

## The Piano Lesson To Premiere at Yale Rep

Michael Marsland



Composer Dwight Andrews and playwright August Wilson

The Yale Repertory Theatre will host the world premiere of *The Piano Lesson*, the newest work by Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning playwright August Wilson. Preview performances will begin Monday, November 23, with opening night on Friday, November 27.

*The Piano Lesson* continues Mr. Wilson's cycle of plays addressing issues of Afro-American life during each decade of this century. Directing the production will be the Rep's artistic director Lloyd Richards, dean of the School of Drama. This is the fourth Wilson-Richards collaboration to be presented at the Yale Rep.

This also marks the fourth time that composer Dwight Andrews is creating the musical motif for an August Wilson play at the Rep. Mr. Andrews, who has been musical director at the theater since 1979 and is now a doctoral candidate at the School of Music, helped develop the music for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the story of a Chicago blues band in the 1920s.

"At the time I was skeptical of the idea of teaching actors to be musicians on stage," recalls Mr. Andrews. Since then, he's helped realize Mr. Wilson's musical vision in *Fences*, which is currently running on

(Continued on page 3)

Broadway, and Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*. "It's a very special relationship," says Mr. Andrews. "By now, I have a sense of August's 'voice'—who he is and how he sees people and drama.

"August understands the way music is central to the Black American experience," contends Mr. Andrews. In *The Piano Lesson*, set in Pittsburgh in the 1930s, a family battles over whether or not to sell a valuable carved piano, an heirloom dating back to the days of their forebears' enslavement in the South.

The production will eventually incorporate piano and blues music of the 1930s, tunes from the "spiritual ethos" and prison work songs, according to Mr. Andrews, who has combed Yale's Collection of Historical Sound Recordings and other resources for original music from the era. In addition, he is creating "metaphysical sounds" for "a ghost who must be realized sonically" and developing original piano music for scene changes.

"The task is very different from a typical music director's," says Mr. Andrews. "In many productions, there is a tendency to use song as a way of biding time on stage. In August's plays, the musical moments are born out of moments of drama.

"In *The Piano Lesson*, for instance, there is a prison work song that denotes a commonality of experience among several of the characters. As it comes up again and again, it begins to take on its own dramatic import."

Featured in *The Piano Lesson* will be Samuel L. Jackson as Boy Willie, an impulsive fast-talker who wants to sell the piano to buy land, and Starletta DuPois as Berneice, Boy Willie's sister and caretaker of the family heirloom.

Mr. Jackson recently traveled to London, Dublin, Asia and across the United States in the Negro Ensemble Company's production of *Home*. Ms. DuPois,

way in *Don't Get God Started*, won the Audelco Award for her performance in *Mary Goldstein and the Author*, which was created while she was an artist-in-residence at Yale.

Also appearing will be Carl Gordon as Doaker, Boy Willie and Berneice's uncle. Mr. Gordon was in the Broadway production of *The Great White Hope* and John Sayles' film *Brother from Another Planet*. Wining Boy, Doaker's older brother, will be portrayed by Lou Myers, who appeared on Broadway in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *The First Breeze of Summer*.

Rocky Carroll plays Lymon, Boy Willie's cohort. He was last seen in the New York Shakespeare Festival's productions of *Richard II* and *Henry IV*. Tommy Hollis appears as Avery, Berneice's suitor and fledgling preacher. His film and television credits include *Ghostbusters*, "All My Children," Thomas on "The Guiding Light" and Willy Benson on "Another World."

Third-year drama student Sharon Washington returns to the Rep as Grace, a woman looking for a good time. Ms. Washington was in last season's Rep production of *The Winter's Tale* as Perdita. Rounding out the cast are Cheneé Johnson and Ylonda Powell, alternating in the role of Maretha, Berneice's 11-year-old daughter. Both are students at the Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School.

Designers E. David Cosier Jr. (sets) and Constanza Romero (costumes) are both completing their graduate studies in design at the drama school. Christopher Akerlind (lighting) is a second-year student at the school.

*The Piano Lesson* will run through December 19. Performances are 8 pm, Monday-Friday; 2 and 8:30 pm, Saturday. There will be Wednesday matinees on December 2 and 9 at 2 pm. There will be no performance on Thanksgiving Day, November 26. For information and tickets, call 432-1234.