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Charles Dutton, left, Lou Myers, Rocky Carroll and Carl Gordon in August Wilson's "Piano Lesson" at the Doolittle

STAGE REVIEW

'Piano Lesson': Harmony at Last

By SYLVIE DRAKE
THEATRE WRITER

The last time this writer looked in on August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson" was last May at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre. It was then a feisty, ebullient, exuberant play in search of an ending.

Except for Carl Gordon replacing Paul Butler as Doaker, the "Piano Lesson" that opened Thursday at the James A. Doolittle Theatre is the same production, beautifully directed by Wilson's longtime mentor and associate, Lloyd Richards, with one very important difference: It has found its conclusion. Amen.

Otherwise, it is still the same talkative, restive play about a brother and sister at loggerheads over what to do with the ancestral piano they own together. The pugnacious, rabble-rousing Boy Willie (Charles S. Dutton) wants to sell it and use his share of the money to buy some farm land, but his widowed sister, the prim Berniece (S. Epatha Merkerson) is ada-

mant about keeping it in her parlor, where it sits. That she also holds Boy Willie responsible for her husband's death merely envenoms the relationship.

The piano is tragically connected to the family history. It was originally sold to the white Sutter family for "one and a half" blacks—Berniece's and Boy Willie's great-grandmother and her 9-year-old son. The great-grandfather, left behind, carved the faces of his lost wife and son into the piano. He carved scenes from their life together, carved the legs to suggest African totems.

After Emancipation, the piano was stolen from the Sutter home by the grandsons, including Berniece and Boy Willie's father, who was killed in the aftermath. Those are the footprints in the sand, the spirits that haunt the family heirloom—spirits Berniece won't surrender. But the sibling dispute, brought on by disquieting recent events, stirs up other more immediate and threatening ghosts, real and figurative, that become principal players in the altercation.

"Piano Lesson" is not a play you just watch. It insists that you listen to it and listen carefully. It is filled with subplot-rich, tangential stories that flow freely into the main current, nurturing ancient cultural and metaphysical roots.

Understanding the complex genealogy of this family is in part understanding African American history. And it is made easier by a chart generously supplied in the program (and worth perusing before the curtain goes up). Doaker Charles (Gordon), retired railroad man, shares his Pittsburg home with his niece, Berniece, and her 11-year-old daughter, Maretha (Melissa Bess Wright). Theirs is a sedentary world set on its ear by the turbulent arrival of Boy Willie, his sweet, passive pal Lymon (Rocky Carroll) and by Boy Willie's singular, relentless request.

Other characters in the landscape: Berniece's suitor, Avery (Tommy Hollis), self-proclaimed preacher skillful at self-justification; Doaker's brother Wining Boy

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(Lou Myers), an itinerant musician with a taste for betting and booze, and Grace (Lisa Gay Hamilton), a young woman picked up first by Boy Willie, then Lymon, but who clearly belongs strictly to herself. Each is vivid and distinct.

Wilson is a consummate storyteller, an observant troubadour of the stage. After you have seen two or three of his plays—"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "Fences," "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," each of which is part of a cycle on 20th-Century black American life—you cannot fail to recognize the signature. His writing has a certain idiomatic, underlying musicality, a poet's muscularity in the language, a sense of myth and—especially in "Joe Turner" and "Piano Lesson"—a window on to a much larger cultural blueprint. For all their realistic settings, these plays are not mere parlor or kitchen-sink or recording-studio plays. They are written in the bones. They cast spells. They draw you into their mysteries.

We will not spoil the play's outcome by revealing it, except to say that it is far more frightening and satisfying than it was (if, unavoidably, a tad more pat too, which is fine). However, Dutton, in an otherwise blistering performance, should reconsider the chummy delivery of his final line. It should be as much a deeply sinister threat as a tossed-off promise—Sutter's ghost, or at least his spirit, speaking through his voice.

Production values are, as they have been all along, appropriate and unobtrusive, which is the highest compliment one can pay them. Constanza Romero has provided costumes and E. David Cosier Jr. a kitchen and parlor that are the reflection of a genteel lower middle class struggling to maintain its dignity. Christopher Akerlind's lighting is highlighted by extraterrestrial pyrotechnics, but it is above all Dwight D. Andrews music that continues to impress.

The play, predictably laced with piano-playing, has some splendid a cappella singing—not the least of its many, major rewards.

At 1615 N. Vine St. in Hollywood, Tuesdays through Saturdays, 8 p.m., with matinees, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays, 2 p.m. Ends April 1. Tickets: \$26-\$36; (213) 410-1062 or (714) 634-1300.