

Review: August: Osage County

This Oscar runner makes up for its flaws in direction with fantastic performances. [Kate Barlow](#) reviews

Tuesday 11 February 2014



Director: John Wells

Starring: Meryl Streep, Julia Roberts, Ewan McGregor

Running time: 121 minutes

Rating: ★★★★★

At the centre of *August: Osage County* is Violet Weston (played by Meryl Streep in an Oscar nominated role), a drug-addicted matriarchal mother of three, whose oral cancer is a metaphor for the vitriol which comes out of her mouth at any opportunity. The highlight of the film is a dinner party scene mid-way though which contains snide remarks, ruined casseroles, awkward phone calls and, finally, descends into a full on fight between Violet and her eldest daughter Barbara (Julia Roberts). Taking up nearly a quarter of the running time, this cringy, awkward, painful to watch but also gloriously funny scene becomes a marker for the total ruin soon to follow.

The film follows a family who have come together to attend the funeral of Violet's husband, an alcoholic poet who committed suicide. It quickly becomes clear to the viewer as to why, as the family bicker, curse and antagonise one another, and that's before the funeral has even begun. A family which is essentially rotten at its core is thus what defines *August: Osage County*. Even tender moments between characters, such as the blossoming relationship between Ivy (Julianne Nicholson) and the socially awkward underdog 'Little' Charles (Benedict Cumberbatch), are destroyed under Violet's abuse which she attempts to pass off as 'truth-telling'.

The performances are the key selling point of the film. Boasting of a star-studded cast containing more award nominations than you can count, each and every character gets a chance to show off their acting

credentials. It is thus difficult to pick particular stand-out performances, as you find yourself stunned into silence (and frustration) by Streep's poisonous Violet one minute, only to be greeted with Julia Roberts' defiant Barb (in her best performance in years), Ewan McGregor's exhausted husband Bill or Margo Martindale's Mattie Fae the next.

While each actor brings a unique spin to their role, the same cannot be said of director John Wells. Based on the play by Tracy Letts, Wells fails to successfully translate the script to screen. The dialogue is left almost unchanged, resulting in some overlong and overdramatic speeches which seem unrealistic before the camera. Similarly, while Wells has moved parts of the action outdoors, making a change from the claustrophobia of the house, one can't help feeling he could have made a little more use of the stunning environment of Oklahoma.

Nonetheless, the film remains a fascinating and at times hard to watch family drama. If nothing else, you'll come out appreciating your own family a little more.



One comment

Stacey

11 Feb '14 at 3:18 pm

This has been one of my favourite films of the year. Stand out performances by Streep and Roberts, and Nicholson made her mark firmly, but with few words.

So much drama, hate and despair, it was almost too hard to watch, but the tragedy of it all and the brokenness of many of the characters kept me hooked.

It caused me to study inwardly and realise the different traits shown by nearly every single character can to some extent, be reflected in my own life and relationships.

I found it a genuinely moving film, reigning in chaos, but leaving me feeling more appreciative of my life.

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