

Emory Teacher Plays a Musical Role in August Wilson's Plays

By Tom Campbell

Special to The Journal-Constitution

Like the perfect setting for a beautiful gem, mournful blues music frames the Alliance Theatre's "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," August Wilson's powerful play about a black man's effort to find his missing wife and mother of his young daughter. When the play begins, breaks for intermission and ends, classic recordings — such as the Rev. Pearly Brown's "I Wonder How Long It Has Been Since You've Seen Your Mother" — fill the air. During the play, bluesy guitar interludes connect the scenes, reinforcing the mood and heightening the drama.

This guitar music may seem born of the period — the play is set in 1911 Pittsburgh — but it is actually the work of Dwight Andrews, a 37-year-old Atlanta newcomer who's serving as composer and musical director of the Alliance production. Mr. Andrews, who is also a music instructor at Emory University, has composed music for all of the original productions of Mr. Wilson's nationally known plays: "Ma Rainey's Black Bot-

tom" (1983), Pulitzer Prize-winning "Fences" (1985), "Joe Turner" (1986) and "The Piano Lesson" (1987).

"Blues is a very important form for August," says Mr. Andrews, who moved to Atlanta from New Haven, Conn., last August. "He carries around a pile of tapes to listen to while he's working. Although I was involved more with modern classical music and avant-garde jazz before meeting him, he brought me around to listening to the music in a new way. I owe a lot to August for introducing me to black music from before 1940."

He met the playwright while studying at Yale, where Mr. Wilson has launched all of his plays. During their initial collaboration, on "Ma Rainey," Mr. Andrews not only provided music but also played the clarinet. When Yale produced "Joe Turner," the composer taught the actors the title folk song and incidental music, as well as a cappella rhythms that accompany the African-inspired juba dance, a midplay scene of jubilation.

"To create these moments in Au-



CURTIS COMPTON/Special

Dwight Andrews, whose guitar music can be heard in August Wilson's 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone,' has composed for all four of the playwright's works.

gust Wilson's plays, I've called on a lifetime of studying music," Mr. Andrews says. "When I was a teenager, I had to sneak around to learn about the less formal kinds of black music."

As a Detroit public school student

in the 1960s, Dwight Andrews played clarinet in the band. But, he admits with a laugh, "I was more interested in sports and girls. My grandmother was a piano

ANDREWS Continued on 4C

Andrews

From Page 1C

teacher, but I avoided her like the plague. In junior high school, though, I was bitten by the bug. I tried to play in every concert, and every other event, that came along."

He made a commitment to a music career while attending Cass Tech, the Detroit performing arts high school whose alumni include Tommy Flanagan, Diana Ross and Sheila Jordan. "Once you got to Cass, you were around so many great players," he says. "It was so demanding and competitive, you had to make the commitment."

At Cass, Mr. Andrews learned about jazz. "Up until that time, my orientation was classical. I really didn't know anything about improvised forms. My parents had two jazz records: one by Les McCann and a greatest-hits album by Count Basie. One Christmas, a friend from school gave me a Cecil Taylor album, 'Unit Structures.' It was the strangest, most wonderful record."

When another friend introduced him to the tenor saxophone, he began playing jazz. Among the major influences on him during this period, he says, were Cannonball Adderley, Horace Silver and Freddie Hubbard — all masters of the funky jazz style of the 1950s and early 1960s known as hard bop.

The young Mr. Andrews was deepening his knowledge of not only classical and jazz, but also pop music. "All of a sudden, it was OK to listen to classical, Top 40, jazz — all kinds of music," he says. "I wore out my eight-track tape of 'Crosby, Stills and Nash.' I was listening to Simon and Garfunkel at the same time I got

into Horace Silver."

His familiarity with pop music led to an invitation to play the sax for a week on tour with pop star Luther Vandross last fall. "I enjoyed it," Mr. Andrews says of the tour, "but it's not the kind of music I could do for very long. Pop today is really a commodity, just a nightly regurgitation of the same performance."

So, after a glamorous week of limelight and limousines, Mr. Andrews returned to Emory, where he teaches music theory and analysis, jazz history and a world music survey course. Meanwhile, he is completing his dissertation, a four-year project on Igor Stravinsky.

"I would love to perform soon," he says, "but right now, my plate is so full. I want to finish the last bit of my dissertation first."

His doctoral research covers Stravinsky's early works, such as "The Firebird" and "The Rite of Spring." "I went to Switzerland to see Stravinsky's manuscripts in person," he says. "I saw his musical sketches, written down on little pieces of paper. I was looking for clues to the question 'What is Stravinsky?' He had a revolutionary spirit. Some of this music is 80 years old but sounds as fresh as anything today."

Mr. Andrews also is interested in having more of his own symphonic works performed. One that is in progress is a large-scale "non-tonal" piece for chorus and orchestra that depicts the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. "It's faithful to the biblical story, but it's set in a very modern musical context. It has an eclectic backdrop — my palette includes everything from Stravinsky to Stevie Wonder."

Mr. Andrews's religious faith has played an important role in his life, ever since his childhood in Detroit. Mr. Andrews credits not only his civil-servant father, but also a Detroit minister, the Rev. Nicholas Hood, for

encouraging his spiritual development. The Rev. Hood urged him to prepare for the ministry.

Another influence on young Dwight Andrews was Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young. "Although I hadn't met him then, I knew of Andy even when I was a kid," he says. "He served as a distant role model for someone interested in the ministry and social change. I spent my summers in New Orleans, where I stayed at Andy Young's mother's house. And now, here I am in Atlanta. So it really is a small world."

Mr. Andrews earned a master's degree in music at the University of Michigan in 1974, then found himself at a crossroads. "I was struggling with an intense, personal question of whether to go to New York and become a jazz player, or to study the ministry and become socially responsible," he says. He took the Rev. Hood's advice and enrolled in Yale Divinity School, where he earned a master's of divinity in 1977.

After Mr. Andrews became an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ in 1978, his friend James Simpson, a prominent stage director, asked him to perform his wedding ceremony. "Imagine my surprise," Mr. Andrews recalls, "when I met his fiancée and saw she was Sigourney Weaver."

New Haven also brought him into contact with important jazz artists, nurturing his development as a performer. He played with musicians such as Anthony Braxton, Oliver Lake and Anthony Davis. He also played woodwinds as a member of the Creative Music Improvisers Forum, a group that jazz trumpeter Leo Smith helped form. Mr. Andrews made music with ensembles led by Mr. Smith for more than five years during the mid-1970s. The most readily available recording of this music is "Divine Love" (ECM).

Mr. Andrews also can be heard on the 1980 album

"The Little People" (Otic Records) with Nat Adderley Jr. (piano) and Nana Vasconcelos (percussion). He plays on the '88 LP "No Friction" (Gramavision) as part of the tentet Fool Proof.

At Yale, he discovered an interest in theater — for his first role, he was asked to play the saxophone in an avant-garde "Julius Caesar" — and gravitated to composing for stage productions. He became resident musical director of Yale Repertory Theatre (1979-86). While there, he composed music for Athol Fugard's "Blood Knot" at Yale and Oyama's "The Resurrection of Lady Lester," even performing the title role of jazz saxman Lester Young. He also served as musical director for New York City Opera's '86 production of "X," Anthony Davis's opera about Malcolm X.

In 1987, the minister-composer received a letter inviting him to apply for a teaching position at Emory. "At first I wasn't that interested, because the job was limited to ethnomusicology," says Mr. Andrews, who was then a doctoral fellow at Rice University. "My area is a little broader than that." However, after guest-lecturing and renegotiating the scope of the job, he joined the Emory music faculty, moving here with his wife, Desiree Pedescleaux, last summer.

Mr. Andrews has discussed a new project with August Wilson, a musical they want to present in late 1990 in a workshop at Theater Emory. "The theater department is excited," he says, "because it would bring a nationally known writer to campus. And it would provide a lot of roles for young actors at Emory and the black colleges in town."

"This is perfect for me," he says of Emory, "because the job is not in conflict with my professional goals. I'm interested in a career in performing and theater, and I have the opportunity to do that here."