

THOMAS KELSEY / Los Angeles Times



Boardinghouse resident Roscoe Lee Browne, left, eyes the knife pulled by James Craven, a stranger obsessed by his missing wife, in "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" at Los Angeles Theatre Center.

STAGE REVIEW

'Joe Turner': Search for Song of Africa

By SYLVIE E. RAKE,
Times Theater Writer

If August Wilson's "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," which opened over the weekend at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, is about anything, it is about African-American cultural loss, greater than any other for having been so entirely involuntary.

It is rare to find a playwright such as Wilson who, play after play, seems to deepen and broaden his themes. But how far can Wilson bend the rules of dramaturgy? In "Joe Turner," he marries an absence of attention to detail and outward realism with elements of myth and passion. It's not always a comfortable union, but it attests to the fact that we've been transport-

ed to another realm, one that has little to do with day-to-day reality and everything to do with the distillations of a writer's mind.

"Joe Turner" is set in a Pittsburgh boardinghouse in 1911, where the relative tranquillity of the owners and the regulars is disrupted by the arrival of a mysterious stranger and his daughter.

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The stranger, Herald Loomis (James Craven), is a dark, brooding man in black coat and black hat who never removes the former and rarely the latter. He is as grungy as his little girl Zonia (Evora Griffith) is impeccably dressed. We learn that he's searching for his wife—has been for four years. Later we find out how he lost her and why, having been a good man unjustly trapped by one Joe Turner and put on a chain gang for seven years.

Finding his wife is Herald's obsession. "It's the only thing I know how to do," he says. "I just want to see her face, so I can find myself a startin' place in this world. I been wanderin' around a long time in someone else's world." Through Herald we observe the fate of an entire people.

These scenes of confession and revelation are enormously powerful in the second half. The build-up to them and the final resolution are propelled and sustained by the presence of another boarder, one Bynum Walker (Roscoe Lee Browne), an ordinary man with extraordinary insights. Half-priest, half-witch doctor, Walker senses Herald's anguish and encourages his self-discovery, by urging him to find "his song," that center of identity lost in the dark night of his soul. In time, Herald does.

Getting there is at once fascinating, powerful and flawed. The final scenes in which Herald's wife, Martha (Adilah Barnes), turns up are awkward in a realistic context. The reunion between mother and daughter is devoid of impulse, the explanation of Martha's disappearance unpersuasive. (Why didn't Zonia's grandmother simply tell Herald where Martha had gone?) Details, yes, but one shouldn't have to be thinking about them.

So this Wilson play, the third in a series that explores black American life through the decades of the 20th Century, leaves us both thrilled and puzzled. (A fourth, "The Piano Lesson," comes to the San Diego Old Globe in May.) Yet this co-production of San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre and LATC, directed by Claude Purdy (who staged Wil-

son's "Ma Rainey" in 1987), is extremely potent.

Much of its success rests with Browne, who has not given such a memorable performance since his unforgettable one in "Dream on Monkey Mountain" at the Taper in 1970. It is rich, life-giving, resonating with laughter, booming tones and grand gestures—enough to make us wonder at the character's true powers. Is this man or spirit? A presence put on Earth to guide the unfortunate Herald? To help an entire people find itself?

The questions remain open. Wilson's skill lies in layering his pieces so that they always give us far more than meets the eye, even if the ending of "Joe Turner" (unlike that of "Fences"), despite its passion, seems too pat.

James Craven's Herald is a giant—a gaunt, ghostly figure whose menacing presence becomes more pitiable with every new revelation. And attractive Kimberley La-Marque is exquisitely tender as the young woman who falls in love with his pain. Steven Anthony Jones and Delores Mitchell are the

fast-talking boardinghouse owner and his wife (though Jones talks so fast he's hard to follow).

Kent Minault is a traveling salesman, Tyrone Granderson Jones as a boarder with a Napoleonic complex and Anna Deavere Smith as a woman on the loose fill out the tapestry of characters. Evora and Miles Griffith are adequate as Zonia and a young neighbor boy who befriends her, but Wilson has written some difficult scenes for them, which would pose problems even for seasoned adults.

Production values are all excellent, from Scott Bradley's cutaway set of a large kitchen and front parlor with the Pittsburgh skyline above, to Pamela Peterson's costumes (remounted here by David F. Draper), Ward Carlisle's lighting, Jon Gottlieb's sound, Dwight D. Andrews' original music and Halifu Osumare's staging of a "juba" dance.

At 514 S. Spring St., Tuesdays through Sundays, 8 p.m., with Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. Until June 4. Tickets: \$22-\$25; (213) 627-5599.