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LaTanya Richardson Jackson on Directing ‘The Piano Lesson’ (and Her Husband)

LaTanya Richardson Jackson believes in ghosts. Better put: She believed her parents, and grandparents, when they talked about being frequently visited by people who were invisible to the human eye. Such a childhood has not only opened her up to having similar experiences but also made her uniquely qualified to bring one of August Wilson’s most haunting plays, “The Piano Lesson,” back to Broadway this fall.

It first premiered there in 1990, and this Broadway revival — the show’s first — will star Danielle Brooks and John David Washington. The play, initially produced in 1987 at Yale Repertory Theater, is the fourth in Wilson’s 10-play series known as “The Pittsburgh Cycle,” which explores a full century of African American life in Pennsylvania’s Steel City.

Jackson saw that original production, in part, because she was an actress and lifelong admirer of Wilson’s work. (She later starred in a Tony-nominated revival of Wilson’s “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” in 2009 and made her directorial debut with his “Two Trains Running” at True Colors Theater Company in Atlanta in 2013.) But she was also there to support her husband, Samuel L. Jackson, who was playing the lead character, Boy Willie. He’s also starring in the revival, but as Boy Willie’s uncle Doaker.

Set in 1936, “The Piano Lesson,” for which Wilson also won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1990, follows two siblings, Boy Willie (Washington) and Berniece (Brooks), as they debate the fate of their family heirloom, a piano upon which the faces of their great-grandmother and her son are carved. Boy Willie wants to sell the piano and buy the property their enslaved ancestors worked on in the South. Berniece wants to keep it, understanding that the piano itself offers them another connection and liberation from their oppressive past. In contrast, Doaker sees the piano as haunted both by Boy Charles, his dead older brother and Boy Willie and Berniece’s father; and the ghost of the white slave owner, Sutter.

On Broadway, Jackson, 72, is best known for portraying Lena Younger in a 2014 revival of “A Raisin in the Sun,” and, more recently, as Calpurnia, in the substantially expanded role of Atticus Finch’s sagacious and reserved housekeeper in Aaron Sorkin’s 2019 adaptation of “To Kill A Mockingbird.” But, within African American drama, in regional theaters and on television shows such as “Grey’s Anatomy,” Jackson has long been a familiar face.

“The star thing,” she told me. “You have to have a mind-set for that. And I just was never willing to do that.”

What she has been doing is giving life to complex Black female protagonists on the stage and screen, and now working to unlock the deeper elements of Wilson’s women. Wilson once said he wanted to create a female character in “The Piano Lesson,” which “was as large as Troy was in Fences.” But, in the end, Wilson had to admit that his interests in the themes of self-worth, tradition, and tracing the history of the piano for 135 years took over the plot so much that his female character was “not as large as I intended.”

Knowing that, Jackson said she paid homage to Wilson the best way she knew how: by making visible the many worlds, obvious and hidden, his play offers us. She added that her early encounters with the play, as well as Wilson and his other works, empowered her to take those risks here in her Broadway directorial debut.

In a recent video interview, Jackson talked about navigating the gender politics of Wilson's plays, what working with Samuel L. Jackson and John David Washington has been like and how she discovered that directing was really her first love. These are edited excerpts from that conversation.

You're the first woman to direct an August Wilson play on Broadway. How has your perspective as a Black woman impacted your approach to his material?

August was such a man's man. When I directed "Two Trains Running" for Kenny Leon's True Colors company in Atlanta, I told him [Leon], "As a woman, I look at things differently, and what might appear to you as minutiae, I find to be an important point."

I remember telling Pauletta [Washington], who played Risa, "Every time one of those men mention a woman who has died or was killed, you drop something in the kitchen and make a big, loud noise so that they have to stop and think about what they just said." We can't just have a conversation about women being cut or stabbed to death like that's just a regular part of life. Our presence should not be something that's taken for granted. Our presence is important.

In "The Piano Lesson," Berniece, like Risa, is the only female lead in the cast.

Yes, Berniece is surrounded by all of this testosterone. I saw the first production of this play at Yale, and I remember asking August after, "Where are all the women? Where are all the parts for women?" And he said, "Well, you know, Joe Turner has women." I said, "But we're always singular." Then, he told me, "I'll write about them when I really know what I'm saying."

My mentor, Douglas Turner Ward, told me: "Great playwrights don't always know what they're writing or what they have written. They attempt to do something, and if it's great, the spirits visit them, and they just write. It's a director's job to see what they have actually written, whether or not it was their intention or not. Usually, with great writers, it's bigger than what they intend." And I find that to be so true of August.

You embrace the otherworldliness of this story. Why was that important to you?

Oct. 2 was the anniversary of August's transition, so I've been thinking about him and his widow, Constanza Romero, and how to approach this story spiritually. I'm telling everybody, "This is a ghost story." I believe there are other worlds where things are occurring, even if we don't see them. To manifest that in the play, I felt that every member in that house was fighting their own ghosts. But Sutter [the white slave owner] represents the ghost of racism and the cruel manner we have had to navigate life in this country. August metaphorically shows that this ghost was an albatross around our necks. But I wanted to visually manifest it so that there was no question that we were attempting to exorcise it.

Like any good ghost story, the house also seems haunted.

I told myself that I had to find a designer who could build a house that was not raggedy but was really broken. August was a genius. In this play, he gave us these two-sided Janus figures. Not just between Boy Willie and Berniece, but [the brothers] Wining Boy and Doaker Charles, and the family and Lymon [Boy Willie's friend]. And he did so because he believed that our people deserve to be recorded and documented in a classical way. That's why we call him our Shakespeare.

So, when I told our gifted set designer, Beowulf [Boritt], that house had to be split open, he was intrigued. Then when I said, “And the house has no walls.” He said, “I’m going down that rabbit hole with you.” Listen, we don’t change August’s words. That’s sacrosanct. That’s not what this vision is about. This vision is about seeing a deeper way into what he has given us.

The piano is so meaningful to this family, and its symbolism is heightened by its physical beauty. Is there a story behind its design?

Other versions of the play always have these pianos with these beautifully carved fresco plaques on them. But, Sam and I — you know I am married to Sam Jackson, right? — well, back in our house in Los Angeles, we have a Tree of Life statue made by the Makonde sculptors from East Africa. They start with a piece of ebony and then pass it among the community members to carve until it is all done. So, I wanted the piano to look like a Makonde statue and Mama’s face had to be the most prominent, and then the little boy Charles. And you know how they made that happen? A 3-D printer.

Speaking of Samuel L. Jackson, he starred as Boy Willie in the original production. Now, he is playing the role of one of the uncles, Doaker Charles. What was it like for you to direct him?

Sam and I are used to working together and being around each other 24/7. But I realized in this particular context, he doesn’t like to take a note. I had heard that about him before, but I just thought, “Oh, he just doesn’t like to take notes from people he feels don’t know what they’re talking about.” I didn’t think I’d even have to tell him, “That’s the note, brother.” And when I did, he said, “Well, I think I would know how that goes.” And I said, “I’m just bringing it to your attention that it didn’t go the way I would like it to go.”The way that I operate is that there are no stars in the room. We are an ensemble, and we are moving together or not at all. But, it was a true gift that this project came to me with Sam and John David already attached to it.

This is John David Washington’s first play. You’ve also known him for a long time, did anything surprise you about his performance?

Denzel and Pauletta Washington have been very generous with their children with me, and I love all their children. They, like our daughter, Zoe, are all worker bees. So to watch John David’s career and be able to help develop it is beyond a responsibility. It’s like being given something from God that says, “OK, you take care of and nurture this.” And to him, I said, “We got this. Just trust me. Your instrument is built soundly. We are going to give you the notes, and all you have to do is play them.” And he has exceeded my wildest imagination.

This brings us back to Berniece. There are the words on the page, and then what you bring to her character.

Or what Danielle [Brooks] brings. I’ve only been trying to guide Danielle toward who I think Berniece is. I’ve seen different renditions of this character, and she is always so angry, almost too angry. And I know she’s frustrated because she lost Crawford, the love of her life, and blames Boy Willie. But there are times that the anger covers up that hurt. So, I’ve told her, “Sometimes I just want to see the hurt because it allows me into you in a different way.” This is a family that loves each other, so she has to have a heart for him, too.

Do you want to continue directing?

Since I was in sixth grade, I knew that this was something inside of me, and God only knows who or what I could have been or done by now if I had just followed that track. I wish I were younger. But this is all I want to do now.