



UA production of award-winning 'August: Osage County' opens Tuesday

By Mark Hughes Cobb / Tusk Editor

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Whether for comedy or tragedy, or dark places in between, unhappy families yield the richest material. Tolstoy would agree, as would Arthur Miller, Sam Shepard, Tennessee Williams, and actor-writer Tracy Letts, Pulitzer- and Tony-winner for "August: Osage County."

For its Broadway premiere in 2007, the several-week visit to the Weston family home in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, won five Tonys, for best play, direction, scenic design, and leading and supporting actresses. Letts also won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and wrote the screenplay for a 2013 film adaptation, starring Meryl Streep, Chris Cooper, Benedict Cumberbatch, Julia Roberts, Ewan McGregor and Margo Martindale.

Audience and critic buzz first brought it to Stacy Alley's attention; the film, cutting an hour from the stage time, convinced her the play needed to return to life. The University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance's production of "August: Osage County" opens Tuesday.

Alley, an associate professor in the department, just missed it in the show's final days in New York, but based on what she'd heard, read the script. She then saw the movie in theatrical release, "... and I liked it, but I didn't love it, because I really think this story needs to be in a shared space," she said. "It's voyeuristic; it feels like you're part of the family."

Following a dilemma involving the family patriarch, the extended clan gathers in the three-story home of Beverly and Violet Weston. It is not a happy reunion.

"It deals with incest, and with affairs, smoking pot, drugs; things adults deal with," Alley said. She and husband Rob have decided their 10-year-old daughter Evy won't be seeing this one, even though she played a role in "Appropriate," which dealt with similarly adult material. "All words are used, not just the F-word. Basically, the filter is gone with these people, especially by a certain point in the show. There's no tip-toeing around it."

Within this toxic environment, chaos ensues. It runs more than three hours, and UA's production will be performed with two 10-minute intermissions.

"It's beautifully written, and it's about humanity," she said. "It's a hilarious and dark take on people, on unfulfilled dreams, what people can do to one another, and how it affects the course of their lives.

"At first you're going to feel, is it OK to laugh at this? These people are messed up. ... I hope people will still want to go home for the holidays, afterward," she said, laughing.

Though there's an ensemble filled by grad and undergrad UA students, the centerpiece remains matriarch Violet, played by Dianne Teague. Though she's performed for just about every theater space around this area for decades, she's been on something of a hiatus since working with Ed Williams, directing his last performance for UA in 2013's "Showboat." That's when Teague and Alley, who was choreographing, first talked about "August: Osage County."

"I don't think I would have ever even brought this play forward (the department decides as a group which shows will fit on each season) without having Dianne. I'm not doing this with anyone else," Alley said.

They'd worked together as actors once before, on "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," from the 2002-03 UA season, when Alley was a grad acting student. It wasn't just she knew Teague would live the part, but would serve as a role model.

"It's always great for both our grads and undergrads, to see someone with her work ethic," Alley said. "She was off book before anyone else, and she has more lines than anyone else."

Like her director, Teague also found the film adaptation unsatisfying.

"I thought there was something wrong with it, though I hadn't read the play yet," she said. "It seemed truncated. It didn't have the depth I thought these characters should have. So I read it, and what was missing was half the show."

Drawn to depictions of how family works and doesn't work, Teague has worked often in plays by Tennessee Williams.

"Tracy Letts seems like the inheritor of that realism, looking into the American family dynamic," she said.

Though everyone has moments, Violet's definitely the center.

“She comes off such a tough person,” Teague said. “I think that is her armor she’s built up over the years, from her mother, who betrayed and abused her. She’s a sharp cookie. One of the things that she keeps saying, that I love, is ‘You can’t slip anything by me.’”

“She wants to be in control all the time. I think maybe I have a little bit of that, too, but that’s a dangerous place to be, probably.”

Letts borrowed the title from a poem by Howard Starks. The poet writes of a matriarch in the winter of life:

“She lies under the sheet,

Thin as one of her old kitchen knives,

honed by years and use to fragile sharpness,

but too well-tempered to break just yet.”

Teague always brings choices, Alley said, but is also quick to both accept suggestions and speak up when something doesn’t feel right, or isn’t working.

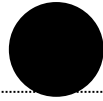
“I think good actors bring to every character part of themselves; it’s impossible not to,” Alley said. “In people with good instincts, the process lives in them a little more easily. I really love when we get to a place where we can just play. Dianne treats it so gingerly, really.”

Both director and lead note that while “August: Osage County” has a long run time, each scene, every episode, propels the tale forward. As with many people who grew up in extreme hardship, the family has developed a kind of gallows humor.

“It’s so funny,” Teague said. “I just hope people will be willing to take the journey. ... the show is always pushing forward into the next discovery, into the next crisis.

“I always feel like I’m headed for something.”

Performances will be 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Nov. 17, closing with a 2 p.m. matinee Nov. 19, in the Marian Gallaway Theatre, Rowand-Johnson Hall on the UA campus. Tickets are \$20 general, \$17 for UA faculty and staff, and \$14 for students, in the Rowand-Johnson box office, by phone at 348-3400, or online at **www.ua.tix.com**. For more, see **www.theatre.ua.edu**.



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