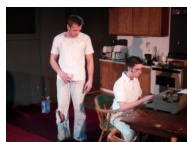


Brother 'Hood: "True West," at the Harrison Hilltop Theatre Through February 7

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 02 February 2009 09:54

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The Harrison Hilltop Theatre's opening-night production of *True West*, Sam Shepard's savage sibling-rivalry comedy, was an almost ridiculous amount of fun. Yet I'm hesitant about describing how *much* fun it was, because it's doubtful - if not *impossible*

- that subsequent audiences will be witness to the astounding, downright magical blend of accident and inventive improvisation that accompanied Thursday's presentation. Unless, that is, actor Andrew Harvey is again able to pull off that bit with the spoon. And actor Eddie Staver III is again able to make the slice of bread stick to the wall. And the cuckoo clock is repaired.

Let me back up. *True West* opens on two temperamentally opposite brothers in a southern California bungalow: Austin (Harvey), a thin, mildly nerdy family man hard at work on a screenplay, and Lee (Staver), a brawny, slovenly nomad in town for a visit. The siblings haven't seen one another in years, but the air of supreme discomfort gives you a fair indication of their childhood dynamic; Lee provokes Austin with blasé, big-brotherly meanness, and Austin regards Lee with a polite wariness that suggests a youth spent unsuccessfully avoiding wedgies. As this trenchant, elegantly comedic elegy continues, the men gradually swap roles and positions of power, and what started as an enjoyably tony spin on *The Odd Couple* turns into a brutal, borderline surreal study of machismo and family dysfunction.

It's also a kick-ass showcase for actors, and while Harvey and Staver were working in top form

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from the start, the true greatness of Thursday's presentation, to my mind, began with the spoon. It was a simple moment, really. While eating cereal in *True West's* second scene, the utensil Harvey was using accidentally leapt out of the bowl and landed on the floor; without making a big deal out of it, the actor picked up the spoon, threw it in the kitchen sink, grabbed a fresh one from a drawer, and resumed breakfast. The handling of this obviously unscripted moment was, in itself, noteworthy - the performers' conversation rhythm wasn't at all affected - but it wouldn't have been memorable as more than a professional reaction to a routine stage goof had it not been the tip of the evening's iceberg.



For the next 90 minutes of director Louis J. Hare's electrifyingly entertaining production, Harvey and Staver proved unflappable and spectacularly witty in the face of unforeseen circumstances, and demonstrated just how phenomenal the art of stage performance can be when it becomes nearly indistinguishable from Real Life. Staver's quickly downed swig of champagne led to foamy overflows from both the bottle *and* Staver. The closing of a door caused a nearby cuckoo clock to crash to the floor, with a broken portion attaching itself to Harvey's shoe. Staver's vicious assault on a plate of bread with a golf club led to a slice (of bread) fusing to a spot on the wall some 15 feet above the ground. And through these and other unplanned moments -

and, with the set morphing into a debris-strewn pigsty, there were

lots

of them -

True West

's stars reacted with hysterical naturalism, treating us to that most inspiring stage sight: actors not only actively thinking, but thinking

in character

. (Harvey, whose Austin was three sheets to the wind, climbed on a counter and removed that bread slice with a putter.)

Which isn't to say the performers were slouches when things *did* go according to plan. Harvey,

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delivering the most thrilling of the half-dozen expert portrayals I've seen him give, is subtly yet achingly tormented here - Austin's monologue about the brothers' toothless father is sick-joke bliss - and proves himself (again) a masterfully sly comedian; his finest moments are literally indescribable ones, as they're all tied to cadence and inflection and gesture, and his skill with a devastatingly deadpan retort. Staver, meanwhile, has recently given several strong performances as violently unpredictable louts, but the actor - miraculously yet unsurprisingly - ensures that his Lee isn't quite like any of the others. So grimly determined that his abject humorlessness makes him

rea

lly
amusing, Lee is an insinuating and threatening presence, yet Staver also reveals the yearning need driving this character; if he can't merely have it, Lee will happily

steal

the

perfect life.

Harvey and Staver play off one another with an almost telepathic assuredness, and filling out the performance quartet, Eugenia Giebel offers a sweet, touchingly underplayed portrayal of the brothers' damaged mom, while Andy Koski's Saul is a faultless, hilarious figure of preening show-biz vainglory. (The actor makes good on the untrustworthy promise of Saul's grammatically telling introductory line: "I have never felt so confident about a project in quite a long time.") Enacting Shepard's beauty of a script, *True West's* performers would be more than enough for an evening's entertainment, and Hare deserves kudos for continually providing

more

than more than enough delights, including the shocking slapstick mayhem (at one point, Staver punches out

a laptop), the smart scene changes that find performers staying in character while stagehands scatter rubbish, and the seemingly improvised comedy involving toasters and car keys, and a miniature stuffed lamb. In a show by a Shepard. Now

that's

clever.

For more information, call (309)235-1654 or visit HarrisonHilltop.com.