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AMANDA BERGLUND

### Black Screen Actors Get a Chance to Thrive

By MAYA PHILLIPS

One of the most exciting parts of the 2021-22 Broadway season was the number of people who looked like me, both onstage and behind the scenes. We saw the Broadway debut of seven plays by Black playwrights, starring Black actors, in an art form that too often tokenizes people of color, alienates them, misrepresents them or ignores them altogether.

But even when productions are bathed in the bright lights of Broadway, they can still be overlooked: Many of last fall's works seemed to disappear as quickly as they appeared in the tough post-shutdown return period. This fall, Broadway may not have as many new works by Black playwrights, but it will serve old favorites with promising casts of versatile Black actors who have built careers not just on the stage, but also in film and TV.

One of last season's highlights was the playwright Alice Childress receiving her long-overdue Broadway debut with the stunning comedy-drama "Trouble in Mind." So, what better time to give even more neglected writers of color their moment in the spotlight? The experimental Black playwright Adrienne Kennedy will follow this

November with a similarly belated premiere, a production of her harrowing 1992 play "Ohio State Murders," starring the stage luminary Audra McDonald as a writer who returns to her alma mater to speak about the violent imagery in her work.

A lethal mix of present-day racial injustice and unrelenting racial trauma from the past, "Ohio State Murders," directed by Kenny Leon, will have an exciting peer in a revival of August Wilson's 1987 play "The Piano Lesson," directed by LaTanya Richardson Jackson (a cast member of the 2009 Broadway revival of "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," to cite another Wilson work). Her husband, Samuel L. Jackson, who originated the role of Boy Willie in "The Piano Lesson" at the Yale Repertory Theater in 1987, will also join this revival, now in the

role of Doaker Charles, Boy Willie's uncle who recounts the titular piano's history. The Pulitzer Prize-winning play follows siblings who are at odds over whether to sell a piano bearing depictions of their enslaved ancestors.

The appeal of these plays doesn't just come down to the material and the ethnicity of the casts, however; the Black casts this season represent captivating newcomers and veterans from various realms of theater, film and TV. So those only familiar with Jackson's explosive acting style in, say, an action-packed Marvel movie or a brutal Quentin Tarantino film, will now see how the actor's energy translates to the stage. The same will be true for Jackson's castmate Danielle Brooks, a star of the Netflix series "Orange Is the New Black" who made an acclaimed Broadway debut in "The Color Purple" in 2015 and tickled audiences as the brassy Beatrice in the Public Theater's 2019 production of "Much Ado About Nothing."

Film and TV are, after all, a different ballgame than the theater, where actors must respond in real time to the action onstage and perform with a resonance that will reach the upper echelons of the balcony. That will be the challenge for John David Washington ("Tenet," "BlacKkKlansman"), who is new to the theater and will be making his Broadway debut in "The Piano Lesson."

Elsewhere on Broadway this season, Yahya Abdul-Mateen II will transition from his arresting roles on TV ("Watchmen") and film (Jordan Peele's "Candyman") reimagin-

ing) in a revival of Suzan-Lori Parks's "Topdog/Underdog," a Pulitzer Prize-winning work that follows the daily rituals of two impoverished brothers named Lincoln and Booth. He will make his Broadway debut opposite Corey Hawkins, who played the charming cab dispatcher Benny in John Cho's film adaptation of "In the Heights." Hawkins also played Dr. Dre in "Straight Outta Compton" and Macduff in Joel Coen's "The Tragedy of Macbeth," and was nominated for a Tony Award for his role as the con man Paul Poitier in the 2017 Broadway revival of John Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation."

Most of these plays are contemporary, dating only from the last three decades or so. (The neglect or erasure of early works by Black artists and other artists of color is, unfortunately, common.) But a West End and Young Vic revival of "Death of a Salesman" reconfigures Arthur Miller's 1949 classic into a story about a Black family, starring Wendell Pierce, André De Shields and Sharon D. Clarke, who won an Olivier Award for best actress for her portrayal of Linda Loman in the British production and is known stateside for her knockout performance in last season's "Caroline, or Change."

So anticipation is running high this season not just for the polished onstage products — the glamorous and funny, tense and heart-rending Black productions — but also for the array of Black talent, from the Broadway of decades past to today's Hollywood stars, that will meet, creating something utterly of the moment.

Some will be making the challenging transition from film and television work.