of it in Hollywood
How could it hurt you when it looks so good

[Chorus:]

Shine your light now
This time it's gotta be good
You get it right now
'Cause you're in Hollywood

There's something in the air in Hollywood
The sun is shining like you knew it would
You're ridin' in your car in Hollywood
You got the top down and it feels so good

I lost my memory in Hollywood
I've had a million visions, bad and good
There's something in the air in Hollywood
I tried to leave it but I never could

[chorus]

There's something in the air in Hollywood
I've lost my reputation, bad and good
You're ridin' in your car in Hollywood
You got the top down and it feels so good

Music stations always play the same songs
I'm bored with the concept of right and wrong

Everybody comes to Hollywood
They wanna make it in the neighborhood
They like the smell of it in Hollywood
How could it hurt you when it looks so good

[chorus]

'Cause you're in Hollywood
'Cause you're in Hollywood
In Hollywood [repeat three times]

Check it out, this bird has flown

[chorus]

'Cause you're in Hollywood
'Cause you're in Hollywood
In Hollywood [repeat three times]

Push the button
Don't push the button
Trip the station
Change the channel
[repeat twice]

Leftfield
Open up

Burn, burn (x2)

Burn, burn, burn...

Open up
Now open up

You lied, you faked
You cheated, you changed the stakes
Magnet toss that pie in the sky
Unrehearsed, let the bubbles burst
- All in all, a dreaming circus
- All in all, a three ring circus
- A fuel in the tea with parody
- Affinity with parody
Tragedy or comedy
Probably publicity

Open up, make room for me
Now open up, make room for me

Lose myself inside your schemes
Go for the money, honey
Not the screen
Be a movie star, blah blah blah
Go the whole hog
Be bigger than God

Burn Hollywood burn, taking down Tinseltown
Burn Hollywood burn, burn down to the ground
Burn Hollywood burn, burn holywood burn
Take down Tinseltown, burn down to the ground

Down, into the ground

Burn, burn, burn
Burn...