

Yale Reps' 'The Piano Lesson' needs considerable fine tuning

By Markland Taylor

NEW HAVEN — A fleeting moment of haunting lyricism opened Lloyd Richards' world-premiere production of August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson" at Yale Repertory Theater on Friday night.

It consisted of a gentle fragment of piano ragtime ushering in an ominous wind that brought to life the window curtains in the upstairs darkness of the domestic setting and then rushed downstairs to ruffle the strings of an elaborately-carved upright piano. Noisy pounding on the front door — at 5 a.m. — soon shattered this visual, musical poetry.

Set in Pittsburgh in 1936, "The Piano Lesson" is the fourth in Wilson's promised octad of plays about black Americans — one for each decade of the century. Its premiere was premature.

Even after work on it at the 1986 National Playwrights Conference at Waterford's Eugene O'Neill Theater Center and rewriting since then, "The Piano Lesson" is in far rougher, weaker shape than "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Pulitzer Prize-winning "Fences" or "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" were when they received their first productions at the Rep.

It needs clarifying, dramatizing and cutting, just as Richards' production of it needs a stronger cast and more rehearsal time.

As of now, Wilson is still trying to write "The Piano Lesson;" he and Richards are still trying to find its dramatic center.

The piano of the play's title was used by a white Southerner in 1856 to buy "one and a half" slaves (an adult and a child). They were the great-grandmother and grandfather of Berneice and Boy Willie, who now own the piano. If I'm correct — and it isn't always easy to follow the play, partly because it's overwritten, partly because of Southern-black accents — their father stole the piano and died because of it. Now the previous owner has died, possibly murdered, and is haunting the Pittsburgh house where Berneice is living with her uncle, Doaker, her 11-year-old daughter, Maretha, and the piano.

Obviously Berneice and Boy Willie are both haunted by their ancestral past, by 200 years of slavery.



Berneice (Starletta DuPois) and her uncle, Wining Boy (Lou Myers) consider the future of the family heirloom piano in the world premiere of August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson" at Yale Repertory Theatre.

Boy Willie has arrived out of the blue from the South with buddy Lymon and a truckload of watermelons to sell. But his main aim is to sell the piano, take his half of the proceeds, and buy a better future — buy land once owned (I think) by the white family that bought his forebears.

Berneice flatly refuses to allow her brother to sell the piano, stating that "You can't sell your soul for money." To her, the piano, which has totemic portraits of her ancestors carved on it by her great-grandfather, is soaked with their blood and is beyond mere monetary value.

The play ends, noisily and unsatisfactorily, with an exorcism in

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which Boy Willie appears to be attacked by the ghost that's been haunting the house.

Wilson hasn't concentrated on the presumably central dilemma surrounding the piano. He wanders away to other characters too often, indulging in story-telling small talk that ends up as padding.

And in the second act he gives Boy Willie so many endlessly long speeches that they become self-defeating, especially as delivered with ear-grating sameness by Samuel L. Jackson (the actor has a tough job since he's supposed to be an impulsively non-stop talker).

On Friday night, Carl Gordon appeared unsure of himself as Doaker and tended to slow the tempo down. Starletta DuPois had assurance and dignity as Berneice, but was sometimes asked by her playwright to switch emotions too abruptly.

Rocky Carroll brought an amusingly loping physicality to the somewhat cliched role of none-too-bright Lymon, and Tommy

Hollis was acceptable as Avery, the preacher who wants to marry widowed Berneice.

As flashy visiting "recording star" Wining Boy, Lou Myers was fine; but the role seems beside the point.

(One of the production's most winning individual scenes is the singing of an insistently rhythmic work song by Boy Willie, Wining Boy, Lymon and Doaker — thanks, presumably, to music director/composer Dwight Andrews. But it, too, hasn't been incorporated persuasively.)

A. David Cosier Jr.'s setting doesn't quite work, the flat reality of the downstairs living-room and kitchen not quite jelling with the gauzy blackness of the upstairs (at times hazy portraits of ancestors appear in it). This uneasy dichotomy is true of Richards' direction — and of the play itself — jazzy humor not coming to terms with the troubling, unsettling spirit that pervades, or should pervade, the work.

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