



Lil Poppet Productions's True West: Coyotes in the Kitchen

Description

Salt Lake City, UT In Sam Shepard's *True West*, the coyotes are always in the kitchen. They don't show up as characters. They live in the sound design, yapping in the hills outside a suburban California home while two brothers tear each other apart inside. That collision is what the play is about. The feral pressing against the domestic, the wild refusing to stay outside, captured here with precision by Lil Poppet Productions in an intimate, razor-sharp production.

True West is about something most of us have felt but rarely name out loud: the particular sting of watching someone close to you succeed in ways you can't account for, or feeling quietly judged by someone whose freedom you secretly envy. Shepard frames it as sibling rivalry, but it plays just as true as a portrait of any close relationship where success has landed unevenly, and neither person can accept the other's version of it.

A man wearing glasses and a light blue shirt sits at a table with a typewriter, engaged in conversation

True West premiered at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco on July 10, 1980, where Shepard was resident playwright, before moving to New York's Public Theater in what Don Shewey, author of the first Shepard biography, called an "ill-fated" production. It took Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago to rescue the play's reputation. John Malkovich and Gary Sinise, then largely unknown, made it legendary in 1982. As *Chicago Magazine* later wrote of the PBS broadcast that brought the production to a national audience, the performances were "hair-raising and often hilarious" and they made the actors into stars. The run eventually stretched to 762 performances. Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly took it to Broadway in 2000, famously switching roles mid-run, a tradition that speaks to what Shewey calls the brothers' nature as "alter-egos or two sides of the same coin." Ethan Hawke and Paul Dano revived it on Broadway in 2018. The play was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. It is, in short, one of the most demanding plays in the American canon. Taking it on is an act of ambition. Pulling it off is something else entirely. Lil Poppet Productions pulls it off.

It's worth knowing that Shepard wasn't writing from a distance. He grew up with a violent, alcoholic father in Pasadena, fled home young, and spent his life oscillating between the raw outsider world he came from and the literary and Hollywood establishment he was trying to crack. One of a

series of plays loosely drawn from his own family history, *True West* suggests, as Shewey puts it, that Austin takes after the civilized mother while Lee takes after the renegade, drunken, desert-hermit father. Lee and Austin are not just two brothers. They are two halves of the man who wrote them, and the play's anguish comes from the fact that Shepard never fully resolved which half he was either.

Black and white image of two men sitting on the floor, engaged in conversation. One man has a bee
Photo: PBS

What the play is doing

The play drops you in mid-scene with no introduction and no explanation. We figure things out the way you would in real life: from context, from costume, from behavior. Austin is at the table with his notebook and his candle, trying to work. Lee is leaning against the sink with a beer, mildly drunk, asking questions that are really provocations. Their clothes tell you everything before a word of plot is spoken. Austin changes his shirt at some point during the evening. Lee never does. By the final scenes, both brothers have shed layers, the domestic surface literally falling away as things deteriorate.

Shepard builds character through accumulation rather than exposition. Early on, Lee mentions a woman botanist he met on the desert, one of several details that seem throwaway but keep returning in unexpected ways as the night unravels. The play rewards attention. What looks like a casual line in the first act often comes back later, when everything has changed, hitting each time differently.

Shepard builds character through accumulation rather than exposition. Early on, Lee mentions a woman botanist he met in the desert who told him you can measure the temperature by counting cricket pulses. She never appears. But she comes back late in the play, long after everything has fallen apart, when Lee is drunk and unraveling and tries to track her down through a telephone operator. He can't remember her last name. He tears every kitchen drawer out looking for a pencil to write down her number. The operator hangs up. It is one of the funniest scenes in the play and also one of the human: this man who projects total self-sufficiency suddenly desperate to hear a woman's voice, reaching for something he has already lost.

A dramatic theater scene featuring three actors: one male in a tank top and beige pants gesturing, a

And then there is Austin himself, married with kids, a career, a life that looks from the outside like everything Lee was supposed to want. By the end of the play, the two brothers have each become what the other envied, and neither of them knows what to do about it. That is the play's great aching irony, and this production delivers it without ever spelling it out.

What Saul (the producer) recognizes in Lee, and what Austin can't bring himself to acknowledge, is an authenticity that can't be learned or imitated. Lee doesn't tell stories from technique. He creates from a life that left marks.

Shepard is making a bigger argument here about American culture and the entertainment industry's complicated relationship with authenticity. Saul thinks he's recognizing something raw and genuine in Lee's story, and he is, but he's also immediately trying to package and sell it. The system

claims to want the real thing while doing everything it can to sand it down. Lee's refusal to be shaped or managed is exactly what draws people to him, and exactly what makes him impossible to contain.

Underneath all of this runs a quieter, more painful thread: their father. He never appears on stage, but he haunts every scene. There is a monologue late in the play about what becomes of a man when he has nothing left and no one to catch him. It is one of the funniest and most devastating things Shepard ever wrote. Both brothers are sons of the same wreckage, and neither of them has figured out what to do about it.

Director Morag Shepherd stages all of this in the Alliance Theatre's black box with quiet intelligence. The kitchen sits at one end of the room, the writing table at the other, the audience surrounding the open space between. The brothers spend the play crossing that ground, encroaching on each other's territory, and by the end, neither of them belongs anywhere. Shepherd also designed the sound, the coyotes and crickets Shepard writes into the play as a kind of ambient pressure, and it is flawless, rising and falling with the tension without ever announcing itself. The whole production has that quality: nothing showing off, everything working.

The ending is abrupt and unresolved, by design. Don Shewey, who has lived with this play for over four decades, once wrote that he thinks about a single line from it almost every day. That's what great theater does. This production earns that.

Two male actors performing on stage, one wearing a tank top and the other holding a bottle, in a dra

The cast

Jesse Nepivoda as Lee is rambunctious, edgy, and explosive. Nepivoda makes Lee's button-pushing feel personal rather than theatrical. His voice fills the room without effort, and his refusal to be managed reads as completely genuine.

David Knoell, as Austin, is electric. A versatile actor who does it all in the theatre world. Knoell delivers what may be his strongest performance to date: a man coming apart in real time, his certainties dissolving one by one, a performance that is impossible to look away from.

Jacob Barnes as Saul Kimmer brings real nuance to a role that could tip into caricature. Barnes makes Saul's slipperiness feel entirely plausible, the kind of man who genuinely believes his own instincts even when they betray everyone around him.

Teresa Sanderson as Mom arrives late and steals her scene completely, walking into a demolished kitchen with total composure, delivering the play's most surreal moment with a perfectly straight face and exactly the right comic edge.

A theatrical scene featuring three male actors: one in a floral shirt and slacks passionately speaking,

The creative team

What this production achieves with a small company and an intensely demanding play is worth pausing on. Every member of this crew carries real weight, and it shows. **Fight director AJ Neuschwander** deserves serious recognition. This play contains intense, sustained physical confrontation, and the choreography is precise enough that the violence feels genuinely dangerous rather than staged. That is not easy to achieve, and it is central to why the production works. **David Knoell**, who plays Austin, also built the set, a fact worth sitting with. The kitchenette he uses is one he constructed himself. Something is fitting about that: an actor literally building and then inhabiting the world his character loses control of. **Stephanie Stroud**'s costume design and production management keep everything running seamlessly behind the scenes.

Bottom line

A production that trusts its audience and its material, and gets both right. The cast is perfectly chosen, the staging is intimate and smart, and the sound design wraps the whole thing in something that feels alive. If you've ever felt the quiet burn of someone else's success, or wondered what you gave up to get where you are, or tried and failed to help someone you love — this one will stay with you. Performances run through June 28.

True West Show Info

By Sam Shepard • Lil Poppet Productions

Venue

Alliance Theatre @ Trolley Square 602 E 500 S suite e 101, Salt Lake City, UT 84102, USA

Run: June 18 — June 28, 2026

Performances

General Admission \$25 + fees

Pay What You Can Set your own amount

Sat June 21 • 2pm • Mon June 22 • 7:30pm • Thu June 25 • 7:30pm • Fri June 26 • 7:30pm • Sat June 27 • 4pm • Sun June 28 • 2pm [Get tickets](#)

Creative Team

Director / Sound Design • Morag Shepherd

Set & Props / Costume Design / Production Manager • Stephanie Stroud

Lighting Design â?? David Knoell & Umbrella Theatre Company

Fight Director â?? AJ Neuschwander

Stage Manager â?? Tyler Strong

Assistant Stage Manager â?? Ender Childs

Poster Design / Photography â?? David Knoell

PR â?? Valentine PR

Directing Observerships â?? Charlotte Gordon, Emily Kitterer

Sources Used

Primary

-Shepard, Sam. *True West* (1980). Published in *Seven Plays*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984.

-Lil Poppet Productions. *True West* production program. Alliance Theatre, Salt Lake City, UT. June 2026.

Criticism & biography

-Shteir, Rachel. â??Whatâ??s True in â??True Westâ???â?• *American Theatre*, May 4, 2023. Review of Robert Greenfieldâ??s biography *True West* (Crown, 2023).

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Production history

â??PBS Airs Steppenwolfâ??s *True West*.â?• *Chicago Magazine*, December 2020. Part of â??50 Moments That Shaped Chicago 1970â??2020.â?• chicagomag.com

â??True West (play).â?• *Wikipedia*. Last edited June 18, 2026. en.wikipedia.org

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