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**Review: 'August: Osage County' at San Francisco's Curran Theatre**

**By Karen D'Souza**

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Animals have been known to devour their own offspring in the wild. For the Weston clan, that might be an act of kindness. When the acid-tongued Violet Weston rips into her children, she never gets around to putting them out of their misery.

In "August: Osage County," there's no place like home for a vicious attack. This is a rare play that not only lives up to its hype (from the Tony to the Pulitzer), it actually exceeds expectations. Tracy Letts' writing sticks in the ears like Velcro. This heart-pounding tragicomedy sucks you in so hard and fast that you barely notice as 3 1/2 hours (and two intermissions) of gasps and giggles come and go.

Like Letts' earlier work, from "Bug" to "Man from Nebraska," the play is meticulously constructed. But it's also insanely ambitious, an epic 13-character autopsy of an Oklahoma family corroded by guilt and regret. Letts steeps this piece in the angst of the Plains, as well as in his own family's demons, and the unflinching honesty of the text is unmistakable.

A Greek tragedy with a Tulsa accent, the Weston brood never seems to hit rock bottom. Suicide, pedophilia, adultery and drug abuse are just the icebreakers in this brawling family affair that's equal parts classical tragedy and tawdry soap opera.

A Medusa in a string of pearls, Violet (the dazzling Estelle Parsons) pops pills like Altoids. Her husband, Beverly (Jon DeVries), drinks like a fish (and then goes to sleep with them).

Their three daughters — the mousy Ivy (Angelica Torn), the frantic Karen (Amy Warren) and the steely Barbara (Shannon Cochran) — return to the family manse thinking they know where the bodies are buried. Only there are more skeletons in this American Gothic universe (set by Todd Rosenthal) than in the average cemetery.

Flawlessly directed by Anna D. Shapiro, this Steppenwolf production feels as lived in as the ratty old robe Violet shuffles around in. The play veers from hysterically funny to achingly sad so quickly the audience may get emotional vertigo.

Certainly, the Oscar-winning, 81-year-old Parsons is so ferocious in the role she must have Violet in her bloodstream. Comatose from the downers she calls her "little blue babies," Violet lurches up and down the stairs. Speech slurred, eyes haunted, she can focus only right before goes in for the kill.

Gathered about Violet is her prey ... ahem, progeny, all of whom suffer from a spiritual malaise as debilitating as any barbiturate. Letts snaps all the pieces in this domestic puzzle into place like a master craftsman. The orchestration of the dinner scene, when everybody rants at once yet all the voices ring out clearly, is breathtaking. It's a madhouse of egos and grief in which the only sane member of the household is the help, Johnna (DeLanna Studi).

But by far the most devastating thing about the play is that no matter how monstrous these characters are, they are still familiar. You can see yourself clearly in these faces, especially in the bravely suffering Barbara (the magnificent Cochran) who starts to echo the parents she has long disdained.

Letts' characters are at once idiosyncratic and universal, quoting T.S. Eliot one minute and succumbing to their basest instincts the next. When Karen's creepy 50-year-old fiance, Steve (Laurence Lau), starts buddying up to her pot-smoking, 14-year-old niece, Jean (the precocious Emily Kinney), you know the chicken isn't the only thing that's grisly at this dinner table.

But I digress. Don't let the sordid details put you off one of the most savagely entertaining evenings at the theater in ages. There's only one reason you might not give "August" a standing ovation, and that's because you might be a little weak in the knees. The Westons are a hideous bunch, but you know you are going to miss them once it's over.

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"AuGUST: OSAGE COUNTY"

By Tracy Letts

The upshot: The hottest show of the summer is an epic anatomy of the American family in meltdown that will make you howl "" sometimes with laughter, sometimes in horror, sometimes both.

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

When: Through Sept. 6

Running time: 3 hours, 30 minutes (two intermissions)

Tickets: \$35-\$80; 1-877-797-7827; [www.shnsf.com](http://www.shnsf.com)

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