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## Getting Schooled, And Loving It

John David Washington, a newcomer to the Broadway stage, adds to his body of knowledge in 'The Piano Lesson.'

By DAVE ITZKOFF

You cannot show up more prepared than John David Washington, cannot outmaneuver him and cannot get ahead of him. If you think you have arrived on time for your lunch appointment with him, you will find he has already been waiting for you — he has, in fact, been sitting quietly at a table at Bubby's for 15 minutes, in his perennially prompt, unapologetically eager manner. And now he is not just ready to eat; he is practically vibrating in his chair so he can tear through a bowl of matzo ball soup and get back to the Ethel Barrymore Theater, where he has been performing in "The Piano Lesson."

Washington is by no means a novice actor. At 38, he has already starred in films like Spike Lee's true-crime drama "BlackKlansman" and Christopher Nolan's mind-bending, time-twisting adventure "Tenet."

But he is a newcomer to the Broadway stage, and in "The Piano Lesson," he is making his debut with a demanding and poignant August Wilson play, in a high-profile production featuring the husband-and-wife team of Samuel L. Jackson (who co-stars in it) and LaTanya Richardson Jackson (who directed it).

Despite his lack of theater experience, Washington has drawn raves for his performance. In her review, the New York Times critic Maya Phillips wrote, "Washington, in a revelatory stage debut, is a blaze of energy lighting every scene he's in."

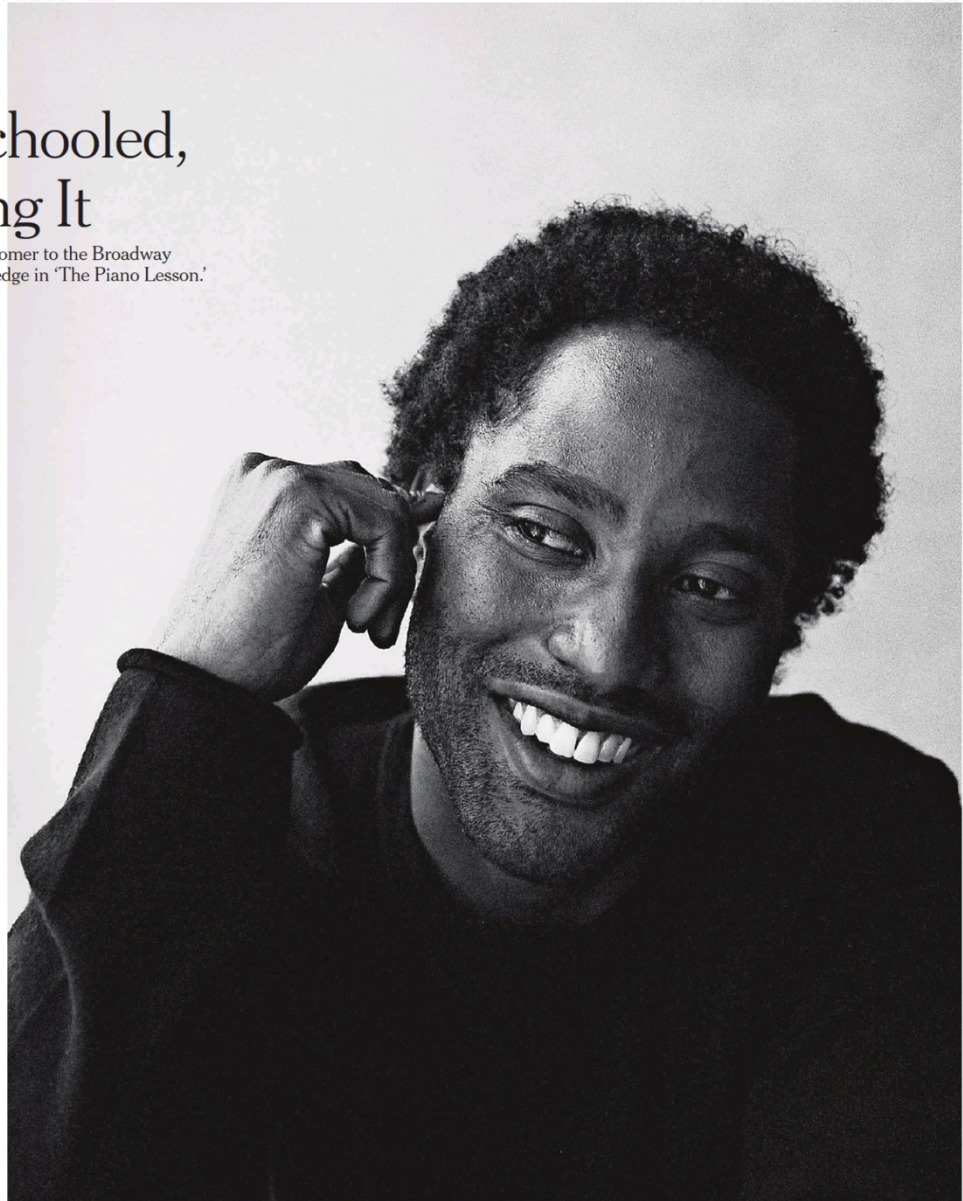
To navigate a text and a discipline that are unfamiliar to him, Washington is approaching the task like a humble rookie, ready to receive the education that it might provide — along with any bumps or bruises that might come with it.

Asked why he wanted to perform in "The Piano Lesson," Washington said: "I did it for selfish reasons. This was like going back to school. This is a master class. I want to learn. I want to get beat up."

He added, "If I can survive, I'm going to be such a better actor than I was before I started this."

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"This is a master class," John David Washington said, explaining why he wanted to perform in "The Piano Lesson."



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On a Tuesday in October before the play had opened, Washington was bracing himself for the rehearsal later that afternoon. "We're going in for notes and preparing to get slaughtered," he said.

If his language is full of vivid, brutal metaphors, it might be because Washington is a former football player — a relentless running back for the Morehouse College Maroon Tigers and later for the St. Louis Rams, as well as teams in the now-defunct N.F.L. Europe and U.F.L.

He is also, of course, a son of Denzel Washington, the decorated actor and filmmaker. John David, who lives in New York, has spent a lifetime observing his father's performances, whether as a child seeing him in "Richard III" at Shakespeare in the Park or as a grown man watching him in the Broadway production of "Fences," the Wilson play that his father later starred in and directed for the screen.

When Denzel Washington learned that John David was getting ready for the eight-shows-a-week rigor of Broadway, he heartily encouraged the proposition. "He said, 'It's a full-contact sport, John David,'" the younger Washington recalled.

But when John David decided that he wanted to pursue acting, after a torn Achilles tendon halted his sports career, it was impressed upon him that he would achieve success only through hard work and not by trading on his last name.

Jackson, a longtime friend of the Washington family, said that he was one of several people who talked to the young man about the challenging path that awaited him. "We all told him, you can't just step up in there and think it's going to happen," Jackson recalled. "You've got to go to class, you've got to put in the work. Being the dedicated athlete that he was, he attacked it in the same way that he attacked that, and he got all he could out of it."

Washington made his breakthrough on the HBO comedy series "Ballers" (2015-19), playing a hotheaded N.F.L. star. Another crucial opportunity came when Lee chose him to star as the police detective Ron Stallworth in "BlacKkKlansman," released in 2018.

As Washington saw it, Lee took a significant chance in elevating him from supporting roles to a lead player: "Spike was like, 'You're not a running back — you're a quarterback. You need to call the offense and run the plays,'" Washington said.

In 2020, he starred in "Tenet," a complex thriller about characters who can move forward and backward in time. Despite Nolan's pedigree, the film's opening was repeatedly delayed by the pandemic and it was ultimately released at a time when audiences were hardly ready to return to theaters en masse.

Two years later, Washington has tried to remain sanguine about his "Tenet" experience. "I believe in God — I'm a heavy believer, so it was the way it was supposed to be," he said. "But it really hurt that we couldn't give it its proper rollout and world tour."

Even so, Washington said he was grateful for the trust Nolan had placed in him and for the chance to help execute Nolan's intricate vision. "As taxing as it was, it damn near broke me, but I'd do it again and again," Washington said.

He was given another prominent big-screen position this fall when he starred alongside Christian Bale and Margot Robbie in "Amsterdam," the antic period caper from the filmmaker David O. Russell.

Bale found Washington soft-spoken and

studious during rehearsals, but said his co-star came alive when they filmed a sequence in which their characters fled a murder scene.

"I kept laughing because he was clearly enjoying showing me that no matter how fast I ran, he could always run faster," Bale said. "I kept zigging and zagging, running circles up and down the street, and he wouldn't ever let me get in front of him."

Bale added, "He's quietly competitive, but I don't think he likes that to be seen much."

"Amsterdam" was a critical and commercial flop, none of which mattered to Washington, who came away with one of his most treasured memories as an actor.

"There was a take I did that was very emotional," he said, "and afterwards, Robert De Niro came over and hugged me and kissed me on the cheek and he said: 'Good job, son.' I will never forget that. I can die now."

"The Piano Lesson," for which Wilson won the second of his two Pulitzer Prizes, is part of the playwright's Pittsburgh Cycle. There, in 1936, the domestic life of Berniece (Danielle Brooks) and her uncle Doaker (Jackson) is interrupted by the return of Berniece's talkative and charismatic brother, Boy Willie (Washington), who has recently left prison.

While Berniece treasures the family's piano, which carries a tragic history and is decorated with carvings of relatives who had been enslaved, Boy Willie has other plans for it, believing he can buy his way to legitimacy with the money earned from selling it.

Washington said that to him the play conveyed "the overwhelming feeling of American society's proprietary entitlement over its history." With a chuckle, he added that it told a relatable story about "every family gathering, how there's always that one cousin or family who shows up and it's like, 'Oh, here we go.'"

Washington said that he started learning his lines for "The Piano Lesson" when he was in Indonesia earlier this year, filming "True Love," a science fiction film written and directed by Gareth Edwards ("Godzilla," "Rogue One").

In rehearsals this fall, Washington said that LaTanya Richardson Jackson advocated the utmost fidelity to Wilson's text. "She always talks about how we're here to amplify his words," Washington said. "Don't put too much sauce on there. Let the words charge all of your decisions."

He has endured a certain amount of affectionate hazing from his more seasoned costars. Washington recounted the time when Samuel L. Jackson and Michael Potts called him out for eating banana chips in rehearsal. "Sam was like" — he uttered a Jacksonesque word that cannot be printed here — "Boy Willie don't eat no banana chips. That's the young generation. He eats pork rinds."

Washington said he had the quickness to retort, "No, see, Boy Willie's ahead of his time."

The play holds a special value for Jackson, who played Boy Willie in its original 1987 production at Yale Repertory Theater. He said, however, that he did not feel particularly territorial about seeing the role

passed onto Washington.

"You can't possess things that way," he said. "And LaTanya told me not to talk to him about Boy Willie anyway — she didn't want me putting my ideas in his head."

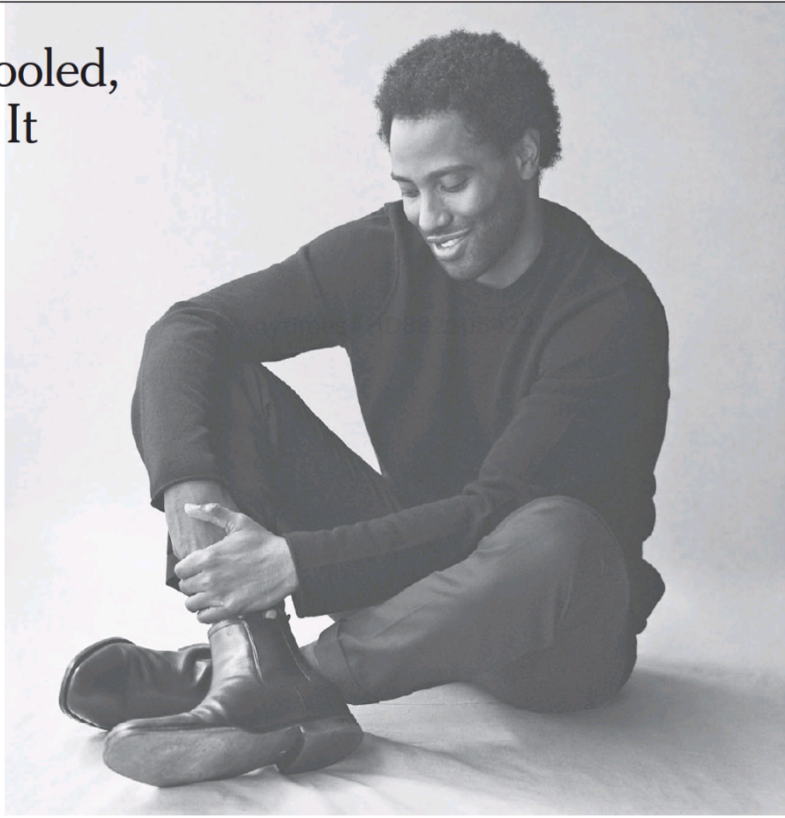
In their work on the play, Jackson said he had already seen Washington grow as an actor. "John David's really quite introverted," he explained. "The only time he puts himself out there is when he has an opportunity to inhabit another character and be someone that's not him."

What "The Piano Lesson" has given Washington, Jackson said, is a confidence that he can take into future film or TV projects — the self-assurance of knowing "when you're on a soundstage or on a set, and nobody's laughing or applauding for you, how you feel about what you just did." He added: "You don't have to go to the monitor to prove to yourself that you did it. You'll know, OK, that felt right."

These are big-picture, existential questions that Washington may contemplate after "The Piano Lesson" ends. For now, he is content to grapple with the day-to-day demands of putting on the play and the pleasures of losing himself in a character who feels diametrically opposed to who he really is.

As he recalled, "There's a line where Sam says to me, 'Will you just be quiet?' There was a night I almost cracked up the way he said it, because I felt like he really meant it."

Washington seemed genuinely delighted by the notion that he could be so talkative it would annoy someone else. "I must have really been rolling that night," he said. "I don't do that in my real life."



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**'If I can survive, I'm going to be such a better actor than I was before I started this.'**

JOHN DAVID WASHINGTON ON PERFORMING IN "THE PIANO LESSON"

John David Washington's father, Denzel Washington, gave him advice about acting: "He said, 'It's a full-contact sport, John David.'"

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