

## Interview: Finding Truth with Cast of 'August: Osage County'

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CHICAGO – Gathering an ensemble cast for a film version of a Pulitzer Prize winning stage play is a tricky assignment. Some of the actors selected for “August: Osage County” – play and screenplay by Tracy Letts – are a mix of veterans (Juliette Lewis, Margo Martindale) and relative newcomers (Julianne Nicholson).

These three actresses joined Meryl Streep, Julia Roberts, Chris Cooper, Ewan McGregor and other notable names to amplify the story of a family coming to terms with their dark past and secret shame. In a sense, the maneuverings of this family in crisis digs into the well of families everywhere, for in the hiding of human flaws, there are distinct psychological problems that arise from what is hidden.



Julianne Nicholson, Meryl Streep and Margo Martindale in 'August: Osage County'  
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

HollywoodChicago.com had a roundtable interview with four of the representatives of the film, nominated for two Golden Globe Awards. The three actresses – Juliette Lewis (“Conviction”), Margo Martindale (TV’s “The Millers”) and Julianne Nicholson – plus play author and screenwriter Tracy Letts, sat down to talk about their remarkable passage toward the time and place of “August: Osage County.”

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Tracy, what was the process for you of shortening the original stage play but still maintaining the the essence of it? Is, for example, the tone different to you in the movie than the play?

**Tracy Letts:** Yes, I think the tone is different. Audiences receive films differently than they receive plays. In a theater, the audience leans forward, their ear is attune to the stage in a different way. It’s an active participation. There is less of that in a movie theater, the film is washing over the audience in a way. So that in itself changes the tone. Losing the length and the depth of some of the characters on the

edges, it has changed the tone of the film as well. We lost the prologue, which gets the play into the humor elements much quicker.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Juliette, what did you understand about the character of Karen that was reflective of you own life?

**Juliette Lewis:** She reminded me a bit of my mother in some ways. My Mom would befriend just about anybody, no matter how dark they would appear to us. My mother doesn't drive, so she would befriend somebody on the bus. Then this guy would come over for a Christmas party, and all the kids would wonder where he came from – he looked like a street person. My Mom would just say he's a guy who wants to start his own business, comes from a good family, etc., completely in denial. It's a beautiful quality about her, but at the same time a fault. How I relate is that in certain times in my life I paint something rosy, ignoring the telltale negative signs, and there is that aspect to Karen.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Margo, there is a significant line in the movie in which your character proclaims, 'There is more to me than that.' Does that reflect back to you in the character of Mattie Fae, is she close to who you are?

**Margo Martindale:** I don't think she's close to me at all. I think I'm an empathetic, sympathetic and very compassionate person. [the table laughs] I do know that you mean, but Mattie Fae has a different rhythm than I have, she has a different speech delivery – pointed and more quickly – I see that and I see how it is different from me. I am from Texas, and she has the same kind of hair that I have, I like make-up and Mattie Fae looks like me. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Julianne, how did you think about the character of Ivy – so repressed in her secrecy – that wasn't necessarily in the screenplay?

**Julianne Nicholson:** I thought about who she was, where she lived and the history she had leading up the situations in the movie. I think she is more uptight around her family, but she is at a point in her life when she is going to allow herself to change. That was important in how I approached her.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Juliette, I was struck by how inherently funny your character was in the film, beyond even what's written into the screenplay. How did you use that humor to find the subsequent pathos that Karen expresses?

**Lewis:** The pathos is what's underneath that girl. In the last scene, she rails that she is a human being stuck in the middle, that's how she understands the situation. It's one of the most profoundly written scenes I've ever had the honor of playing. I live for those kind of human contradictions when I act, what we reveal and what we conceal.

I've also never been in a film in which I had a three page monologue. We have all met that person or been that person – talking too much to make an impression. I auditioned with that monologue and learned to find the beginning and ending. The difficulty in that scene was the handling of the props and the rhythm – when she gets her pants up, when the suitcase folds. In film, I'm used to not doing stuff like that over the dialogue, but John [Wells, the director] liked it and let me do it.



Juliette Lewis and Meryl Streep in 'August: Osage County'  
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Let's talk about the dinner sequence in the film, one of the longer ones at about 20 minutes. Since it turned from comedy to tragedy on a dime, how did the cast prepare themselves to shoot it?

**Martindale:** Number one, we really came prepared to do that scene, and it just happened. Each moment led into the next moment, and nobody really understood the 'turn' of comedy to drama. The moments happened, with Meryl driving her own kind of truth into it. It must be in the writing itself, if you play what is there and play it real, in the moments that change from funny to horrible, it became just visceral in that



room.

**Nicholson:** It was nineteen pages, and John Wells had planned five days for us to do it, and we completed it in three and a half days. He broke it into three sections, we did six pages a day. The night before we started the sequence, we all gathered at Meryl's house and had dinner, and we ran through the scene in the same positions at the table, just to get a feel of what the beats were, and where we were at. We all came prepared, and we were all excited to be there, and that's why it took less time than was planned.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is it like to be at that table, with a group of actors that are at the top of their games at the same time? Does that happen often?

**Lewis:** No it doesn't. It was a rare and special experience, and I was floored that there was no hierarchy or egos – all those large personalities in the characters, but we all came to the table in a similar fashion. We were there to do our best, without artifice and with different preparation processes. But it was really down to earth, with an amazing bunch of people.

**Martindale:** I remember when Meryl made the turn. It was so electric, organic and natural. It was extraordinarily thrilling.

**Lewis:** And it reminded me, 'game on!' She was steering the ship.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Julianne, since this role is so high profile for you, and it marks a turn in your career, where have you felt it the most personally?

**Nicholson:** Well, it started when I turned 40. My husband was relocated to Los Angeles and I thought it would be perfect for me, because all the studios are there. I was thinking I'd get a TV show. The result for that was f\*\*king crickets. [laughs] I got maybe three auditions, with no callbacks. It was the first time I felt a total lack of confidence. Now how would I feed my babies?

But right after that, I got a lead role in a Sam Shepard play in New York, which led directly to this. Experience is a very funny thing, you can not feel successful, but also hope there can be an upswing. This movie gave me so much in terms of believing in myself again, besides the utter joy in just doing it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Margo, you've worked with so many directors over the years. Is there one in particular - stage, TV or screen - that really touched your core acting sensibility and turned it on its ear?

**Martindale:** It was Alexander Payne ["Paris, je t'aime"], because he directed me in that segment like a silent screen actress. Because I can act, he could tell me how to feel, and I could do it. Isn't that marvelous?



Margo Martindale, Julianne Nicholson, Juliette Lewis and Tracy Letts in Chicago, December 2013  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Tracy, as a native Chicago artist and one of the all-time great playwrights from here, what defines to you the character of theater art in Chicago, and where do you feel it has an influence in the overall entertainment and theater community?

**Letts:** That's an easy one. It's the ensemble. There has been a tradition of it here for a long, long time. Because of theater economics in New York City, it's more of a star driven system, and it impacts the theater that is done there. It's also difficult to do new work in New York, because it's too expensive. Chicago has a long tradition of looking out for each other. If you have a four person play, and you know three other people are looking out for you, the work will benefit.

'August' is an outgrowth of that, and it's become exportable. There was an amazing response to the play when it moved to New York, and I think that is what audiences there were responding to, the ensemble cast and the sharing.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** At the end of 'August: Osage County,' do you feel some optimism or is it all just pitch black with the family's dysfunction?

**Lewis:** It's definitely a turning event. At a film Q&A, the audience was asking me specifically what happened to all the characters. I just started making things up. [laughs] There has to be some optimism for the viewers.

**Letts:** That family has exploded, and the children have been scattered to the wind. There is hope for them individually, and there is hope for Mattie Fae to make something new. There is not much hope for Violet [Streep's character], because that tissue is dead or dying. But for the children who is cast away, the possibilities still live for them.

**Martindale:** I took it to be like the play. That Barbara [Julia Roberts] will always have part of that world in her body and mind, but is finished with it. Yet no matter how far you're finished with it, you are never finished with it.

*"August: Osage County" opens everywhere on January 10th. Featuring Meryl Streep, Julia Roberts, Ewan McGregor, Margo Martindale, Juliette Lewis, Julianne Nicholson Sam Shepard, Dermot Mulroney, Abigail Breslin, Benedict Cumberbatch and Chris Cooper. Screenplay Adapted by Tracy Letts, from his play. Directed by John Wells. Rated "R"*



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