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(Cover) Fraser's Grooming: Natasha Laibei; Aronofsky Grooming: Amy Komarowski/The Wall Group; (This page) Emilio Madrid

Cover photograph by Benedict Evans

Power couple Samuel L. Jackson and LaTanya Richardson Jackson team up for a production of August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson" on Broadway.

Married to Their Work

Samuel L. Jackson and director LaTanya Richardson Jackson bring August Wilson back to Broadway — By Brent Lang



FINE TUNING
Samuel L. Jackson
and LaTanya
Richardson Jackson

SAMUEL L. JACKSON had his marching orders.

So when actor John David Washington approached him for tips about playing Boy Willie, a role Jackson originated in the 1987 production of August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson," he clammed up. "I was specifically told by the director not to give him advice," Jackson says. "John David asked several times, but when he realized that I was not allowed to help him, he stopped asking."

The director, in this case, is LaTanya Richardson Jackson, who also happens to be Jackson's wife, as well as the first

woman to oversee a production of Wilson's work on Broadway. The two are teaming up on the hotly anticipated revival of the classic drama, only this time Sam is playing Boy Willie's uncle, Doaker Charles. It marks his first time on Broadway since 2011's "The Mountaintop," in which he played Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and LaTanya's first time directing after a run of acclaimed stage performances, including the 2014 revival of "A Raisin in the Sun" and 2018's "To Kill a Mockingbird."

"I'm always open to working onstage," Sam says. "But I was not looking for it. The fortu-

nate thing was they got the right director who was able to convince me to do it."

"The Piano Lesson" unfolds in Pittsburgh during the Great Depression and follows an argument between Boy Willie and his sister, Berniece (played in the revival by Danielle Brooks), over whether to sell a family heirloom — a piano with carvings made by an enslaved ancestor. Berniece wants to keep it, seeing it as a valuable piece of history and a reminder of the ties that bind, but Boy Willie wants to sell it and use the proceeds to buy land to farm. "It's a debate between honoring your legacy versus using something to buy your stake in the American dream," says LaTanya. "What do you do? Do you hold on to that piece of history, or do you use it to try to create generational wealth."

Those issues, LaTanya argues, remain just as timely now as they did when Wilson first produced the play. And the play is being staged again at a time of great change in the theater industry. In recent years, Broadway has been under pressure to elevate more artists of color and to provide more opportunities to stage work that centers on historically underrepresented communities.

"Women have been sidelined in a lot of businesses, including the business of Broadway, particularly when it comes to directing," LaTanya says. "We haven't changed a single line in the play, but as women, our vision is different."

In the case of "The Piano Lesson," Sam says his wife has found a fresh way into the classic play. "A lot of people tend to treat this like a family drama or a living, breathing soap opera about a family in turmoil," he says. "But LaTanya saw a ghost story."

Sam and LaTanya say that having been married for more than 40 years gives them an important shorthand when it comes to working together. "I'm used to listening to her, so that's not a problem," says Sam, who adds that they don't usually take their work home with them. "We talk about it sometimes," he says, "but not a lot. We have other things on our plate to take care of and deal with. We have lives." ●

THE
NEW YORK
ISSUE

