

# Karin Babbitt and Mountain Community Theater cast get to the dark heart of 'August: Osage County'



(From left): Daria Troxell, MarNae Taylor, Megan Parle and Karin Babbitt are part of a large ensemble cast in MCT's 'August: Osage County.' Photo by Benjamin Canant.

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An extraordinary experience awaits theatergoers who venture to Ben Lomond in the next two weeks to see Mountain Community Theater's production of "August: Osage County." It's not only riveting; it's phenomenal.

Much has been made of the comparison of the film version of Tracy Lett's 2007 dark (really dark) comedy. It's an unnecessary comparison, and for those who saw last year's movie, it's extremely worthwhile to see the stage version because it adds much more richness and depth to the characters.

There are relatively few theater roles that are as intrinsically cruel, unpleasant (and probably mentally ill) as Violet "Vi" Weston. The havoc she wreaks on her emotionally crippled family is beyond words. Suffering from cancer of the mouth, she nonetheless chain smokes and endlessly spews out venom as dispassionately as spitting out watermelon seeds.

In his director's note, Peter Gelblum relates that he was fortunate to get his "first choices" for nearly every role in "August." It certainly seems so, most particularly in Karin Babbitt as the vile, vampiric Violet. It's often impossible to take your eyes off Babbitt as she unsteadily descends the mid-stage stairway, turban-topped and frequently disheveled. At times she nervously sways sideways, then pounces on her record player to whirl drunkenly to her beloved recording of Eric Clapton's "Lay Down Sally." And that's even before she starts popping pills ad infinitum.

Babbitt is a tour de force in this role, and because she is so appalling, it's easy to have enormous sympathy and empathy for those around her – especially her three daughters. As the oldest Weston daughter, Barbara, MarNae Taylor holds her own in her frequent quarrels with Vi, and she garners compassion for her marital problems with her husband Bill (a charming, understated turn by Andrew Singleton) and her out-of-control, pot-smoking daughter Jean (Dahlela Hennig who shows real promise as the girl-woman eager to do anything her parents don't want her to do).

Vi's other two daughters are Ivy (Daria Troxell) and Karen (Ann McCormick). Both are convincing in somewhat unpretentious roles, though director Gelblum should have coaxed a smile out of Troxell a bit more because it's wearisome to watch someone frown all the time. McCormick got some of the biggest laughs from the play in her first scene when she follows Taylor around the dining table endlessly babbling on about her upcoming wedding to Steve (a roguish Marty Lee Jones), oblivious to the fact that her sister is doing all the work of setting the table for an upcoming family dinner.

As Vi's sister Mattie Fae, Suzanne Schrag wrings what she can out of a fairly mundane part. (Ironically, Schrag, in a curly red wig, is a dead ringer for Meryl Streep in the film version of "August.") Steven Capasso as Mattie Fae's henpecked husband Charlie Aiken is caring and compassionate when dealing with his son "Little Charles" (a quirky, disheveled Davis Banta).

All of the remaining actors (Michael La Mere as the sheriff, Chad Davies as Beverly Weston and Megan Parle as Johanna, the Cheyenne Indian woman hired by Beverly to care for Vi before he disappears) are reliable in their smaller roles.

It's remarkable what set designer Mark Hoagland did to create many different rooms in the Weston home. There's Beverly's beloved study where his daughters gather late one night, fueled by alcohol, to titter and giggle about their mother's odd places of hiding her pills. The study is also where Beverly finds refuge from Vi and where he wrote his book of poetry, "Meadowlark," dedicated to "my Violet." The main part of the set is the Weston living room and dining room, divided by the prominent stairway leading up to bedrooms and the tiny attic room occupied by Johanna.

That dining room is, of course, the setting for both some hilarious humor and the devastating (and violent) confrontation between Vi and Barbara. While ranting nonstop and tearing down everyone else, Vi drinks, smokes and declares triumphantly that she is just "truth-telling."

It took a large production team to make this all happen. Time Armstrong's lighting, Steve Edmonds' sound design and Maggi Hoogs' costumes are all first-rate.

This is not always an easy play to watch, yet Gelblum has coaxed such nuanced performances out of his actors that it is well worth the nearly three-hour running time (it starts early – at 7:30 p.m. – and has two intermissions).

So there you have it: This is a very turbulent depiction of an Oklahoma family whose dysfunctions range from pill addiction to alcoholism, suicide, infidelity and incest. Yet there's still humor, kindness and soul. In other words: It's a microcosm of life. Don't miss it.

'August: Osage County'

**When:** Thursday June 5, plus Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m. Through June 15

**Where:** Mountain Community Theater, Park Hall, 9400 Mill St., Ben Lomond.

**Tickets:** \$20 general; \$17 students/senior. 2-for-1 night June 5, available at [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com)

**Details:** [www.mctshows.org](http://www.mctshows.org).