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Ralph Fiennes, Samuel L. Jackson electrify the drama on N.Y. stages

'Straight Line Crazy,' with Fiennes as Robert Moses, and 'The Piano Lesson,' with Jackson and other stars, are among the big fall draws.



Perspective by Peter Marks Theater critic

NEW YORK — There are so many things to dislike about Robert Moses, the single-minded city planner who bulldozed 20th-century New York into submission. And Ralph Fiennes does justice to them all.

In "Straight Line Crazy," David Hare's clear-eyed character study of the automobile-worshipping brute force who claimed every public right of way for his personal mission, Fiennes is majestically vile. Stalking the thrust stage of the Griffin Theater at the Shed with an awkward lope, his mouth fixed in a perpetual grimace, Fiennes applies a hypnotic antiheroic varnish to the man who remade New York's byways, parklands and beachfronts.

For an actor who's wrapped himself around Coriolanus, Voldemort and a Nazi commandant in "Schindler's List," this play is another opportunity to turn an audience on by putting them off. Fiennes has never been repelled, professionally speaking, by toxicity. Taking up Hare's cause here, he dares us to invest in a figure driven to dominate everything in his path — not only the landscape, but the people who inhabit it, too. In the process, Fiennes and directors Nicholas Hytner and Jamie Armitage give life to what otherwise might seem a historian's dry irony: that a man devoted to the common good could be so uncommonly cold.



In the wave of autumn play openings in New York, star turns like Fiennes's can be as vibrant as the turning of the leaves. That is certainly the case, too, in the crackling Broadway revival of August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson," with a cast headed by John David Washington, Danielle Brooks and Samuel L. Jackson. Some others in the fall harvest are not so blessedly endowed: Gabriel Byrne's new autobiographical solo show on Broadway, "Walking With Ghosts," boasts Byrne's abundant charm but traces topics that have been explored more compellingly on many other theater occasions.

Reed Birney, a mild-mannered Everyman who won a Tony for "The Humans," materializes off-Broadway with his son Ephraim in Joseph Dougherty's "Chester Bailey." The Irish Repertory Theatre production, staged by Ron Lagomarsino, is an oddly unconvincing account of a young man blinded in an industrial accident and the ineffectual shrink who tries to dispel his illusion that he still can see. Its chief attraction is Reed Birney's gift for keeping us in suspense about a character's secrets.

Even more patience-trying is a British import ending its run at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn: director Emma Rice's windy novel-to-stage rendering of Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights," a 90-minute production's worth of ideas dragged out to three hours of stagy antics. And I mean, dragged. As this show embarks on a national tour, one wishes that its traveling crew included an editor.

One of the wonders of this new "Piano Lesson," directed by Latanya Richardson Jackson, is how effortlessly the cast deals with the play's heavier-handed conceits and finds the essence that some productions miss. That core element is the tension in the tale, set in 1936, between Brooks's Berniece and Washington's Boy Willie. They are equally hardheaded siblings but polar opposites when it comes to levelheadedness.

Richardson Jackson, the original Calpurnia in Broadway's recent "To Kill a Mockingbird" (and wife of Samuel L.), applies an actor's eye to the proceedings. That pays off grandly, as Berniece, the picture of stability, squares off with the erratic Boy Willie over the sale of the family heirloom — a piano inlaid with carved figures from anguishing Black history. It's a struggle, of course, with deep metaphorical meaning: The piano symbolizes both possibility and pain, and it literally haunts this Pittsburgh homestead, owned by their uncle, Samuel L. Jackson's Doaker. (The piano is provided an evocative framing in the Ethel Barrymore Theatre by set designer Beowulf Boritt.)

Jackson is a generous presence onstage, a true ensemble member who, despite his star wattage, shares the spotlight gracefully with other indelible performers. These include Michael Potts as Doaker's brother Wining Boy, a musician with a weakness for the bottle, and Trai Byers as Avery, the preacher who's sweet on Berniece. Ray Fisher is an out-and-out revelation, portraying Boy Willie's friend Lymon, who initially seems a bit dim but emerges as a complexly, and comically, appealing character. And Brooks and Washington are wondrously well-matched as the siblings in whom the playwright saw conflict and convergence — both reacting to their own restless impulses in explosively different ways.

The aspirations of a Berniece or Boy Willie would be of no interest to the Moses of “Straight Line Crazy,” whose first act is set a decade before the events of “The Piano Lesson.” Among Hare’s points here is that Moses — for whom Infrastructure Week was a lifelong event — was as much a social engineer as a structural one. He mowed down low-income neighborhoods in the Bronx to build the Cross Bronx Expressway, and devised overpasses too low on his Long Island parkways to allow buses — presumably filled with Black and Brown people from the city — to reach Jones Beach.



The moment is therefore ripe for a dramatic consideration of his extraordinary impact and his hideous moral blind spots. It’s fascinating that a British rather than American playwright thought to tackle this subject; I first saw the play earlier this year at London’s Bridge Theatre, where the names and places didn’t seem to mean much to the audience. At the Shed, in Manhattan’s redeveloped Hudson Yards, even the words “Nassau County” coming out of Fiennes’s mouth drew a laugh.

I liked it more this second time, especially as some of the supporting performances have gained in resonance: Helen Schlesinger offers piercing authority in her turn as journalist Jane Jacobs, who rallied the public to defeat one of Moses’s worst projects. Judith Roddy, Alisha Bailey and new cast member Adam Silver are excellent as conflicted, humane staffers and counterweights to their boss’s ever-deepening misanthropy.

Fiennes’s unsparing portrayal — he takes Moses to withering heights — is central to the play. But the source of the character’s opaque cruelties are underexplored. That prevents “Straight Line Crazy” from being the sort of experience you wrestle with meaningfully afterward. We’re left simply with the portrait of a man who could move earth, with no thought of heaven.

The Piano Lesson, by August Wilson. Directed by Latanya Richardson Jackson. Set, Beowulf Boritt; costumes, Toni-Leslie James; lighting, Japhy Weideman; sound, Scott Lehrer. With April Matthis, Jurnee Swan, Nadia Daniel. About 2½ hours. At Ethel Barrymore Theatre, 243 W. 47th St., New York. telecharge.com.

Straight Line Crazy, by David Hare. Directed by Nicholas Hytner and Jamie Armitage. Sets and costumes, Bob Crowley; sound, George Dennis; music, George Fenton; lighting, Jessica Hung Han Yun. With Danny Webb. About 2½ hours. At the Shed, 545 W. 30th St., New York. Performances sold out, but a waitlist is available at theshed.org.

Walking With Ghosts, written and performed by Gabriel Byrne. Directed by Lonny Price. Set and lighting, Sinéad McKenna; costumes, Joan O’Cleary; sound and music, Sinéad Diskin. About 2 hours 10 minutes. Through Dec. 30 at Music Box Theatre, 239 W. 45th St., New York. telecharge.com.



Chester Bailey, by Joseph Dougherty. Directed by Ron Lagomarsino. Set, John Lee Beatty; costumes, Toni-Leslie James; lighting, Brian MacDevitt; sound, Brendan Aanes. About 95 minutes. Through Nov. 20 at Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St., New York. irishrep.org.

Wuthering Heights, adapted and directed by Emma Rice. Sets and costumes, Vicki Mortimer; sound and video, Simon Baker; lighting, Jai Morjaria; movement, Etta Murfitt; music, Ian Ross. About 3 hours. Through Sunday at St. Ann's Warehouse, 45 Water St., Brooklyn. stannswarehouse.org.