

## Variety

### August: Osage County

(Curran Theater, San Francisco; 1,665 seats; \$80 top) A Jeffrey Richards, Jean Doumanian, Steve Traxler, Jerry Frankel, Jennifer Manocherian, the Weinstein Co., Ronald & Marc Frankel/Barbara Freitag, Rick Steiner/Staton Bell Group presentation of a Steppenwolf Theater Company production of a play in three acts by Tracy Letts. Directed by Anna D. Shapiro.

Beverly Weston - Jon DeVries  
Johnna Montevata - DeLanna Studi  
Violet Weston - Estelle Parsons  
Ivy Weston - Angelica Torn  
Mattie Fae Aiken - Libby George  
Charlie Aiken - Paul Vincent O'Connor  
Bill Fordham - Jeff Still  
Barbara Fordham - Shannon Cochran  
Jean Fordham - Emily Kinney  
Sheriff Deon Gilbeau - Marcus Nelson  
Karen Weston - Amy Warren  
Steven Heidebrecht - Laurence Lau  
Little Charles Aiken - Stephen Riley Key

By [DENNIS HARVEY](#)

**Tracy Letts' Pulitzer-winning "August: Osage County" hits the road with all strengths intact in its national touring production. This richly entertaining dysfunctional-family fire sale juggles the hilarious, the poignant and the appalling on a retro "well-made play" scale seldom seen in these times of lean budgets. Impeccably cast with thespians largely new to the work -- Broadway replacement Estelle Parsons' matriarch is the major holdover -- Anna D. Shapiro's staging otherwise levies few significant changes on her prior incarnations for Chicago, New York and London. Hopefully, critical acclaim and audience buzz will create sufficient event status for this now-rare touring ensemble drama in its post-San Francisco stops.**

Late summer heat is nothing compared to the swelter inside the Westons' home in rural Oklahoma, where bilious Violet (Parsons) -- ironically recovering from mouth cancer -- keeps the temperature cranked, being "cold-blooded, not just metaphorically." When dissipated poet-prof spouse Beverly (Jon DeVries) takes a powder and his boat is discovered missing as well, various subsidiary relatives reluctantly arrive to manage the crisis.

Each character and performer gets a chance to shine in this latest edition of a very juicy play. Violet's eldest daughter and favorite, Barb (Shannon Cochran), struggles to stay in charge; her teen daughter, Jean (Emily Kinney), is growing up a little too fast, and her husband, Bill (Jeff Still), has abandoned ship for a younger woman. Youngest sis Karen (Amy Warren) arrives with an overload of neediness and a disturbingly slick fiancé (Laurence Lau). Only middle sister Ivy (Angelica Torn) has stayed here all along to be beaten down by Mom's incessant abuse, but she has a secret plan to bolt -- and a secret lover to bolt with.

Meanwhile, Aunt Mattie Fae (a priceless Libby George) busybodies everyone to death, particularly her hapless son, Little Charles (Stephen Riley Key), to the slow-burning consternation of hubby Charlie (Paul Vincent O'Connor).

Death, substance-abuse intervention and almost too many queasy revelations for one family (or play) to withstand keep things hopping in a long evening whose symphonically rangy beats -- from calm to creepy to hysterical (in both senses) -- Shapiro has down with scientific precision by now.

With so many drop-dead lines and explosive scenes, there's a risk of "August" turning broad, of actors hitting too hard emotional marks that scarcely need emphasis for effect. (This is a play whose listeners don't want to miss a single sentence, not least because so many beg to be quoted.) And just rarely, when Parsons' otherwise imposing Violet lays on the pill-addled shtick a bit thick, or Letts himself can't resist capper-capping dialogue, you can see how this work will require directorial check-ins to ensure its tricky seriocomic balance doesn't go slack or coarse on the road.

At present, however, the epic evening has scarcely a false note or lull, with an entire cast grooved into characters who all get compelling arcs of their own. (That is, excepting the only nonfamily observers, nicely played by DeLanna Studi as housekeeper Johnna and Marcus Nelson as Sheriff Deon.)

All design contributions remain sturdy, though even Todd Rosenthal's ingenious three-story set can't quite handle all the demarcations of household space Letts requires. Perhaps some day, "August: Osage County" will get an opera-house-scaled stage for that -- indeed, one wouldn't be surprised if this built-to-last play eventually gets its own opera.

Set, Todd Rosenthal; costumes, Ana Kuzmanic; lighting, Ann G. Wrightson; sound, Richard Woodbury; original music, David Singer; dramaturg, Edward Sobel; casting, Stuart Howard, Amy Schechter, Paul Hardt. Opened, reviewed Aug. 12, 2009. Running time: 3 HOURS, 30 MIN.

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