

CREATIVE LEARNING RESOURCE PART A

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY

BY TRACY LETTS

27 FEBRUARY – 16 MARCH
HEATH LEDGER THEATRE



 **BLACK SWAN**
STATE THEATRE COMPANY

A CO-PRODUCTION
WITH
 **BELVOIR ST**
THEATRE

PRESENTED IN
ASSOCIATION WITH
PERTH
FESTIVAL

 Australian Government

 Creative
Australia

 Department of
Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries

 lollywest

PRINCIPAL
PARTNER
 Fortescue



HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

BLACK SWAN'S CREATIVE LEARNING RESOURCES ARE ALIGNED WITH THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM FOR DRAMA, ENGLISH AND LITERATURE. THESE RESOURCES ARE OFFERED IN TWO PARTS, DESIGNED TO ENHANCE THE VIEWING EXPERIENCE AND TO SUPPORT FURTHER EXPLORATION POST-SHOW.

Part A is to assist your excursion to the theatre by providing background information about the play, pre-show activities and research opportunities.

Part B includes production images, behind-the-scenes footage, and post-show analysis activities.

Icons to look out for within each pack include:



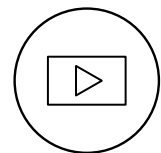
ACTIVITY



DISCUSSION



READING



VIDEO

Black Swan State Theatre Company of WA produced this Creative Learning Resource.

Compiled by Christie Sistrunk (Creative Learning Manager).

Cover images by Brett Boardman and Joel Barbitta.

Design by Troy Barbitta.

Black Swan State Theatre Company of WA acknowledges the Whadjuk Nyoongar people as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live. We pay respects to all Aboriginal Elders and people and stand united towards a shared future.



Image by Brett Broadman: Rohan Nichol (as Steve Heidebrecht), Anna Samson (as Karen Weston) and Esther Williams (as Jean Fordham).

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CONTENT WARNINGS & CURRICULUM LINKS

Image by Brett Broadman: Pamela Rabe (as Violet Weston) and Amy Matthews (as Ivy Weston).

CONTENT WARNINGS

- **Language:** Use of strong language and mature themes.
- **Mental Health/Substance Abuse:** Depression, emotional instability, death, loss, drug addiction including opiate dependency.
- **Family Conflict/Violence:** Intense familial conflict, dysfunctional relationships, harsh language, verbal aggression, and emotional violence.
- **Sexual Content/Abuse:** References to infidelity, sexual situations, and incest.

CURRICULUM LINKS (ATAR)

Literature

Unit 3: Texts in Context

Analysis of the American Dream, family structures, societal expectations, and the examination of cultural and historical issues.

Unit 4: Interpreting Texts

Exploration of literary devices, themes, and character dynamics. Comparative studies with the 2013 film adaptation or plays like Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Drama

Unit 3: Representational, Realist Drama

A prime example of modern American realism, focusing on intricate characters, subtext, and emotional and psychological motivations.



ABOUT BLACK SWAN STATE THEATRE COMPANY OF WA

BLACK SWAN STATE THEATRE COMPANY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA CREATES HIGH QUALITY THEATRICAL EXPERIENCES THAT CELEBRATE, CHALLENGE, AND INSPIRE OUR COLLECTIVE HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

Founded in 1991, the Company has earned both critical and popular acclaim for its world premiere productions and highly distinctive reinterpretations of international theatre classics – all of which are infused with the unique culture of Western Australia. The Company is led by a Board of Directors, chaired by Francois Witbooi. Artistic Director is Kate Champion and Chief Executive Officer is Ian Booth.

State Theatre Centre Excursion Management Plan can be downloaded here.

[CLICK HERE](#)

OUR VISION

Connecting artists and audiences through the power of theatre to entertain, challenge and inspire.

OUR PURPOSE

To create exceptional, high-quality theatre that speaks to the world from our unique WA culture, landscape and moment in time.

OUR VALUES

Creativity. Creativity is essential to everything we do.

Connection. We collaborate to tell stories, nurture relationships and share knowledge, to maximise the impact and reach of our company.

Innovation. We are forward-thinking and responsive to the changing world around us, balancing responsibility with courage to make meaningful choices.

Quality. We engage a skilled and trusted team, prioritising diversity and respect, to deliver exceptional outcomes for our company and community.



ABOUT BELVOIR ST THEATRE

FOUNDED IN 1984 IN SYDNEY'S SURRY HILLS, BELVOIR ST THEATRE GREW FROM THE NIMROD THEATRE COMPANY.

Known for bold programming, new Australian works, innovative classics, and plays that challenge social norms, Belvoir's productions have toured internationally and won numerous prestigious awards.



Take your students on a virtual tour of Belvoir St stage, warehouse and workshop.



Image by Brett Broadman: Eamon Flack (Director)

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

EAMON FLACK

THE GREAT PLAINS RUN THREE THOUSAND KILOMETRES LONG AND EIGHT HUNDRED WIDE FROM CENTRAL CANADA RIGHT DOWN THROUGH THIRTEEN OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AS FAR SOUTH AS TEXAS AND NEW MEXICO.

Once upon a time tens of millions of bison roamed the plains, and their hoof steps and eating and shitting were almost as great a force as the weather in forming its ecology: grassland, savannah, prairie. For thousands of years dozens of tribal nations made their homes there - Arapaho, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Choctaw, Nakota, Dakota, Pawnee, Osage... From the buffalo came their food, clothes, shelter, tools, and a whole way of life.

The arrival of English, French, Dutch, Spanish settlers from the sixteenth century on pushed the tribal nations into each other's lands and upended the old rhythms of life on the plains. For centuries the nations fought with the settlers and with each other, relocated, converted to Christianity, signed treaties, formed their own governments - everything to keep hold of their world. All the while European settlement pressed on harder and tighter. In 1830 the Federal Government passed the Indian Removal Act, and in the decades that

followed tens of thousands of Native Americans from almost forty tribes across the continent were driven, by violence or lies, into the newly formed Indian Territories on the southern Great Plains.

The Osage Nation, for one, had signed a treaty with the United States in 1825 ceding their traditional lands in what are now Missouri, Oklahoma and Arkansas in exchange for a reservation and protection in Kansas. There, smallpox, cholera, government paternalism and the loss of their way of life devastated their people. In 1870 the Osage sold their reservation in Kansas and bought a million and a half acres from the Cherokee Nation in the Indian Territories. This was the beginning of the Osage Nation Reservation.

The Cheyenne, on the other hand, twice signed treaties that were twice dishonoured by the government, and twice went to war with the United States Army to keep hold of their lands and life on the Plains. In 1864 the Army massacred hundreds of Cheyenne men, women and children at Sandy Creek. The Northern Cheyenne would continue to war against the US for another decade, but in 1867 most of the Southern Cheyenne were forced onto the new Cheyenne Arapaho Reservation in the Indian Territories.

At the same time, the mass slaughter of the



buffalo began - for money, for fun, to clear the land for cattle and corn, to cut the plains with railways, and to drive the tribal nations from their lands. Thirty million bison filled the plains before European settlement; by 1890 only a few hundred remained.

For the next century the reservations of the Indian Territories were ruled by a regime of Federal Government "protection" which we would recognise from the mission regime here: languages banned, children taken, wages stolen, resources appropriated.

In 1907 the Indian Territories were merged with Oklahoma Territory and the new state of Oklahoma was decreed the 46th state of the United States. The largest of the state's 77 counties, running alongside the Osage Nation Reservation in the northeast, was Osage County.

...

In 1930, less than a century after Europeans replaced the thousands-year old ecology of the Plains with a new ecology of farming and agriculture, the new ecology collapsed, and the Dust Bowl began. Without the buffalo and the grasses, the topsoil blew away, the old cycles of drought intensified, blizzards of dust blocked the sun, crops failed, livestock starved. Half a million people lost or abandoned their homes and homesteads. Thousands died from dust, pneumonia and malnutrition. About three million people left the Plains altogether.

There was always a ring of Old Testament about the taking and settling of the Plains. It was a brutal, brutalising and vaunted foundation story - the epochal pursuit of a "manifest destiny". Those 19th century settlers who managed to claw a life out of the Plains had done so by force and grit and God and a fierce sense of the clan, of who belongs to who, who gets what.

Nothing or no one would take this away from them. The Dust Bowl taught their descendants the same lesson again, only harder: Hold tight to what you've got, because at any moment the Plains could turn into a pit of destitution, defeat, misery, loss. There's nothing worse than a loser. You do whatever you have to do to stop sliding into the pit.

...

Eventually that meant electing Donald Trump. Twice. The American way of life has been in collapse for decades now. The lashing out is like nothing we've ever seen. Trump's MAGA movement, multiplied by the dementedness of social media, has licensed an insane outbreak of blame, anger, self-pity, ignorance, paranoia, lies, delusions, revenges, hatreds... And now it has swept to power. "This will truly be the golden age of America," said Trump on election night, "We are going to help our country heal." It's hard to believe that the MAGA movement, even with all the instruments of the Federal Government at its command, will be able to satiate its own appetites let alone heal America. It's just as likely that MAGA is the last dance of dying way of life that refuses to accept its time is up, more willing to devour its children in the pursuit of some mad idea of revival than entertain the very real possibility that America is terminally fu***d up.

A lot like Tracy Letts' play: great promise declined into pain and addiction; the old voice of humanism turned incoherent and gone AWOL; the hatred of vulnerability and responsibility and the worship of strength and winning; the distracted hubris of liberalism; the neglected habits of shared obligation. Letts wrote his play back in 2006, but the America of the Trump era is all there in prototype.

The questions the play asks are the same questions we all face now as Trump begins his transition back to the White House: How the hell can this play out in any way that isn't both ridiculous and terrible? How does a history of brutalisation, violence and lies bring itself to an end? Is there any way out? Or does the whole way of life have to be left to die?

Image by Brett Boardman: Amy Mathews (as Ivy Weston).





THE ARTISTS CAST



CAROLINE BRAZIER
MATTIE FAE AIKEN



BEE CRUSE
JOHNNA MONEVATA



GEOFF KELSO
BEVERLY WESTON



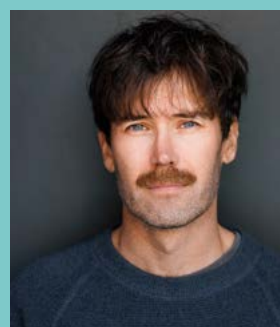
BERT LABONTÉ
BILL FORDHAM



AMY MATHEWS
IVY WESTON



HAYLEY MCELHINNEY
BARBARA FORDHAM



WILL O'MAHONY
LITTLE CHARLES AIKEN



BEN MORTLEY
SHERIFF DEON GILBEAU



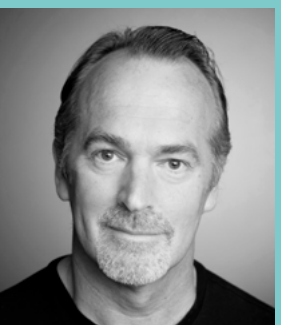
ROHAN NICHOL
STEVE HEIDEBRECHT



PAMELA RABE
VIOLET WESTON



ANNA SAMSON
KAREN WESTON



GREG STONE
CHARLIE AIKEN



ESTHER WILLIAMS
JEAN FORDHAM



THE ARTISTS CREATIVES



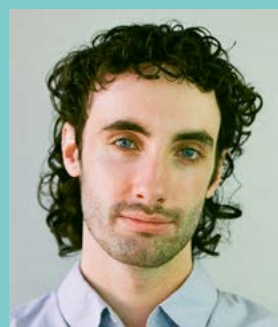
TRACY LETTS
WRITER



EAMON FLACK
DIRECTOR



BOB COUSINS
SET DESIGNER



MORGAN MORONEY
LIGHTING DESIGNER



RACHAEL DEASE
COMPOSER & SOUND
DESIGNER



ELLA BUTLER
COSTUME DESIGNER



KATE CHAMPION
PERTH REMOUNT
ASSOCIATE



GUY SIMON
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR



MARGARET THANOS
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR



LAURA FARRELL
VOCAL COACH



NIGEL POULTON
FIGHT & MOVEMENT
DIRECTOR



Image by Brett Boardman: Pamela Rabe (as Violet Weston).

SYNOPSIS

THIS PULITZER PRIZE AND TONY AWARD-WINNING PLAY IS A DARKLY COMEDIC FAMILY DRAMA SET IN RURAL OKLAHOMA.

The story unfolds after the disappearance of Beverly Weston, the troubled patriarch of the Weston family. His wife, Violet, the sharp-tongued, pill-addicted matriarch, gathers her estranged daughters and their families in the wake of the crisis.

As secrets unravel and tensions flare, the family confronts long-buried grievances, exposing cycles of dysfunction, generational trauma, and the fragile pursuit of the American Dream.

Through biting humour and raw emotion, the play delves into the complexities of love, betrayal, and survival within a fractured family.



Pamela Rabe plays one of the 'great theatre monsters' in August: Osage County.

"To play somebody with that much complexity and mental and verbal dexterity, it's a real challenge."

Read the full article here.



CHARACTERS

THE PLAY FEATURES A ROBUST CAST OF 13 CHARACTERS, EACH CONTRIBUTING DEPTH AND COMPLEXITY TO THE NARRATIVE, AND THEMES OF DYSFUNCTION, BETRAYAL, AND SURVIVAL.

THE WESTON FAMILY

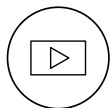
1. **Violet Weston** – The matriarch of the family; battling cancer and addiction.
2. **Beverly Weston** – The patriarch; a poet and alcoholic, whose disappearance triggers the story.
3. **Barbara Fordham** – The eldest daughter; estranged from her husband and struggling with her role as a mother.
4. **Ivy Weston** – The middle daughter, who feels trapped and unappreciated by her family.
5. **Karen Weston** – The youngest daughter; optimistic yet naive, engaged to Steve.
6. **Bill Fordham** – Barbara's estranged husband; a college professor having an affair with a student.
7. **Jean Fordham** – Barbara and Bill's teenage daughter; rebellious and vulnerable.

EXTENDED FAMILY

8. **Mattie Fae Aiken** – Violet's sister; opinionated and overbearing.
9. **Charlie Aiken** – Mattie Fae's kind-hearted but passive husband.
10. **Little Charles Aiken** – Mattie Fae and Charlie's son; sensitive and insecure, later revealed to be Beverly and Mattie Fae's son.

OTHER CHARACTERS

11. **Steve Heidebrecht** – Karen's sleazy fiancé, whose predatory behaviour adds a sinister layer to the story.
12. **Johnna Monevata** – A young Cheyenne woman hired as a live-in caretaker; a quiet but steady presence.
13. **Sheriff Deon Gilbeau** – A local sheriff and former high school flame of Barbara, who informs the family of Beverly's death.



Listen to director Eamon Flack and actors Pamela Rabe and Tamsin Carroll discuss the significance of *August: Osage County's* title, themes, and characters with ABC's Michael Cathcart, followed by a key scene between Violet and Barbara [interview begins at 38:20mins]

Image by Brett Broadman: Rohan Nichol (Steve Heidebrecht), Anna Samson (Karen Weston) and Esther Williams (Jean Fordham).





STYLE

Image by Brett Broadman: (L-R) Rohan Nichol (as Steve Heidebrecht), Anna Samson (as Karen Weston), Will O'Mahony (as Little Charles Aiken), Bert LaBonté (as Bill Fordham), Pamela Rabe (as Violet Weston) & Bee Cruse (as Johanna Monevata).

THIS AMERICAN TRAGICOMEDY IS PRESENTED IN A REPRESENTATIONAL STYLE AND FEATURES AN EPIC THEME, CHARACTER, AND NARRATIVE, WITH VERBALLY DEXTEROUS DIALOGUE DRIVING ITS THREE-ACT STRUCTURE.

ACT ONE: Establishment and Inciting Incident

The first act serves as the exposition, introducing the Weston family, their immediate crisis - Beverly's disappearance - and the central conflict of familial collapse while establishing character dynamics and themes of loss and resentment.

- **Prologue:** The poetic and introspective tone of Beverly's interview with Johnna establishes themes of disconnection, addiction, and existential despair. Beverly's vanishing creates the mystery that drives the family's gathering.
- **Scene One:** The reassembly of the family highlights the toxic dynamics between Violet and her daughters. Violet's addiction, caustic nature, and fractured relationships are revealed, setting up the emotional stakes.
- **Scenes Two & Three:** The search for Beverly escalates the tension, and the act culminates with the discovery of his body, marking the turning point that transitions the family from uncertainty to mourning.

ACT TWO: Escalation and Confrontation

This act serves as the narrative's emotional climax, exposing the family's raw dysfunction and escalating the stakes for each character.

- **Scene One:** The funeral dinner becomes a battleground where Violet viciously critiques her family, revealing long-standing grievances and her own bitterness.
- **Scene Two:** The infamous dinner scene explodes into chaos, with Barbara physically and emotionally attempting to seize control. This scene epitomizes the play's dark humour and emotional volatility.
- **Scene Three:** Personal secrets, including Ivy's romantic plans and Karen's obliviousness to Steve's flaws, deepen the family's fractures.

ACT THREE: Resolution and Fallout

The final act functions as the denouement, tying together narrative threads and leaving the audience with a sense of both finality and lingering unease about the family's tragic legacy.

- **Scene One:** A shocking revelation symbolises the Weston family's cycle of deception and entrapment.
- **Scene Two:** Steve's predatory behaviour traumatises Jean and forces Karen to confront her denial, exposing further moral decay.
- **Scene Three:** Violet is left abandoned, her alienation complete. Johnna's quiet care provides a stark contrast to Violet's despair, emphasising themes of connection and disconnection.



Image by Brett Broadman: Bee Cruse (as Johnna Monevata)

THEMES

THE AMERICAN DREAM, FAMILY DYSFUNCTION & GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Set in Oklahoma, *August: Osage County* examines the American Dream through the lens of family dysfunction and generational trauma, exposing the cracks beneath the idealised pursuit of success.

The narrative explores how unresolved conflicts and emotional wounds echo across

generations, revealing how the American Dream can divide and burden families, instead of uniting them.

The play draws on themes from American classics like Eugene O'Neill's exploration of addiction and Tennessee Williams' focus on hidden desires. It also addresses the broader issue of land desecration and ownership, with the title referencing the Osage Tribe's ancestral homeland in Oklahoma.



Read how the significance of Indigenous land in the narrative is further deepened with Bee Cruse, a Biripi, Wiradjuri and Yuin actor of Aboriginal, Native American, and Chinese heritage, portraying Johnna Monevata.



AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY & BLACK SWAN'S CREATIVE LEARNING PROGRAM IS PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY

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ARTISTIC DIRECTOR PARTNER



MAJOR PARTNERS



INTERNATIONAL AIRLINE PARTNER



SEASON PARTNERS



CLAYTON UTZ



SUPPORTING PARTNERS

ALEX HOTEL



BLACK SWAN FUTURE FUND

Supported by Minderoo Foundation, generous philanthropists, and legacy gifts, Black Swan's Future Fund was established in 2017 to build a strong financial foundation to support growth and sustainability. The investment fund enables the delivery of works of exceptional quality, scale, and ambition. We thank those who have supported the Future Fund, in particular, we acknowledge the extraordinary generosity of Nicola and Andrew Forrest, and look forward to creating many more opportunities for our artists and audiences.

FUTURE FUND FOUNDING PARTNER



