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The language of playwright Tracy Letts’ *August: Osage County* is loaded with layers of emotion underneath its dialogue. During New Ground Theatre’s opening performance on Friday, a few actors neglected the dark undertones, reciting their lines as if Letts’ words held nothing below the surface. Most, however, got to the heart of the script, impressively revealing the richness of the work through performances that ranged from subtle to over-the-top. While not perfect, the show deserved the standing ovation it got from the audience.

Directed here by Derek Bertelsen, Letts’ dark comedy centers around the Westons, an Oklahoma family that gathers when its patriarch Beverly (Patrick Gimm) goes missing. As they wait for word on his whereabouts while trying to support and sober up their prescription-drug junkie of a mother, they’re forced to confront (or ignore) their own revealed demons.

The most powerful performance comes from Jessica Flood, one of the few local actresses who awes me with her talent. (She was stunning in Harrison Hilltop Theatre’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* last year.) As Barbara, the eldest Weston daughter, Flood is captivating as she conveys intertwining and often conflicting emotions. At one point, she raises her voice in anger at her husband with fear and uncertainty evident in her eyes.

In *August: Osage County*’s lead role, Patti Flaherty could easily overplay matriarch Violet at the expense of credibility, especially during her drug-addled stupors, but she walks a fine line. Her speech is slurred and sometimes unintelligible as she shuffles around the stage, almost dribbling at the mouth as she spouts drivel. Flaherty, who has shown a knack for comedy in past performances, could take this act into laughable territory. But she makes her character pitiable and scary through unnatural arm movements, vacant eyes, and unexpected fits of anger. She’s particularly impressive in a climactic scene in which Violet demeans her daughters and flies into a rage, screaming and flailing, with daggers in her eyes as she fights to maintain control of her family.

As Ivy, the middle child, Jackie Madunic offers one of the most emotionally intense performances I’ve yet seen from her, as she violently tosses a chair and shouts gutturally at the point a secret involving her forbidden relationship is revealed to her.

Bryan Woods is atypically but effectively cautious and awkward as Little Charles. While noteworthy for his confident, sometimes cocky characterizations, Woods is just as remarkable here for taking on such a different personality and making it believable with a shaky voice and the body language of a dejected, browbeaten man. Susan McPeters is also convincing in her matter-of-fact manner as Mattie Fae, Violet’s sister.

Leah Otting’s portrayal of the shallow Jean – Barbara’s daughter – is appropriately thin, with her rapid, almost mumbling speech befitting her toked teen, but it would have been richer if she integrated the anger, defiance, and sadness suggested by Letts’ words. David Cabassa’s Sheriff Deon lacks the shading necessary to make it clear he is a potential love interest for one of the characters, though he does exude a subtle sensuality.

And Heidi Pedersen’s acting often ignores that her character Karen’s lines are often defense mechanisms; Karen sometimes attempts to focus on something positive to avoid darker truths, but Pedersen delivers them as part of a conversation rather than as non sequiturs meant to reveal something deeper. She personifies Karen’s avoidance with a perky nature, but the performance misses some of the character’s psychological nuance.

Bertelsen, who also serves as the set designer for this production, effectively uses a multi-level set to imply a three-story home – a living room, dining room, office, and porch across the front half of the stage and a raised bedroom and attic sharing the back half. This allows for seamless scene changes requiring only the lighting of a different space, and it fosters a brisk pace. That’s particularly welcome considering that the show runs a lot longer than the average theatre fare – almost 200 minutes (including two intermissions). The first two hours were over before I knew it, even though the performance could have been tightened by cleaning up a few awkward pauses.

Overall, Letts’ script contains more poignancy than New Ground’s production of it, mainly because a few actors didn’t plumb the script’s depths of darkness. But more often than not, the efforts of Bertelsen and the cast hit the right notes.

*For tickets and information, call (563)326-7529 or visit NewGroundTheatre.org .*