

# *August: Osage County* and *Lone Survivor*: Sound and fury signifying not too much...and a celebration of the US military

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*August: Osage County*, directed by John Wells; screenplay by Tracy Letts, based on his Broadway play of the same title. *Lone Survivor*, directed by Peter Berg; screenplay by Berg, based on the book by Marcus Luttrell and Patrick Robinson

Directed by John Wells (*The Company of Men*, 2010), *August: Osage County* is a “timeless” family melodrama set in rural Pawhuska, Oklahoma (near Tulsa), during a hot summer in 2007. The screenplay by Tracy Letts (born in Tulsa in 1965) is based on the latter’s 2007 award-winning play of the same name.

Letts was a longtime member of the Steppenwolf Theatre and co-founder of the Bang Bang Spontaneous Theatre (1990-2000), both in Chicago. Indeed, *August: Osage County* has a lot of emotional “bang bang,” but little “spontaneity,” as the star-studded cast generates a good deal of sound and fury in its presentation of intergenerational dysfunction.

“My wife takes pills and I drink,” says Beverly Weston (Sam Shepard), a once-acclaimed poet, as the film opens. He has recently hired a young Native American woman Johanna (Misty Upham) to be live-in caretaker and cook for the chaotic household. His wife Violet (Meryl Streep) introduces herself to the domestic while she flies high on prescription medication. A diagnosis of mouth cancer has not slowed down Violet’s pill-popping or chain smoking. To cover her balding, graying head, she wears an unlikely brown wig as needed.

Shortly afterward, Beverly disappears and family members are summoned. First on the scene is Violet’s sister Mattie Fae (Margo Martindale) and her husband Charlie Aiken (Chris Cooper). Violet’s youngest daughter, the subdued Ivy (Julianne Nicholson), lives in the area and is often the object of her mother’s derision. The oldest of the Westons’ three daughters, the willful Barbara (Julia Roberts), makes the trip from Colorado with her husband Bill (Ewan McGregor), from whom she is separated, and her teenage daughter Jean (Abigail Breslin).

Meanwhile, flashy middle daughter Karen (Juliette Lewis) arrives in a convertible with her latest beau, Steve (Dermot Mulroney), a sleazy operator from Florida (with a penchant for adolescent girls), whom Karen introduces as her fiancé. Mattie Fae and Charlie’s shy, insecure son “Little Charles” (Benedict Cumberbatch) will eventually join the crowd.

A few days later, Beverly’s corpse is found by the local sheriff. The Weston patriarch apparently took his boat out on a lake and

ended up drowning. Suicide is suspected. A cold, efficient funeral is followed by a family dinner during which the drug-fueled Violet heaps scorn on family members with her malevolent, acerbic “truth-telling.” This leads to a physical confrontation with Barbara. Throughout the ruckus, Johanna waits on the family with a placid demeanor that eventually explodes at the expense of the teen-loving Steve. “All this meanness,” as Charles describes the family dynamic, does not resolve itself happily, or even peacefully.

The movie’s action takes place in extreme August heat in a shuttered old house, creating an airless, claustrophobic atmosphere. An inordinate amount of fanning, moaning and groaning does not help the family’s collective bad temper. The few quiet moments in the drama serve as life support for the audience.

Streep competently dominates *August: Osage County*. It is her vehicle. As an aging cat on a hot tin roof, she gives a tour-de-force performance. Shepard’s brief appearance is graceful and stands out in the generally ungraceful, badly organized movie.

Roberts tries hard to bring her angry, frustrated character to life, but remains fairly wooden. Nicholson as the repressed introvert and Lewis as the desperate, lonely and well-meaning airhead are effective. Martindale as Mattie Fae is striking—not literally, although striking does take place in the movie. Cooper as her husband, as always, is wonderful to watch.

McGregor as Barbara’s alienated spouse barely registers, and Cumberbatch as “Little Charles” stumbles through his portrayal of a self-effacing, supposedly mentally deficient but sweet bumpkin. McGregor and Cumberbatch are fine actors who could not make much of their paper-thin roles. Upham as the long-suffering, wise Native American seems to have been artificially inserted into the theatrics.

A brief reference is made to poverty, in regard to Violet’s and Beverly’s childhoods (Violet: “What do you know about life on these plains...about hard times?”), but neither social relations nor money are the film’s major concerns. *August: Osage County* is obsessed with its misguided and shallow notions that psychological relations are based on fixed personality traits and that early family experiences drive the world.

The trio of Roberts, Lewis and Nicholson are clearly intended to bring to mind Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (a play that Letts has

adapted). But unlike Letts and Wells, even if somewhat passively, Chekhov offered insight into the lives of human beings suffocated by a dead-end provincial existence in a rotting social order. The dead-end, suffocated existence of Wells's characters is presented superficially and never probed to its roots—a malfunctioning, life-destroying social order.

In *August: Osage County*, an abundance of acting talent is on display, but to what end? Actor and writer Letts comes out of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, which has its strengths, but specializes, in the end, in scattershot, "apolitical" emotionalism not grounded in the more profound social realities. This type of theater wins a lot of Tonys and Pulitzers, but has little impact on the cultural or political atmosphere. It tends toward social conformism cloaked in histrionics.

### ***Lone Survivor***

Director Peter Berg's *Lone Survivor* is based on the account of former US Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell. Luttrell, the only survivor of a four-man SEAL unit that undertook a mission in 2005 in Afghanistan, is played by Mark Wahlberg. The team's goal was to assassinate a Taliban leader, who was a thorn in the side of the US invaders.

The majority of the film is spent paying tribute to the SEALs' superhuman training, which, during the 40-minute, blood-splattered battle sequence, enables the four SEALs to fight on with bullets in their heads, injuries to all limbs and a war-is-great-hell camaraderie. Meanwhile, the "dark enemy," that is, opposition to the US invasion and occupation, is mowed down with relative ease. Nonetheless, the team fails in its mission. Besides Luttrell, the other SEALs include Taylor Kitsch as Michael Murphy, Emile Hirsh as Danny Dietz and Ben Foster as Matt Axelson. Eric Bana plays their commanding officer.

In an interview, director Peter Berg boasted: "I spent months with active SEAL teams (but I was not allowed to film). I did go to Iraq. I was given permission by the SEAL community and special operations to go and embed. I am the only civilian to embed with an active SEAL platoon." Congratulations, Mr. Berg, on your special relations with a death squad! That will be remembered.

When Wahlberg states in an interview that "I don't like war. But I love soldiers and I love what Marcus did," he believes he is making a non-judgmental, non-political statement. Would he make the same non-judgmental, non-political statement about a Wehrmacht unit in Belarus in 1942, for example? It is a pernicious lie that the conduct of soldiers can be separated from the goals and driving forces of the war they are fighting. The conflict in Afghanistan is a predatory, neo-colonial operation, serving the geopolitical interests of the American ruling elite. The brutal actions of the US military against Afghan civilians flow inevitably from the aggressive, imperialist character of the war.

At the time of the release of Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*, the WSWS quite rightly denounced the film as part of a "deplorable trend". Sections of the liberal establishment and

intelligentsia, particularly under Barack Obama, have devoted themselves to rehabilitating the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. From there, they have proceeded to support the US-backed overthrow of the Libya government and Washington's ongoing efforts to topple the Syrian regime. These upper middle-class layers have climbed aboard the military train, which they would have scorned a few decades ago, at a time when an increasing proportion of the American and world population are opposed to the never-ending imperialistic war drive.

According to a web site that monitors such things, nearly 75 percent of the more than 150 film critics whose opinions were registered endorsed *Lone Survivor*. Shameful, for example, were the comments of *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott, who wrote: "The defining trait of 'Lone Survivor'—with respect to both its characters and Mr. Berg's approach to them—is professionalism, It is a modest, competent, effective movie, concerned above all with doing the job of explaining how the job was done. Afterward, you may want to think more about reasons and consequences, about global and domestic politics, but while the fight is going on, you are absorbed in the mechanics of survival."

Global and domestic politics are the essential issue here, not an afterthought. Furthermore, Scott is way off the mark when he says the film is competently made. *Lone Survivor*'s politics are reflected in its crude, ham-fisted aesthetics. For his own reasons, the critic of the right-wing *New York Post* was far closer to the mark when he commented that "This is a movie about an irrelevant skirmish that ended in near-total catastrophe, during a war we are not winning.... Pull back a bit from the jingoism and it's hard to see what was purchased with so much young blood."

It should be mentioned in passing that director Berg proudly announced at the time of the release of his 2007 film *The Kingdom*—about an FBI investigation into a bombing in Saudi Arabia—that the movie received "a great reaction from the FBI in particular."



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