



**AIM:** To explore the relationships in *August: Osage County*, and what, when, and why we choose to keep private in life.



**Identify** the main relationships of the play.



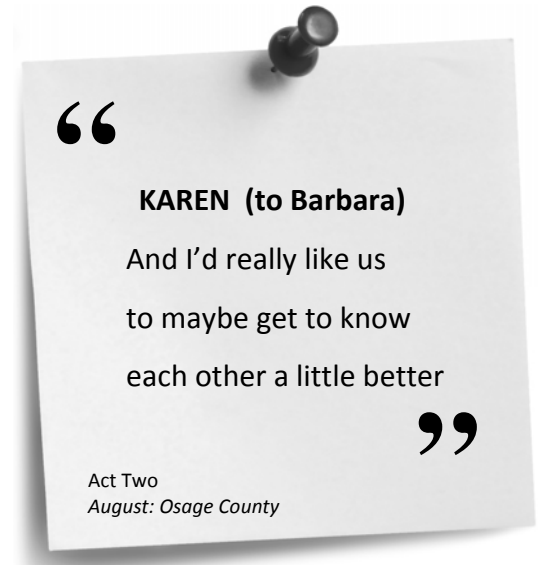
**Design** a program cover, poster or advertising material that visually represents the relationships within the play.



**Draw** a relationships tree (or use your family tree from Pre-Production Education Resources).



**Use** colours, patterns or texture to depict the connection between characters, the type of connection, and the strength of the connection.



### Discuss

1. Which relationships did you identify with or relate to in *August: Osage County*?
2. What external influences impacted on the evolution of the relationships?
3. How does a family dynamic dictate familial relationships?
4. Which relationship breakdown did you feel to be the most significant?
5. How does the heat impact on the characters and their relationships?

## YOU CAN'T SAY THAT!

Barbara and Bill have many comic exchanges in the play regarding her family background, which even matriarch Violet calls “small town folks.”

Such politically incorrect dialogue includes:

### “ ACT ONE

**BARBARA** The jokers who settled this place. The Germans and the Dutch and the Irish. Who was the asshole who saw this flat hot nothing and planted his flag? I mean, we fucked the Indians for this?

**BILL** Well, genocide always seems like such a good idea at the time...

**BARBARA** This is the Plains: a state of mind, right, some spiritual affliction, like the Blues. ”

**Make** a list of revelations of a character’s attitude, past, relationships and/or history that made you gasp.

## PHOTOGRAPHS



**Divide** into groups of three.

**Choose** a character each from *August: Osage County*.

For example, Ivy, Little Charles and Mattie Fae.

**Set** up a scene where the three of them are looking through a box of photographs of key family moments, as in Act Two of the play, after Beverly’s funeral service.

**Describe** each photograph as it is taken from the box.

For example, Beverly launching his book, Beverly and Mattie Fae at a family function, the birth of Jean Fordham with her proud parents Barbara and Bill.

**Improvise** dialogue for the three characters as they react to each photograph.

**Then**

**Join up** with two other groups.

**Have** the three sets of characters splintering off into separate conversations as they look at different photographs.

**Organise** some overlapping dialogue as the three groups speak semi-simultaneously, in the manner of Letts’ dialogue in Act Two just before dinner.

## AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY

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## BELONGING



**Beverly Weston** – retired poet, ‘complicated’- only seen in Prologue; was an alcoholic; saw himself as “a human cactus”. In the Prologue, Beverly confides, “I don’t know what it says about me that I have a greater affinity with the damaged.”

**Violet** – has mouth cancer and still smokes; addicted to pills. Violet has many machinations to gain her prescriptions from county pharmacists. Tells her daughters at their family reunion, “These walls must’ve heard a lot of secrets.” She then confesses in Act Three, “My momma was a nasty, mean old lady. I suppose that’s where I get it from.” In the opening Prologue, Beverly says of Violet, “I apologise for the temperature in here. My wife is cold-blooded and not just in the metaphorical sense. She does not believe in air-conditioning.... As if it is a thing to be disbelieved.”

**Barbara Fordham**, the eldest daughter, Beverly’s favourite – has moved away to teach and marry. Accuses her estranged husband of having “male menopause.”

In Act One Scene Three, she says: “The subject is me! I am the subject.... I am in pain! ! I need help!.... You pulled the rug out from under me.”

Ivy Weston (Barbara’s sister) accuses Barbara of getting out of Oklahoma, “As if by having a child you were alleviated of all responsibility.”

“

**BARBARA** We’re your sisters,  
we might’ve given you some  
comfort.

**IVY** I just don’t feel that  
connection very keenly.

”

Act Three, Scene One  
*August: Osage County*

**Find** other quotes like those above, which reveal a character’s sense of belonging or not belonging.

**Use** these quote to create a character profile.

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## HOTSEAT

**Participate** in an interview or hot seat that demonstrates understanding and empathy for your chosen character.

**Choose** someone to interview you.

For three minutes, **respond** to scripted character questions.

For example,

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What are the relationships you have to other characters in the play?
4. To which social group do you belong and what job do you hold?
5. Where do you usually live?
6. Who are your friends and who are your enemies?
7. How do you fit into the story of the play?
8. Do you consider yourself to be a good or bad person – why?
9. What metaphors are applied to you – for instance, Charlie tells us in Act One that “No one ever called her ‘Shrinking Violet.’”
10. At the end of the play, what do you think people might say they know about you?
11. Explain your character’s situation and concerns as depicted in the story of the play.

You will then be asked two to three impromptu questions.

*This is like a “life offstage” exercise by famed Russian acting practitioner, Konstantin Stanislavsky.*

**Answer** these questions based on the facts of the play and your interpretation of the character’s motivation and relationships in the context of the plotline.



## ESSAY TOPIC

“Understanding nourishes belonging.... A lack of understanding prevents it”.

**Demonstrate** how *August: Osage County* represents this interpretation of belonging.

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## PARK BENCH

**Create** simple scenarios of given circumstances, based on a park bench.

**Include** information regarding who, what, where, when, why.

**For example,**

The man and woman knew each other many years before and one has never lost the desire to be with the other.

**OR**

The two girls have never met but instantly like each other when they accidentally bump heads.

**OR**

The lady eating her lunch begins to tell a complete stranger her deepest darkest secrets.

**OR**

The two men sit together and talk about nothing of any significance, perhaps the weather.

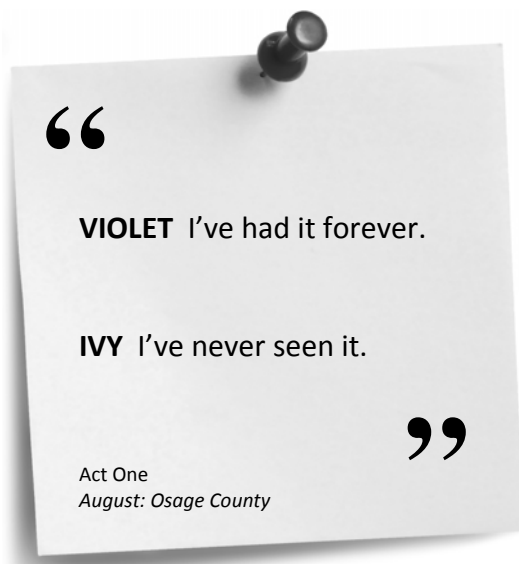
**Select** two players to play a scenario.

**One** sits on a bench.

**Another** enters.

The players **co-exist**, improvising a scene

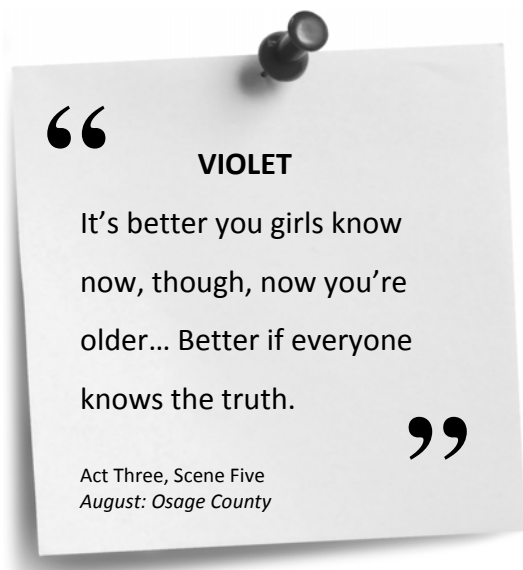
**Initially**, do not verbalise the scene at all (or very little).



**Rely** on inner desires, glances and the physical (tell-tale) body gestures and reflexes.

**One** player discovers a reason they need to leave, and do so.

**Rotate** through the group of players until everybody has played at least one of your scenarios.



### **Then**

#### **Add speech!**

**Two** players sit on a park bench (either in a scenario you have previously established, or an improvised situation).

**One player** must reveal a secret about himself or herself.

**Within ten seconds**, a third player must enter and sit on the park bench.

**The third player** must justify his or her inclusion in the scene.

**Warning:** there can only be three people on the bench for ten seconds.

**Within ten seconds**, one player must find a justification to leave.

**Note:** players can re-enter as a new character, or create the return of an established character.

### **Discuss**

1. Was it harder to create a scenario and characters with words or without? Why?
2. Did each character clearly demonstrate their reason for leaving in the initial scenes?
3. How were the most theatrically interesting relationships between characters created?
4. What was the difference between having to justify your exit from the scene initially, compared with having to justify an exit in ten seconds?
5. What impact did the entrance of a third player have on the relationship between the two initial characters?
6. How did different players choose to reveal their secret?
7. What sorts of secrets were revealed?
8. How did the onstage dynamic change after the revelation of the secret?
9. What impact did the entrance of a third player have on the atmosphere created by the revelation of a secret?



**AIM:** To explore the significance of the house as a physical representation of the emotional state of the characters.

The Weston home has as much of an influence on the atmosphere, dynamic and narrative as characters themselves. Its role in creating the physical and psychological surroundings of family members who either still live there, or have in the past, is phenomenal. The house provides claustrophobia and metaphoric heat at different points in the play. Most characters – notably Mattie Fae and Charlie, Barbara and Bill, and Jean – stop to regather themselves before entering and after exiting the family home.

“

**BILL** Are you ready for this?

**BARBARA** No. No way.

**BILL** Well. Take a second.

*(They stand, taking in the night, breathing the air.)*

”

Act One  
August: Osage County

### THRESHOLDS



**Brainstorm** a list of thresholds that you cross in your life.

**Highlight** those that feel significant every time you cross them.

For example, entering a hospital.

**Underline** those that feel significant depending on context.

For example, coming home way later than your curfew.



### Discuss

1. Why does Letts have each new set of characters preparing for their entrance outside on the porch?
2. How could you interpret this preparation as ritual?
3. How did this preparation impact on the introduction of characters?
4. What impact did this preparation have on suspenseful story telling and narrative?
5. What qualities are the porch and house, respectively, imbued with by this preparatory ritual?





## THE HOUSE



The lighting often stays on when characters have left the room to keep the audience focused on what they are about to or have just witnessed, waiting for characters to drift back in from the oppressive heat. It's also a way of threatening social situations with the solitude of some characters' lives, such as Violet and Barbara.

**ACT ONE**, stage directions.

“ All the windows in the house have been covered with cheap black plastic shades. Black duct tape seals the edge of the shades, effecting a complete absence of outside light. ”

1. What do you interpret from the stage directions for the setting of Act One, as quoted above?
2. How do you interpret the removal of the black shades in Act Three?
3. What role did lighting play in the creation of space and atmosphere in Steppenwolf's production?
4. How did the production (the actors, the design and the direction) focus our attention on one area or another?
5. Why do you think Letts utilises cross fades so often in his stage directions for lighting?
6. What other factors in the design had a direct impact on the action? Consider the set design, the levels, the alternating spaces and the simultaneous nature of the plot.

**Create** a model, storyboard or other visual representation to demonstrate how you, as a designer would deal with the prerequisites of the playwright's instruction to have so many locations all over the house, with some lit and working simultaneously.



## TELEVISION



1. How often did you notice the television was on, in the background or even foreground of scenes, throughout the production?
2. How did the television influence the characters?
3. Did the television distract or engage you, as an audience member?
4. How is the play and/or production reminiscent of the world of television?





## THANK GOD YOU'RE HERE

Watch a couple of episodes of *Thank God You're Here*



*Thank God You're Here* – Hamish Blake

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRsE10EtcuM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRsE10EtcuM)



*Thank God You're Here* – Ross Noble

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoae1T-uyuk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoae1T-uyuk)



*Thank God You're Here* – Josh Lawson

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYE5OJ9V3RI&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYE5OJ9V3RI&feature=related)

**Play** your own version of *Thank God You're Here*.

**Create** various scenarios where the entrance of one person affects the direction of the scene.

**Send** Player A out of the room.

**Devise** a scenario.

For example, three people await legal representation to make a class action on the doggy daycare group that changed the personality of their pets.

**Players B, C and D** each take up a character that fits within the scenario.

**Re-enter** Player A, into the scenario, having no idea where or who they are.

**Players B, C and D** endow Player A as the key figure in the scenario.

For example, the lawyer for the pet owners, the head of the doggie daycare, a staff member at the doggie daycare who is a key witness for the prosecution.

**Play** out the scene, prompting Player A as required.

### Discuss

1. What were the difficulties for Players B, C and D?
2. What was the difficulty for Player A?
3. What worked, theatrically, in the scene?
4. What is the difference between this format and an open improvisation?



**AIM:** To explore genre classifications for *August: Osage County*.

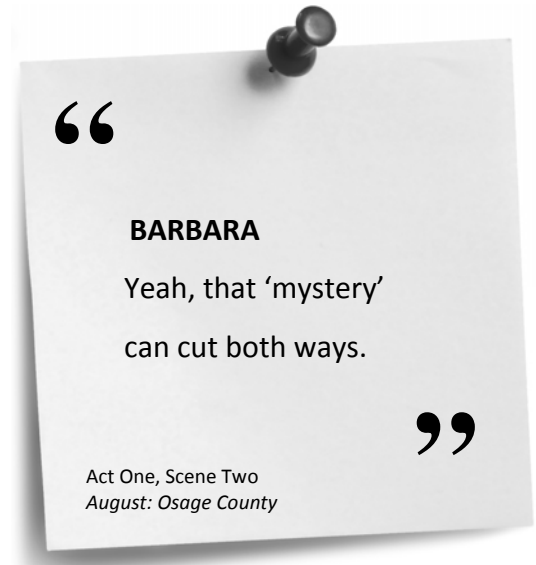


**GENRE DISCOVERY**

**Discuss**



1. Why is it too simple to classify *August: Osage County* as a murder mystery or whodunit?
2. How does the play fit this genre?
3. How is the play distinct from this genre?
4. What other genres would *August: Osage County* fit into?



**Write or devise** your own reveal of a suspenseful whodunit.



**Consider**

1. How much should the audience know at the outset to whet their appetite?
2. How do you engage the audience as stakeholders?



**COMEDY VS. TRAGEDY**

**Research** the definitions of comedy and tragedy.

**Decide** whether you would consider *August: Osage County* to be a comedy or a tragedy.



**Come up** with some events or actions in the text that make the play a comedy.

**Include** moments in the production that were made funny by the actors or direction

**Find** moments or outcomes in the play that make it a tragedy.

**Add** any scenes from the production that were made tragic by the actors or direction.

**DEBATE**

**+** While *August: Osage County* has brief moments of comic relief, it is essentially a tragedy.

## IS THERE AN IN BETWEEN?



**Use** the internet to research the following terms:

Black comedy

Tragicomedy



**Note** the difference between the two.

**Create** an argument that shows how *August: Osage County* is an example of one of the above genres.

**Find** a member of the group that chose the opposite genre to you.

**Use** only quotes from the play to argue your case.

### Discuss

1. Can you name any other texts that you would consider either black comedy or tragicomedy?
2. What makes you consider them to be examples of that particular genre?
3. How does black comedy and tragicomedy affect an audience's response to the play?
4. How does the comedy make an audience react to the tragic elements?
5. How do the tragic elements make us respond to the comedy?
6. How would this affect any writing or play building that you undertake in the future?

“

**BILL**

Oh Christ. How does a  
person jump in the water...  
and choose not to swim?

”

Act One, Scene Four  
*August: Osage County*

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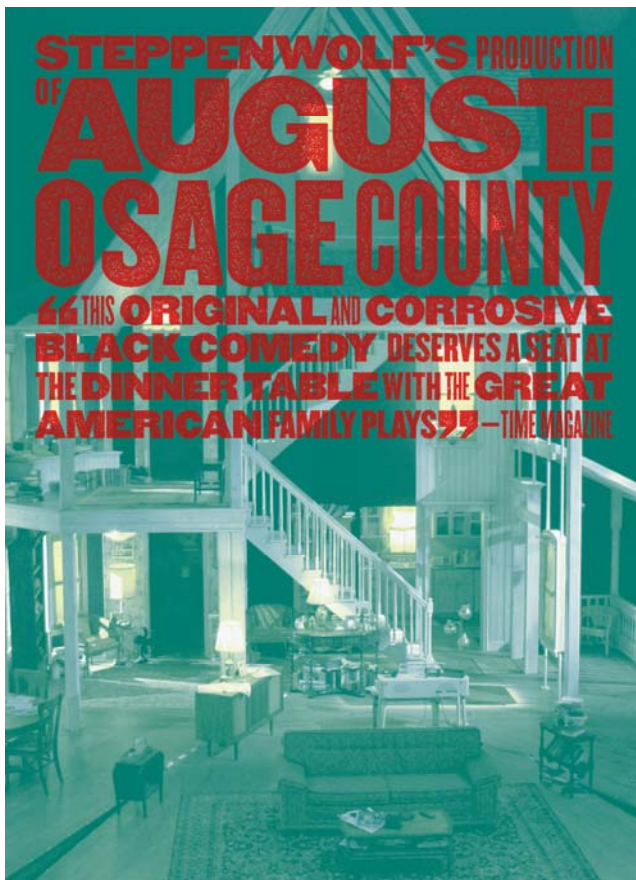


# Education Resources Pre-Production

Sydney Theatre Company and The Sydney Morning Herald present  
a Steppenwolf Theatre Company production

## AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY

By Tracy Letts



### PRE-PRODUCTION RESOURCES

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Education Resource compiled by Education manager **Naomi Edwards**, Education Coordinator **Toni Murphy**, Editor **Lucy Goleby**, Contributors **Jeffrey Dawson**, **Michael Mitchell** and **Elizabeth Surbey**

#### KEY



AIM of exercise or section



Extension Exercises



Download and watch



Drama Exercises



English Exercises



Play online

#### AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY

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### ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

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### ABOUT STC ED

[www.sydneytheatre.com.au/stced/about](http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/stced/about)

### ABOUT STEPPENWOLF THEATRE

<http://steppenwolf.org>

Committed to the principle of ensemble performance through the collaboration of a company of actors, directors and playwrights, Steppenwolf Theatre Company's mission is to nurture artists, encouraging repeatable creative relationships and contribute new works to the national canon. The company, formed in 1976 by a collective of actors, is dedicated to perpetuating an ethic of mutual respect and the development of artists through on-going group work.

Steppenwolf has grown into an internationally renowned company of forty-two artists whose talents include acting, directing, playwriting, filmmaking and textual adaptation.

In January of 1974, in Highland Park, Illinois, Gary Sinise was approached by high school classmates Rick Argosh and Leslie Wilson about putting on a production of Paul Zindel's *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little*. Sinise had recently graduated from high school and Rick and Leslie had one semester remaining. Highland Park High School was where co-founders Jeff Perry and Gary Sinise had met and became fast friends having done several plays together. The young founders decided on the name Steppenwolf for their new company which came from the book by Herman Hesse which Argosh happened to be reading at the time.

Steppenwolf has now grown into a company which includes 43 theatre artists whose strengths include acting, directing, playwriting, and textual adaptation. Today Steppenwolf remains committed to producing dynamic and exciting theatre. The company's subscription base of over 20,000 is an indicator of the Chicago community's enthusiasm for Steppenwolf Theatre.



**Explore** a day in the life of Steppenwolf Theater Company

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXBJ7fhS71A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXBJ7fhS71A)

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## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

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Tracy Letts was born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the United States, quite close to the setting of *August: Osage County*. In his long and varied career he has worked as an actor, director and writer. He has worked with the Steppenwolf Theater Company since around 1985. He has acted in numerous plays, including Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

In a review for the *New York Times*, Patrick Healy describes Tracy Letts as:

“ A recovering alcoholic and former pack-a-day smoker who could have majored in profanity had he not dropped out of college, he has a well-earned dark side that mixes with a surprising sweetness and exuberant humor. *After 'Osage' Accolades*, [www.nytimes.com/2008/07/20/theater/20heal.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/20/theater/20heal.html) ”

Many of the themes and characters of *August: Osage County* are lifted directly from Letts' own life. His maternal grandmother spiralled into drug addiction after her husband's suicide. This family history, alongside his own struggles with addiction have inspired Letts, who has written a number of plays that explore addiction, mental illness and the damage that human beings inflict on one another. In 2008, he was awarded the Drama Desk Award, Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play for *August: Osage County*.

**Watch** the youtube video about how Tracy Letts creates his work and his background.

*American Buffalo - Tracy Letts on His Creative Process*



[www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWoAfBqv1CE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWoAfBqv1CE)

**Watch** some behind the scenes footage from Steppenwolf's premiere production



*August: Osage County - In Performance with Jeff Perry*

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOjrlCwEY98](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOjrlCwEY98)

“

Letts... knows just how to put the **fun** back into **dysfunctional**. ”

Barbara Mehlman & Geri Manus  
[www.newyorktheatreguide.com/reviews/augustosagecounty07.htm](http://www.newyorktheatreguide.com/reviews/augustosagecounty07.htm)



### Tracy Letts' previous plays:

1993 Killer Joe

1996 Bug (play)

2003 Man from Nebraska

2007 Bug (film)

2007 August: Osage County

2008 Superior Donuts

2009 Three Sisters (adaptation)

### BUG

As you can see from the list above, Letts wrote the play *Bug* which was subsequently made into a cult movie. The story centres on Agnes (Ashley Judd), who tends bar alongside pal R.C., and has recently moved into a shoddy roadside motel in hopes of avoiding her menacing and recently paroled ex-husband, Jerry. The play and film are both described as psycho-thrillers which are both dark and tragic.



**Research** the term 'psycho-thriller'.

**Discuss**



1. What are the main features of this kind of play?
2. How does a psychological thriller differ from a normal thriller?
3. What are some films, books or plays you have seen or read that you would describe as a psycho-thriller?



**Write** your own psycho-thriller scene for a film or play.



**Draw** a storyboard for your scene.

“ **BARBARA**  
I'm wishing -- God, this is so awful -- I'm wishing my father was here...and my mother was the one who had disappeared. ”

Act One, Scene One  
*August: Osage County*



## CREATIVE TEAM

**Director** – Anna D. Shapiro

**Set Designer** – Todd Rosenthal

**Costume Designer** – Ana Kuzmanic

**Lighting Designer** – Ann G. Wrightson

**Sound Designer** – Richard Woodbury

**Composer** – David Singer

**Fight Choreographer** – Chuck Coyll

## CAST

Gary Cole

Deanna Dunagan

Kimberly Guerrero

Mariann Mayberry

Amy Morton

Sally Murphy

Paul Vincent O'Connor

Jeff Perry

Molly Ranson

Rondi Reed

Chelcie Ross

Troy West

Gary Wilmes



## THEMES

Family disintegration, family power structures, gender differences, cultural differences, African-American relations, intimacy, loneliness, alcoholism, drug addiction, adultery, pedophilia, aging, generational change, incest, infidelity, variations of love, and relationships.

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*August: Osage County* centres around the lives of the Weston family who live in a rural, but middle-class part of Oklahoma. The Westons are intelligent, sensitive creatures who have the uncanny ability of making each other absolutely miserable. When the patriarch of the household mysteriously vanishes, the Weston clan gathers together to simultaneously support and attack one another.

“

**BEVERLEY WESTON**  
Violet's husband

My wife takes pills, and I drink. That's the bargain we've struck.

Act One  
August: Osage County

”

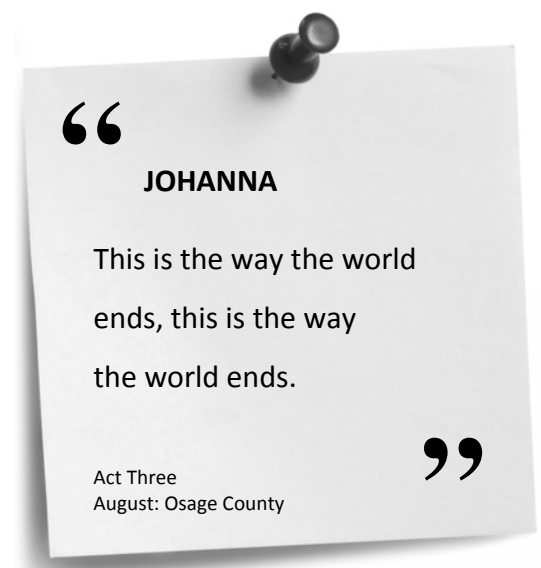
The Weston family is led by Violet Weston: a devious and almost evil matriarch. She is addicted to painkillers (and any other pill she can pop) and suffers from cancer of the mouth. Violet's husband Beverly is a full-time alcoholic and one-time famous poet. The couple have three adult daughters: Barbara, married to Bill, who is having an affair with one of his college students, and mother to 14-year old Jean; Karen, newly engaged to Steve, and Ivy.

At the beginning of **Act One**, Beverley has inexplicably disappeared. Barbara, Ivy and Karen, and their respective partners and children, are called back to the family home to comfort Mother in her time of need, and get to the bottom of Dad's disappearance. Violet's abrasive sister, Mattie Fae and Mattie's henpecked husband, referred to by Violet as 'Little Charlie', also arrive. This seeming act of kindness from Violet's family does not stop her from spewing cynicism or funny, yet sinister, insults onto her daughters.

Nearing the end of Act One, the sheriff comes to the house to announce that Beverly has been found drowned in a lake in what is presumed to be a suicide. This has a devastating effect on Violet's mental state, sending her spiralling into confusion.

**Act Two** begins with Beverley's funeral: another chance for Violet and Mattie to share family anecdotes, stories, and painful memories. Act Two progresses toward a large, formal dinner at which it is revealed that Little Charles and Ivy (first cousins) are secret lovers who plan to leave for New York. The dinner turns into a physical fight between Violet and Barbara, which results in Barbara finally confront her mother about her drug addiction, calling a doctor and destroying all of Violet's prescription medications.

In **Act Three**, Violet is sober but no less vindictive. She tells her daughters that the doctor believes she may have brain damage and they discuss her future. The news of Charlie and Ivy's relationship leads Mattie Fae to reveal that Charlie is actually her illegitimate son by her brother-in-law Beverley, making Charlie and Ivy half-brother and sister. The family breakdown continues as Karen's finance Steve is discovered attempting to molest Barbara's 14-year-old daughter, Jean. Karen accuses Jean of inviting Steve's advances, and they leave. Violet blames Barbara for Beverley's death, in the process revealing that Violet herself may have been able to prevent him from committing suicide. Finally Violet is left alone with Johanna, the mistreated African-American maid.



**August: Osage County Official Website**

[www.augustonbroadway.com/home.php](http://www.augustonbroadway.com/home.php)



**Watch** the Broadway trailer

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjHpOzL6Wqk&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjHpOzL6Wqk&feature=related)



**AIM:** To gain a clear understanding of the relationships between the characters in August: Osage County.

**Compile** the Weston and Aiken Family Trees.

**Consult** the Tree Builder 4.0 format:

[www.myheritage.com/family-tree-builder?gclid=CMuHmcv8r54CFU8wpAodnzB9lw](http://www.myheritage.com/family-tree-builder?gclid=CMuHmcv8r54CFU8wpAodnzB9lw)

### Include

Violet Weston: the devious matriarch.

Beverly Weston: husband of Violet.

Barbara Fordham: the Weston's eldest daughter.

Bill Fordham: her husband.

Jean Fordham: their 14-year-old daughter.

Ivy Weston: Violet and Beverley's middle daughter.

Karen Weston: Violet and Beverley's youngest daughter.

Steve Heidebrecht: Karen's fiancée.

Mattie Fay Aiken: Violet's sister.

Charlie Aiken: Mattie Fay's husband.

'Little' Charles Aiken: Mattie and Charlie's son.



**Build up** psychological profiles of each character to include with their entry on their family tree.

**Compile** three quotes by each of character, to gain an understanding of their perspective.

**Include** three quotes said about each of the characters, to gain an understanding of their position in the eyes of the others characters.





**AIM: To explore autobiography as theatre.**

*August: Osage County* is very much a family affair for playwright Tracy Letts, whose grandfather committed suicide when Tracy was only ten years old and whose grandmother was addicted to pain killers. Tracy Letts's father, Dennis Letts, originated the role of the family patriarch, Beverly Weston, in Steppenwolf's premiere production of *August: Osage County*. In performing the role of Beverly, Dennis was acting as his own father-in-law.

Keep in mind that there are a number of entertainment sources that are based on fact, but riddled with false information. A recent example of this is the distribution of the TV series *Underbelly*, which was banned in Victoria because it risked influencing or biasing people's opinions with false information.

**Discuss**



1. How does Tracy Letts' personal background come through in *August: Osage County*?
2. Do you think that *August: Osage County* should be clearly labelled as an autobiographical play? Why or why not?
3. How is memory fragile?
4. Does memory become corrupted deliberately or accidentally?
5. Does every memory have an inevitable bias?
6. Why do different people have different ideas about the accuracy of memory?





## Performing characters based on real people

A number of plays depict real people in their narrative. However, whether a play is based on fact or fiction, it is vital for a performer to research the character that they are playing.



**Find** a partner within your group.

**Take** turns to interview each other.

**Start** with the following information.

1. Full name
2. Date of Birth
3. Suburb
4. Who you live with
5. Favourite activities
6. Bad habits
7. How others would describe you.

**As** you talk, watch your subject closely to discover how he or she interacts with the world.

**Find out** as much as you can about:

### **BODY**

Mannerisms

Gestures

Habitual actions

Posture

### **VOICE**

Accent

Tone

Pitch

Any impediments (be careful, your subject may be sensitive)

Volume

## HUMAN INTERACTION

1. How do they interact with people of a higher status?
2. How do they interact with people of a lower status?
3. Do they use formal or informal speech?
4. Are they easily intimidated or do they stand tall?
5. Are they introverted or extroverted?

“

### VIOLET (TO IVY)

Your shoulders are slumped and your hair's all straight and you don't wear make-up. You look like a lesbian.

”

Act One, Scene One  
*August: Osage County*

**Stop** interviewing each other when you feel you have enough information, both factually and physically, to create a character based on your partner.

**Swap** roles with your partner.

**Have** a conversation where you take on the characteristics of your partner as a character study.

**Separate** from your partner.

**Create** an introductory monologue for your partner-based character to present to the group.

**Do not** collaborate with your partner at this point!

**Present** your monologue to the group.

## Discuss

1. Do you feel you gave an accurate representation of your partner?
2. How did you feel about seeing yourself portrayed on stage?
3. What did you notice about the most successful representations?
4. What advice would you give your partner if they were to do this activity again?
5. If you were to write a play about a living person, what would you need to be careful of?
6. How would circumstances change if you had to write a character based on a member of your family?





**AIM:** To understand how deception, lies and suspense can be used to create theatre.

### THE DECEPTION CARD GAME



This stationary game (originally invented by psychology student Dimitry Davidoff in Russia, 1986) is a group game involving strategy and bluffing. It is good for discussing topics such as lying, deception, trust and good versus evil.



There are five roles one can play: one narrator, two members of the mafia, two members of the police (or one if the group is not large), one doctor, and the townspeople.

The object is to eliminate the mafia before they murder the entire town.

**AGES:** 14 and up.

**RECOMMENDED NUMBER OF PEOPLE:** Groups of 8 to 12.

**MESSINESS FACTOR:** No sweat.

**MATERIALS REQUIRED:** A deck of cards to determine who plays which role.

**RECOMMENDED SETTING:** Indoors.

### SETTING UP THE GAME

**Nominate** one person to be the narrator.

**Take** the following cards from the pack for 12 players:

- 2 x aces (which represent mafia members)
- 2 x kings (which represent police people)
- 1 x queen (which represents the doctor)
- 7 x number cards (for each remaining player to represent townspeople)
- Note: if there are only 10 people playing, you would only have 5 x number cards.

**Shuffle** the cards.

**Randomly** select a card, without revealing your identity as a mafia member, police, doctor etc.

## PLAYERS

**Ace card:** Anyone who gets an Ace card is a Mafia member. Their goal is to keep secret that they are Mafia and blend in with the townspeople. For them to win the game, they want to eliminate the townspeople one by one each round but not to get eliminated.

**King card:** Anyone who gets a King card is a member of the police. The police try to figure out who is guilty of being a Mafia member and who is innocent. Their goal is to help the townspeople work out who to eliminate during the day. They generally want to keep their identity secret so that the Mafia cannot eliminate them early.

**Queen card:** The doctor role. This optional (but recommended) role serves one purpose – to try to protect people during the night. Doctors can also be selfish and choose to protect themselves during the night.

**All other cards (number cards):** Townspeople. Their goal is to figure out who is a member of the secret Mafia, and to eliminate them from the town during the day.

## HOW TO PLAY

The players stand in a circle.

The narrator walks around the outside of the circle.

Each cycle of the game, the narrator takes the town through the following commands.

## NIGHT

**Narrator:** “It is night-time, so everyone please go to sleep.”

*Everyone closes their eyes*

**Narrator:** “Doctor, please wake up and choose someone you’d like to protect.”

*The doctor, if still alive, silently points to someone they would like to protect for that night.*

**Narrator:** “Doctor, please go to sleep.”

*The doctor closes his or her eyes.*

**Narrator:** “Mafia, please wake up.”

*Members of the mafia quietly open their eyes. The ones that are still alive choose a person to eliminate by silently pointing to someone in the group. The narrator takes note of the victim.*

## **NIGHT cont.**

**Narrator:** “Mafia, please go to sleep.”

*Members of the mafia close their eyes.*

**Narrator:** “Police, please wake up.”

*The member(s) of the police that are still alive open their eyes and silently point to one person who they suspect is a member of the Mafia.*

*The narrator quietly nods or shakes their head to affirm whether that person is indeed Mafia.*

**Narrator:** “Police, please go to sleep.”

*The member(s) of the police close their eyes.*

**Narrator:** “It’s morning. Everyone please wake up.”

*Everyone opens their eyes.*

## **DAYTIME UPDATE**

The narrator announces the person who was the intended victim of the Mafia.

If doctor correctly selected the person who was targeted by the Mafia, they are safe.

If the Mafia successfully killed somebody, that person must quietly leave the circle.

Victims may not speak to anyone for the remainder of the game, but can watch everything.

## **DAYTIME VOTING**

The townspeople (along with the Mafia and Police, who pretend to be townspeople) nominate people they suspect is a member of the mafia.

Each person nominated may make a defense and plead their case.

The entire group votes on which person will be banished from the town.

The person receiving a majority vote (50% or above) is banished, and must leave the circle.

After someone is banished, the day is over.

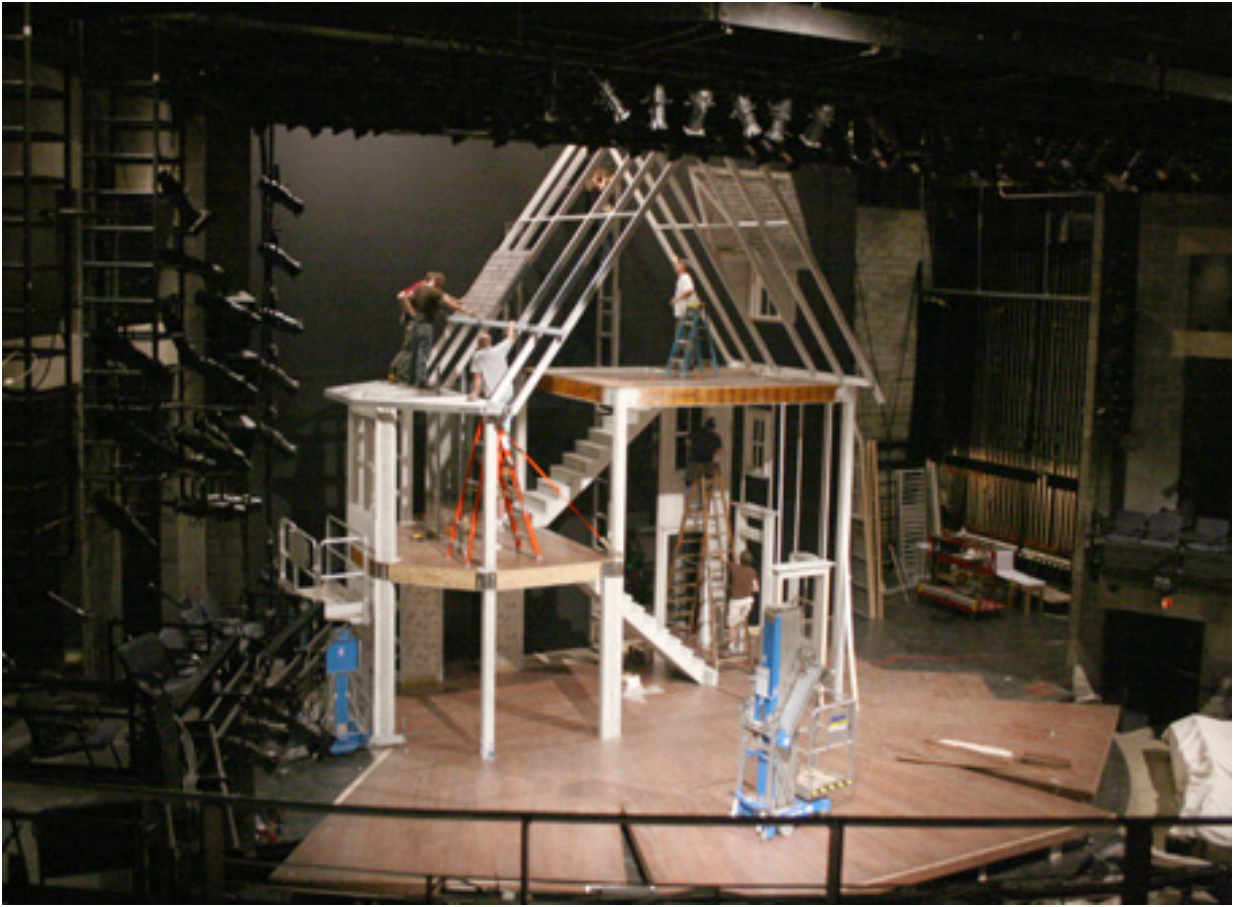
The day may also end without any banishment, if the entire group decides to do so.

Once the day ends, the narrator takes the group back to **NIGHT** to begin the cycle again.

## **HOW TO WIN**

The police or townspeople win if they successfully banish all mafia members.

The mafia wins if they successfully murder all the townspeople.



Todd Rosenthal is the set designer of the Steppenwolf Company's *August: Osage County*.

The set for this production as you can see from the image above, is the Weston family home, which consists of exposed beams on three levels. This metaphorically reveals the dark secrets of the family. The set, like the play, is naturalistic yet serves the production architecturally and also assists in highlighting the subtext. In fact, each room either hides or reveals the past over the play's duration of 3 hours 40 minutes in a seamless fashion.

### Discuss

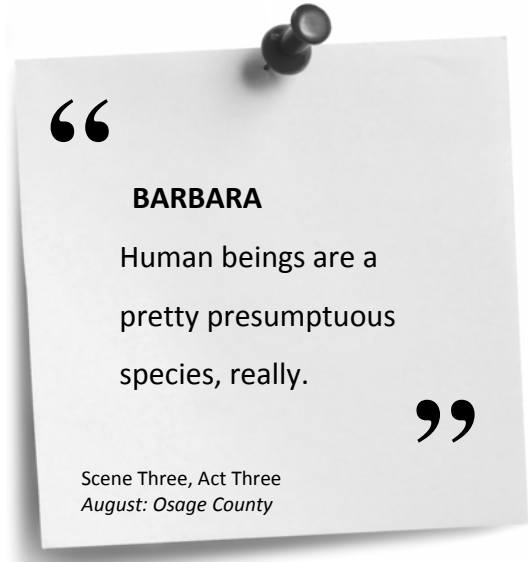


1. Think of a set for another production you have seen. How does that set not only provide the chairs, walls and tables for the actors but also a sense of atmosphere?
2. How does lighting communicate mood?
3. Which colours of light communicate what emotions?
4. How does sound design communicate mood?



**AIM:** To consider the benefits and limitations that exist when writing a play for an established and defined ensemble.

*August: Osage County* was commissioned by Steppenwolf theatre to be performed by its ensemble cast. This means Tracy Letts needed to create specific characters to fit the established ensemble when he was writing the play.



**Create** a list of the various elements that Letts would have needed to consider and accommodate when writing *August: Osage County*.



**Underline** the elements you feel could have been inspiring to Letts.

**Highlight** the elements you feel would have posed a complication or difficulty to Letts.

**Remember**, challenges and inspirations may be one and the same thing.

**Discuss**

1. Do you think writing a play for an established ensemble is ultimately beneficial or detrimental to the success of the play? Why?
  - \* Find examples in the play to support your argument.
2. What difficulties do you imagine would have arisen for the ensemble that Letts wrote *August: Osage County* for, when rehearsing the play?
3. What difficulties can you foresee in another company producing a play originally written for a specific ensemble?
  - \* Note examples in the production to support your argument.
4. Do you think these difficulties are unique to a play written in these circumstances?







## CREATE A CHARACTER FOR YOUR FAVOURITE ACTOR



**Choose** an actor/actress from either film, TV or theatre whose work you are quite familiar with.

**Keep** your choice a secret.

**Use** your understanding of the plots of *August: Osage County* to create a character for this actor to play.

### Consider

1. What is your character's name, age, gender etc?
2. What is your character's (brief) personal history?
3. What is your character's relationship with the other characters in the play?
4. Why they are present in the household at this time?
5. What secrets or bad habits does your character have?
6. How does your character react to the events that unfold throughout the play?
7. What values does your character hold?

“

### CHARLIE

Now listen here... you're wrong about these people, they love you. Some of them haven't gotten the chance to see what I see...

”

Act Two  
*August: Osage County*

**Write** a short scene for your created character in which he or she interacts with (an)other character(s) in *August: Osage County*.

**Choose** whether your scene is relevant to a plot point from the play or general expositional conversation.

### Include

1. How other characters treat and speak to the character you have created.
2. How your character responds to other characters.
3. The language, accent, and tone of voice your character uses.
4. Physical gestures, including posture and body language.
5. The overall attitude and presence of your character.
6. How your character's age and social standing within the family affects their action, inclusion and engagement in the scene.



## IN ACTION

**Prepare** your scene for a staged reading.

**Play** the character you created.

**Cast** the remaining characters with other actors in your group

**Briefly** introduce the character you created to your audience prior to the performance.

### Then

After the reading, **ask** your audience to guess which famous actor you originally wrote your character and scene for.

**Seek** their reasons for whichever actors they suggested would fit the part.

### Then

**Reveal** the actor that you had chosen.

**Outline** the aspects of that actor's work or personality that informed your creation of the role and the scene.

## WRITE IT UP



**Write** a reflection about why you created this character for your particular actor.

### Consider



1. Who else could play this role?
2. What differences they would bring to it compared to the actor it was originally written for?
3. Did you decide against any ideas that would help to develop the character because they didn't suit the actor?



## DEBATE

Should a playwright write according to the skills of the actor, or should the actor adapt to the character as created by the playwright?