



JOHNNY CRAWFORD/Staff.

Afemo Omilami (from left), Chuck Patterson and William Jay.

'Joe Turner' Finds Its Song at the Alliance

Theater Review

By Steve Murray

Special to The Journal-Constitution

A theatrical lightning bolt, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" electrifies the mind and spirit. It's a powerhouse production that lifts the Alliance Theatre to a level of artistic achievement seldom seen in Atlanta.

Set in 1911 Pittsburgh, August Wilson's drama detonates inside a boardinghouse owned and run by ornery Seth Holly, son of free Northern parents, and his placid wife, Bertha. Most of their tenants are new to the North, searching for the sort of jobs and self-worth impossible to find in Southern backwaters.

At the start of the play, the tenant causing Seth the biggest grief is Bynum, a conjure man in the habit of sacrificing pigeons in the yard.

Bynum's name comes from his mystic art, what he calls his personal "song." He's able to bind people — parted lovers, broken families — but only if they're meant to be together.

Binding of a grimmer sort haunts the latest boarder. Arriving like a thunderclap, Herald Loomis darkens the doorstep with his daughter Zonia.

"I knew when I first looked at him something wasn't right with him," Seth says.

What's wrong is a lot. Stolen from his wife and baby 11 years earlier and pressed

into seven-year peonage, Loomis has been searching ever since for his wife, Martha.

The play's title comes from a folk song based on the career of Joe Turney, brother of the governor of Tennessee, who lured black men to crap games in Memphis, arrested them and sent them downriver to work on farms.

Loomis's search is central to the play, but there's much more going on here. The idea of binding and bonding beats at the heart of the drama, as the boarders engage in a changing dance of partnership, separation and searching.

Cocky Jeremy takes up with Mattie,

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who's just been left by her lover; but when the stylish Molly sashays through the door, his neck develops a swivel.

The post-emancipation history of wandering and longing infects the characters' brains and hearts. Even the young boy Reuben, flirting precociously with Zonia, tells the girl, "When I get grown, I come looking for you."

Ultimately, the person Loomis must bind with is himself. In a ritualistic act, he literally takes charge of the blood that beats within him and repossesses his own song.

Besides the emotional whammy of several devastating scenes, what makes the play a triumph is Mr. Wilson's virtuosic dialogue. Pulitzer Prize winner for "Fences," the playwright captures the mesmerizing rhythms of colloquial speech, turning the commonest phrase into a verbal gem.

The everyday grounding of setting and language lets Mr. Wilson dose his play with the supernatural. It's a breathtaking mix, akin to the balance of the matter-of-fact and the miraculous found in Latin American magic realism. But Mr. Wilson's references are North American and African, pinpointed in Loomis's vision of bones rising from the sea and walking on water toward the land. It's a stunning metaphor for ancestors lost in passage from the homeland to Southern harbors.

A sense of fate throbs through the play, visually captured by Mi-



Afemo Omilami and Je Nie Fleming in Alliance Theatre production.

chael Olich's splendid set. Ostensibly a realistic boardinghouse, it stops just short of the wings, letting us see actors approach the set moments before they knock on the

front door. The device fuses theatrical contrivance with the script's sense of inevitability.

The cast is uniformly excellent. As the tortured Loomis, Afemo Omilami has knockout moments; finally, here's a part for the actor's oversized talents. Chuck Patterson is very strong as the cantankerous Seth, balanced wonderfully by Carol Mitchell-Leon's wry, warm Bertha. William Jay plays Bynum with a straightforwardness that belies his unearthly powers. Michael Genet manages hilarious bits as Jeremy, as does Iris Little-Roberts as the determined, haughty Molly. As put-upon Mattie, Lynn Brown is touching, while Sharlene Ross does as well as she can as Martha (an underwritten role). James Mayberry scores some comic moments as Sellig, the white pots-and-pans salesman who helps find missing people. Even the child actors are good: Aaron Fisher as Reuben and especially Je Nie Fleming as Zonia.

Kenny Leon's beautifully focused direction moves scenes gripingly forward. Susan E. Mickey's period costumes and Ann G. Wrightson's capable lighting round out the production's technical strengths, while Dwight Andrews's fine original guitar score introduces the acts.

"Joe Turner's Come and Gone" is a mountain of a play. With every scene, it carries the audience higher, takes greater risks, and at its peak, soars. It's a song of songs.

"Joe Turner's Come and Gone."
Alliance Theatre. Through Feb. 25.
7:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Sundays. 8
p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays. 1 p.m.
Wednesday, Feb. 1. \$12-\$26. Wood-
ruff Arts Center, 1280 Peachtree St.
NE. 892-2414.