



Education Resources Pre-Production

Sydney Theatre Company presents

TRUE WEST

Written by Sam Shepard

Directed by Philip Seymour Hoffman



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Education Resource compiled by Acting Education Manager **Naomi Edwards**, Education Coordinator **Toni Murphy**, Contributors **Elizabeth Surbey, Michael Mitchell**

KEY



AIM of exercise or section



Extension Exercises



Download and watch



Drama Exercises



English Exercises



Play online

TRUE WEST

Sydney Theatre Company Education Resources 2010

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ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

www.sydneytheatre.com.au/about

ABOUT STCED

www.sydneytheatre.com.au/stced/about

CREATIVE TEAM

Writer: Sam Shepard

Director: Philip Seymour Hoffman

Set Designer: Richard Roberts

Costume Designer: Alice Babidge

Lighting Designer: Paul Jackson

Composer & Sound Designer: Max Lyandvert

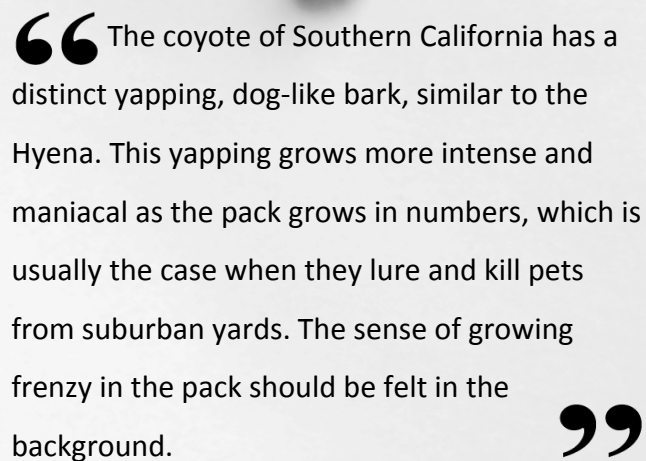
CAST

Wayne Blair

Brendan Cowell

Alan Dukes

Gillian Jones



“ The coyote of Southern California has a distinct yapping, dog-like bark, similar to the Hyena. This yapping grows more intense and maniacal as the pack grows in numbers, which is usually the case when they lure and kill pets from suburban yards. The sense of growing frenzy in the pack should be felt in the background. ”

True West - **A Note on Sound** Sam Shepard

SYNOPSIS

TRUE WEST is a character study that examines the relationship between Austin, a screenwriter, and his older brother Lee. It is set in the kitchen of their mother's home 40 miles east of Los Angeles. Austin is house-sitting while their mother is in Alaska, and there he is confronted by his brother, who proceeds to bully his way into staying at the house and using Austin's car. In addition, the screenplay which Austin is pitching to his connection in Hollywood somehow gets taken over by the pushy con-man tactics of Lee, and the brothers find themselves forced to cooperate in the creation of a story that will make or break both their lives. In the process, the conflict between the brothers creates a heated situation in which their roles as successful family man and nomadic drifter are somehow reversed, and each man finds himself admitting that he had somehow always wished he were in the other's shoes.

<http://www.sam-shepard.com/truwest.html>

“

I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's a real thing, double nature. I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It's not so cute. Not some little thing we can get over. It's something we've got to live with.

”

Sam Shepard <http://www.samshepard.com/truwest.html>

THEMES

Sibling Rivalry, Abandonment, The Meaning of Success, Art Vs. Business, The American Dream,

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AIM: To explore the appearance of sibling rivalry in literary history and find commonality between a number of examples.



VISUAL STORYTELLING



Research one of the following famous sets of siblings and **use** the information that you find to **create** a scene that tells the characters' story of sibling rivalry.



Cain and Abel

Romulus and Remus

Peter and Edmund (from *The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe*)

Faramir and Borimir (From *The Lord of the Rings*)

Bart and Lisa Simpson

Charlie and Alan Harper

Bud and Kelly Bundy

The Story of the Prodigal Son (Luke: 15: 11-32)

Bianca and Katarina (From *Taming of the Shrew* OR *10 Things I Hate About You.*)

Regan, Goneril and/or Cordelia (From *King Lear*)

Present a scene, including existing dialogue that you find or create your own.

Discuss

1. What similarities existed among the performances?
2. What did each character want from the other?
3. How did each character try to maintain or increase their status in the scene?
4. Did any character get one-up on the other? How?

Now:

Make a list of all the conventions of sibling rivalry that you have seen. Your teacher may be able to help you. After you see *True West* you can reflect on this list.

WHAT DOES POWER LOOK LIKE?



Aim: To explore a range of possibilities for power to be demonstrated on stage and to come explore how, other than with aggression, power can be shifted between actors in a scene.

1. From the audience, one person is chosen to make a dramatic freeze frame on stage.
2. A second person is then selected to do the same, but it is their job to show the class that their character in the freeze frame has more power than the other character.
3. A third person then takes the place of the first person. This person must diffuse the power of the second person to make them look like they have more power.
4. A fourth person takes the place of the second person etc. and so the game continues until every member of the class has been a part of the freeze frame.

Discuss

1. What freeze frame images were the most powerful?
2. What makes you believe this?
3. What images didn't work? Why?



Replay the game.

This time, when you enter the freeze frame, rather than replacing a character from it, add to it so that eventually all members of the class are part of it.

Discuss

1. If a person was to look at this freeze-frame as a photograph, where would their eyes be drawn to first?
2. What makes you say this?
3. Was there only one power struggle? Or were there many?
4. Which ones were more obvious?
5. Which ones involved the least and most amount of danger to the characters involved?
6. What other types of power were demonstrated in the freeze frame?



Aim: To develop an understanding of subtext and realise that what is being said, is not always what is felt.

Write or improvise a scene with two characters in it. The content can be what ever you choose however it must meet the following conditions.

1. Both characters are afraid of each other.
2. Neither character wants the other to recognise that he or she is afraid.
3. Both characters want the other to be afraid of them without using threats or intimidation.

As you work on this activity, **consider** how you are going to show these conditions to the audience without explicitly telling them.

Present these scenes to the rest of your class.

Discuss

1. Which scenes most effectively met the aim of the task?
2. What made the effective scenes so effective?
3. How would completing this activity make you approach the reading of a script in the future?



AIM: To explore and determine whether *True West* is a representation of a typical American family and to explore the extent to which Lee and Austin's family history influence the events in the play.



WHAT'S NORMAL?

In pairs or small groups, **create** a table with two columns in it.

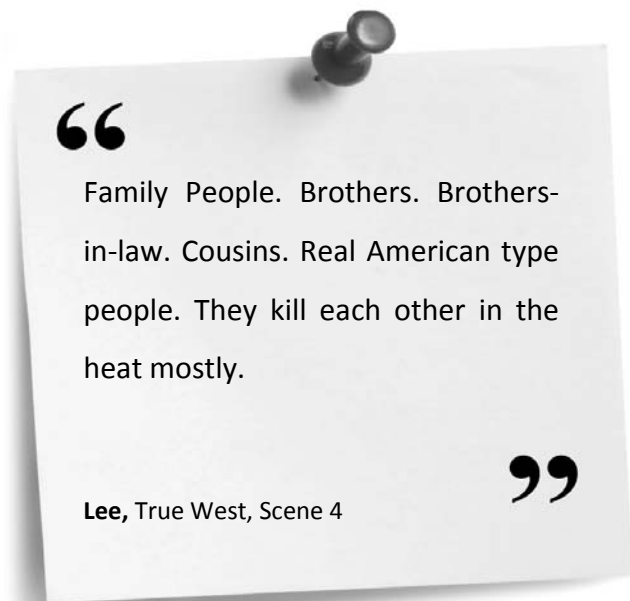
In the first column, **list** all of the things that happen in the play that make the audience think that Lee and Austin belong to a normal family.

In the second column, **list** all of the unusual things that happen in the play that make you feel that Lee and Austin do not belong to a normal family.

In your pair or group, **determine**, through discussion and analysis of events in the play, whether Lee and Austin are a normal family.

Share this conclusion with the other groups in the class and justify your decision. Be prepared to answer questions from other groups.

When you have heard each of the groups' decisions, **rejoin** the members of your original group and use the justifications that you heard from the other groups in the class to **create** a number of definitions of normal, based on their responses.





FAMILY PHOTOS

Think about the play: what each character said, did, how they responded to others, etc.



In small groups, **decide** upon an event from Lee and Austin's childhood. This may or may not have happened in their life, but you need to be able to explain why you think it could have possibly happened.

Using tableaux, document the event in five snap shots that **tell** a story with a beginning, a middle and an end.

Other members of your class must be able to **recognise** each character in the scene and the event that is being depicted. They will also try to **estimate** how old each character is at the time and whether it is a typical day being depicted or a special event.



To extend this activity, make sure you **don't discuss** the tableaux that the other groups display.

Once you have seen all tableaux, put the name of each group into a hat and pick out a different group's name from it.

In your group, use the five snapshots from the group whose name you drew to **build** a 1-2 minute scene that shows the event that

their tableaux photos came from. This must include a knowledge of how each character in the scene would think, act and react as well an understanding of the kind of words the character would use.

Show this scene to the rest of the groups in your class and **invite** the group that originally presented that event to comment on how accurate the event was to the way that they pictured it.

“

Well I don't understand why you'd want to talk to anybody else anyway. I mean you can talk to me. I'm your brother.

”

Austin, True West, Scene 8



MUM AND DAD

Make a **list** of everything that we are told about Lee and Austin's mum and dad.



Discuss as a class the traits that Austin and Lee share with what is seen of Mom and heard of about Dad.

Brainstorm the possible reasons why their marriage may not have worked, and what happened in their lives that has brought them to where they are in their present life.

Create a series of duologues that show what you think are the most significant events in their lives. This could be when they meet, or when they separate. Make sure you consider and decide if there were other factors that had an effect on their marriage.


Present the scene that you think is most significant of the three that you have created to the rest of the class. Be prepared to justify your reasoning behind your decision.

“

Nobody can disappear. The old man tried that. Look where it got him.

”

Austin, Scene 7, True West

 **AIM:** To explore the way in which directors, actors, writers and designers use and manipulate dramatic elements to create the response that the audience gets from the production.



THE BEST BIT

Think back to when you saw the play.



Identify, to the rest of the class, your favourite moment.

Explain why you felt that moment was the best.

Discuss:

“

They square off at each other, keeping a distance between them. Pause, a single coyote heard in the distance, lights fade softly into moonlight, the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape.

”

Stage Direction, Scene 9, True West

1. Why do you think you responded so positively to this moment?
2. What elements of drama can you identify as being used or manipulated to bring that moment to life for you?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the moments that other students in the class identified as being their favourites? Why?
4. Is there any part of the production that you didn't like? Why?
5. What would you have done to make the moment more engaging?

MAKING THE MAGIC



Brainstorm a list of the techniques or elements that the playwright, director, designers and actors used in order to make the play more engaging for the audience. These could include: Tension, dramatic action, surprise, sound effects or any of the elements of drama.

In pairs, **choose** one of the techniques and **discuss** or **research** the consequences of not including this element or technique in the play.

Write a five sentence paragraph on how the drama and audience engagement can be heightened through creative use and manipulation of that particular dramatic element or technique and the effect that it had on STC's production of *True West*.

Read your paragraph to the rest of your class.

*Not only will this activity help you to understand *True West* better, but you can collate your class's responses and copy them for when you have to respond in an exam.

As you listen to other members of the class, **suggest** ways in which you could improve on their responses.

Discuss:

1. Had you ever actively noticed the use of these elements and techniques in performance? Or have you simply taken them from granted?
2. In terms of importance, how would you rank each of the elements and techniques that your class has mentioned? Be prepared to justify your response. Remember there are no wrong answers.
3. In what circumstances would it be appropriate, or even beneficial, to exclude some of the elements and techniques that your class has discussed?

“

Hey, ya' know, if that uh' story of yours doesn't go over with the guy, tell him I got a couple a' projects he might be interested in. Real commercial. Full a suspense. True-to-life stuff.

”

Lee, Scene 2, *True West*



HEIGHTENING OTHER DRAMAS

Use the internet or your school library to **find** a scene or an extract from a scene.

Imagine that you are either directing or designing for that particular play.

Write a few paragraphs about how you could use or manipulate dramatic and production elements in order to be more engaging for the audience. Remember to describe how you would stage it as well as act it.

Swap scenes with another member of the class and repeat the process.

Discuss with the person that you swapped with what you agree with or disagree with in their ideas. Make sure you can say why you disagree if necessary.



AIM: To explore the way in which gender and masculinity are expressed in *True West* and determine what it actually takes to be a 'real' man.



MASCULINE ATTRIBUTES

Consider which of the brothers from the play you would more likely be friends with.

Conduct a class discussion to get a sense of how popular each character is with your class, explain the reasoning behind your decision.

Make a **list** of all the traits, actions and thoughts that the brothers in *True West* display that are considered to be predominantly masculine.

Share your list with two other members of the class in order to form a workgroup.

Compare your lists and as a group, **conclude** who, of Lee and Austin, is more masculine.

The term 'real' man is often used to change masculine behaviours that a man should be ashamed of, e.g. "real men don't beat their wives", to promote behaviours that are not typically masculine "Real men pray the rosary' or to advertise a product by making the user more masculine "Real men smoke cigars".

In your group, **choose** five behaviours that 'real' men demonstrate. (This doesn't need to be based on what you have already discussed about the most masculine brother).

Determine which of the brothers fits the mould of a 'real' man that you have created. Is the brother that fits the mould that you have created the same brother that you found to be most masculine?

Present your conclusions to the rest of the class.

“

I can kill him! I can easily kill him. Right now. Right here. All I gotta' do is tighten up. See?

”

Austin, Scene 9, *True West*

Discuss

1. Did all groups in the class take this activity seriously? If not, why do you think that is the case?
2. Were both brothers variously identified as being most masculine?
3. Do you agree that all behaviours that have been identified are predominantly masculine? Why?
4. Does masculinity have any relationship with respectability?
5. Based on everything that has been mentioned throughout this activity, can you come up with a class definition of Masculinity?
6. Where do you think our ideas and opinions about masculinity come from?



GENDER SWITCH



“

Lee I don't need toast. I need a woman.

Austin A woman isn't the answer. Never was.

”

Scene 9, True West

Imagine how the play would change if any or all of Lee, Austin and Saul were actually a woman.

Consider how each of their behaviours and actions would change in order to gain and maintain their power.

In groups of three, **recreate** a scene from the play.

Determine which member of your group is going to play each character.

Flip a coin. If it is a head, play your character as if he was a woman, if it is a tails, play your character as if he was a male.

Remember each character in each scene wants something from another. How would that character use their gender to meet that objective?

Discuss

1. How did the women in your scenes demonstrate strength?
2. How did they anticipate masculine behaviors to get what they want?
3. How did the male characters respond to the females?
4. How did the characters of the same sex treat the character of the opposite sex?
5. Was sex ever used as a bargaining chip? Did anyone play the damsel in distress? How did this affect the other characters in the scene?
6. Would *True West* work if it were cast with two female actors to play Austin and Lee?