

**ARTS CLUB THEATRE COMPANY  
TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE  
2010/2011 Season**



**Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage**  
January 27 – February 27, 2011

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## WELCOME

This guide was created to encourage teachers, students, and audience members to explore the play further, either before or after the actual performance.

If you have any questions, comments or suggestions for the guide, please contact our group sales representative at 604.687.5315 x253, or by email at [groups@artsclub.com](mailto:groups@artsclub.com).

## ABOUT THE COMPANY

The Arts Club of Vancouver was founded in 1958 as a private club for artists, musicians, and actors, and officially became the Arts Club Theatre in 1964 when the company opened its first stage at a converted gospel hall at Seymour and Davie Streets.

Now in its 47th season of producing professional live theatre in Vancouver, the Arts Club Theatre Company is a non-profit charitable organization that operates two theatres, the Granville Island Stage and the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, on a year-round basis. Our popular productions range from musicals and contemporary comedies to new works and classics. The company also tours provincially on a regular basis, with a three-show season presented at venues around British Columbia.

*August: Osage County* is generously supported by Presenting Sponsor:



## SYNOPSIS

*For the Westons, one hot summer weekend changes everything forever. This is the funny and poignant account of a dysfunctional family in the midst of a **spectacularly entertaining** meltdown. Widely regarded as the first great classic of the 21st century, this is a not-to-be-missed contemporary masterpiece.*

*August: Osage County* is about the reunion of the Weston family. The head of the Weston family, Beverly, disappears for five days, and the rest of his family reminisce and share stories about him and each other. Through several scenes and anecdotes, the audience learns about the range of emotions that the Weston family members feel for each other, everything from animosity to guilt. Barbara has marital problems due to her husband's adultery with his college student. Violet harbours deep pain and dispenses accusations against her daughters.

When the family learns that Beverly has been found drowned in a lake (presumably by suicide), conflicts and tensions within the family escalate.

Returning from Beverly's funeral, Violet's daughters and her sister, Mattie Fae, share more family anecdotes and past stories. The scene progresses towards a large, formal dinner that Johnna and Mattie Fae have helped to prepare. In an aside, it is revealed to the audience that Little Charles and Ivy, who are first cousins, are secret lovers who plan to leave for New York. During the dinner, tensions boil into a violent confrontation between Violet and her daughter Barbara. As the rest of the family try to make sense of the hatred between mother and daughter, Barbara confronts her mother about her drug addiction and rids the house of her prescription drugs.

The next day, the audience learns that Violet's doctor believes she has brain damage. Discussing her future with her daughters, several illicit relationships are discovered, such as the relationship between Little Charles and Ivy, who thought they were first cousins, but are actually half brother and sister through an adulterous relationship between Beverly and Violet's sister, Mattie Fae.

By the end of the play, Violet's daughters have left the house leaving only Barbara, Violet, and Johnna, and it is implied that the family relationships have been permanently fractured. Barbara and her mother have one angry last confrontation during which Violet blames Barbara for her father's suicide. Violet also reveals his suicide might have been preventable since she knew which motel he stayed in the night he left the house. The play ends depressingly, as Barbara, knowing her mother's temper and madness have won against anything rational, leaves the house. Violet is left only with Johnna, who ends the play with a recitation from a T.S. Elliot poem: "This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends"

## TIME AND PLACE

The play is set in a large country home outside Pawhuska, Oklahoma, sixty miles northwest of Tulsa during August 2007.



The Weston family in the Steppenwolf Theatre production. Photo by Robert J. Saferstein.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

### **Beverly Weston**

Husband of Violet and father to his three 40-something daughters. A one-time world class poet and full-time alcoholic. Polite, soulful, melancholy, and ultimately suicidal.

### **Violet Weston**

The devious matriarch. She has lost her husband. She is addicted to painkillers (and any other pill she can pop). She suffers from cancer of the mouth. But that doesn't stop her from spewing her cynicism or her hilariously sinister insults.

### **Barbara Fordham**

The eldest daughter. In many ways, Barbara is the strongest and most sympathetic character. Throughout the play she tries to gain control of her chaotic mother, her dilapidated marriage, and her pot-smoking 14 year old daughter.

### **Ivy Weston**

The middle daughter. A quiet librarian, stereotypically mousy. Ivy has stayed close to home, unlike the other errant Weston sisters. This means Ivy has had to endure the acid tongue of her mother. She has been maintaining a secret love affair with her first cousin.

### **Karen Weston**

The youngest daughter. She claims to have been unhappy her entire adult life, prompting her to move away from the family and reside in Florida. However, she returns to the Weston home bringing along a fiancé in tow—a successful 50 year old business man who, unbeknownst to Karen, turns out to be the most loathsome character within the play.

### **Johnna Monevata**

The Native-American live-in housekeeper. She is hired by Beverly just days before his disappearance. She may not have many lines, but she is the most compassionate and morally grounded of all the characters. She claims to stay in the caustic household simply because she needs the job. Yet, there are times when she swoops in like a warrior-angel, saving characters from despair and destruction.

## AWARDS & NOMINATIONS

### **2007 Jeff Award (Chicago)**

Best New York - Play  
Best Production - Play

### **2008 Drama Desk Award**

Outstanding Actress in a Play - Amy Morton  
Outstanding Actress in a Play - Deanna Dunagan (*WINNER*)  
Outstanding Costume Design - Ana Kuzmanic  
Outstanding Director of a Play - Anna D. Shapiro (*WINNER*)  
Outstanding Featured Actor in a Play - Jeff Perry  
Outstanding Featured Actress in a Play - Rondi Reed  
Outstanding Play

### **2008 Drama League Award**

Distinguished Production of a Play (*WINNER*)

### **2008 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award**

Best Play

### **2008 Outer Critics Circle Award**

Outstanding New Broadway Play

### **2008 Pulitzer Prize**

Drama - Tracy Letts (*WINNER*)

### **2008 Theatre World Award**

Deanna Dunagan (*WINNER*)

### **2008 Tony Award**

Best Actress in a Play - Amy Morton  
Best Actress in a Play - Deanna Dunagan (*WINNER*)  
Best Direction of a Play - Anna D. Shapiro (*WINNER*)  
Best Featured Actress in a Play - Rondi Reed (*WINNER*)  
Best Lighting Design of a Play - Ann G. Wrightson  
Best Play  
Best Scenic Design of a Play - Todd Rosenthal (*WINNER*)

## ABOUT THE CREATIVE TEAM

### JANET WRIGHT – DIRECTOR



Janet Wright is a stage, television and film actor and a theatrical director. Affiliated with the Arts Club since the early 1970s, she has performed and directed in over 40 productions including being in the leading role in *Memoir*, *The Club*, *Miss Margarida's Way*, and *Hedda Gabler*.

Wright has forged a strong working relationship with the Stratford Festival in Ontario, as both an actor and a director. She won praise for her masterful and insightful direction of Stratford's 1998 production of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, starring Lally Cadeau in the lead role.

In addition to having a prolific career in Canadian theatre, Wright has established herself as an exceptional film actress, making countless appearances on TV and in movies dating back to the early 1970s. Her most recognized movie role has been that of Ethel Shapford in director Wolfgang Petersen's *A Perfect Storm*, where she worked with George Clooney, Mark Wahlberg and Diane Lane. Janet is often recognized for her wonderful sense of humour and wry, self-deprecating wit, a testament to her strength and spirit. Her deep sardonic chuckle and sharp comedic timing were integral parts of her successful portrayal of Emma Leroy on CTV's *Corner Gas* (2004-09), perhaps the best-loved comedy in the history of Canadian TV.

### TRACY LETTS – PLAYWRIGHT



Tracy Letts has been an ensemble member at Steppenwolf Theatre since 2002 and performed in *Betrayal*, *The Pillowman*, *Last of the Boys*, *The Pain and the Itch*, *The Dresser*, *Homebody/Kabul*, *The Dazzle*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (also in Dublin and Toronto), *Three Days of Rain*, *Road to Nirvana*, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, and the Steppenwolf for Young Adults production of *The Glass Menagerie* (1988).

As a playwright, Tracy's work includes *Killer Joe*, *Bug*, and *Man From Nebraska*, which premiered at Steppenwolf, was named a finalist for the 2004 Pulitzer for Drama and was awarded the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the 2008 Tony Award for Best Play for *August: Osage County*. Tracy was also named as one of *Time's* "Best of 2003."

## A NOTE FROM THE ORIGINAL DIRECTOR

This is an enormously proud moment for Steppenwolf. *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts, represents a confluence of the unique strengths of our theater: a play created by an ensemble member whose work has been seen on the stages of Chicago, New York, California and London; directed by his long-time collaborator, ensemble member Anna Shapiro, another artist with national and international credits; performed by a cast of outstanding Chicago actors and eight Steppenwolf ensemble members. The play was developed through the New Plays Initiative under the dramaturgy of Steppenwolf Director of New Play Development, Ed Sobel. And it premieres for you, the Steppenwolf audiences who have supported our core values of innovation and ensemble with your adventurous appetite for new and challenging work and your loyalty to the theater and our artists.

*August: Osage County* is a play that not many theaters would undertake: a new play with 13 characters, a play rigorous in its thought, vigorous in its language, a play that delves deeply into our human challenges and heartbreaks, and a play that brings to vivid life the complex tumult of the humor, wit and sorrow of our most intimate connections.

As a writer, Tracy sort of amazes me. The voice in his plays is always identifiably his own but takes on such strange, elastic nuance play to play. First there was *Killer Joe*—wild, irreverent, funny and obscene. Then, *Bug*—dense, paranoid, political. Then, *Man from Nebraska*—again, the humor, but humble, sweet, profound and spiritual. Now: *August: Osage County*. Again, an enormously deft deployment of language—veering from the outrageous to the tender. But oh my—the scale of the thing. In three acts, Tracy tells a multi-generational family story that traces the legacy of the lies and wounds, the alliances and crazy tendernesses that define our most intimate connections. By introducing the character of an outsider—the Native American woman who comes to tend the family in need and who lives, not incidentally, in the attic of their home—Tracy invites us to see the story of the Weston family as the story of our American heritage. To what does this woman, a "native American" who has lost her own family, bear witness in the drama of the Weston family? And who is this American family?

The patriarch is an academic and a poet. And an alcoholic. The matriarch is a wife and a mother. And a drug addict. Does this recall that other towering family of American drama, the family of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*? So be it. Does the exchange of insult and dependence in the Weston family recall the pact between Martha and George in another great American drama, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? So be it. These allusions—familiar to an American theater-going audience—are being consciously invoked by Tracy to encourage our reading of *August* as a drama of not only one family, the Westons, idiosyncratic in their personalities and relationships but also, our reading of the Westons as emblematic of a characteristically American family.

The positioning of Johnna Montevata, a Cheyenne American, as the witness—the ghost in the attic—reinforces this allegorical reading of the Weston family. Johnna arrives at the Weston home as the poet-par triarch of the family recounts the trajectory of his family's exhaustion. The house has become dysfunctional—the children dispersed, the physical environment in disarray, the survivors—he and his wife—unable to maintain their own care and feeding. The once prize-winning poet has succumbed to the dissolution of drink—he has turned his life over to the "Higher Power" of his own incapacity and "join(ed) the ranks of the Hiring Class." He has given over the agency of his life to a paid employee—one, who, not incidental to this American tale, is a "native American" whose own father has died in an agricultural accident. With purposeful irony, Tracy describes the death of Johnna's father who died in a sea of wine grapes—falling into a flatbed truck of the grapes he was hired to harvest. So, where the poet, Beverly Weston, has chosen the demise of drink, Johnna's father is swallowed by grapes he picks to make the wine (that kills the man who owns the house that Johnna is being hired to put in order...). It's the story of "the House that Jack Built"—our childhood trope on the action of recursion.

It's recursion that Tracy is examining: the recursions within any individual family and the recursion of our American family (that returns us, finally, to the family of our "native Americans"). Recursion is the return, the determination of a succession of events by the operation of a set of precedents. The children of the Weston family—the successors—are determined in their unfolding by the character of their precedents, their parents. The irony of Beverly invoking drink as his "Higher Power" (reversing the language of recovery) points toward the larger irony of the positioning of the parental sins as the creative, the generative, force of the Weston family (reversing the God/sin equation). Something is rotten at the core of the family—and, Tracy may be suggesting in *August*, something is rotten at the core of our American identity. That "something" has everything to do with our Native American family—a family in which the patriarchal force is killed in service to our thirst for our own dissolution.

It is fitting that the Weston parents have chosen drink and drugs as the coping mechanism for their sorrow (a sorrow precipitated by their own unhappy childhoods). Drink and drugs are the agents of unconsciousness, the tools for forgetting, the medication for a pain that is chronic. And, we see, drink and drugs become the agents for the continuation of that pain: they allow Beverly and Violet to turn inward, to ignore the needs of their children and to dull them to the cruelty of their words and actions.

*August: Osage County* is a deeply gratifying and rich exploration of this one, multi-generational family, the Westons. Articulated with the family of Johnna, it shimmers with the metaphorical import of THE American family: a family wounded (and wounding) at its heart and committed to forgetting its painful past.

The great pleasure of the play is its truthful mining of the insanities and complexities of family. In the insanities are, too, riotous humor, surprising gestures of love and loyalty, and a deep sympathy for our human failings. It is an honor to give this play to

you. It has been crafted and is animated by the home team—our ensemble, our artistic staff, the rich talents of our Chicago and visiting theater artists. We undertake a play of this scale and ambition for an audience that has demonstrated an appetite for the big work--relevant themes, complex psychologies, and interpretive challenges. Many thanks for your acumen and courage in creating, with us, a theater that speaks to how we live now.

— MARTHA LAVEY

## A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

While it's rarely a simple matter to pinpoint the precise inspiration for a new play, the genesis of *August: Osage County* can be traced to my deliberate desire to write for an extant acting ensemble – in this case, Steppenwolf Theatre Company. The hope of any playwright is that he or she can, through narrative, tap into universal themes. My first goal was to construct a narrative that holds a bushel of interest and a kernel of truth for the actors of this ensemble.

When reviewing the biographies of the actors who comprise Steppenwolf, I was struck by a nearly common denominator: place of birth. From Lincoln, Illinois to Council Bluffs, Iowa, from Mankato, Minnesota to my hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the majority of ensemble members are small-town Midwestern people. Their stories are my stories. We share the history of families – mainly descendants of Irish or German or Dutch homesteaders – who forged their ethos from hardscrabble Depression years through the Baby Boom. We share the multi-generational conflict that inevitably arises when Those Who Have Nothing have willed their pride and guilt to Those Who Have Wanted for Nothing. *August: Osage County* is my attempt to explore this generational schism and the Midwestern sensibility with an ensemble of like-minded artists.

My play is a family story. (As Sam Shepard – still to this day Steppenwolf's most produced playwright – said when asked why he writes so much about family: "What else is there?") And after thirty years of intense artistic collaboration, the Steppenwolf ensemble is another kind of family. The politics of tribalism are common to both. It is my hope that *August: Osage County* will provide an artistically viable opportunity for Steppenwolf to learn how the dynamics of "family" continue to mold us and our approach to the world.

—TRACY LETTS

## **AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY: A PRODUCTION HISTORY**

*August: Osage County* premiered in June 2007 at Steppenwolf Theatre Company (Martha Lavey, Artistic Director; David Hawkanson, Executive Director) in Chicago. The director was Anna D. Shapiro; scenic designer was Todd Rosenthal, the costume designer was AnA Kuzmanic, the lighting designer was Ann G. Wrightson, the sound designer was Richard Woodbury; original music was composed by David Singer, fight choreography was by Chuck Coyl, casting was by Erica Daniels; the dramaturg was Edward Sobel, the dialect coach was Cecilie O'Reilly, the stage manager was Deb Styer and the assistant stage manager was Michelle Medvin.

*August: Osage County* opened on Broadway at the Imperial Theatre on December 4, 2007. It was produced by Jeffrey Richards, Jean Doumanian, Steve Traxler, Jerry Frankel, Ostar Productions, Jennifer Manocherian, The Weinstein Company, Debra Black, Daryl Roth, Ronald Frankel, Marc Frankel, Barbara Freitag and Phil Mickelson, and Rick Steiner and Staton Bell Group. The Broadway show closed on June 28, 2009 after 648 performances and 18 previews.

Elsewhere, it premiered in the UK at London's National Theatre in November 2008, Israel at Tel Aviv's Habima Theatre in January 2009, Puerto Rico at San Juan's Rene Marquez Theater Hall, Australia at Melbourne's Arts Centre Playhouse, Austria in Vienna's Akademietheater, Argentina in Buenos Aires' Teatro Lola Membrives and Sweden at the Göteborg City Theatre.

## THE THEMES OF AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY

By Wade Bradford:

### Mothers and Daughters

In Tracy Letts' play, Mothers and daughters are more likely to verbally and physically abuse one another rather than exhibit kindness. In Act One, Violet continually asks for her eldest daughter. She depends on Barbara's emotional strength during this family crisis. Yet, at the same time, Violet cruelly points out Barbara's advancing age, her evaporated beauty, and her failed marriage – all issues that Barbara wishes to be left unspoken. Barbara responds by putting a stop to her mother's pill addiction. She rallies the rest of the family into intervention mode. By this might be less of tough-love and more of a power-play. During Act Two's climactic "family dinner from hell," Barbara throttles her mother and then declares, "You don't get it, do you? I'M RUNNING THINGS NOW!"

### Two Types of Husbands

If August: Osage count is a reflection of reality, then there are two types of husbands: A) Docile and unmotivated. B) Philandering and unreliable. Violet's missing husband, Beverly Weston appears briefly, only during the play's beginning. But in that scene, the audience learns that Beverly has long since ceased to communicate with his wife in a healthy manner. Instead, he accepts that she is a drug addict. In turn, he drinks himself into a spiritual coma, becoming a very docile husband whose passion for life has fizzled out decades ago.

Beverly's brother-in-law, Charles, is another timid male character. He tolerates his unpleasant wife for almost forty years before he finally puts his foot down, and even then he's rather polite about his uprising. He can't understand why the Weston family is so vicious toward each other. But the audience can't understand why Charles has stayed around for so long!

His son, Little Charles is a 37-year old couch potato. He represents another example of an unmotivated male. But for some reason, his cousin/lover Ivy finds him heroic" despite his simple-minded lethargy. Perhaps she admires him so much because he presents a sharp contrast to the more devious male characters: Bill (Barbara's husband - the college professor who sleeps with his students) represents middle aged men who want to feel more desirable so they abandon their wives for younger women. Steve (Ivy's fiancé) represents the sociopath-type guys that prey on the young and naïve.

### What Goes Around Comes Around

Most of the characters dread the notion of living alone yet they violently resist intimacy, and most seem doomed to a sad, solitary existence. The final lesson is harsh but simple: Be a good person or you'll taste nothing but your own poison.

## ATTENDING THE SHOW

### ARRIVING AT THE THEATRE

Please arrive at the theatre with ample time (45–60 minutes, depending on the size of your group) to pick up and distribute tickets and resolve any seating issues within your group. Please ensure chaperones arrive before or at the same time as students.

Buses may unload passengers in the loading zone in front of the theatre but engines must be turned off while doing so. Once passengers have exited the vehicle, please be advised that you must find alternate parking for the duration of the show.

### THEATRE ETIQUETTE

In order to ensure an enjoyable show for all audience members, please impart some general theatre etiquette to students. They should keep in mind that this is not a movie theatre and different audience etiquette applies to a live theatre environment.

- It is important to turn off wristwatch alarms, cellular phones, and beepers for the duration of the show. If you are concerned about missing an emergency call, please leave your name or device and seat location with an usher and we will alert you if a call comes through.
- No outside food or drink is allowed in the theatre or lobby.
- Please finish refreshments purchased at the concession in the lobby before entering the theatre.
- We request that you refrain from eating or unwrapping candy in the theatre, as it is a distraction for others.
- Please be modest with your use of fragrances so that audience members with allergies can also enjoy the performance.
- Seating at The Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage and the Granville Island Stage is assigned. Please sit in your assigned seat and respect the fact that other seats have been reserved for other patrons.
- If you must leave the theatre during the performance, you will not be seated again until the intermission or another appropriate interval.
- Please respect your fellow audience members and the performers by refraining from talking during the performance. Even whispers carry!
- If you have a complaint about another guest, please tell an usher or the Audience Services Manager rather than approaching the person yourself. We will be happy to address concerns on your behalf.

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Identify and evaluate the messages and themes of *August: Osage County*. Argue whether or not readers can get any valuable “life lessons”.
2. How realistic is the portrayal of the Weston family? Do their values and their behavior reflect “real life” families of today?
3. What should the readers and audience members learn from this play?

## SOURCES

[www.steppenwolf.org](http://www.steppenwolf.org)

[www.plays.about.com](http://www.plays.about.com)

[www.ibdb.com](http://www.ibdb.com)

[www.shows.ctv.ca](http://www.shows.ctv.ca)

[www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com)