

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Everyone You Could Possibly Want in 'August: Osage County'

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, December 11th, 2013

An actor friend, Stanley Bahorek, last week posted this to his Facebook page:

“In case you were thinking of getting me a Christmas present (you are soooo thoughtful), please don’t trouble yourself – I will be getting EXACTLY WHAT I WANT from my friend Meryl.”

“August: Osage County,” which opens on Christmas day, was the present to which he was alluding. If you are someone who appreciates first-rate acting, there is no question that this film delivers. Meryl Streep plays Weston family matriarch, Violet, in the film adaptation of Tracy Lett’s Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning play of the same title. When Streep first appears onscreen, her metamorphosis is so eerily complete, that there were audible gasps from audience of the preview screening I attended at the Mill Valley Film Festival.

Director John Wells received The Spotlight Award that evening for his unique brilliance as a film director and his courage in bringing to screen this particular family story “that resonates with everybody.” Wells’ directing accomplishments are staggering: 55 Emmy wins, 270 Emmy nominations, along with countless prizes for his creative contributions as a writer, director and producer on such hit series as “ER,” “The West Wing,” and “Third Watch.” “Directing is all about trust,” Wells explains; “The actors are naked, exposed and dependent.” He offers an analogy, “You’re conducting a very talented group of musicians, and it is your responsibility to see that they all blend together.” There is not a weak link in the star-studded, truly ensemble cast of “August: Osage County.” Julia Roberts has proclaimed, “It was the best acting experience of my life.”

The following is an edited version of the discussion with director John Wells directly following the screening of “August: Osage County,” at the Christopher B. Smith Theatre in San Rafael, during the Mill Valley Film Festival.



Meryl Streep (Violet Weston), Julianne Nicholson (Ivy Weston), and Juliette Lewis (Karen Weston) in “August: Osage County.” Photo courtesy of The Weinstein Company, Dimension Films.

You have taken a Pulitzer Prize-winning play that is language and character driven and adapted it for film. Can you talk about that process?

John Wells: The play is about 3 hours and 40 minutes, with intermission. I was very fortunate to work with Tracy Letts for about eighteen months on the screenplay. We spent a lot of time talking about what Tracy needed to describe in the play because the audience would not see it, and what we could show in the film that he would not need to describe. That was a lengthy process of our discussing basically every line. I think there are only 6-7 lines (for transitional purposes) in the film, that are not in the play. Otherwise, the screenplay is the exact dialogue from the play. Also,

close-ups allow for a very different reading in film. You really see relationships. During the dinner sequence, for example (which is about twenty minutes long), you get a lot of subtext from close-ups that might not read on stage where you are simply not close enough to the action to see what's happening so precisely. The play was billed on Broadway as a comedy, so audiences showed up for a comedy. Our big worry when we were filming was, would anybody know that it is supposed to be funny? In film, we are going to see certain things that will make it more challenging to get to that place.

On stage, the play ends differently. Tracy felt that Barbara was the protagonist for the piece, and that he wanted to see her leaving. The original ending that I shot, drove test audiences out of their minds. I'm big on ambivalence, but apparently not everyone shares my enthusiasm. People wanted to lynch me at the test screenings for that ambivalence. Those are the kinds of things that you figure out in doing your test screenings. It's an ongoing process. The festivals I find to be much more helpful than the testing if you will. In testing, I think, people feel as if they are supposed to have answers, instead of just responding to the film about how they actually felt.

You filmed on location in Osage County, Oklahoma?

JW: We purchased the house and the fifty acres that surrounded it about an hour and a half outside of Tulsa, forty minutes from Bartlesville, in Osage County. We made some modifications, redid the kitchen, made some of the rooms a little bit larger. It was cheaper than building a set. We found a condo complex, called "The Gramercy Lofts," and rented the entire thing — nine of these very nice, brand new townhomes, and put all the cast there. So literally, Meryl was next door to Julia, who was next door to Chris, who was next door to Margo. Margo and Meryl are both excellent cooks, and they would cook most nights for the cast. They would get together in the evenings at Meryl's house and rehearse for the next day. We shot in thirty-five days, a lot of scenes, with lots of actors in them. Many of us had seen the play on Broadway. I saw it before I actually knew that I would be involved with it. So there was this constant wanting to be up to the material.

Were you able to rehearse?

JW: There are different kinds of rehearsal. I am not big on trying to pre-block scenes. What we did do was sit down and do scene analysis; we spent hours talking and answering questions. We shared a lot of research about the place itself, the people and their history, which is important in understanding the motivations behind the pioneer spirit and strength from growing up in that tough place. The women did a wonderful thing — they spent time together studying the decisions that each other were making about facial expressions and the way their hands moved. Since they were playing sisters, Meryl and Margo spent a lot of time together figuring out how they had grown up laughing, how they would eat, how they would play with their hair, how they smiled. It's very subtle, but you'll notice as you watch the film, even though the actors don't look tremendously alike physically, they feel more like a family.

What was your personal connection to the material?

JW: I am from the Plains outside of Denver, and I have a lot of family who live in rural areas. Even with technology, you spend more time talking to each other, engaged with each other. Particularly the older generation who grew up without all the technology — that's still how they prefer to interact. One thing I joked about, was how I sat through many, many, 2-3 hour dinners, desperate to get out of there! I think one of the themes of the film is that, for better or for worse, we become our parents. We reach a moment in our adult lives when we have to decide what we are going to use and what we are not going to use, how much our family history is going to effect us and determine what the rest of our lives are like. One of the things that struck me when I saw the play — afterwards, a lot of people started telling stories in the lobby and out on the street about their own families. Nobody thinks that they had a mother who was exactly like Violet, but we all

come from complicated family systems with siblings and jealousies, and feelings that we didn't get the affection that we should have, or that one got more than the other, or guilt because we felt that we got more than someone else. We are always, all of us, competing for finite and incomplete amounts of acceptance from parents. "August: Osage County" is about the violence that we visit upon people we claim to love. Cycles of emotional abuse over many generations and the question: Is it possible to break that cycle? We spent a lot of time talking about what it was individually for the actors that they could then call upon when we were shooting.



Julia Roberts (Barbara Weston) and Meryl Streep (Violet Weston) in "August: Osage County."
Photo courtesy of The Weinstein Company, Dimension Films.

What were some of the challenges along the way?

JW: Originally, we had planned to shoot it in the summertime. I went to Oklahoma and the temperature was 116-118 degrees, for two weeks in a row. The house was unbearable, so we moved filming to September.

These are difficult roles. Because we were shooting in the house and living together, they weren't roles that you could really escape when you went home. The role was with you for eight weeks. When you have a lot of people on set, it can get difficult because people are waiting at certain times, and it's hot and uncomfortable. One of the things you can do when you are directing particularly large ensembles, is to try to find ways to talk outside of the dialogue, in a similar fashion to what the scene is expressing, so actors don't drop out of it. You don't want to have a very different mood, more jocular or a more intense than what is actually happening in the scene, because that energy will effect what the actors are doing. So there is a little bit of conscious performance as the director to try to maintain an atmosphere that allows the actors to do their best work and not break from it.

How were you able to get Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts, at the same time?

JW: It is one of those Hollywood stories. Harvey Weinstein released the first film that I directed, "The Company Men." We were having a marketing meeting, and he asked me about one of the actors who had been in that film, and then he commented, "He would be good in 'August: Osage County' — you should direct that." I said, "Ah, sure." But it doesn't always end up with something happening simply based on Harvey saying it. I went back to my office when my agent called: "I hear you're directing 'August: Osage County.'" "I saw it and I admired it," I admitted. "Is there a script?," I asked. "Not really," he added, "I also represent Meryl Streep, and she loved it! You ought to see if she would want to do it." I knew Meryl, a bit, socially. My agent set up a meeting and we spent a couple of hours talking about the material and what we would both hope, for its translation from stage to screen. Meryl said, "Well, let's do it." So I called Harvey, and asked "Will you make it with Meryl?" "Yeah, I'll make it with Meryl." [Big laugh from Mill Valley Festival audience.] "I'm not sure who else I would have made it with, but I'll make it with Meryl!," he said. My agent also represents Julia Roberts. "Julia saw it and loved it, would you have that same meeting," he asked — which I did. It's a very brave performance from Julia Roberts. She really wanted to do it. We had a lot of serious conversations about what that would look like. Julia is a beautiful forty-five year old woman. But she is a forty-five year old woman, and we weren't going to be doing anything. "I don't want you wearing make-up. It's an adult role for a woman who has reached a certain point in her life," I indicated. She gained some weight and did no make-up. There was no vanity whatsoever. Julia Roberts really reached what I consider to be a great performance.



Chris Cooper (Charles Aiken) and Benedict Cumberbatch (Little Charles Aiken) in "August: Osage County." Photo courtesy of The Weinstein Company, Dimension Films.

How did you approach casting the other roles in the ensemble?

I don't expect to ever have this experience again in my life, but once you have Meryl Streep sign on to be in film adaptation of a Pulitzer Prize-winning play and Julia Roberts is going to be in it — everyone that you have ever met, is interested in the piece! So the challenge was making certain that you had the right mixture of players to make it work. Chris Cooper — I just called him up and said, "Chris, September, you're going to be in Oklahoma, I don't want to hear about it." "What is it?" "It's with Meryl!" "Ah, yeah," he conceded. Meryl suggested Margo Martindale, and Margo came in and auditioned in New York. I had worked before with Julianne Nicholson who plays Ivy, the middle daughter. She's a wonderful actress and extremely important to the dynamic of us all working together. She and Meryl and several of the others are classically trained stage actors with a certain approach to their craft, so they bonded very quickly and brought a lot of discipline to what we were doing everyday. (Because, you know, when you have ten people around a table staring at the same piece of chicken for like five days, it can get a little silly!) Benedict Cumberbatch, I didn't know. I got a call from the casting director saying, "I've got this iPhone audition from this English actor with the RSC. It's a little weird because he's holding the phone out during the audition, so his arm is in it." He was really wonderful, and so I cast him. It was only after he arrived, that I started to get emails from "The Cumberbatches," which is a whole internet-thing, for people who have turned crazy about him. Juliette Lewis came in, and Dermot Mulroney. Ewan McGregor, I've known from when he was on "ER" twenty years ago; he was interested. Sam Shepard offered "to swing by when I'm driving back from Montana" — because Shepard won't fly. It just came together like that. So I don't ever expect to have this experience again. It was just everybody that you could possibly want, who said WHEN can I show up.

Top Image: Julianne Nicholson (Ivy Weston), Juliette Lewis (Karen Weston), Dermot Mulroney (Steve), Chris Cooper (Charles Aiken), Benedict Cumberbatch (Little Charles Aiken), Ewan McGregor (Bill Fordham), Abigail Breslin (Jean Fordham), Julia Roberts (Barbara Weston), and Margo Martindale (Mattie Fae Aiken) in "August: Osage County." Photo courtesy of The Weinstein Company, Dimension Films.

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