

A Performance Review of *The Piano Lesson*

August Wilson, Playwright

LaTanya Richardson Jackson, Director

Barrymore Theatre, New York, NY

December 6, 2022 – January 29, 2023

Thirty-five years after its original workshop production, August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* was revived on Broadway with a limited engagement at the Barrymore Theatre in New York City. Previews began on September 19, 2022, and the production played its final performance on January 29, 2023. Directed by LaTanya Richardson Jackson, the revival featured her husband, Samuel L. Jackson as Doaker (Berniece's uncle), John David Washington, in the role of Boy Willie, and Danielle Brooks in the role of Berniece. Equally, the piano as prop and signifier within the play was endowed with the influences of what Wilson referred to as his Four B's: the poetry of Amiri Baraka, the magical realism of Luis Borges, the Blues, and the visuality of the painter Romare Bearden.

A critically acclaimed actress for the stage and screen, the production was Richardson Jackson's Broadway directorial debut which occurred at a challenging moment. Theatres across the country sought to regain footing under post-COVID-19 pandemic conditions and fill their houses with audiences. Hence the choice to stage Wilson's two-act drama set in Pittsburgh's Hill District in 1936 during the middle of the Great Depression, signaled a refrain on themes of trauma, rupture, ghostly memories, redemption, and rejuvenation under the direst of conditions that recur throughout Wilson's oeuvre.

While an orthodox reading of the stage directions indicates that the action of the play begins with Boy Willie's banging on the door during his pre-dawn arrival with his friend Lymon (Ray Fisher) at the Pittsburgh home of his sister Berniece and his uncle Doaker, Richardson Jackson's direction began with a sharp high pitched sound cue of a piano that underscored the silhouetted image of Berniece suddenly sitting up in bed –as if waking up from a nightmare in Borges like fashion. The choice was one that seemingly dropped its audience into the darkness of what felt like the referential abyss of the ocean and the traumatic rupture of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the afterlives of chattel slavery. Simultaneously, the choice to focus on Berniece as the first body that was seen on stage centered her as the primary character of the play and head of the house. Yet, the grace with which Washington handles Boy Willie's didacticism cannot be overstated. The role requires stamina and particular attention to language as his character speaks nonstop throughout the play.

An entrepreneur and hustler who was once incarcerated in Mississippi's notorious Parchman Plantation-cum-Mississippi State Penitentiary for violating the Jim Crow ways of the

South, Boy Willie saturates the Charles home with his scheme to sell a truckload of watermelons from Mississippi as well as sell the piano that sits in Berniece's parlor. To the extent that brother and sister have diametrically opposed objectives (to sell/to keep the piano), their hostilities are complicated by Berniece's blaming Boy Willie for the circumstances that led to the death of her husband and by the appearance of the ghost of Sutter which makes its first appearance at the end of Act I but is also introduced during the brief prelude when Berniece wakes from her nightmare. To that end, the ghost of Sutter is an ephemeral object and character that also drives the drama throughout. Samuel Jackson as Doaker is a mediator between brother and sister which requires him to do far more listening and at times selective intervening. The 2022 production of *The Piano Lesson* is as much a story about negotiating the legacy of the piano as an object of intergenerational wealth and history as it is about negotiating the passage of intergenerational stories and legacy from Jackson's origination of the role of Boy Willie in the 1987 production and his mentorship of the much younger Washington in the role of Boy Willie.

The piano serves as both an heirloom and a character in the play and is both an archive and repertoire of the Charles family history. From Boy Willie's initial point of view, it is a pathway through which to raise capital and, in turn, acquire the land in Mississippi from the recently deceased James Sutter who fell down a well under mysterious circumstances. While Boy Willie, Doaker, and Wining Boy (Doaker's brother portrayed by Michael Potts), express the memories of the Charles family through stories, lore, and blues poetry in the style of work songs and Amiri Baraka, the family ancestors who were enslaved by the Sutters are carved into the piano. It was Willie Boy, the great-grandfather of Boy Willie and Berniece, who made the carvings of the family genealogy into the piano after Willie Boy's wife Berniece and their nine-year-old son were traded away to a man named Joel Nolander from Georgia. The carvings, *a la* Romare Bearden's paintings, and collages of Black life are a tangible reminder of the sacrifice of the Charles family and the intergenerational trauma they endured.

Yet, the piano becomes activated by the characters through their engagement with the object as a musical instrument that possesses properties of phonic grace as when Wining Boy, a former blues musician, plays the instrument while simultaneously articulating the stories of the Great Migration out of the agricultural South and into the industrial North. Equally, Maretha (Berniece's daughter portrayed by Nadia Daniel), is taught the musicality and history of their family by her mother in tender exchanges between Brooks and Daniel. However, the penultimate scene of the play necessitates that Berniece plays the piano as she speaks to and through the piano in a soulful-like cadence that is a convergence of gospel, prayer, and blues. Most importantly, Berniece's voice addresses Sutter's ghost as Boy Willie physically battles with the spirit on the second floor of the house in Berniece's bedroom. It is a scene in which the broken frame of the house which is also the *mise-en-scene* of the play, shifts on cue as Washington's character tussled with the ghost that is created through a light project onto a scrim. The re-assembly of the house that coincides with the exorcism of Sutter's ghost convinces Boy Willie that the piano's lesson of the family's long struggle for survival and identity outweighs his immediate desire to acquire land in Mississippi. The Charles family's triumph over Sutter lifts

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the spirits of the Charles family and amicably resolves the conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie as he concedes to leave the piano in the parlor.

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