

STAGE REVIEW

Wrestling With Ghosts in 'The Piano Lesson'

By SYLVIE DRAKE, *Times Theater Writer*

SAN DIEGO—In no particular order, but rather like the pieces of a giant puzzle, August Wilson is committed to writing a series of plays chronicling black life in different decades of the 20th Century.

SAN DIEGO COUNTY "The Piano Lesson," which opened Thursday at the Old Globe, is No. 4—in terms of public presentation if not of writing order. It takes care of the '30s and constitutes another buoyant and engrossing story, again with a suspenseful plot and metaphysical edge, set in an iconographic reality.

After "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "Fences" and "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," one begins to discern in "Piano Lesson" what you might call the Wilson style: the presentation of story (as opposed to text), with complex sub-stories—parenthetical and tangen-

STAN HONDA



In August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson" at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre, Charles S. Dutton, left, S. Epatha Merkerson, and Rocky Carroll argue over the fate of the family's parlor centerpiece.

tial—all of which feed like streams into the river that is his play.

The surprising result, within the traditional framework of a verbal/linear event, is transcendental kitchen-sink drama. Through dramatic banalities, Wilson probes a complex network of African and American roots. It's like listening to an ancient troubadour tell a tale of cross-cultural heritage and mythology with the habit of an old poet who has traded his rhyming dictionary for a stage.

The genealogy of "The Piano Lesson" is sufficiently ramified to require a blueprint (which the program at the Globe charitably supplies). We're invited into the parlor and kitchen of Doaker (Paul Butler), a retired railroad man who shares his Pittsburgh home with his widowed niece Berniece (S. Epatha Merkerson) and her 11-year-old daughter, Maretha (Melissa Bess Wright).

The parlor's centerpiece is an old carved piano belonging to Berniece and her brother Boy Willie (Charles S. Dutton). Berniece and Boy Willie's great-grandmother and her 9-year-old son were traded for that piano by a slave owner named Sutter, and the carvings on it are the work of the great-grandfather who was left behind.

After Emancipation, the piano was stolen from the Sutter home by the grandsons, one of whom—Berniece's and Willie Boy's father—paid with his life.

The crux of "Piano Lesson" is the struggle between Berniece and Boy Willie over the piano's fate. Sutter has died and Boy Willie has a chance to buy his land. For Boy Willie it's poetic vindication and escape from slavery—the slavery of working for others. He wants to sell the piano to raise the cash he needs, but Berniece won't do it.

For Berniece the piano is a totem filled with ancestral ghosts. And to complicate matters, she holds the blowhard Boy Willie responsible for her own husband's death. As the bickering mounts, the bad blood between them boils.

Other characters play into this drama: Berniece's suitor, Avery (Tommy Hollis), a self-anointed preacher with a knack for divine self-justification; Willie Boy's buddy Lymon (Rocky Carroll), sweet-tempered and laid back; Grace (Tonya Pinkins), a defiant woman picked up and wooed by Lymon and Boy Willie; the happy-go-lucky Wining Boy (Lou Myers), Doaker's brother—and, occasionally, a ghost at the top of the stairs.

Wilson's interweaving of agendas and temperaments, his ear for the shaggy-dog humor and richness of the most casual and most charged exchanges, climax into a second act of tremendous power. But, as in "Joe Turner," there is a sudden dropping of detail in final moments that's as maddening as it is inexplicable.

In the end, what happens to the piano is unresolved. We know it plays an intense role in Boy Willie's final confrontation with Sutter's ghost, but we're left wondering who wins, who loses and whether Boy Willie ever gets his land.

Everything up to that point has been so cleverly calibrated that Wilson's decision to leave these questions unanswered feels like an unconsummated act.

Questionable on a purely functional level is the remanding of Maretha to her room as matters lurch toward their explosive end. The child was terrified by Sutter's ghost in Act I. Why, in Act II, send her to what becomes the battlefield for Boy Willie and the ghost?

Except for this minor bleep, Lloyd Richards, who staged this Yale Repertory Theatre production, has marshaled a superior cast with the same *brío* that made such powerful presentations of the first three Wilson plays. Dutton delivers a staggering performance as Boy Willie. Hefty and flinty and loud, he's a tower of numbing, nonstop babble and unquenchable energy who mows down everything in his path.

Production values are adequate and appropriate, with E. David Cozier Jr.'s sparsely furnished set reflecting the economic bleakness and hard-won respectability of the inhabitants. A word of special commendation for Dwight D. Andrews' musical contributions. One of the show's highlights is some soulful a cappella singing in Act I.

At the Old Globe Theatre, Simon Edigon Centre for the Performing Arts in Balboa Park, Tuesdays through Saturdays, 8 p.m. (except May 17 and 25 at 7 p.m.); Sundays, 7 p.m.; matinees Saturdays and Sundays, 2 p.m. Ends May 28. Tickets: \$16-\$25; (619) 239-2255.