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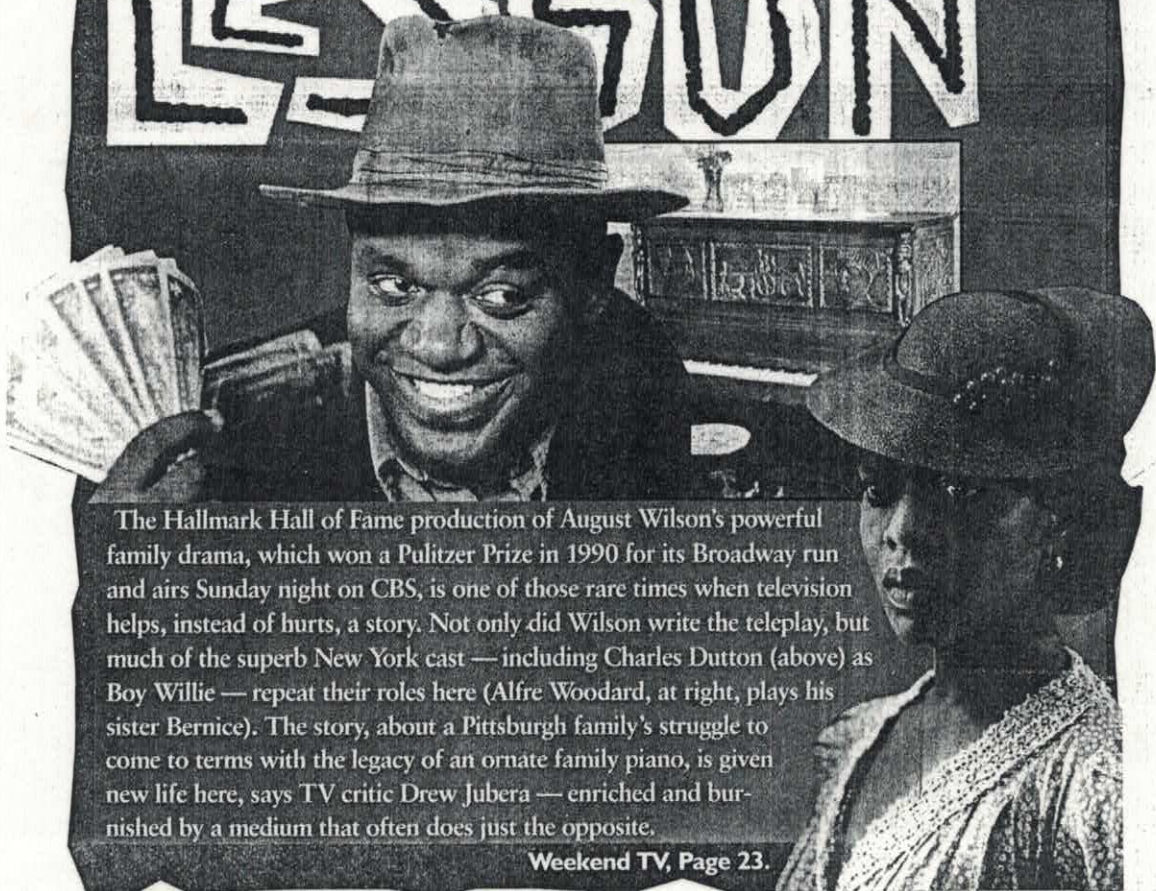
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Weekend Preview

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OnTV

THE PIANO LESSON



The Hallmark Hall of Fame production of August Wilson's powerful family drama, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1990 for its Broadway run and airs Sunday night on CBS, is one of those rare times when television helps, instead of hurts, a story. Not only did Wilson write the teleplay, but much of the superb New York cast — including Charles Dutton (above) as Boy Willie — repeat their roles here (Alfre Woodard, at right, plays his sister Bernice). The story, about a Pittsburgh family's struggle to come to terms with the legacy of an ornate family piano, is given new life here, says TV critic Drew Jubera — enriched and bur-nished by a medium that often does just the opposite.

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Television

WILSON'S PULITZER WINNER

'Piano Lesson' resonates on small screen

By Drew Jubera
TV CRITIC

There's a moment at the start of "The Piano Lesson" when you just know CBS is going to blow it—that it's going to open up this exuberant, eerily magical stage drama of a black family caught between its past and future until everything evaporates under all the sunlight.

When we're taken outdoors to see two black men noodling their way from Mississippi to Pittsburgh, in a pickup heaped with watermelons, we wonder if this signals that what follows will head down the broad, overliteral road of a TV movie.

But the hands that adapted this "Piano Lesson" won't let it happen. They're the same hands that in 1990 crafted it into a Pulitzer Prize-winning production on Broadway. Author August Wilson wrote the teleplay, his longtime collaborator Lloyd Richards directed it and most of the superb cast from New York follows them, including Charles Dutton as Boy Willie. Emory University's Dwight Andrews wrote the music.

Rather than thin the work for television,

REVIEW
"The Piano Lesson" ***½ 9 p.m. Sunday on WGNX/Channel 46 (3747). Ratings range from one to four stars.
THE VERDICT
Great play. Great TV.

this group enriches and burnishes it—a rare, sure-footed accomplishment for a drama whose musical centerpiece was hailed by one critic at the play's debut as "the most potent symbol in American drama since Laura Wingfield's glass menagerie."

Set in 1936 Pittsburgh, "The Piano Lesson" begins with the dawn-breaking, door-rattling arrival of Boy Willie from Mississippi to the house of his widowed sister, Bernice (Alfre Woodard). At once lovably raucous and avengingly single-minded, he's there to get his family's heirloom piano. He wants to sell it to buy farmland belonging to the family that once enslaved his own; for him the piano, carved intricately with his ancestors' stories, is symbol of his ability to step up and out in the Jim Crow South.

But Bernice, who lives with her daughter and uncle Doaker (Carl Gordon) and who still

believes Boy Willie contributed to her husband's fatal shooting, sees a piano built not from wood but her family's blood.

"You can't sell your soul for money," she tells Boy Willie.

"I'm selling it for land," he snaps back. "Land's the only thing God ain't makin' any more of. You can always get another piano."

But the piano has its own life; it can play when it wants, with ghosts sometimes launched from its worn keys. It sits fitfully in the middle of this brother-sister conflict, as if there to prompt a coming to terms with the family's future.

The drama creeps up on you, then explodes in quick flashpoints; the ghosts dip in and out (sometimes to too-hokey effect); underlying sadness is spliced with belly laughs. All of it is performed by an unerring ensemble, led by Dutton, that seems to share Wilson's spacious poetry as much as act it.

The camera, meanwhile, sweeps us along rhythmically, keeping in toe-tapping time with the action. By directing us with a rapid eye to just the right detail, it also allows Wilson to trim much of the long-windedness that bloated the original; about 30 minutes of running time has been axed.

The result is more than televised theater. This is TV that has given a great play new life.