

# THEATRE REVIEWS



Adilah Barnes, Kimberley LaMarque, Roscoe Lee Browne & James Craven in August Wilson's new drama at the Los Angeles Theatre Center

## Joe Turner's Come and Gone

Presented by L.A. Theatre Center & American Conservatory Theatre; Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., Los Angeles; (213) 627-5599. Opened April 7; plays Tues.-Sun., 8; Sat. & Sun. mats., 2; closes June 4.

It is a formidable theatrical structure August Wilson is constructing, each scene consisting of a dramatic work investigating the black experience and condition in America during a particular decade in the 20th century, including *Fences* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The most powerful of this series to date (*The Piano Lesson* makes its west coast debut next month at San Diego's Old Globe) deals more directly than the others with the core of Wilson's statement. It is a deep, darkly shaded window through which we can look into the heart of the matter, into racial dream and personal vision. As each of the plays in Wilson's gallery shows his growth as a playwright, each also brings him closer to that power which distinguished the more important work of another cataloguer of the pain of the American dream, Eugene O'Neill. The sense of melody, tragedy and stature, of humor and indestructible human will residing in the simplest of souls which is at the heart of *Joe Turner* stands alongside the best of O'Neill. If there is a renaissance of powerful black theatre burgeoning across the country its beacon is in the mind of August Wilson, its blood in the ink which flows from his pen, its body in the world he recreates with such tenderness, understanding and empathy.

It is 1911 and the scene is the Holly boardinghouse in Pittsburgh. Seth Holly, volatile, honest to his own principles and operating in his own version of the 20th century beat in a fine performance by Steven Anthony Jones, is a workingman, proud of his minor advances and fighting to strengthen their effect, partly through the art his father taught him, the magic of making handy utensils from scrap sheets of tin. Seth is on the verge of being a modern man, with modern ideas and digging into modern methods for his future and security. His long-standing tenant Bynum Walker, unruffled in his simple approach to his own future and the meaning of life, comes from an older

society of scruffy metaphysics and the poetry of existence; in the magnificence of Roscoe Lee Browne's multihued portrayal Bynum frequently seems himself the mystical "shiny man" he has been seeking for years. Into this microcosm drops Herald Loomis, lately having served seven indented years under the yoke of Joe Turner, here specified but also generic as a symbol of the white oppression under which the blacks have suffered in spite of nominal advances in status. James Craven's Loomis grows subtly and powerfully from the shadowed image of his first entrance to the strength and resolve of his final exit. This little world is the bridge between 19th century condescension and the beginnings of rationalization which would slowly start to emerge throughout the 20th century. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is more than an important play, it is a finely wrought drama that mesmerizes from Seth's opening lines as he watches through the kitchen window as Bynum performs one of his mystical rites in the back yard, to Herald Loomis' final involvement as a harbinger of the new black who was to make his presence felt more and more significantly as this century moved through its traumatic sea changes.

Director Claude Purdy guides this co-production between LATC and San Francisco's ACT with an insightful key to the shifting rhythms and gentle nuances of Wilson's yeasty dialogue and the affecting differences between the last generation and the next. He knows what the writing and the characters are about.

Delores Mitchell finds a great deal of humor and detail in her characterization of Bertha Holly, Seth's loving and attentive wife. As their second boarder, young and thoughtless, self-involved and raunchy Jeremy Furlow, Tyrone Granderson Jones has the right strut and stance for Wilson's statement about the type and imbues Jeremy with a slight edge of vulnerability that gives his performance forthright honesty. Kent Minault has an interesting vulnerability of another type as the white traveling man who sells Seth's pots and pans and is also a "people finder;" he and his father once found runaway slaves but he now finds blacks for other blacks. The delightful, winsome Kimberley LaMarque, with a voice as rich and textured as fresh honey, is a

strong, often touching Mattie Campbell, whose man has left and who finds momentary security with Jeremy and a possibly rewarding future with Loomis. Anna Deavere Smith is a fine, hard-edged Molly Cunningham, a lonely lady who might want some company during her stay at the Hollys', and Adilah Barnes makes a firm impression as Martha Pentecost, the long gone wife Loomis has been searching for with his young daughter since he got out from under Joe Turner's thumb. Alternating in the role of Loomis' daughter Zonia, young Christina Hill is excellent, particularly in a powerful scene as she discovers in trepidation she is to remain with her mother as Loomis strikes out on a new road; also very good is Christopher Newsome Blaine as Ruben Scott, a neighbor boy who befriends Zonia. All of the performances have that elusive quality required for writing of this caliber and richness, a sense of style and import that reaches for the inner heart of Wilson's work.

Scott Bradley's scenic design of the Holly kitchen, sitting room and backyard is detailed and livable (even considering an anachronistic plastic butter dish), a striking effect multiplied by the veracity and appropriateness of Pamela Peterson's excellent period costumes and the intricate, painterly lighting design by Ward Carlisle. Jon Gottlieb's atmospheric sound design is his usual superb quality, along with the original music and musical direction by Dwight D. Andrews, and the excellent staging by Halifu Osumare of the astonishing "juba" scene in Act I.

— T. H. McCulloh