

## **SF Examiner**

### **One riveting unhappy family in 'Osage County'**

**By: Georgia Rowe  
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SAN FRANCISCO — The dysfunctional family has become a staple in American fiction, but no one has ever created a family quite as horrible – or hilarious – as the Westons of “August: Osage County.”

Bitterly scathing, corrosively funny and oddly moving, Tracy Letts' 2007 tragicomedy is a “Long Days Journey into Night” for its generation – a compelling new play that grabs the audience and never lets go.

That's quite a feat, considering its epic size. Structured in three acts, with a 13-member cast and a running time of nearly 3-1/2 hours, Letts' Pulitzer Prize-winner offers the kind of in-depth look at a family that one rarely sees in the theater anymore.

The play, which premiered at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre in 2007 and has gone on to acclaimed productions in London and on Broadway, made its long-awaited Bay Area debut Wednesday at the Curran Theatre.

Presented by Best of Broadway, directed by Anna D. Shapiro and featuring the brilliant Estelle Parsons as Violet, the Westons' appalling family matriarch, “August: Osage” more than lives up to its advance reputation.

Set in the Weston home in Pawhuska, Okla., the story begins when Violet's husband, Beverly (Jon DeVries) walks out one morning and never comes back.

As the family – Violet's sister (Libby George as Mattie Fae), three daughters (Angelica Torn as Ivy, Amy Warren as Karen, and the excellent Shannon Cochran as Barbara), grandkids and various husbands and boyfriends – gather to lend support, we see what might have driven Beverly away.

Violet, a foul-mouthed, chain-smoking, drug-addled cancer patient, is the kind of wife and mother who makes Medea look warm and fuzzy.

Violet isn't just mean; she has a special gift for attacking people at their most vulnerable. Her daughters take the brunt of her abuse, but no one escapes; the entire family, including Johnna, the Native American maid Beverly hired just before he decamped, gets a share.

Over the course of the next few days – and at a lengthy family dinner that is the play's dramatic high point - accusations fly, blame is assigned, and long-held secrets – everything from infidelities to incest – are revealed.

One of the remarkable things about Letts' script is how much humor is embedded in the warfare, and director Shapiro, using every inch of Todd Rosenthal's sprawling three-level set, gets a note-perfect performance from each member of the cast.

But it's Parsons who works her way under the skin. With her haunted eyes, grating voice and unnerving way of smiling just as she's landed a body blow, the 81-year-old actress creates an indelible portrait of a maternal monster.

Still, "August: Osage" is an ensemble piece, and Letts never lets us forget the myriad ways that family ties can poison and nurture. The Westons aren't a family you'd want to live with. But spending three hours in their company makes for a riveting theater experience.

### **THEATER REVIEW**

#### **August: Osage County**

*Presented by Best of Broadway*

**Where:** Curran Theatre, 445 Geary St., San Francisco

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays; closes Sept. 6

**Tickets:** \$35 to \$80

**Contact:** (415) 512-7770, [www.shnsf.com](http://www.shnsf.com), [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com)