

August: Osage County - Why bi-coastal critics don't get it

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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After seeing the screen adaptation of Tracy Letts' 2008 Pulitzer Prize winning play, "August: Osage County," I understand why the New York and Los Angeles critics – and possibly a lot of Oscar voters – didn't like it.

New York Times critic A.O. Scott says, "August: Osage County' falls into an uncanny valley between melodrama and camp, failing to achieve either heights of operatic feeling or flights of knowing parody. The jokes are too labored, too serious. The serious moments tilt toward the preposterous, above all a climactic revelation that seems, on sober examination, to be more of a technical detail than a seismic explosion."

Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* wasn't impressed, either. He said the movie was like "that branch of reality TV where dysfunctional characters, whether active or passive, make a public display of their wretched lives."

I'll bet neither of these people was raised in the South.

That valley "between melodrama and camp" is where we live.

And, we have perfected the art of making preposterous, very public displays regarding our wretched lives. The movie may be set in Northeast Oklahoma, but Letts' characters are distinctly Southern in their total and complete dysfunction.

Not that Southerners have a monopoly on it, but I don't think our cousins north of the Mason/Dixon Line are quite as familiar with twisted family dynamics as we are.

The movie opens with Beverly Weston – played brilliantly and all-too-briefly by Sam Shepard – a once famous, but now faded, alcoholic, interviewing a young woman for a housekeeper and caretaker for his pill-addled wife, Violet.

Of course, Meryl Streep was tapped to play Violet. She gives a master class in acting; it's over the top to be sure, but how else would you play a drug-addicted, bitter, cancer-ridden, aging woman whose husband has disappeared and whose children despise her?

Streep's scene describing a particularly bitter Christmas memory is especially poignant and should be used to teach Acting 101. Theater teachers could just roll the clip and tell their students, "Do that."

Playing opposite Streep is Julia Roberts, who lays down a performance that announces her as more than just a pretty face attached to legs that go on for weeks.

Roberts' Barbara Weston-Fordham is also bitter and aging, helpless to keep her husband from hooking up with a much younger woman and able to do nothing as her teenage daughter experiments with drugs and flirts with danger.

Roberts takes to the role with such naturalness that you sometimes forget she's playing a part. Her battle scenes with Streep are compelling in their viciousness and brutality. Be warned. This is not a movie for Pollyannas.

Julianne Nicholson is cast as Ivy, the middle daughter – the one who never left home.

Nicholson is luminous as the calm, level-headed sister who could not find the courage to escape the toxicity of her family.

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The way the lighting designer worked with Nicholson's red-hair and freckles is worth nothing, not to mention the steady, stable acting she delivers amid an ensemble of strong performances.

Baby sister Karen Weston's role is given much more weight in the play.

Juliette Lewis does a good job with the role, but something in her final scenes just doesn't ring true. No spoilers here, but I was expecting a lot more controlled rage.



Of particular note are the performances of Jacksonville native Margo Martindale and Chris Cooper, one of my all-time favorite actors.

Martindale plays Mattie Fae Aiken, Violet's sister, with Cooper as her long-suffering husband, Charles. Every family I know has an Aunt Mattie Fae and Uncle Charles. At first, the couple offer much-needed comic relief, but you soon realize they have their share of problems, too.

Here's a sobering scene from late in the movie. (Contains language that might be offensive.)

Charlie: Mattie Fae, we're gonna get in the car and go home. And if you say one more mean thing to that boy I'm gonna kick your fat-Irish ass into the highway.

□□ □ *Mattie Fae: What the hell did you just say to me?*

□□ □ *Charlie: Kids, go outside, would you please? I don't understand this meanness. I look at you and your sister and the way you talk to people and I don't understand it. I can't understand why folks can't be respectful to one another. I don't think there's any excuse for it. My family didn't treat each other that way.*

□□ □ *Mattie Fae: Oh, maybe 'cause your family didn't have ...*

□□ □ *Charlie: You better not say anything about my family right now, I mean it! We just buried a man I loved very much. And whatever faults he may have had, he was a good, kind, decent man. And to hear you tearing your own son up not even a day later dishonors Beverly's memory. We've been married 38 years and I wouldn't trade it for anything. But if you can't find a generous place in your heart for your own son, we're not gonna make it to 39!*

The two veteran actors make that scene plausible.

Mattie Fae is totally gobsmailed by Charles' stern talk and Charles is completely believable as a man who has kept his mouth shut far too long.

As for lack of a "seismic explosion" of an ending the *New York Times* critic mentions, the audience of about 50 in the theater last week gasped when the big reveal came. Seemed pretty earth-shaking to me, too, and I read the play so I knew what was coming – but still wasn't prepared for it.

As Streep yanks the final nail from the coffin of Weston family secrets, she says: "I told you nobody slips anything by me."

I want to see the film again, just to get a closer look at the set they created from an old farmhouse outside of Pawhuska. You could feel the oppressive heat and constrictive confines of the place. I found it difficult to breathe at times. That's the mark of a good set designer. They put

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you in the middle of the action, making you feel what the characters are experiencing. Bravo.

The film is rated R for a reason. If the F-bomb offends you, you might want to find another movie, as this one is full of strong language and very adult situations.

“August: Osage County” is playing at the Majestic 12 in Greenville and at several theaters in Tyler, including Carmike and Times Square. Find a location closest to you by visiting www.fandango.com and then entering the movie title and your zip code.