

**Theme:** American Dream reflected in Sam Shepard's *True West*

**Source:** Lyrical Theatre Study Guide <http://www.lyrictheatre.co.uk> (2004) - Extract

As part of our ongoing commitment to producing the very best in contemporary theatre, the Lyric Theatre is delighted to present Sam Shepard's *True West*. Described by *The Guardian* as "a powerful indictment of what it takes to be a man in the land where the myth has turned sour". This dark, funny and disturbingly vital play offers us the opportunity to see the work of a modern master at his finest.

5 The self-styled Cowboy Laureate has gained a reputation as one of America's foremost living playwrights. His work has consistently explored the dark underside of the multitude of the various 'American Dreams', most notably the one manufactured by Hollywood. His preoccupation with an American Midwest, which may or may not have existed, that is peopled with iconic characters is on the surface the stuff of movies to an Irish audience. But delve beneath and you find a wealth of  
10 personal and universal truth that is overwhelming. Shepard's characters are explosive bundles of pain, disillusionment, disenchantment and longing.

In *True West* Shepard offers us a window into a world he knows well. As a scriptwriter he is familiar with the way in which writers are treated in the Hollywood machine. Far from being considered talented or influential they have traditionally been merely scribes for hire and Austin's growing  
15 realisation of just how small he is in the scheme of things parallels the demise of the American Dream for many. Then there is Lee, stereotypically American, the loner cowboy, outside the law, answering to no one yet yearning, however temporarily for the conventional life of his younger brother. The combination of the brothers, overwhelmingly different yet the same makes for high drama and asks of us a number of questions: What is the measure of success? What defines quality of life? What does it  
20 mean to be authentic and does it even really matter? They are not easy to answer.

Nowhere is Shepard's preoccupation with identity more apparent than in *True West*. It has been said that the two brothers are simply parts of a whole. That as individuals, they are incomplete and certainly their yearning to take on board each other's characteristics would appear to back this up. One Broadway production of the play pushed this notion to the extent of swapping the actors playing the  
25 brothers on consecutive nights.

### Annotations

2 indictment – accusation 5 Cowboy Laureate – (reverential) reference to Sam Shepard 9 delve – search deeply 14 scribe – writer 25 consecutive – following one after another

### Assignments

- 1) Give a short summary of the aspects that – according to the text - make *True West* worthwhile watching (for an Irish audience).
- 2) Explain descriptions in the text that capture the nature of the play and its characters by relating them back to representative parts of the drama (with page and line references). Take "Shepard's characters are explosive bundles of pain .....longing" (l. 10) as a starting point.
- 3) Discuss the pros and cons of "swapping the actors" as suggested at the end of the text. Consider the different appearances of John Malkovich (Lee) and Gary Sinise (Austin) in the 1984 production of the play.

