

# In the Name of Love

Leebrick's *A Lie of the Mind* is a triumph

In many regards, *A Lie of the Mind*, now at Lord Leebrick, is classic mid-career Sam Shepard; arid, patchy, proletarian and grotesque, the play telegraphs a confessional tone continually slashed and clotted by several strata of male violence, be it implied and symbolic or actual as a heart attack. Like Cormac McCarthy, Shepard is an elegist of the subdivided open range, of the paranoia and brutality that result from killing off the buffalo and paving over the places they once roamed. Ideals and dreams loom large in this dramatic universe — the ideal of love, the American dream — but the idyllic is constantly being choked out by knots in the flow of communication. Communication, or miscommunication, is ever the wrench in the system for Shepard, the gremlin in the works.

The play opens in darkness, as Jake (Kato Buss), on the phone to his brother Frankie (Jacob King), admits to mindlessly beating his wife Beth (Mary Buss), perhaps to death. As they retreat into the arms of their respective families — Jake to his childhood home and wizened, tough-as-nails mother Lorraine (Rebecca Nachison) and sister Sally (Michelle Nordella), Beth to her parents Baylor (Achilles Massahos) and Meg (Gloria Lagalo) and hothead brother Mike (Mike Hawkins) — the roots of dysfunction are increasingly flayed open.

Playing psychological empath, Shepard complicates any quick-and-easy assignments of victimization; by revealing the demons inhabiting each character, he pushes the envelope beyond good and evil, seeking deeper, more insidious causes of the hurt we inflict on those we most love. If everyone, in the end, is a victim, is no one a victim? Judge not, Shepard seems to say, but rather look and listen: They know not what they do in the name of



MIKE HAWKINS AND JACOB KING AT LEEBRICK

their silent desperation, and the circle — of violence, of resentment, of mistrust — goes unbroken.

The lie that slinks and slithers its way through *A Lie of the Mind* is as unavoidable as it is self-perpetuating. That lie might just be language itself — the way words become insufficient in the face of want and need, ultimately warping and undermining exactly what they're intended to express. For Shepard, the universal solvent of violence seeps into every utterance, creating a language that threatens, with every syllable, to dissolve into despair. The specter of the past — as the Oedipal ghost of Jake and

Sally's dead father, as love lost and lost opportunities mourned — haunts, and in haunting, paralyzes, every character but one: Beth, whose traumatic head injury seems, through a kind of erasure, to open her up to existential reckonings devoid of any emotional immediacy. *What is love?* she asks, and *Who am I? Why do I hurt so?*

*A Lie of the Mind* is lesser Shepard, nowhere near in scope and emotional punch to his 1979 Pulitzer-winner *Buried Child*, nor can it hold a candle to *True West*, another inferno of sibling rivalry and filial detach. But, really, I'd take minor Shepard over major Ibsen any day, and the greatest virtue of *A Lie* is also the reason Leebrick's production is one of the finest works to hit local stages in the past five years: This is an actor's wet dream, full of smoldering scenes and scathing dialogue, and the cast ties into it like a theater afire.

In the leads, Kato and Mary Buss are stupendous, seizing upon their broken characters and filling them with scorched soul; their performances are mesmerizing, emotionally seismic but subtly sophisticated. And the amazing thing is, the rest of the cast keeps right up: Nachison is a bristling storm of malign motherhood; veterans Massahos and Lagalo provide a large share of the play's humor and emotional anchorage; Hawkins is spot-on as Beth's pissed-off pistolwhip of a brother; and Nordella, newly returned to the stage, is a wonder as Jake's younger sister, besieged on all sides by the psychosexual ooze of ancestral obsession.

These players, each taking her superb spin across the boards, turn an OK play by a great playwright into an object lesson in aces-up acting. Get thee to the Leebrick. **EW**

*A Lie of the Mind* plays through June 3 at Lord Leebrick Theatre; lordleebrick.com 465-1506.

**CULTURE** BY DANTE ZUÑIGA-WEST

# Burn Baby Burn

Jacob Keeton puts the smackdown on spicy hot wings

Months ago we witnessed *EW* intern Andrew Hitz take the Hot Mama's Wings Kamikaze Challenge and nearly hemorrhage. In an event that requires contestants to eat nine unreasonably spicy wings in six minutes, Hitz destroyed previous records by decimating all nine wings in two minutes and forty eight seconds. We were impressed.

But records are made to be broken. And as is the case with any sport, there is always someone somewhere who is better than you. No shame in that reality — there are monsters out there.

Jacob Keeton is a monster. Monday, May 14, he stomped Hitz's achievement into the dust of forgotten things. He can handle spice in a way that defies human limits. He is the lone Hot Mama's Wings Kamikaze Smackdown champion.

"At about wing five I felt like shit," Keeton says. "I didn't think I was going to win, but I kept going because people were yelling at me."

To put things in perspective, the Hot Mama's Wings Kamikaze Challenge differs from the Hot Mama's Wings Kamikaze Smackdown in that contestants must eat as many kamikaze wings as possible within the allotted time-frame of five minutes. These wings are no joke, slathered in a sauce made from vinegar, salt, tomato paste, butter, onion, garlic, habanero peppers, chicken, cayenne pepper and an extra-spicy ingredient that Hot Mama's Wings refuses to disclose, these things will melt your intestinal tract on the way in and singe your colon on the way out.

"I don't even like spicy food," says Keeton. "I hate spicy food!"

Keeton says he was urged to participate in the event by



CONTESTANTS FACE OFF IN THE KAMIKAZE SMACKDOWN

friends who saw his aptitude for enduring spice when he first ingested a kamikaze wing. He ate 22 wings and beat out 11 determined challengers during the Smackdown's five-minute time period, and though he did at one point look as if he might vomit, Keeton hung in there. Toward the end of the competition, somewhere around the two-minute warning, the judges told Keeton that his wings weren't clean enough. So, like a true champ, Keeton went back and cleaned the wings, bone after fiery bone.

There is no telling what personal hell Keeton slipped into hours after his clutch performance at Hot Mama's Wings. It is likely that he shut the door of his bathroom and went to a terrible place.

But pain is temporary, and pride is forever. Keeton won more than a bad-ass trip to the coast at a hotel that has in-room Jacuzzis — he won the respect of the many who watched him eat, and burn and keep eating. We salute him, and we can't wait for the next Smackdown. **EW**