

## ARTS COMMENTARY

## 'Funny, powerful, not to be missed: 'August: Osage County'

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Families.

You can't live with them and you can't live without them.

In "August: Osage County" at Florida Repertory Theatre, we meet the Westons, who give a whole new meaning to the phrase "dysfunctional family."

In fact, dysfunctional is too tame an adjective for this group. The Weston family history includes alcoholism, addiction to and abuse of prescription pills, homelessness, verbal and emotional abuse, suicide, adultery and divorce.

It isn't too far into this Tony Award- and Pulitzer Prize-winning play before you start thinking: Maybe the Weston daughters would've been better off being raised by a pack of wolves, because surely wolves would've been much less vicious.

The father, Bev (Ray McDavitt), drinks heavily. (He was an audience favorite. But Mr. McDavitt should take care not to sacrifice clarity for authenticity; on opening night he spoke with an Oklahoma accent so thick, I struggled to understand even half of what he said — and I've read the play.) His role demonstrates how someone's absence can affect us as deeply as his presence.

His wife, Violet (Sara Morsey), is addicted to pills, and though suffering with mouth cancer, continues to smoke.

Violet is a deeply unhappy woman, her misery a corrosive acid that eats through her family, destroying everyone around her.

Watching Ms. Morsey's mesmerizing performance, you want to turn away, yet you cannot take your eyes off of her as she weaves about, slurring her words, inflicting more damage on her children.

This is a dark comedy, and Ms. Morsey, along with the rest of this astounding 13-member cast, skillfully navigate that fine line between comedy and drama. One minute you're appalled by something she's said or done, the next you're laughing at her. It's a roller coaster ride of emotions, thanks to Tracy Letts' amazing writing, Robert Cacioppo's strong directing and the cast's insightful acting.

On opening night, Ms. Morsey drew laughs from just one word or by a simple gesture, such as flicking the ashes of her cigarette.

Of course, with all the horror happening on stage, you're dying to break the tension and laugh.

When Bev, the patriarch, winds up missing, everyone returns home. This includes the three Weston three daughters: dutiful Barbara (Jan Wickstrom), who's having marital problems; overlooked middle child Ivy (Stacey Scotte), who has a secret love; and the youngest, wild child Karen (Rachel Burtram), whose taste in men isn't exactly stellar.

In fact, none of the Weston women have made healthy choices with men, except for Violet's sister, Mattie Fae (Carrie Lund), and that seems to be just sheer luck. While acerbic Violet slices people to shreds with her words as a stiletto, Mattie Fae's words are like a baseball bat, indiscriminately beating people over and over again. She browbeats her son, but subjects everyone to her harsh judgments.

Instead of being a comforting balm, truth, in the hands of these women, is wielded like a weapon.

When a character states, "I have a truth to tell!" you don't know whether to laugh or cry.

**A barrage of hurt**

Watching "August: Osage County" is like having a hand grenade tossed into your lap every 10 minutes or so. Each new family revelation is like another bomb exploding; no wonder this is a family of wounded, hurting people.

I saw "You Can't Take It With You" on this very same stage last season. When the Sycamore family gathered around their dining table, there was such warmth and love that I wished I could be part of that fictional family. Watching the Westons at their table in what seems like a twisted parody of the Sycamores' scene, all I could think was: I'm so glad I'm not a member of this family!

Ms. Lund gives one of the best performances of her career as the larger-than-life, crass and careless Mattie Fae.

And Ms. Burtram bursts onto the stage, chattering non-stop, as if she'd have to face the truth if she stopped talking. Her character wants so desperately to be married that she's willing to live in denial.

Ms. Scotte, as the middle sister, is her polar opposite: quiet, even-keeled,



Dysfunction done right: The cast of "August: Osage County," playing at the Florida Rep.

COURTESY PHOTO

responsible... but seething underneath.

Of the three sisters, however, most of the weight lies on the eldest — Ms. Wikstrom's character, Barbara. And she has some of the play's best scenes, as she fights with her mother, argues with her husband (Chris Clavelli) and slowly realizes that she has to do something to stop the family cycle from reoccurring.

She has moments of true vulnerability and anguish in this show, and it's interesting to watch her character grow and change over the course of its three-plus hours.

("August: Osage County" is longer than the typical show, with three acts and two intermissions, yet is so fast-paced it doesn't seem that long. For this show, Florida Rep has moved the start time of evening performances to 7:30 p.m.)

It's impossible to mention every actor in this ensemble piece, but mention must be made of Mr. Clavelli's understated and on-target performance as a man having a classic mid-life crisis. Mr. Clavelli has the ability to disappear within his characters and never fails to disappoint when he's onstage.

And Mark Chambers brings a solid goodness to his role as Mattie Fae's husband. One of his speeches earned applause from the audience, while his stumbling prayer brought laughter.

Jim Hunter's four-leveled set gives us the suggestion of walls, showing us wood rafters that look like bones picked clean by vultures. The walls are most non-existent, which should give a feeling of spaciousness, yet the house feels claustrophobic, filled with the Weston fam-

ily's secrets and lies.

Mr. Cacioppo has said he wanted to direct this show ever since he saw it on Broadway. And he's done an excellent job; the pace is quick, and the actors keep the perfect balance between humor and drama, so that we want to laugh even when we feel repelled or saddened. They make it easy for us to believe they're a real family, and that the husbands and wives have been married to each other for 20-plus years.

**A Southwest Florida premiere**

This gripping production is the Southwest Florida premiere of the play, and smart theater-goers should be sure not to miss it.

"August: Osage County" is devastatingly powerful; horrifying, yet funny. It's a masterpiece of American theater that holds a sly mirror up to our foibles, our failings and our flimsy attempts to find love and make something of our lives.

You can't chose the family you're born into, Mr. Letts seems to say, but maybe, with a lot of self-knowledge and more than a little luck, you can keep from re-creating an unhealthy one. ■

in the know

**"August: Osage County"**

- >> **When:** through March 27
- >> **Where:** Florida Repertory Theatre, 2267 First St., Fort Myers
- >> **Tickets:** \$39, \$44 and \$20
- >> **Info:** 332-4488 or www.floridarep.org
- >> **More:** Evening performances begin a half hour earlier than usual, at 7:30 p.m.

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