

## San Francisco Chronicle

Theater review: 'August: Osage County'  
Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic  
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**August: Osage County:** Dark comedy. By Tracy Letts. Directed by Anna D. Shapiro. With Estelle Parsons, Shannon Cochran, Angelica Torn, Amy Warren et al. (Through Sept. 6. Curran Theatre, 445 Geary St., San Francisco. Three hours, 30 minutes. Tickets: \$35-\$80. Call (415) 512-7770, [www.shnsf.com](http://www.shnsf.com).)

It doesn't take a thing away from Estelle Parsons to say that her bravura performance is just icing on the rich theatrical cake that is "August: Osage County," which opened Wednesday at the Curran Theatre.

Wheedling, cajoling or flaying each of her grown daughters, slurring and swaying in a drugged haze or careening headlong down a long flight of stairs, Parsons' Violet emerges as one of the most exhilaratingly monstrous matriarchs in theater history. But her Violet is fully integrated in a web of vibrant performances, even matched in charismatic intensity by Shannon Cochran as her eldest daughter, Barbara. And the real star of the evening is Tracy Letts' astonishingly funny nuclear-family meltdown of a play.

"August" is a triumph, an endlessly gasp-and-laugh-inducing dark comedy of three generations of middle-class family dysfunction in director Anna D. Shapiro's fine-honed Steppenwolf Theatre production, which recently finished its multiple-Tony-winning New York run. The touring edition in SHN's Best of Broadway series at the Curran features not only Parsons but also other veterans of the Broadway cast.

Not to mention the set. Todd Rosenthal's imposing three-story Oklahoma Plains homestead replicates Letts' intricate construction as ably as it accommodates his separate and overlapping scenes. This is a sprawling family drama of dirty secrets in the great American tradition of Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee and Sam Shepard, a 13-character "Who's Afraid of a Long Day's Journey" that runs 3 1/2 hours (with two intermissions) and leaves an energized audience wanting more.

"My wife takes pills and I drink," a garrulous Beverly Weston (Jon DeVries) explains to the young woman (DeLanna Studi) he's hiring to look after the house. The retired academic and once-promising poet is understating the case, as Parsons' first appearance - semi-articulate, combative and coquettish - makes clear.

Then Beverly disappears. The drama unfolds as the far-flung family assembles to help Violet through the crisis.

First on the scene are daughter Ivy (Angelica Torn) - butt of her mother's belittling sarcasm but armored with her father's cynicism - and Violet's motormouth sister Mattie Fae (Libby George), with long-suffering husband Charlie (Paul Vincent O'Connor). The way Mattie Fae talks about her nebbish son Charles (Stephen Riley Key) makes Violet look restrained.

Subplots thicken and sniping heats up with the arrival of Cochran's Barbara, in the midst of her own marital crisis, with husband Bill (Jeff Still) and precocious 14-year-old daughter Jean (Emily Kinney). Youngest sister Karen (Amy Warren) is an afterthought, as she's painfully aware, but makes up for that with a monologue of epic self-absorption and the presence of her delectably sleazy fiance (Laurence Lau).

Every one of these damaged individuals plays a key role in Letts' intricate cat's cradle of shocking revelations and plot twists. "August" isn't as bloody as his trailer-trash dark comedy "Killer Joe," but it has its elements of adultery, child abuse, incest and pedophilia amid the family mayhem.

Parsons encompasses generations of familial warfare within her Violet. The wooziness of her drugged haze, her body pitched forward as if her head were lost in fog, is more than effective camouflage for the toxicity of her "truth telling" barbs. You need not know the actress is approaching her 82nd birthday to gasp with disbelief each time she plunges down that long staircase.

Cochran's willowy, menopausal Barbara proves to be every inch her mother's daughter. The escalating face-off between them, and the relish they take in combat, provides the savagely comic crux of the drama. The recognition that any victory achieved can only be hollow brings "August" to its unexpectedly poignant close.

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