

## Arts & Entertainment

IN REVIEW

# Wilson's haunted family

**THE PIANO LESSON**, by August Wilson. Directed by Lloyd Richards. Yale Repertory Theatre, through Dec. 19.

By Margaret Spillane

Among the many pleasures of "The Piano Lesson," two shine brightly from start to finish: music and storytelling. Whatever dislocations and hardships have be-deviled their lives, the characters in August Wilson's new play all remain vigorous participants in the centuries-old oral culture of black America. Assembled around the kitchen table or in the sitting room, these relatives and friends contribute to the ongoing process of their own history, tale upon tale, song upon song.

### SPILLANE ON THEATER

These stories are cast in sharp relief against a backdrop of cultures in conflict. As the play opens, a youth named Lymon who's freshly arrived from Mississippi lopes into the modest Pittsburgh home of Berneice and Doaker. As played by Rocky Carroll, Lymon's anxiety energizes the stage: he endlessly tries to arrange his limbs and gestures to conform to the alien rhythms of the citified people around him. Yet in a rural context, Lymon's movements would be considered graceful, appropriate. "The Piano Lesson" is rich with such conflicts — not only urban versus rural and Northern versus Southern, but also white versus black, male versus female, and present versus past.

The crisis at the heart of "The Piano Lesson" involves all these divisions. Boy Willie, who's just arrived up North with Lymon, wants to sell the heirloom piano owned by himself and his sister Berneice. The money will let him buy good farmland, becoming the first person in their family's history to work land not owned by some white man. Berneice steadfastly

refuses to sell. To her, the piano is a beautiful, brutal reminder of the crimes of slavery. Its magnificently carved wood was the work of their slave great-grandfather, who sculpted its legs into portraits of his wife and young son. Both wife and son were later sold for the piano. Berneice's father's violent death was related to the piano, and her mother polished its wood not just with furniture wax, but, as Berneice tells it, "with her own blood." And then there's old Sutter, a white man recently and mysteriously dead in Mississippi, whose family once owned both the slaves and the piano. Now his ghost stalks Berneice's household.

Several visual effects enhance the themes of these stories. As the play begins, the stage is black except for one second-story window lit by moonlight, its curtains blowing phantomlike on a moaning wind. Equally compelling is the closing scene, a gorgeous thunderstruck *tableau vivant*.

But that final scene's audacity is undercut by another, far more heavy-handed, image: a gallery of ghostly portraits made visible by strobe-flashing sheets of lightning. This effect lends a comic-strip banality to the presence of ghosts in the play, which needs no such self-conscious literalness.

Such flaws can be easily repaired; they cast only the palest of shadows over the important work August Wilson is accomplishing in "The Piano Lesson." Artists of other ethnic cultures should pay special heed to Wilson's depiction of the powerful, unapologetic persistence of oral tradition in 20th-century black America. This rich offering of musical and narrative testimony is not mere homage, not pastiche: it is an assemblage of healthy, ongoing dialogues between present and past, in which horrors as well as treasures are brought to light. A future can be assured only to those capable of rescuing both the terror and the beauty of their history from the tomb of silence. ♦