

## O, THE OPRAH MAGAZINE August Issue

### Estelle Parsons' Aha! Moment

The actress tried to please people all her life. Now, at 81, playing a woman who behaves very, very badly, she has discovered a whole new part of herself.

My entire life has been about trying to be a good girl. When my mother died, I found a journal she'd written when I was a child, and on one page she wondered what she was going to do with me. I had broken a chair, and she wrote about how she was going to have to speak with my father about it, and how my sister was this "twinkling little star" and how much trouble I was. The thinking back then was "Children should be seen and not heard." And, oh, I was very much heard! I remember wanting to be quiet, but instead I was rambunctious, impulsive, volatile, and aggressive. When my mother took me to grown-up parties, I'd crawl under tables, getting my curls out of place and making my dresses dirty. None of this was "bad seed" stuff, mind you. I never hit my sister over the head with a poker or anything. Still, there seemed to be a never-ending list of things I did wrong.

After I decided to become an actor, I came to understand that all the things I had been trying to suppress were exactly what made acting so great for me: You have to live in the moment so strongly. In life, we're taught not to be impulsive, but in acting, you have to follow every impulse you have.

In the '60s, I had a good career in the theater but never felt truly at home onstage. Then in 1967 I worked with director Arthur Penn in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and it changed my life. The cacophony turned to harmony; suddenly the black keys and the white keys were in their proper place—and I could play them.

After winning the Oscar the next year for *Bonnie and Clyde*, which Arthur also directed, I called to thank him and I asked, "What should I do now?" He said, "Just keep on doing what you're doing." Forty years later, here I am continuing to do what I do—now in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *August: Osage County*.

At 81, I'm still discovering so much about acting and about myself. When friends first suggested me for Violet, the rageful matriarch in the play, I didn't think I'd be able to relate to her at all. I had a lot of fear about the role. But then the character started rubbing off on me in real life. I'd been playing the part for six months when my daughter and grandson came to visit. He was telling us about life as captain of his university's football team; when his mother interrupted, I got frustrated and suddenly snapped, "Shut up, Abbie!" She left the room crying, and I went to her and said, "I'm really sorry—Violet just sort of crept out of me."

If anybody had ever told me I had a dark side, I would've said, "Who are you kidding?" But Violet is me, and I am her. I've learned a lot from playing her. I know it's supposed to be acting, but what is acting but having to be yourself?

— As told to Suzan Colón