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Composer Dwight Andrews

By Joyce H. Bell

Dwight Andrews and William Ransom, faculty members in Emory University's Department of Music, collaborated musically on the 1990 Pulitzer Prize-winning August Wilson play, *The Piano Lesson*, that opened April 16 at the Walter Kerr Theatre in New York, less than a week after receiving the prestigious award for drama.

The Piano Lesson focuses on the black experience in America as seen through a prism of conflict between a brother and sister over their family's slavery-era heirloom piano. The play toured the nation to large audiences before its Broadway debut.

Andrews, an ethnomusicologist at Emory University, composed the score for *The Piano Lesson*, his fourth such collaboration with Wilson, having previously scored Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1983), Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fences* (1985) and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986).

Andrews noted that his newest collaboration with Wilson will be a full-scale musical produced at a workshop with Theater Emory in 1991.

As in all Wilson plays, the motif in *The Piano Lesson* is the music, particularly the blues, serving as a repository for black heritage.

Arranger, composer, music director and jazz artist, Andrews designs and structures musical sequences for the plays after conducting a comprehensive study of music of the period. "My responsibility is to make the musical moments an extension of the

play, a natural progression of the drama," he explains.

"It means creating and arranging music which literally would have been heard at that place and time. The music weaves through the story, and conjures up not just a melody, but a whole sensibility about the character's lives." He adds, "Wilson's characters are just regular people. But they have wonderful, curious stories to tell."

Andrews credits Wilson with helping him appreciate music he was not familiar with. An avid classical music and avant-garde jazz lover, Andrews began to explore early 20th century black music with Wilson's nudging, though he had spent a lifetime studying music. "Wilson is a musician; he knows the music—obscure blues pieces I wasn't aware of. It is interesting to see how he interpolates the sensibilities of the blues into his plays."

Andrews met the playwright while studying at Yale, where Wilson has launched all his plays. "Wilson has been a very supportive and warm friend over the years. He's shy and quiet, but he's an intense writer—writing all the time, always working on new projects. Wilson writes for the sheer joy of it. That's where he differs from most Broadway playwrights. He's not interested in mounting a new work, but in the creation of a new project. He's very disciplined."

Andrews earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in music at the University of Michigan and a master's of divinity in 1977 at Yale Divinity School. He is a Ph.D. candidate in music theory at Yale University and is a Mellon doctoral fellow at Rice University in Houston. He served as resident musical director for the Yale Repertory Theatre from 1979-86, composing music for Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot*, among others.

William Ransom, head of the piano division in Emory's music department, recorded Andrews' music for the production in their first ever collaboration, but says Ransom, "I hope to do more in the future. After all, our offices are right next to each other." Ransom received his bachelor and master degrees from Juilliard and the doctor of musical arts degree from the University of Michigan. He has toured the U.S. extensively as well as east and western Europe and has been hailed by the press as "one of the greatest of the new generation of pianists."

Ransom's recording can be heard during the memorable scenes when a ghost plays on the ornate old piano, which in actuality houses a computerized player piano. The music was refined during the play's runs in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and even into the last few weeks in New York. ■■■