

REVIEWS

**AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY**  
**National Theatre**  
**South Bank**  
★★★★★

**I**N RURAL Oklahoma a man goes missing from his family home leaving his pill-popping wife, Violet (Deanna Dunagan) to face her mouth cancer, addiction and demons alone, save for the Native American housekeeper he mysteriously hires just before his departure.

Violet's delay in raising the alarm is the first of many mis-communications between the Weston family members.

The set – a wholesome, clapboard Waltons-style pile – belies the simmering disregard and contempt the Westons have for one another. As Violet's sister and her three middle-aged daughters return to the family home with dutiful intentions (and their significant others) in tow, the gathering and subsequent wake quickly degenerate into a brawling free-for-all where snide comments are sniped like machine gun fire and home truths ferociously spat.

The characters' underlying longing for some sense of family and their resentment that their blood bonds are devoid of any positive emotion are palpable.

Tracy Letts' tragi-comedy is a treat of slick writing and, as each Weston blames another for what their lives could have been, Letts' razor-sharp lines are charged with an irony and humour from which only the audience are sufficiently removed to appreciate.

As they purge themselves of their secrets, Letts' characters leave the family home even more miserable than when they arrived. With revelations of divorce, the attempted seduction of a minor, adultery, illegitimacy and incest, it becomes apparent that living with the truth turns out to be just as painful as living the lie.

The chemistry and dynamics between the cast members of the Steppenwolf theatre company, who hail from Chicago, are testament to the talents of their director Anna D Shapiro. She adds an intensity and raw energy to the text that carry the play at a pace through its three and a half hours – an epic by today's standards.

The fact that the housekeeper, Johnna (Kimberly Guerrero) is not only more virtuous than the entire Weston clan put together, but also bakes the best apple pie, may be seen as comment on the failings of the nuclear family or of the non-realisation of the American dream. However, ultimately this is a relationship play.

Watching August: Osage County in the festive season may bring your worst family-gathering nightmares to the surface, but that in part is what makes this Pulitzer and Tony award-winning play so darkly entertaining.

Until January 21.

JO COOKE

**THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS**  
**Pentameters Theatre**  
**Hampstead**  
★★★★☆

**I**T IS 100 years since Kenneth Grahame wrote his children's masterpiece.

Adapted by A. A. Milne for the theatre under the name of Toad Of Toad Hall, it has been a stable Christmas favourite ever since until recent years when it has been largely ignored by the larger West End companies.

Harry Meacher has brought it up to date, added some well known tunes and with a cast of intrinsically funny actors has made it an enjoyable show for adults as well as children.

It may not seem to be politically correct, but that is unimportant. The story belongs to an earlier age when courtesy, kindness and hospitality was the prerogative of the upper classes and the lower classes, the vulgar stoats and weasels are finally put back into their place in the wild wood.

There is more than a hint of Wodehouse in the speech patterns and one is reminded of Jerome K Jerome when Ratty delivers his famous speech about messing about in



Things not going well in Osage County for Amy Morton (Barbara Fordham), Rondi Reed (Mattie Fae Aiken) and Deanna Dunagan (Violet Weston).

Picture by Mark Douet

boats.

One of the brightest of ideas is to use the weasels as scene shifters. These thieving rascals pinch anything, including the boat and the river. This means there is no hiatus during the scene changes. The weasels led by Jackie Skarvellis who also gives us a wonderful inebriated judge in act two, are a comic bunch providing a well orchestrated counterpoint of dialogue as they constantly repeat each others words.

Meacher's casting is perfect. The River folk have great sweetness. Mole is given an endearing and very clear characterisation by JT Eaton and the neat and somewhat pernickety water rat is exemplified by Brian Hands. Roger Sansom is a commanding avuncular badger and Jonson is bursting with energy as the over ebullient and vain-glorious Mr Toad.

Each takes a turn at narrating which keeps the story going and leaves out any scenes without obvious jokes or drama. John Dalton has created a charming woodland setting and the cut outs are cute and effective. A family treat.

Until January 10.

ALINE WAITES

**IN A DARK DARK HOUSE**  
**Almeida Theatre**  
**Islington**  
★★☆☆☆

**N**EIL LaBute's early work often seemed like David Mamet-tinged dispatches from a world in ethical meltdown.

But, curiously, while his latest offering contains more tenderness – and autobiographical content – than of late, it lacks the writer's usual bite.

Here we meet Steven Mackintosh's disgraced (and unconvincing) lawyer

Drew who is being visited in rehab by his solid, security guard brother, Terry. Drew has been ordered to clean up after a drug-assisted car crash and thinks the judge will be influenced if Terry attests to the childhood sexual abuse his brother suffered at the hands of a mutual friend.

This being Neil LaBute, we are soon enticed into a world of not always surprising plot twists and recreational cruelty. But, although LaBute is often accused of professional misanthropy, he's more a distressed messenger describing the moral mess we're stuck in.

But here one's sense is of a playwright trying too hard. Where past work such as In the Company of Men featured tautly believable dialogue, this much-revised offering sounds jarringly self-conscious. Particularly grating is when the designer workwear-sporting Terry responds to Drew's evasions by telling him "nothing's gonna come of nothing... so try again." Believable speech, or the sound of a writer who can't resist a Shakespeare reference? Elsewhere, the dialogue is too obviously press-ganged into exposition or plot development duties; particularly when Terry admits that he too was molested by their friend ("I believe you, and I suppose you know why").

Eventually, David Morrissey's Terry, whose violent facial semaphore needs toning down, realises that "people are capable of anything": something we don't need to visit a theatre to clock. And the play's psychoanalytical model of conflict – talking cure – and resolution smacks of American TV drama.

The playwright's programme note invokes the spirit of writers like Anton Chekhov, Arthur Miller and Sam Shepard. But despite Michael Attenborough's directorial efforts and a fine turn by Kira Sternbach as Jennifer, this play suffers in comparison to the

work of such figures.  
Until January 17.

DAVID GAVAN

**CHAUNTECLEER AND PERTELOTTE**  
**Hen & Chickens**  
**Highbury**  
★★★★☆

**A**N AMOROUS hen, a horny cock – with quite a lunch box – and a nymphomaniac farmer's wife who isn't getting any at home come together in this bawdy, farmyard comedy.

With just a perch and a partial view of their farmyard home through broken slats in their chicken coup, the poultry make their own entertainment.

And award-winning writer Dougie Blaxland's main characters cockerel Chauntecleer (Tim Dewberry) and his sweetheart hen Pertelotte (Annie Hemingway) do that by getting low down and dirty with each other.

Their lusty bliss is soon shaken by infidelity. And the inevitable jealousy that follows is satisfied with a cold-blooded act of revenge that re-establishes the farmer as top of the pecking order.

Fun and frenzied, Chauntecleer and Pertelotte is a wonderful piece of physical theatre and each raunchy, rhyming line is delivered with relish by Tim Dewberry and Annie Hemingway. They play a host of characters in the course of this colourful drama which has something of Chaucer, Carry On and CBeebies about it.

Guaranteed to get you chuckling, Live Wire Theatre's production of this short play – two half hour acts with a 10-minute interval – is perfect pre-dinner theatre.

Until December 20.

JO COOKE



Chauntecleer and Pertelotte is at the Hen and Chickens theatre in Highbury until December 20.