

A Study Guide
Of
The Piano Lesson

By August Wilson

FORT WAYNE CIVIC THEATRE

IN THE WINGS
Arts-In-Education Program

PERFORMANCES FOR SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL SERVICES
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The Author

Pulitzer Prize winning playwright August Wilson (April 27, 1945 - October 2, 2005) is one of the most influential writers in American theater. He is best known for his unprecedented cycle of 10 plays, often called the Pittsburgh Cycle because all but one play is set in the Pittsburgh neighborhood where August Wilson grew up. The series of plays chronicle the tragedies and aspirations of African Americans during each decade of the 20th century.

The son of a white father and a black mother, August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittle on April 27, 1945 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His father, also called Frederick August Kittle, was a German immigrant and baker and spent very little time with the family. His mother, Daisy Wilson, raised August and his five siblings in a small, two-bedroom apartment in the poor Hill District neighborhood of Pittsburgh, working hard as a cleaning lady to put food on the table.

When August Wilson was a teenager, his mother married David Bedford and the family moved to Hazelwood, a predominately white working-class neighborhood. There and in school, August and his family encountered threats and racial hostility. After going through several different high schools, including a year at Pittsburgh Central Catholic High School, August Wilson eventually dropped out of school all together, at the age of 15, turning instead to self-education at the Carnegie Library.

After his father died in 1965, August Wilson officially changed his name to honor his mother. That same year, he purchased his first typewriter and began to write poetry. Drawn to the theater and inspired by the civil rights movement, in 1968 August Wilson co-founded the Black Horizons Theatre in the Hill District of Pittsburgh with his friend, Rob Penny. His early work failed to gain much attention, but his third play, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" (1982), about a group of black musicians discussing their experiences in racist America, won August Wilson wide recognition as a dramatist and interpreter of the African American experience.

August Wilson's series of plays brought him recognition as one of America's most celebrated dramatists and earned him numerous awards, among them the Tony Award (1985), the New York Drama Critics Circle Award (1985) and the Pulitzer Prize for drama (1990). The Virginia Theater on Broadway in NYC was renamed the *August Wilson Theater* in his honor in 2005, and the African American Cultural Center of Greater Pittsburgh was renamed the *August Wilson Center for African American Culture* in 2006. Wilson died on October 2, 2005 from liver cancer. He was sixty.

The Pittsburgh Cycle of Plays

- "Gem of the Ocean," 1904
- "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," 1911
- "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," 1927
- "The Piano Lesson," 1936
- "Seven Guitars," 1948
- "Fences," 1957-58 and 1963
- "Two Trains Running," 1969
- "Jitney," 1977
- "King Hedley, II," 1985
- "Radio Golf," 1997



Quotes

- [on African American artist Romare Bearden] "When I saw his work, it was the first time that I had seen black life presented in all its richness, and I said, 'I want to do that -- I want my plays to be the equal of his canvases.'"
- "Style ain't nothing but keeping the same idea from beginning to end. Everybody got it."
- "I might be a different kind of fool, but I ain't gonna be the same fool twice."
- "I know some things when I start. I know, let's say, that the play is going to be a 1970s or a 1930s play, and it's going to be about a piano, but that's it. I slowly discover who the characters are as I go along."
- "Regardless of the medium, rewriting and more rewriting is still necessary. No one gets anything right the first time, and since I don't write with a hammer and chisel, it's relatively easy for me to change. It's just words on paper. Words are free. You don't go to the store and order a pound of words, or five hundred words, and pay your three dollars. They're free."

Fun Fact

- The first revival of Wilson's play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* opened on Broadway in April of 2009. It closed in June, but not after experiencing ticket sales triple the day after President Obama saw the show with his family.

The Play

Synopsis

The Piano Lesson is set in Pittsburgh in 1936, with all the action taking place in the house of Doaker Charles. A 137-year-old, upright piano, decorated with totems in the manner of African sculpture, dominates the parlor.

The play opens at dawn. Boy Willie, Doaker's nephew, knocks at the door and enters with his partner, Lymon. The two have come from Mississippi to sell watermelons. Willie has not seen his sister Berniece, who lives with Doaker, for three years as he has been serving a sentence on the Parchman Prison Farm. Willie asks his uncle for a celebratory drink: the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog have drowned Sutter in his own well. Willie intends to sell the family piano and use the money to buy Sutter's land, the land his ancestors once worked as slaves. Doaker, however, is sure Berniece will not part with the piano. Indeed, Avery Brown—a preacher who has been courting Berniece since her husband Crawley died—has already tried to get her to sell it. Willie schemes to get in touch with the prospective buyer himself. Suddenly Berniece cries out off-stage, "Go on get away." Berniece claims she has seen Sutter's ghost, calling Boy Willie's name. She is convinced that her brother pushed Sutter into the well. Shaken, she refuses to cooperate with his plans.

Three days later, Doaker's brother Wining Boy, a wandering, washed-up recording star, sits at the kitchen table discussing the recent events with the men. Wining Boy mentions that he heard Willie and Lymon were on Parchman Farm. Willie explains that some whites had tried to chase Willie, Lymon, and Berniece's husband Crawley from some wood they were pilfering. Crawley fought back and was killed while the other two went to prison. The men reminisce about Parchman and sing an old work song.

Doaker then explains the piano's history to Lymon. During slavery, a man named Robert Sutter, the recently deceased-Sutter's grandfather, owned the Charles family. He wanted to make an anniversary present out of his friend's piano but could not afford it. Thus he traded a full and half grown slave—Doaker's grandmother Berniece and his father—for the instrument. Though initially Sutter's wife loved the piano, she eventually came to miss her slaves, falling desperately ill. So, Sutter asked Doaker's grandfather, Willie Boy, to carve the faces of his wife and child into the piano. Willie Boy did not only carve his immediate family, however, but included his mother, father, and various scenes from the family history. Years after slavery, Berniece and Boy Willie's father, Boy Charles, developed an obsession over the piano, believing that as long as the Sutters held it, they held the family in bondage. Thus, on July 4, 1911, he, Doaker, and Wining Boy stole it. Later that day, lynchers set Boy Charles's house on fire. He fled to catch the Yellow Dog, but the mob stopped the train and set his boxcar on fire. Boy Charles died along with the hobos in his car, all of whom became the ghosts of the railroad. Once Doaker has finished his story, Willie and Lymon attempt to move the piano. Berniece enters and commands Willie to stop, since the piano is their legacy. Berniece invokes the memory of their mother, who attended to the piano until the day she died. She attacks Boy Willie for perpetuating the endless theft and murder in their family, blaming him for the death of her husband. Suddenly, Maretha, Berniece's daughter, is heard screaming upstairs in terror, as Sutter's ghost has appeared again.

The following morning, Wining Boy enters with a suit he has been unable to pawn. Shrewdly, he sells his suit to Lymon, promising that it has a magical effect on the ladies. Lymon and Boy Willie plan to go out the local picture show and find some women. Later that evening, Berniece appears preparing a tub for her bath. Avery enters and proposes to Berniece anew. Berniece refuses and wonders why everyone tells her she cannot be a woman unless she has a man. Changing the subject, Berniece asks Avery to bless the house in hopes of exorcising Sutter's ghost. Avery suggests that she use the piano to start a choir at his church. Berniece replies that she leaves the piano untouched to keep from waking its spirits. Several hours later, Boy Willie enters the darkened house with Grace, a local girl. They begin to kiss and knock over a lamp. Berniece comes downstairs and orders them out. As Berniece is making tea, Lymon returns, looking for Willie. He is tired of one-night stands and dreams of finding the right woman. Musing on Wining Boy's magic suit, he withdraws a bottle of perfume from his pocket and gives it to Berniece and they kiss.

The final scene begins the next day with Willie telling Maretha of the Ghosts of Yellow Dog. He has already called the buyer about the piano. Berniece enters and once again orders Willie out of her house. They argue anew and Willie invokes the memory of his father, arguing that he only plans to do as he might have done. Willie and Lymon begin to move the piano. Berniece exits and reappears with Crawley's gun. Suddenly a drunken Wining Boy enters, comically breaking the tension of the scene. He sits down to play a song he wrote in memory of his wife, shielding the piano from Willie. A knock at the door follows, and Grace enters. She and Lymon have a date for the picture show and suddenly Sutter's presence asserts itself. Grace flees with Lymon, leaving only the members of the Charles family and Avery in the house. Avery moves to bless the piano. Boy Willie intercedes, taunting Sutter as Avery attempts his exorcism. He charges up the stairs, and an unseen force drives him back. He charges back up, and then engages with Sutter in a life-and-death struggle. Suddenly, Berniece realizes what she must do and begins to play the piano. "I want you to help me," she sings, naming her ancestors. A calm comes over the house. Willie reappears and asks Wining Boy if he is ready to catch the train back south. Willie says goodbye to his sister, and Berniece gives thanks.

Characters

- **Avery**

Avery was one of Boy Willy's acquaintances down South but like so many other southern African-Americans he migrated to the North. He now works in Pittsburgh as an elevator operator. Avery has also become a preacher and is trying to raise funds to build a church. His dream of becoming a preacher and ministering to a congregation represents one of the traditional ways in which African Americans rose to prominence within their communities and reminds the audience of the importance of religion within African-American culture. Avery courts Berniece and hopes that she will agree to marry him and play piano for the church congregation. But when Avery repeats his proposal of marriage to Berniece in Act Two, scene two, she refuses to talk about it seriously. Instead, she asks him to return the next day to exercise Sutter's ghost and bless the house. Avery's exorcism ceremony is unsuccessful, however. It is up to Berniece to call upon another spiritual source — the power of her ancestors — to rid the family of Sutter's presence.

- **Berniece Charles**

Berniece, Boy Willie's sister, long since left the South for Pittsburgh. There she married Crawley and had a daughter, Maretha. Widowed for three years, she works as a domestic to support her small family. Recently, an old acquaintance from down South, Avery, has begun to court her; however, Berniece is very ambivalent about his interest. She feels angry that her family and friends are pressuring her to marry again: "Everybody telling me I can't be a woman unless I got a man." Berniece's attitude toward the piano is also profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, she is fiercely protective of it and refuses to allow Boy Willie to sell it. She also encourages Maretha to play the piano. On the other hand, she refuses to play the piano herself, claiming that she only played it while her widowed mother was alive out of respect. After her mother's death, she ceased to play it because she was bitter about the pain it had brought the family. In the last scene in the play, Lymon and Boy Willie attempt to remove the piano, but Berniece threatens them with Crawley's gun. The potentially tragic confrontation between sister and brother diffuses when Sutter's ghost appears. While Boy Willie tries to wrest it physically from the house, Berniece turns to the past — to African-American spiritualism — to exorcise its presence. The siblings' joint battle with the past thus reconciles them in the present.

- **Boy Willie Charles**

Boy Willie is Berniece's brother and Doaker's nephew. Unlike them, he has remained in the South, farming the land that their family worked for generations. He dreams of raising enough cash to buy land from the diminished Sutter family so that he can become an independent farmer rather than a debt-ridden share-cropper. Boy Willie plans to raise the cash by selling a load of watermelons and the family piano, which he part owns with Berniece. To this end, he travels North to Pittsburgh. Berniece refuses to sell the piano, however, and there are additional troubles in the past that divide brother and sister. During Boy Willie's last visit, he was involved in an illegal racket and fell into trouble with the local police. He lied to Berniece's husband, Crawley, about the racket; Crawley tried to protect him from the police and was killed. Boy Willie departed hastily. His grieving, hostile sister is thus doubly opposed to his plan to part with the family legacy. Boy Willie complains that Berniece never uses the piano, and he uses this observation to justify his decision to sell it. His complaint is a good example of his pragmatic approach to life: why should not an unused piano be sold to purchase productive land? But it does no justice to Boy Willie's character to describe him as simply interested in "getting ahead." Boy Willie reverences the family past in a different way from Berniece. He seeks to revitalize the land worked by his enslaved ancestors and to make that land finally theirs by owning and working it himself. Moreover, he seeks to educate his niece, Maretha, about her background, believing that pride in the past will help her hold her head high.

- **Doaker Charles**

Doaker is Berniece and Boy Willie's uncle. He is a dignified, wiser older man who used to earn his living building and working the railroads and now works as a railroad cook. If Boy Willie and Berniece are two out-of-kilter wheels, their uncle Doaker is the frame that holds them together. He is the play's chief story-teller: in fact, he does a better job of remembering and narrating the family history than either Berniece or Boy Willie. It is

through Doaker that the audience learns about the importance of the piano: “See, now . . . to understand about that piano . . . you got to go back to slavery time.” Doaker’s description of the piano’s place in their family history is powerful stuff, and although he plays a neutral role in the siblings’ dispute, his narration of the story suggests that he sides with Berniece.

- **Maretha Charles**

Maretha is Berniece’s eleven-year-old daughter. She is mainly important because Berniece and Boy Willy clash about how she should be raised. Should she be told her family’s history, particularly the history of the piano that her mother is encouraging her to play, or should she be encouraged to forget it and thus be freed from the “burden” of the past? The resolution of this question has particular importance because Maretha, as the next generation of the family, represents the future of not only her own family but of the African American people.

- **Wining Boy Charles**

Wining Boy is Doaker’s brother and thus Boy Willie and Berniece’s uncle. He is a failed musician and gambler, by turns charming and affectionate, at others, selfish and irresponsible. As his name implies, he is something of a “wino” — a heavy drinker — and also something of a “whiner” — a bluesman. In Act One, scene two, Wining Boy reminisces about old times with Doaker. He also succeeds in conning money from Lymon and Boy Willie, both of whom are flush with cash after selling their watermelons. His role in the play is not critical but in some ways his presence is a reflection upon the present fate of the piano: the failure of the music within.

- **Grace**

Grace’s appearance on-stage is brief. She and Boy Willie have a brief encounter in the living room before Berniece, outraged, orders them to stop or leave the house. They leave.

- **Lymon**

Lymon is Boy Willie’s friend from “down South.” He is in trouble with the local sheriff back home and has traveled North with Boy Willie to escape prosecution and to sell their truck load of watermelons. Lymon plans to stay in Pittsburgh. It is, however, his first time in the North, and for much of the play he is more concerned with exploring the dazzling city lights than with selling the watermelons and finding a job. His inexperience and naïveté provide much humor in Act Two, scene one, when Wining Boy cons him into parting with six hard-earned dollars for a cheap suit, shirt, and pair of shoes. His naïveté is also apparent in Act Two, scene three, when he tells Berniece that Boy Willie picked up the woman Lymon had been angling after. During this scene, Lymon compliments Berniece on her nightgown and gives her a bottle of perfume. They kiss. Their brief intimacy suggests that Berniece is melting the barriers she erected after Crawley’s death; this prefigures the play’s positive resolution.

Quotes

- **Boy Willie:** “That's when I discovered the power of death. See, a nigger that ain't afraid to die is the worse kind of nigger for the white man. He can't hold that power over you. That's what I learned when I killed the cat. I got the power of death too. I can command him. I can call him up. The white man don't like to see that. He don't like for you to stand up and look him square in the eye and say, ‘I got it too.’ Then he got to deal with you square up.”
- **Berniece:** “I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me. I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits.”
- **Boy Willie:** “Hey, Berniece, if you and Maretha don't keep playing on that piano, ain't no telling me and Sutter both liable to be back.”

Fun Fact

- The first revival of Wilson’s play Joe Turner’s Come and Gone opened on Broadway in April of 2009. The show was the center of controversy in that it was the first time one of Wilson’s plays had been directed by a white director (Bartlett Sher). During his lifetime, Wilson only allowed black directors to direct his work. He felt that the subject of his work, the African-American experience, could only be understood by an African-American. He once said that he “declined a white director not on the basis of race but on the basis of culture.” Wilson’s other reason for this rule was to give more opportunities for black directors and designers.

Sher is a close friend of Wilson’s widow, Constanza Romero, who was the one to initially endorse Sher’s production. On the subject, she said, "While August had been this heavyweight champion of black culture and the African-American experience on stage, that was his work when he was alive. My work is to get these stories out there and to help ensure that audiences walk out of the plays with a deeper understanding for these American stories and for the ways our cultures intertwine."

The revival was nominated for six Tony Awards in 2009. Roger Robinson won in the Featured Actor category and Sher won for direction. The show also won the award for Best Lighting Design. It closed in June, but not after experiencing ticket sales triple the day after President Obama saw the show with his family.

Original NY Times Review

A Family Confronts Its History in August Wilson's 'Piano Lesson'

By FRANK RICH

Published: April 17, 1990

The piano is the first thing the audience hears in "The Piano Lesson," the new August Wilson play at the Walter Kerr Theater. Three hours later, it seems as if the music, by turns bubbling and thunderous, has never stopped.

Though Mr. Wilson won a Pulitzer Prize last week for this work, no one need worry that he is marching to an establishment beat. "The Piano Lesson" is joyously an African-American play: it has its own spacious poetry, its own sharp angle on a nation's history, its own metaphorical idea of drama and its own palpable ghosts that roar right through the upstairs window of the household where the action unfolds. Like other Wilson plays, "The Piano Lesson" seems to sing even when it is talking. But it isn't all of America that is singing. The central fact of black American life - the long shadow of slavery - transposes the voices of Mr. Wilson's characters, and of the indelible actors who inhabit them, to a key that rattles history and shakes the audience on both sides of the racial divide.

Set in the Pittsburgh of 1936, just midway in time between "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" and "Fences," Mr. Wilson's new play echoes his others by reaching back toward Africa and looking ahead to modern urban America even as it remains focused on the intimate domestic canvas of a precise bygone year. Though "The Piano Lesson" is about a fight over the meaning of a long span of history, its concerns are dramatized within a simple battle between a sister and a brother over the possession of a musical instrument. The keeper of the piano, a family heirloom, is a young widow named Berniece (S. Epatha Merkerson), who lets it languish unused in the parlor of the house she shares with her uncle and daughter. Her brother, Boy Willie (Charles S. Dutton), barges in unannounced from Mississippi, intending to sell the antique to buy a farm on the land his family worked as slaves and sharecroppers.

One need only look at the majestic upright piano itself to feel its power as a symbolic repository of a people's soul. Sculptured into its rich wood are totemic human figures whose knife-drawn features suggest both the pride of African culture and the grotesque scars of slavery. As it happens, both the pride and scars run deep in the genealogy of the siblings at center stage. Their great-grandfather, who carved the images, lost his wife and young son when they were traded away for the piano. Years later, Berniece and Boy Willie's father was killed after he took the heirloom from a new generation of white owners.

In "The Piano Lesson," the disposition of the piano becomes synonymous with the use to which the characters put their ancestral legacy. For Berniece, the instrument must remain a somber shrine to a tragic past. For Boy Willie, the piano is a stake to the freedom his father wanted him to have. To Mr. Wilson, both characters are right - and wrong. Just as Berniece is too enslaved by history to get on with her life, so Boy Willie is too cavalier about his family's heritage to realize that money alone cannot buy him independence and equality in a white man's world. Like all Wilson protagonists, both the brother and sister must take a journey, at times a supernatural one, to the past if they are to seize the future. They cannot be reconciled with each other until they have had a reconciliation with the identity that is etched in their family tree, as in the piano, with blood.

Mr. Dutton and Ms. Merkerson prove to be extraordinary adversaries through every twist of their no-holds-barred dispute. They command equal respect and affection through antithetical acting styles. As he first revealed as Levee, the discordant trumpet player in Mr. Wilson's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," the burly, broadly smiling Mr. Dutton is a force of nature on stage: a human cyclone who, as Berniece says, sows noise, confusion and trouble wherever he goes. Here is that rare actor who can announce that he's on fire and make an audience believe he might actually burn down the theater. Yet the impressive Ms. Merkerson remains quiet and dignified holding her ground against him - at least up to a point. In the evening's most devastating scene, she slugs her brother in impotent fury, as if her small fists and incantatory wails might somehow halt the revenge-fueled cycle of violence that killed her father and her husband and their fathers before them.

Although the second act contains its dead ends, repetitions and excessive authorial announcements - an O'Neill-like excess in most of this writer's plays - Mr. Wilson prevents the central conflict in "The Piano Lesson" from becoming too nakedly didactic by enclosing it within an extended household of memorable characters. The ebb and flow of diurnal activity in Berniece's home thickens the main theme while offering a naturalistic picture of a transitional black America in an era when movies, skyscrapers and airplanes were fresh wonders of the world. A Wilson play feels truly lived in - so much so in Lloyd Richards's supple production that activities like the cooking of eggs, the washing of dishes, and the comings and goings from an audibly flushed toilet never seem like stage events, but become subliminal beats in the rhythm of a self-contained universe.

Still, the play's real music is in the language, all of which is gloriously served by the ensemble company that Mr. Richards has assembled and honed during the more than two years that "The Piano Lesson" has traveled to New York by way of the country's resident theaters. Carl Gordon, as an uncle who has spent 27 years working for the railroad, and Lou Myers, as another uncle who has hit his own long road as a traveling musician, trade tall and small tales of hard-won practical philosophy, political wisdom, women and whisky - some of them boisterously funny, others unexpectedly touching. At other moments, their colloquial verbal cadences trail off seamlessly into riffs of actual song, whether piano blues or roof-raising vocal harmonies, that express their autobiographies of pride, defiance and suffering as eloquently as their words.

A younger generation of dispossessed black men with a different set of experiences and aspirations is just as vividly represented by Tommy Hollis, as a Bible-toting elevator man with dreams of leading his own Christian flock, and Rocky Carroll, as a wide-eyed rural drifter dazzled by his first exposure to the big city. A scene in which Mr. Carroll briefly courts Ms. Merkerson by presenting her with a dollar bottle of "French perfume" is, in writing, staging and performance, a masterly romantic duet of crossed signals and unacknowledged longings that seems to float up from a distant, innocent time like a hallucination.

While there are no white characters in "The Piano Lesson," the presence of white America is felt throughout - and not just by dint of past history. Boy Willie repeatedly and pointedly announces that he will sell the piano to a white man who he's heard is roaming through black neighborhoods "looking to buy musical instruments." Whatever happens to the piano, however, the playwright makes it clear that the music in "The Piano Lesson" is not up for sale. That haunting music belongs to the people who have lived it, and it has once again found miraculous voice in a play that August Wilson has given to the American stage.

Review of Production at Chicago's Court Theatre

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* well played at Court Theatre

by Catey Sullivan

It is as close to a can't miss combo as you're apt to see in Chicago's theatrosphere: Director Ron OJ Parson, leading man AC Smith and playwright August Wilson. And sure enough, that triumvirate of talent creates something wonderful in the Court Theatre's production of *The Piano Lesson*.

The dialogue sparks with intelligence, the characters run as deep as the wells that figure in several off-stage drownings, and the plot is a high stakes clash between the natural and the supernatural worlds. The downside: Wilson peters out with his final scene, leaving many a loose end dangling and filling the stage with the contrived drama of special effects and cacophonous screaming in lieu of a solid, satisfying conclusion. But right up until those final flashy and ultimately disappointing moments, *The Piano Lesson* is both richly rewarding and absorbing.

Set in the 1930s, the play is the fourth in Wilson's monumental 20th Century cycle. Penning a drama for each decade, Wilson explored the African-American experience (as much as that experience can be described as a collective) with more detail, scope and insight than any other American playwright to date. Like each of the plays in the cycle, *The Piano Lesson* is takes place in Pittsburgh in a world where the past reaches out to touch the present like fingers of encroaching fog. Here, the echoes of bygone times are both tangible (the hand-carved, heirloom piano at the heart of the tale) and intangible (the slithering shadows and whispered rustlings of the dead).

Wrapped through it all is a titanic clash of wills among members of the Charles family, a group whose slave ancestors are barely two generations gone. Boy Willie (Ronald Conner, spot-on as an exasperatingly garrulous man in a hurry to begin his future) wants to sell the incredibly valuable piano of the title in the name of the future. He'd use the money to buy the land his grandfather worked as a slave and, by starting a farm there, avenge his father's life-long humiliation at toiling another man's land for subsistence wages.

Boy Willie's sister Berniece (Tyla Abercrombie) is granite solid in her insistence that the piano stay right where it is, in the Pittsburgh house she shares with her Uncle Doaker (Smith, an actor who is a maestro when it comes to depicting August Wilson creations). The family paid for the instrument in blood, Berniece notes with understated yet uncompromising passion – every note that comes from the piano is rooted in the death of Boy Charles, their grandfather.

The passage is a thriller; part wild adventure tale and part spine-chilling ghost story. It is also as horrifically tragic as the dozens of unquiet hobo ghosts who everyone in the Charles family knows haunt the Yellow Dog train line. (How those hobos burned to death in a boxcar along with Boy Charles? That's a story that will stay with audiences long after the final curtain.)

Like all the dramas in Wilson's formidable cycle, *The Piano Lesson* is shadowed by the supernatural. Berniece and Doaker are both visited by Sutter – after he died by falling down his well – dressed in his burial suit and calling for Boy Willie. And in bit of sound design creepiness par excellence (by Nick Keenan), Doaker's very house shudders and moans every time Boy Willie attempts to move the heavy piano.

Of the many marvelous intricacies winding through the drama, Boy Willie and Berniece's clash of wills is the most dominant, although there are fully realized and often hilarious side-stories: The pathetic and poignant attempts by Boy Willie's friend Lymon (Brian Weddington) to get a girlfriend, if only for a night; Doaker's ne'er do well brother Wining Boy (Alfred H. Wilson) trying to raise a few bucks by pawning a silk suit; Boy Willie's ceaseless chattering.

Being the great dramatist that he is, Wilson makes it all but impossible to decide who is right in the core conflict between Boy Willie and Berniece. Boy Willie's dreams of a better future, Berniece's insistence on honoring the past – both perspectives are presented with passion and detail.

The ending offers no resolution, only fire and brimstone and an abruptness that leaves the piece feeling unfinished. A coda, we'll argue, is in order.

Fun Facts

- *The Piano Lesson* was inspired by Romare Bearden's painting of the same name.
- The original Broadway production opened at the Walter Kerr Theater on April 16, 1990, running for 328 performances, and was nominated for the 1990 Tony for Best Play.
- Several original cast members went on to be in the 1995 Hallmark Hall of Fame movie version of the play.

The Piano Lesson, along with several other August Wilson plays, is available at the Allen County Public Library.

Discussion

- 1) What is the thematic significance of the final exorcism? Discuss the roles each character plays in casting out Sutter's ghost.
- 2) *The Piano Lesson* relies more on reportage and storytelling than action. Discuss the role of storytelling in the play.
- 3) Music is a crucial element of this play as is the trope of the piano lesson. Choose and discuss one example of the use of music in the play.
- 4) How does the ghost affect the characters of the play? What other plays have you seen in which ghosts significantly alter the outcome of the story?
- 5) Aside from the monetary value, what does owning a farm mean to Boy Willie?
- 6) Do you agree with Boy Willie or with Bernice about what should be done about the piano?
- 7) What do you think Maretha will take away from this experience?

**Do you have questions or comments about *The Piano Lesson* or the Civic Theatre's production of it?
Join the discussion on Facebook:
Fort Wayne Civic Theatre.**

ADDITIONAL ARTICLES OF INTEREST

The Value of History in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/16391/the_value_of_history_in_august_wilsons.html?cat=4

***The Piano Lesson* Study Guide by August Wilson**

<http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-pianolesson/>

***The Piano Lesson* Resource Guide**

http://penumbratheatre.org/downloads/studyguides/The_Piano_Lesson_Resource_Guide.pdf

May All Your Fences Have Gates – Essays on the Drama of August Wilson

http://books.google.com/books?id=9J7DW-IXBp8C&pg=PA105&lpg=PA105&dq=August+Wilson+The+Piano+Lesson&source=bl&ots=r7n5rgg0fn&sig=4h6FLGtjmLQsBKQw4dkXn3ThIWI&hl=en&ei=yyhvSuPHG5r8tgfy2ODZCA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9

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