

With more work, 'Joe Turner'

could succeed

By RUTH LESSER

You won't find his name in the cast of characters of August Wilson's new play, in its world premiere at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Yet, the presence of the title character of "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" is undeniably stamped on the work, as it is on the hearts and minds of the characters in the latest and, chronologically, the earliest Wilson play.

Set in Pittsburgh in 1911, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" precedes both "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" and "Fences." The two previous Wilson plays were set in the 1920's and '50s, respectively.

With the new play, Wilson, who may well be the foremost dramatic exponent of Black American history, examines still another area of his people's development. In this case, he deals with the dislocation and loss of identity of the newly freed slaves.

Joe Turner, who was a real person, symbolizes the old slave master who was responsible for the breaking up of many families, like that of Herald Loomis, Wilson's protagonist. Played by Charles S. Dutton who portrayed Levee in "Ma Rainey" and recently starred as Othello at the Yale Rep, Loomis is a haunted man.

Not only does he bear the wounds of his seven years' indentured slavery, but also the loss of his wife and his sense of identity. He is a lurking, ominous character, although Dutton's heavy hand makes him laughable at times.

Ultimately, however, he reaches tragic proportions, when the playwright finally pulls together the disparate strains of his work, which include religious, as well as historical and mythic elements.

Christ-like, Loomis achieves salvation after his 11 years' passion, including four years spent searching for his wife.

Wilson's play begins just weeks before this dramatic climax, with the arrival of Loomis at a boarding house in Pittsburgh, the latest stop on his arduous journey. Seth and Bertha Holly — the proprietors of the boarding house, played

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by Mel Winkler and L. Scott Caldwell, respectively — are Northern blacks.

Seth is a craftsman as well as a property owner and is not particularly sympathetic to the unskilled new arrivals. Bertha, on the other hand, is a warmhearted earth mother whose feet are firmly planted in reality. When her husband constantly says there's something strange about their newest boarder and wants to throw him out, she holds him in check, as she does also when he goes on about his high business aspirations.

There is, in fact, quite a lot of humor in "Joe Turner" in spite of its serious themes. And, the conclusion is optimistic in contrast to its forebodings.

The character of Bynum Walker, played by Ed Hall, is a prime example of the play's serio-comic nature. Bynum, named for his binding functions, is a conjurer with roots in black America's African heritage. While an object of skepticism, this member of the boarding family, himself an outcast in search of his own "shiny man," manages to soothe and bring comfort to the tortured souls to whom he ministers.

Among those, in addition to Loomis, is Mattie Campbell, an abandoned young woman who comes to Bynum for help in getting her man back. The play's title also refers to the instability of relationships between black men and women, which dates back at least to the aftermath of slavery.

In "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," not only does Loomis search for his wife and Mattie (played by Kimberleigh Burroughs) for her husband, but then a new-found relationship between Mattie and the young Jeremy (Bo Rucker) is established and soon dissolved. Only Seth and Bertha's relationship is a constant.

Another young black woman, Molly Cunningham (played by Kimberly Scott) represents a different



Lajara Henderson and Charles S. Dutton play a father and daughter searching for the girl's mother in "Joe Turner's Come and Gone."

approach to the problem of disconnectedness. She is a tough loner who espouses a philosophy of independence.

The play's final female character, with the exception of Loomis' young daughter, is his finally found wife, Martha Pentecost. Angela Bassett makes a brief, though impressive, appearance in this role of an evangelical Christian who affords Loomis his resurrection.

Other than Bynum's conjuring, the vehicle through whom Martha is found is the character of Rutherford Selig. Played by Raynor Scheine, the play's only white is a peddler-finder. His ancestors, he cheerfully

acknowledges, were bringers — of slaves — and he carries on their tradition by bringing people back together, as does his black counterpart, Bynum.

Part of Bynum's magic resides in song, through which he soothes and binds. His continuous crooning of the tune, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," presents yet another reason for the title's significance.

Under Lloyd Richards' direction, each of Wilson's characters and themes is deftly displayed. The realistic setting is aptly rendered by Scott Badley, as are the costumes by Pamela Peterson and lighting by Michael Giannitti. Subtle musical direction by Dwight Andrews, with sound design by Mathew Wiener, also accompany the polished production.

Unfortunately, all the rich strains Wilson exposes in this new drama still need further development and fusion before the play can peak. There is more narration than action. In fact, at times, his characters stand around watching each other without really interacting.

With such a wealth of material, it is only a question of refining and direction to make "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" into another great success for August Wilson. The play runs at the Yale-Rep through May 24.