

THEATER REVIEW: "Seduced" is a critique on American desires, dreams

Although many know Sam Shepard best as a film actor — Chuck Yeager in "The Right Stuff," opposite longtime partner Jessica Lange in "Crimes of the Heart," in Terrence Malick's "Days of Heaven" and more — he built his reputation primarily as a writer.

Even while carving out an eclectic career verging from counterculture to mainstream, Shepard wrote his most famous trio of plays — "True West," "Curse of the Starving Class" and "Buried Child," a Pulitzer Prize winner — in the late '70s and early '80s, about the same time he created "Seduced," playing now in the Allen Bales Theatre as part of the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance's season.

Shepard's plays are challenges at best, with wild, anarchic blends of myth, dark humor, sparse language and harsh realities, but director Raines Carr has pulled together a dimensional, disturbing creation, shadowy with edges protruding. It's led by a stellar central performance from Matt Gabbard as Henry, a Howard Hughes-ish recluse gabbling, exploding and imploding in his later years.

Garrett Walsh's set, an aviator's graveyard dimpled by an OCD navel, helps Gabbard hunker at the central chaos of a crash-down life, an effect nicely assisted by shifting tones in a tawny, sometimes-harsh lighting design by Amanda Harris. It's desert and oasis, man and machine, ugly reality and dismantled fantasy.

"Seduced" opens musically, with the elegiac title track to Randy Newman's 1972 classic, "Sail Away," which, despite the seeming incongruity, sets the course. Newman's sardonic, backhanded assaults deeply influenced Shepard: The songs are written into the script.

The thing some who only know Newman as writer of "Toy Story" hits miss is that his sweet melodies often hide satiric twists, such as in "Short People," one of the more widely misunderstood anti-discrimination hits, or in "I Love L.A.," "Rednecks," or "Birmingham," a song both tongue-in-cheek and not, which is always slightly disturbing to see Magic City folks sing along with.

