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THEATER

# A 'Piano Lesson' worth seeing, and learning



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Lately, I've started to feel as if I am once again majoring in dramatic literature as an undergrad at NYU and taking an introductory course on African-American Drama.

At this moment, theatergoers can check out new productions of three pillars of African-American dramatic literature, each representing a different era and generation: Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1959), August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson" (1987), and Suzan-Lori Parks' "Topdog/Underdog" (2001).

"The Piano Lesson" is one of the best-known works in Wilson's monumental "Century Cycle" of 10 dramas dramatizing the African-American ex-

perience in each decade of the 20th century, which are mostly set in Pittsburgh's Hill District, with some recurring themes and characters. Long before the current effort to produce film adaptations of all of Wilson's plays, "The Piano Lesson" received a 1995 Hallmark Hall of Fame TV film version with many members of the original Broadway cast.

In advance of a new film version of the play that is intended for Netflix (which produced Wilson's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" in 2020), "The Piano Lesson" has returned to Broadway with an exceptional cast that includes Samuel L. Jackson, Danielle Brooks, and John David Washington (who is Denzel Washington's son, and who also looks a lot like his father), under the direction of LaTanya Richardson Jackson (who is Samuel L. Jackson's wife).



Samuel L. Jackson in "The Piano Lesson"

PHOTO BY JULIETA CERVANTES

Set in 1936 Pittsburgh, “The Piano Lesson” is a conversational, spiritual, and musical drama that is grounded in the conflict between two siblings over how to reconcile their family’s past and future, as demonstrated by their piano, an heirloom dating back to the days of slavery, in which their ancestors are depicted in elaborate wood carvings.

While Boy Willie (Washington, with youthful vitality yearning) wants to

sell the piano in order to raise the funds necessary to buy the farmland on which their family labored for generations, Berniece (Brooks, pained and defiant) is adamant that the piano, which their father lost his life to secure, must never be sold, leaving their uncle Doaker (Jackson, conciliatory and chummy) to mediate the dispute.

To complicate matters, the piano is haunted by the ghosts of the family’s ancestors and former own-

ers, which culminates in a spectacular climax to the nearly three-hour play.

This is a straightforward, well-acted, richly-designed, enjoyable revival that accentuates the competing passions exhibited by Washington and Brooks and the sincere, warmhearted personalities surrounding both of them, including Jackson, Ray Fisher, Trai Byers, and Michael Potts.

*Barrymore Theatre, 243 W. 47th St., [pianolessonplay.com](http://pianolessonplay.com). Through Jan. 15.*