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## Review: Sam Shephard's 'Fool for Love' at Backdoor Theater



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By Leela Ginelle, PQ Monthly

Think back to the worst moments of the worst relationship you've ever been in, when you and your partner's dysfunctions had fused, bringing out behaviors so raw and ugly you couldn't believe they were your own. It's at this point that Sam Shephard's play "Fool for Love" (which runs at the Backdoor Theater through April 21) begins, and the mood is sustained for its 70 minute duration.

May and Eddie, the lovers, have a history — quite a complex one we later find out — and neither can seem to let the other go, or let them in. This dynamic may not sound new, but the visceral desperation the two show in enacting it is.

Eddie is a stunt man, who has tracked May down in a motel room, where she's fled. He dreams of their living together on a piece of land in the desert, a dream she has no interest in. May reminds him how many times he has come and gone, and



Jenny Newbr in "Fool for Love," directed by Asae Dean, at Backdoor Theater through April 21. Photo by Matt Schneider.



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begs him to leave, except that when he does she crumbles, literally howling with pain.

In Asae Dean's production, their motel room is like a scorpion pit, with May and Eddie pursuing one another around the single bed. Their love, and its bizarre origin, is the play's backbone. Each has someone else — for Eddie it's a mysterious wealthy woman called "the Countess," for May, a local groundskeeper named Martin — but these others eventually seem like fantasies, alternative lives they might imagine were they not grafted to one another.

The play's standout performance belongs to Jenny Newbry Waters, who portrays May. She completely inhabits the part. At times her body writhes and shakes, suggesting some past traumas only hinted at by the script, yet somehow deepening its impact.

As Eddie, Arthur Delaney feels not quite as suited to his part. He's athletic, and captures Eddie's immaturity, but lacks the certainty and charm the role calls for.

Written almost thirty years ago, Shepard's play both embodies and critiques a world of patriarchy on the verge of collapse. This plays out in Eddie and May's dynamics in unspoken, disturbing ways. Eddie comes and goes from May's motel room, with the full expectation that he can "reclaim" her. When tries to leave, however, he physically bars her.

To agitate May, Eddie practices his lasso tricks in her room, a symbol of his freedom and mobility in the world. May, meanwhile, provokes his jealousy by wearing a red dress for her date with Martin, suggesting her only social capital is her body.

Shepard brings these themes out more fully in the ghostlike character known only as the Old Man. A possibly literal father figure, the Old Man comments on the action, occasionally interacting with May and Eddie, and suggesting generations of masculine failure. While an interesting idea, it's the least successful part of the script.

Dean tweaks these dynamics more playfully and directly by foregrounding the homoeroticism Shepard subtly suggests in the interplay between Eddie and Martin, who arrives for his date with May halfway through the play. The exchanges are hilarious, coming as they do in the midst of the jealousy, confusion, and violence of the general action, and yet, seeming perfectly plausible all the same.

As Martin, Tommy Harrington is marvelous, conveying a real physical and psychological presence, which effortlessly suggests the play's southwestern desert location.

Dean's direction throughout is kinetic, and the play lags only in the script's speech-y final moments, which is the script's fault rather than hers. In those moments Eddie, May, and the Old Man tell their stories, as they remember them, placing their previous behavior into a larger context.

The play's achievement, as well as the production's, is to make such erratic behavior something we turn to rather than away from, and to make May and Eddie feel human rather than monstrous. What could be merely an evening long argument against heterosexual unions is instead a love story, just not the kind you think you'd ever be in yourself.

*"Fool for Love" at the Backdoor Theater through April 21.*



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