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CULTURE/ENTERTAINMENT

Portrait of the American Soul -- August: Osage County

by **Richard Ciccarone**
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When I began writing theater reviews for SF Appeal, I had a deal with my editor Eve. We both felt the needs of the smaller houses were being grossly underserved by the media and it was our goal to remedy that as best we could. I am breaking this rule now for two reasons.

The first is that **the national tour of** Tony Award winning *August: Osage County* has, for a play of this importance, been promoted rather quietly. The second is that this play forges the soul of our nation's conscious between a blunt hammer and anvil and deserves all the attention any news outlet which still claims an interest in theater can furnish.

Osage County is an epic monument to America in its current state of identity crisis, from our misplaced idealization of the "greatest generation" to the castration and molestation of those we are now raising. While that may seem like a bleak prospect to watch for three and a half hours, playwright Tracy Letts' achievement is his ability to show us this weathered landscape with a finely crafted sense of humor.

Rarely have I heard an audience of nearly fifteen hundred people erupt in the communal relief of laughter. But the humor is so organically integrated into the mythical tapestry of his characters that it became clear to me how the American sense of humor is as richly embedded into our souls as is our industriousness and entitlement.

The play examines a litter of women whose axis suddenly vanishes from the play in the form of the brilliant and weary patriarch. There are other men in the piece, but they are all victims of varying states of perpetual adolescence. Their only dependability is their unfailing ability to fail, or to see what is directly before them.

But Letts' attitude of the masculine is carefully dismissed so that he can fully engorge his work with the feminine forces of nature. It can not be ignored that there are three daughters paying homage to a craggy and moribund parent, only instead of the Learish pomp and circumstance, there is the familial dining room scene replete with family secrets, years of seething resentments and the finale in physical combat. In Lear there is the obsession with courtly ritual while in Osage it is the American obligation to domestic congress. Both are equally tragic.

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What I found most inspiring in this work was not just the flawless script, but the unspoken truths that found a home through the author's supernatural insight. The small, almost overlooked gestures between the characters penetrated well beyond the spoken word and into the realm of modern legendary truth: the triumph of manners over common sense, the gradual degradation of our icons, the painful revelation of human frailty are indicated in this play with the utmost nuance and intricacy that it is our uniquely American courtly ritual.

As for performances, this is a production that demands the finest theatrical craftsmen and women available and we are blessed in San Francisco to have been furnished thus. Estelle Parsons has accumulated enough experience in her successful career to fully understand a woman this encumbered with pain and disappointment but also with the physical agility to fulfill the demands of a character under the spell of barbiturate binges.

Her eldest daughter, played by Shannon Cochran, is less of a character and more of a storm gathering on the great plains, unleashing her irresistible fury and then dispersing into a low rumble of distant thunder. It is not merely a performance, it is a barometric punch that overtakes you.

Sometimes it is a thing of beauty to behold the truth but most times it is a painful experience. With *August: Osage County*, it is both. And like the American soul, it can be endured through laughter.