



(Right to left) Chris Leebrick, Achilles Massahos and Richard Leebrick in Sam Shepard's *True West*.

Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?

The theater of brotherly love (and hate)

A show at the Lord Leebrick is always an intimate affair. With the audience literally under actors' noses, every eye movement registers, every drop of sweat sizzles. Occasionally the effect misfires, as when viewers of last year's mostly competent *Assassins* were blasted back into their chairs by enthusiastic performers. At its best, however, the cozy Leebrick offers the opportunity for engaging, personal theater, unattainable in other locales.

Richard and Christopher Leebrick are perfectly in sync as Austin and Lee (even down to matching soul patches).

The company opens its 15th season with Sam Shepard's *True West*, a superb use of the arena, showcasing some fine acting in roles traditionally considered tours de force for the two male leads. First mounted at the Leebrick as part of the company's second season, with co-founders Christopher Leebrick and Randy Lord in the leads, this revival features Christopher's return; he is joined by his brother Richard Leebrick.

The brothers in life also play brothers on stage. Housesitting for his suburban, aged mother, Hollywood screenwriter Austin (Richard) hopes to get a jump on his next movie pitch. When Austin's freeloading thief of a brother Lee (Christopher) shows up on the doorstep and charms the movie producer Austin has been cultivating, the siblings begin collaboration on a western film treatment combining Austin's talents as a writer with Lee's talents as a hood. The project ultimately leads to a little male bonding, a whole lot of drinking and one very funny scene involving a plurality of

small kitchen appliances.

The show has some trouble out of the gate, dragging a bit before it picks up speed in later scenes. Richard as tight-laced Austin falls prey through much of the first act to the "straight man" trap of serving as a barely solid buffer braced against the tidal wave of his brother's performance. Christopher's acting falters a bit when called upon to portray Lee's danger and menace, but he attacks the loutish, beer-swilling role with obvious relish, in a commendably loose, careening style.

Both Richard and his nebbishy character relax as the play rolls into its second act, when the borders between the brothers' personas erode and ultimately reverse. Richard hits his stride with a well-acted identity crisis, leading to a burst of convincingly staged violence.

Richard and Christopher Leebrick are perfectly in sync as Austin and Lee (even down to matching soul patches). Their nuanced joint performance conjures the familiarity and shorthand of family communication, incorporating that special way brothers always seem to know just which buttons to push with each other.

The Leebrick clan is ably assisted by Bobbye Sorrels as the feuding screenwriters' mother and Achilles Massahos as their increasingly disenchanted producer. Massahos especially shines in his small role, injecting the closed system of the suburban ranch home with a ray of up-tempo smarminess. Director Joseph Gilg stages his players naturalistically, emotively, like wary beasts circling each other in a confined space. The Leebrick (and the Leebricks) does right by Shepard's rumination on fraternity, machismo and the long departed cowboy heroes of the Saturday matinee. **EW**

True West runs Oct. 5-7 & 13-14. For tickets call 465-1506. \$8-\$17.

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