



THEATRE



Not Roseanne, but still funny: Parsons (far right) with Jeff Still and Shannon Cochran

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Falling into it Stage veteran Estelle Parsons on August: Osage County and her “disgusting” career

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BY DAVID BALZER November 04, 2009 21:11

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY
Written by Tracy Letts. Directed by Anna D Shapiro. Featuring Estelle Parsons, Shannon Cochran, Libby George, Jon DeVries. Presented by Mirvish Productions and Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Nov 5-15. \$20-\$89. Tue-Sat 7pm; Wed, Sat-Sun 1pm. Canon Theatre, 244 Victoria. 416-872-1212. www.mirvish.com.

“I have post-traumatic stress from it,” says a confident, remarkably youthful-looking 81-year-old Estelle Parsons of her initial experience with Tracy Letts’ Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning drama *August: Osage County*, which comes to the Canon Theatre courtesy of Mirvish this week. She is not referring to her role — the toxic, cussing, pill-popping Oklahoma matriarch Violet Weston — but her induction into it. The stage legend, best known to Gen-Yers as *Roseanne*’s officious sitcom mother, has handled more than her share of psychologically demanding parts over the years, but had never before worked on a new play for which she did not have a hand in originating the character. Instead, she replaced Deanna Dunagan, who won a Tony for Violet and later departed from the role citing exhaustion. Parsons was literally thrust onstage.

“The director was not around; the playwright was not around,” she says, in her warm New England-ese during an interview in a room at the Pantages Hotel. “I played it for about a month before I even realized someone died in the thing. All I knew was, OK, I know my lines for that scene. For two months I kept thinking I was Deanna.”

Of course, this being Parsons, she pulls out an anecdote from her voluminous stage experience to confirm her chops: she took over for a truant Susan Johnson in the 1958 Feuer and Martin Broadway musical *Whoop-Up*, and was, naturally, “letter perfect” in the pinch. Then she explains how she put an end to the trauma with *August*: when Chicago’s acclaimed Steppenwolf Theatre, which developed the play, decided to go on tour “with the best actors,” she jumped at the chance, finally getting an opportunity to rehearse intensively with Letts.

This mix of happenstance and fierce professionalism has characterized Parsons’ career from a young age. She initially wanted to go into politics, like her father, and then went into law, and then into talk television (she was one of the first writers and reporters on NBC’s *Today* show), all the while pursuing her interest in music onstage. Then she performed with Ethel Merman, did Brecht, became a student of Lee Strasberg (later in life she was the artistic director of the Actor’s Studio for five years) and met Arthur Penn, who, among other things, cast her as Blanche in his pivotal early Hollywood Renaissance film *Bonnie and Clyde*. She won an Oscar for it, but remained faithful to the theatre, her passion, occasionally appearing on TV because of her agent or “just because I felt like working.”

“I’m deeply committed to acting,” she clarifies, after jokingly calling the more random aspects of her career “disgusting.” “I have this romantic idea about vaudeville, especially on tour, when you go out to big houses and think, ‘Wow. I’m doing what the vaudevillians did.’ I really like to entertain live people.”

And this is precisely what *August: Osage County* offers her. “What I called on for this play is the cabaret style,” she says, contradicting many views of Letts’ work — which clocks in at over three hours — as a gritty depiction of Midwestern family dysfunction, and also of her own style as exclusively Method-bound. “It’s not naturalistic. The stage managers are timing scenes to the minute, which proves [that].

“I’ve been in the play for a year and four months,” she continues, her eyes brightening. “I’ve never played anything that long in my life, never took a contract longer than four months on Broadway because I always said that that’s all I can play a play. But this is not like a play; it’s a phenomenon. The audience jumps right in, laughing and groaning. Sometimes they talk to us. It’s a dream, for me. And everywhere we go it’s the same.

“Except Portland, Oregon.” Parsons drops a devilish pause, and smiles. “I think they thought we weren’t acting. I overheard this guy at the hotel, and he said, ‘Oh, there’s this play at the Keller Auditorium and it’s very well-written but it’s very bizarre. And it’s very long.’ And I had this funny feeling that, in Portland, they thought we were real. I don’t think they appreciated that it wasn’t me; it was Violet.”

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