Then Ellen Terry's Four Lectures on Shakespeare were published posthumously in 1932, the TLS declared them "full of the sympathy of a woman and the insight of a genius". Terry had given her first lecture in Glasgow in 1903 on "The Letters in Shakespeare's Plays", later adding to her repertoire "The Triumphant Women", ". "The Pathetic Women", and "The Children in Shakespeare's Plays". Compiled with the editorial support of her "literary henchman" Christopher St John, the talks were heavy with quotations, loosely structured, idiosyncratic, partly improvised – and written to be spoken. With them, Terry toured the United States and Canada in 1910 and Australia and New Zealand on the brink of the First World War.

For the pre-eminent actress of the Victorian age, increasingly subject to poor sight and failing memory, the lectures were a type of homecoming, allowing her to revisit her glory days playing opposite Henry Irving at the Lyceum in roles such as Ophelia, Juliet, Desdemona and Beatrice. But they were also a significant, and exhausting, second career for her, one in which she was in her element both as a student and performer of Shakespeare. She was quick to disavow theory in favour of the actor's imagination and the privileged insights gained "only from union with" Shakespeare's women.

Terry's success as a lecturer rested on three pillars and the first of these was her diligent scholarship. Virginia Woolf believed her to be "as close and critical a student of Shakespeare" as Bernard Shaw, and remarked: "this mutable woman, all instinct, sympathy, and sensation, is as painstaking a student and as careful of the dignity of her art as Flaubert himself'. A special affinity with Shakespeare's women illuminated her careful study, as attested by her son, the stage designer and theorist of the theatre, Edward Gordon Craig: "She played her

Hermany selves

KATHLEEN RILEY

ELLEN TERRY WITH EILEEN ATKINS Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, until February 23

many selves in playing the Shakespearean heroines, and only now and then was she obliged to play anything at all weak, for most of the heroines in Shakespeare are remarkable for their strength". Last was her gift for transfiguration, for giving the rawest of materials a radiance, fullness and presence. Her greatnephew John Gielgud recalled an evening at Mrs Cazalet's house in Grosvenor Square when the elderly Terry read the part of Beatrice to a company of nervous amateurs in evening dress: "The play seemed to catch her by the throat, she rose from her chair, and the years fell from her - she almost seemed to dance with high spirits".

Without any contextualizing preamble, Eileen Atkins strides purposefully onto the stage of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in the person of Ellen Terry, dressed in striking midnight-blue velvet - trousers, waistcoat, fulllength open cloak and a ruff-like collar, a High Victorian Elizabethan costume both alien and curiously appropriate to her subject. The only incongruous note is struck by the prosaic paper tissue she occasionally produces where an elegant cambric handkerchief might have lent an added dash of theatricality and occasion. Svelte and statuesque, she carries with her an unusual air of professorial glamour.

Wisely, and of necessity, Atkins does not attempt any sort of impersonation of Terry, of



Eileen Atkins as Ellen Terry

whom the artist Graham Robertson said: "She shone with no shallow sparkle or glitter, but with a steady radiance that filled the room, and had the peculiar quality of making everybody else invisible", and whose voice Woolf likened to someone drawing "a bow over a ripe, richly seasoned cello". Atkins's performance is more in the nature of a re-imagining, authentic in spirit to her great predecessor, evocative of her celebrated magnetism but with no specific blueprint beyond the published lectures themselves and "a few hints, a few diffused faint clues and indirections" (a phrase Terry borrowed from Walt Whitman as the epigraph to The Story of My Life).

Her selection and adaptation of Terry's words provide an engaging seventy-minute tour of the Triumphant and Pathetic Women, a

kaleidoscopic exposition of their vulnerability, moral courage, acuity, dignity, humour and sufferings - and all delivered with consummate clarity, economy and fluidity. There is perhaps too little variation in her portraiture and the evening, though short, loses some momentum two thirds of the way through. In her interpretation of the profoundly moving reconciliation scene between Lear and Cordelia and of Ophelia's madness, her acting is oddly schematized, marred in the one instance by facial contortions and in the other by "lunatic" hand contortions. But Atkins, who turns eighty this year, is quite wondrous in distilling through her Rosalind, so "full of voluble, laughing grace" as Hazlitt observed, the very essence of young love, and she invests Portia's "quality of mercy" speech with a prayerful potency and quietude.

Where Atkins excels, and where the lectures seem at their most new-minted, is not in the set pieces but rather in Terry's anecdotal asides, autobiographical snatches and in her prismatic, incisive and sensitive analyses of the Shakespearean heroines with whom she identified at a visceral level. And it is worth considering alongside Terry's support for women's suffrage, if not its more militant face, the freshness and resolve of such a statement as:

Have you ever thought how much we all, and women especially, owe to Shakespeare for his vindication of woman in his fearless, high-spirited, resolute and intelligent heroines? The assumption that "the woman's movement" is of very recent date – something peculiarly modern - is not warranted by history.

In bringing to life again these neglected lectures in the medium for which they were intended, Eileen Atkins has done us and Ellen Terry a considerable service and, if nothing else, has given renewed validation to Gordon Craig's claim that Terry "was very much a daughter of Shakespeare".

his is not the Midwest", Barbara (Julia Roberts) tells her almost estranged husband (a meek Ewan McGregor) as they drive across Oklahoma's breathtakingly flat vistas. "This is the Plains: a state of mind, some spiritual affliction, like the Blues." Roberts exhales the theatrical lines as if we all talk like this, all the time. Tracy Letts has cut down his Pulitzer Prize-winning play to fit the screen; whole scenes are lost, but what refilm of August: Osage County is not a dumbeddown version of the play – in fact some of the over-explanation we get on stage is elided here ans for this?" Barbara asks, gazing out. You can see the pores of her sweaty skin and the grey in her hair. This is not habitable land and the people who have survived here are of a particular type.

Namely, Violet (Meryl Streep), who appears in a prologue, stumbling down the stairs.

Plains speaking

ROZALIND DINEEN

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY Various cinemas

mains is largely intact. Which is to say that the Nicholson and Juliette Lewis, respectively) back to the family home, along with their partners, their aunt and uncle (Margo Martindale and Chris Cooper), and a cousin (Little - and the all-celebrity cast serves the film rath- Charles, played by Benedict Cumberbatch). er than vice versa. "I mean we fucked the Indi- Quietly in the background, witnessing, is Johnna (Misty Upham), the native American help whom Beverley hired just before his disappearance.

On screen we accompany the characters on their car journeys to and from the church, the liquor store and back into the house, where even parakeets die from heat exhaustion. Until Her hair short from chemotherapy, high and about mid-point, the film is dominated by distorted on "pills", she lays her forehead up Letts's thematic intentions and the cinemaagainst her husband's (Beverley, played by tographer Adriano Goldman. In the house, Sam Shepard) and they look at each other for Goldman sets Streep up at a dressing table, a beat too long. That beat is one of very few reflected back to us three times by her various moments of real tenderness in the film. The mirrors. It is an ornate shot and, knowing next day, Beverley (a poet and a drinker) goes Streep as we do, we find it hard not to read it as missing. Violet's distress and, soon, a funeral a signal that we are about to witness her muchbring her three daughters Barbara, Ivy and Ka-lauded talent. But the scene is quiet, Streep is ren (played beautifully by Roberts, Julianne contained and everything feels a bit held back.

Little Charles meets his father at the bus station (a second moment of tenderness). He has overslept and missed the funeral; father love soothes over his etched-in discomfort. Everything is in place except the dynamo.

Then comes the centrepiece, a long scene in which almost the entire cast gather round the table for the funeral dinner. Violet in an Elizabeth Taylor-style wig is a monster, jabbing out the lesson of her "truth-telling" with a lit cigarette. The assembled do not know where her remarks – which can start out like gentle missives, but end in missiles - will land, or who will go down with them. We watch as Barbara slowly reaches the end of her fairness; she accuses her mother of being an addict, demands the pills and, when she is refused, physically launches. Here is the director, John Wells (ER, The West Wing), doing what he is so well-known for - fast action, larly in America. In August: Osage County, spitting dialogue, trusting that the eye will the handful of tender scenes, which, refreshregister even the most fleeting of reactions if ingly, do not cloy, are not enough to it is primed to look out for it. And now we're bind. Violet is relatively easy to walk out on off, each character holding the energy of - unless you are paid to stay, like Johnna. In her convictions just below the skin, ready to spite of the three-mirror setup, Violet does blow at any moment. Barbara spills expletives, throws pill bottles at doctors, smashes things, is running things, possibly becoming her mother.

This is not an American family drama, it is a long look at the un-family. Among the moments of horrible, relieving humour, it asks us to consider whether everything has to be so awful. And it is awful: we have here addiction, suicide, cancer, affairs, divorce, neglect, incest. It is significant that Violet's three adult daughters have only one child between them, Barbara's fourteen-year-old Jean (Abigail Breslin), but it is more telling that Barbara has to outline to Jean the most basic rule of family:

Die after me. I don't care what else you do, where you go, how you screw up your life, just ... survive. Outlive me, please.

The natural law of the generational contract is not a given on the Plains and must be en-

This "unnaturalness" is taken too far. Monsters usually hold a claim to some part of their family's emotions, which is why they are so hard to abandon to their own ruin. The lacerating family drama has borne rich fruit for many playwrights and screenwriters, particunot experience the moments of self-knowledge that make for a tragedy, and the fault for that lies not with the filmmakers, but in the play itself.