



A Pizza Party on a Broadway Stage, With the Cast of ‘The Piano Lesson’

Samuel L. Jackson, LaTanya Richardson Jackson, John David Washington and more gathered at the Barrymore Theater with pepperoni pies and paper cups. Interviews by Juan A. Ramírez

LaTanya Richardson Jackson: This is a big family affair. John David [Washington] I've known since he was born. Danielle [Brooks] I came to know several years ago when she did "The Color Purple" [2015 revival] on Broadway. I knew everybody when I cast them [in August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson," now on Broadway], except April [Matthis] and Trai [Byers]. I could tell there were days when [the actors] wanted to choke me, but because it was me, they knew they couldn't.

We didn't have a lot of rehearsal time and, for a Wilson play, unless you have a long rehearsal period, you don't have enough time to hang out. But I got to notice how people relax, because we were together all day. We enjoy the camaraderie of the words and learning and blocking and all of it. So while you're doing that, you see who everybody is. This is a pretty conscious crew. [My husband, Samuel L. Jackson] and I count ourselves among those who have been conscious for a long time — so all of this "woke" generation, we've been woke forever. We talk about things that are timely, where we are as a people and how relevant the themes [of Black Americans' generational trauma] in the play are. We talk about the world that we live in, because this particular cast lives in the world in a very tangible way.

John David Washington: It was a little weird having a pizza party onstage in 1936 [the year the play takes place], but it was a nice excuse to get together and enjoy the fruits of our labor. We joked about things that have happened on different nights — like when [his co-star Samuel L. Jackson] gave me a look that almost made me crack up onstage.

I've known the Jacksons since I can remember, but I feel like I have an even closer relationship to [them] now. It's very eye opening sharing the stage with these extraordinary artists.

The attendees: In addition to the director LaTanya Richardson Jackson, 73, the cast of "The Piano Lesson" (except for Danielle Brooks, 33, and Trai Byers, 39, who were sick, and Ray Fisher, 35, who'd injured his ankle) was onstage at the Barrymore Theater: John David Washington, 38; Samuel L. Jackson, 73; Michael Potts, 60; April Matthis, age withheld; Nadia Daniel, 12; and Jurnee Swan, age withheld.



The food: Pepperoni and margherita pizzas from a “highbrow” spot, as Washington called it. “I love Domino’s and Papa Johns, but when you’re in New York, you should get the best,” he says. When Washington hosts dinners in Los Angeles, he’ll offer Veuve Clicquot and vodka with lemonade. But tonight, there was only water in paper cups, to keep the set as tidy as possible.

The conversation: With many Broadway shows following the same schedule, most of the cast hasn’t been able to see other productions. They lamented this loss, though Washington also feels rewarded by being a part of “something very powerful that’s happening right now for Black artists,” with productions of “Death of a Salesman,” “A Strange Loop” and “Topdog/Underdog,” all featuring Black casts, running concurrently. Richardson Jackson, who is a vice chair of the American Theatre Wing, spoke of loving the staging of “Into the Woods.”

Etiquette tip: At home, Washington likes to invite his guests over around 6 p.m., so that if the party flops, “they have the option to get out of there by 8:30 without shaming me.”

