



FAMILY FEUD

August: Osage County *takes a brutal but cathartic look at family dysfunction*

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY: Directed by John Wells. Screenplay by Tracy Letts, based on the play *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts. Cinematography, Adriano Goldman. Editing, Stephen Mirrione. Music, Gustavo Santaolalla. Starring Meryl Streep, Julia Roberts, Chris Cooper, Ewan McGregor and Margo Martindale. Smokehouse Pictures, 2013. R. 120 minutes. ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Happy families are all alike, but every fucked-up family is fucked-up in its own way.

This is especially true of the family at the center of *August: Osage County*, director John Wells' adaptation of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Tracy Letts. Dysfunctional is too mild a

designation for the gaggle of pill-poppers, alcoholics, suicides, secret sharers and forked-tongue meanies who compose the Weston clan, which is thrown together, grudgingly, after its boozy patriarch, played by Sam Shepard, comes up missing. What ensues when these sad, mad people gather to help Violet (Meryl Streep) deal with her loss is a shitstorm of resentment and recrimination, fueled by narcotics, jealousy, incest and the general bitterness of unresolved emotions that reaches across three generations. It is glorious.

Taking a cue from great writers like Tennessee Williams and Carson McCullers, Wells and Letts (who also adapted

the screenplay) have given *August* the deeply tragic bent of a Southern gothic, and they leave no stone unturned when it comes to unearthing family secrets. The film practically revels in the shock and awe that result from throwing open the Weston closet and hauling each shred of dirty laundry into the stark light of an Oklahoma summer. There is humor in this festival of hurt feelings, but it is a vicious, queasy breed of humor, as when Barbara — Violet's oldest daughter and an inflexible scold, played exquisitely by Julia Roberts — barks at her mother: "Eat the fish, bitch!"

The film is far from perfect. It flirts with shocking for shocking's sake (although the slam on political correctness is disconcertingly hilarious). As director, Wells slouches toward overkill; his pacing and framing can be ham-fisted and didactic, and he badgers where he should finesse.

These are minor objections, however, if only because the sheer fury of Letts' dialogue — coupled with amazing performances from the likes of Chris Cooper, Ewan McGregor, Juliette Lewis, Abigail Breslin, Margo Martindale and especially Streep, who is stunning in her portrayal of human wreckage — works to give *August* the appeal of a bloodless but brutal derailment, where each member of the family is an isolated but linked boxcar loaded with the dynamite of bad feelings. The pile-up is fantastic, and there's a thrill in that, a catharsis.

Because good art, after all, must have teeth — especially dramatic art, which makes hay of our divine human comedy. Shakespeare didn't become Shakespeare by giving those young lovers 2.5 kids and a three-car garage in the final act, and cats don't bounce on roofs that are lukewarm. *August* has been criticized as being too dark and heavy, an accusation which, when you consider the number of bullet holes and butcheries that riddle your average action blockbuster, only goes to show the extent to which we've lost the stomach for true tragedy. The bite of *August* is sharp and hard, yes, but it is instructive and invigorating, too. Sort of like life itself. ■

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NUT JOB, THE (DIG) (PG)
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