

# Covering seams with blues is Andrews's piano lesson

By Debby Waldman  
Register Staff

THE theater press office refers to it as a collaboration, but Dwight Andrews sees his relationship with playwright August Wilson differently.

"It's not a collaboration in the sense of writing a musical, where the writer and the lyricist and the composer come together and bounce ideas off each other," said Andrews, the musical director and composer for Wilson's new play, "The Piano Lesson."

"August's ideas are fairly developed when he comes to me," Andrews continued. "In a sense, I'm just the facilitator to work the ideas."

In the case of "The Piano Lesson," which opened at the Yale Repertory Theatre last week, the idea was to incorporate blues music from the '20s and '30s and "even music that predates record-

ing" into a story about a family battling over an heirloom — a 130-year-old piano that had been used by slave owners to purchase two of the family's ancestors.

Wilson specified what music he wanted in the script. Andrews' duties included arranging the existing music, writing music for set changes, and working with the cast.

"My biggest responsibility is simply to make the musical moments, the few that there are, grow out of the drama and happen in a way that seems real," Andrews said. "Sometimes it means creating the music. Sometimes it means arranging music. Mostly it means making music a seamless part of this drama."

"The Piano Lesson" marks the fourth Wilson play for which Andrews has served as musical direc-

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Maro Lovitt/The Re

Dwight Andrews sets the musical tone for August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson."

# Andrews: Musical director adds shade of blues to Wilson's work

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tor. The others are "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "Fences" and "Joe Turner's Come and Gone."

The Wilson-Andrews relationship began in 1983, when the Yale Rep produced "Ma Rainey." Then the resident musical director at the theater, Andrews had first dibs on any plays being produced there. He wanted to work on "Ma Rainey" because it focused on black blues musicians in the late 1920s, a subject in which he was especially interested.

Though his title in the "Ma Rainey" program implies he dealt exclusively with notes and time signatures, Andrews spent much of his time with the actors, teaching them to play their instruments. He even had a colleague, now-Yale Rep musical director Daniel Egan, help him.

"None of the guys played wind instruments," Andrews recalled, musing aloud whether the play was "my theatrical challenge or nightmare." His conclusion: "It was actually a dream come true, because it worked out."

Many of the reviews praised the actors' musicianship, though few mentioned Andrews' name. The oversight doesn't seem to bother him.

"It really is not a foreground-background issue," he said. "I want to be involved with projects that I think are important. Whether it's on the title page is not important."

Besides, it's not as if his life revolves around composing music for the theater. Andrews is working on his thesis (on the early works of Igor Stravinsky) for a Ph.D in music at Yale; teaching at Rice University in Houston, where he is a Mellon Doctoral Fellow; and ministering part time at a the Plymouth Congregational Church in Beaumont, Texas.

Religion is what brought Andrews, 36, to New Haven in 1974. Inspired by ministers he had encountered as a teen-ager in Detroit, he enrolled in the Divinity School. He served as minister at the Black Church at Yale until he left for Houston in 1986.

Music was equally important to him. A saxophone player who attended the same Detroit high school as Diana Ross and Ray ("Ghostbusters") Parker Jr., An-

draws arrived at Yale fresh from the University of Michigan, where he had earned a master's degree in the subject.

"I intended to have two careers when I came here," he said. "I wanted to do church work because I was very interested in that, and I also wanted to continue in music because I had my training in that. The only thing that didn't figure into it was my theater work."

Andrews credits Broadway composer Maury Yeston, who was one of his teachers, as providing the encouragement that led to his work at the Yale Rep. And he quotes a time-worn adage when questioned about the longevity of his relationship with Pulitzer prize-winning playwright Wilson.

"The projects we've done have all been successful," he said. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Even Wilson, the poet-turned-playwright whose works have won enough drama awards to fill a trophy case, has a hard time talking about it.

"Who else would I call?" he said when asked why he brought Andrews back from Houston to work on his new play. "He does such great work. . . . I cry every time I listen to the music in 'Joe Turner.'"

Andrews and Wilson plan to write a musical together, although they have yet to set a date for the collaboration. Andrews' first priority is his doctorate.

Three years ago he told a reporter from his hometown newspaper that he planned to finish his thesis "between now and December of '85, unless Lloyd comes up with some new Broadway show in the meantime."

Three plays later Andrews is still pushing back the deadline, but the blame — if you can call it that — has been lifted from Yale Rep director Lloyd Richards.

"It is taking me a little bit longer," Andrews said, "because I've been doing plays with August Wilson."