



KINDRED

Decades after *Samuel L. Jackson* originated a role in August Wilson's turbulent family drama *The Piano Lesson*, he's headed to Broadway with *John David Washington* to bring a ghost story back to life *By TONY NORMAN*

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SPIRITS

“ I WAS AROUND

when August would come and lay out eight pages of a new speech that we had to put in that night because we were doing previews—and you run and you do it,” says Samuel L. Jackson. He’s thinking back to 1987, when he originated the role of Boy Willie in August Wilson’s play *The Piano Lesson* at the Yale Repertory Theatre. He regards the late playwright as “the Black Shakespeare” but says, “Man, it was a lot of words. It was grueling.”

This fall, John David Washington plays Boy Willie in a Broadway revival directed by Jackson’s wife of 42 years, LaTanya Richardson Jackson, and—because Jackson himself will appear as Boy Willie’s uncle, Doaker Charles—he’ll do it while standing onstage with the man who first gave the character flesh and blood. “I’m coming in as a student,” Washington says in a dual interview with his costar. “I’m coming in to learn as much as I can from our director, LaTanya, and this man here.” Washington has known Jackson since the former was a toddler, thanks to Jackson’s friendship with his father, Denzel. Still, it sounds like it’d be intimidating to re-create the role right in front of him. Jackson waves the idea away. “He didn’t see me do it,” he says, then adds playfully, “but I killed that shit.” Washington laughs: “And the ghosts, like in the theme of the play, will forever haunt us.”

The Piano Lesson, which won Wilson his second Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1990, takes place in the Charles household in Pittsburgh in 1936, as Boy Willie and his sister, Berniece (Danielle Brooks), battle over the fate of the family’s prized piano and contend with the good and evil spirits it conjures. Boy Willie is an impetuous striver eager to grab his piece of the American dream even if it means aggravating an already tempestuous relationship with his sister. He wants to sell the piano to buy land in Mississippi that their family toiled on for decades as sharecroppers, and to start building some generational wealth. Berniece wants to keep the piano as a testament to their tragic history; it is, after all, carved with

images of their ancestors. Doaker, who makes several of the play’s key speeches, wants the most elusive thing of all: peace.

Boy Willie and Berniece’s struggle over the piano summons the ghost of a dead landowner named Sutter, who terrorized the family in the South. The malevolent spirit could be a stand-in for slavery, Jim Crow, white supremacy, or all of the above—and it’s this force that Richardson Jackson is most interested in wrangling with on Broadway. “Let’s amplify this part of it,” she tells me, flashing the most contagious smile you’ll ever see. “Let’s look at this effin’ ghost. Why is Sutter there? What does Sutter want? Why we still talking about Sutter? We keep conjuring the ghost—but we don’t deal with it. We gonna have to deal with it, and we’re gonna deal with it in this one.”

Richardson Jackson has revered *The Piano Lesson* ever since she saw her husband play Boy Willie at Yale Rep. “You can mess around and put different clothes on it, but you have to leave that language alone, because what he’s written is sacrosanct to me,” says the director, who was nominated for a 2014 Tony for best actress for Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* and later played Calpurnia in Aaron Sorkin’s adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. “I’m quick to tell everyone: August Wilson didn’t create the language, but he was able to capture it better than anyone that I have ever read or seen. He writes it and I hear my grandparents.” Wilson’s dialogue, she says, reminds her of her grandfather going off to play checkers and “talk smack.”

WILSON’S MONUMENTAL 10-play Pittsburgh Cycle, of which *The Piano Lesson* is a part, captures the joys and undeniable challenges of Black life in earthy, colloquial, poetic, mysterious language that both reveals and obscures the intentions of the main characters. When I ask Richardson Jackson if she plans to reimagine any of the parts in *The Piano Lesson*—as Sorkin did when he amped up Calpurnia’s role in *Mockingbird*—she says, “The way August



WASHINGTON: HAREK; JOE CIMA; GROOMING: CHERIE KEATING; JACKSON: GROOMING: BILIE GENE TALLOZ; SHARON FALCONAS; PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY PRESS CREATIVE; FOR DETAILS, GO TO PFCOM/CREBIT.

PIANO PLAYERS
Samuel L. Jackson
and John David
Washington,
photographed in
New York City on
June 29.

Clothing by
Giorgio Armani.
Previous spread:
Jackson’s clothing
by **Giorgio Armani**;
tie by **Charvet**.
Washington’s
clothing by **Prada**.



Clothing by
Fear of God.
Throughout:
hair products
by Kristin Ess
(Washington);
grooming products
by Giorgio
Armani Beauty
(Jackson) and
Twelve Beauty
(Washington).

wrote Berniece, she's dynamic already. She's already ahead of the game. And with the embodiment of Danielle Brooks, it's going to the next level."

With the exception of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which features two major white characters and takes place in Chicago, the Pittsburgh Cycle plays center exclusively on the Black experience in Pittsburgh over the course of 100 years. White folks are referred to in passing and exist only offstage. Pittsburgh's Hill District, a predominantly Black working-class neighborhood that fell on bleak times with deindustrialization, is every bit a character in the plays, and references to real streets and institutions flow freely. As a newspaper journalist in Pittsburgh, I've known plenty of Black literary folks who claimed to have inspired characters in Wilson plays. The truth is that the city got around to fully embracing his work only after he left and won acclaim elsewhere. His appearances in Pittsburgh were well attended but marked by an ironic, somewhat bitter undertone that seemed to translate to: "You had a chance to love me first, but you didn't take it. How do you like me now?"

I got to meet and talk with Wilson on two occasions before his death in 2005. In the '90s, he gave a short speech at the Homewood public library, then mingled with community leaders and fans. I approached him when he was standing alone and eating a piece of cake on a small paper plate. He was a soft-spoken man whose shyness was evident immediately. I was grateful that his eyes didn't glaze over when I told him how much I loved the few plays of his that I had been able to see up to that point. Wilson perked up when I told him I was a feature writer at the local newspaper and a participant in the Kuntu Writers Workshop, a group he started with playwright-poet Rob Penny in 1976. He spoke about the workshop's mission, saying it was important for Black writers to have a space to share work and receive critical feedback in a loving environment. Soon, some local mucky-mucks horned in on our conversation and pulled him away for pictures. I was left with the impression of a firm handshake and encouragement to keep writing, no matter what.

Though Wilson seemed reserved in person, he and his longtime collaborator, the director Lloyd Richards, were demanding when it came to perfecting the plays. Jackson tells Washington and

me that part of his regimen for playing Boy Willie was "being hung upside down" so he'd have the stamina to speak at the top of his lungs for three hours.

THE PIANO LESSON first hit Broadway in 1990, but Jackson was not yet enough of a star to play the role he'd helped bring to life. Charles S. Dutton took over as Boy Willie and drew a Tony nomination. Jackson was relegated to the wings. "I never went on when I was an understudy," says the actor, who has said he was a high-functioning crack addict at the time. "I kinda lost my mind. I went to rehab because of it."

At the time of our interview, rehearsals for the revival at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre haven't yet begun, and Jackson is still reacquainting himself with the text of *The Piano Lesson*. He has found himself in the company of ghosts, he tells me—not just Sutter's but the whole cast from Yale Rep. "It's sometimes daunting," he says, "and it's fun only because I hear all the people I did the play with. I hear myself being Boy Willie. Doaker carries his own weight, his own water, in a whole nother kind of way." When Washington says he plans to learn from Jackson, his mentor interrupts and says of his wife and director, "She's already told you that you can't talk to me." Both men laugh. "I can still learn by example," Washington says, adding that he can relate to the tension between Boy Willie and Berniece and the play's exploration of the different meanings of inheritance.

As for Richardson Jackson, she says she cried while observing the photo shoot for this story. "I'm watching John David Washington and he's a star now," she says. "I'm about to have the opportunity to work on a tremendous piece with people whose hands I've held for a long time. Danielle, I've known her since she was young, and of course Sam, whom I've known 50-something years. These are people I know."

Richardson Jackson will be the first woman to direct an August Wilson play on Broadway. She's never directed on Broadway at all, but then how many Black women have had the chance? "There are a lot of us in regional theater that no one knows about," she says. "The dominant culture has had a lot of time to practice—and they practice in the A space. So Broadway is it. They practice here. I don't have a lot of time to practice—or to be nervous."

About Broadway or ghosts. ■