

JOE TURNER HAS COME AND GONE

BERKELEY REP

DECEMBER 2, 2008

(Photography by Kevin Berne)

Took in the ongoing production at the Berkeley Rep of August Wilson's *Joe Turner Has Come and Gone*, second in the Pulitzer Prize winning ten play series that documents the Black experience from 1900 to the 1990's, each play taking on a separate decade. Delroy Lindo, fresh from his romping triumph with last year's *Blue Door* at the Rep, returned to direct.

August Wilson, who died of liver cancer October 5, 2005, won two Pulitzer prizes, seven Tony awards, and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play eight times as well as numerous other prestigious citations from nationally renowned organizations.

He is generally regarded as a giant of American theatre who has long sealed his place among the literary lions of American letters with William Faulkner, Langston Hughes, Arthur Miller, and the other luminaries in the heavens.

The director, Delroy Lindo, comes to the Rep with significant chops and experience. He was named Best Director by LA Weekly for his *Medal of Honor Rag*. He appeared in the Broadway and national tour productions of *Master Harold...and the Boys*; and on Broadway in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, for which he received Tony and Drama Desk nominations for best actor. He won an NAACP Image Award and a Helen Hayes Award nomination for his performance

as Walter Lee in *A Raisin in the Sun*, produced at the Kennedy Center and LA's Wilshire Theatre. He appeared in *The Exonerated* at London's Riverside Theatre Company, and this summer portrayed the title role in *Agamemnon* at LA's Getty Villa.

His film credits include *The Cider House Rules*, *Clockers*, *The Core*, *Crooklyn*, *Get Shorty*, *Gone in 60 Seconds*, *Heist*, *A Life Less Ordinary*, *Malcolm X*, *The One*, *Ransom*, and *Romeo Must Die*. Delroy's television credits include *Kidnapped*, *The Exonerated*, *Glory and Honor*, *Profoundly Normal*, *Soul of the Game* and the Peabody Award-winning *Strange Justice*. He has written, produced and directed documentary interviews featuring Spike Lee, Charles Burnett and Joan Chen.

The play is set in Wilson's native Pittsburgh in the year 1911, a time in which hundreds of thousands of Black Americans headed up to the industrial north in search of jobs after the collapse of the antebellum South's economy, which had relied upon free slave labor to conduct business for hundreds of years. The rise of Jim Crow laws, and such things as the true historical figure of "Joe Turner" (actually named Joe Turney) helped impell this migration to the boomtown north.

In the opening stage direction, Wilson says, "They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow, crooked cobbles and the fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth."

As for the Joe Turner of the title, which references a song composed by WC Handy and which is sort of sung by the character Byrnum "Binder" Walker in the second act, he was a White man and the brother of Tennessee governor Pete Turney. Turney, acting with authority as Sheriff, would press Black men into forced labor, often for years at a time, spontaneously and without allowing communication to loved ones. Women finding their husbands missing would be told, "Joe Turner's been here. He's come and gone with a long chain with 50 links to it."

The reality was so horrific that Turney became this mythic figure in song as Joe Turner.

Memphis Minnie alluded to this process of looking for one's lost husband in her "Where is My Good Man Gone?" as did many other songwriters.

All of the action takes place in the living/dining room of a boarding house kept by the Holly family, born and raised citizens of Pittsburgh. Seth works nightshift at the factory steel mill, and earns some extra cash on the side making tin pots while letting out rooms. To this boardinghouse comes a mysterious and vaguely frightening man named Herald Loomis, played strongly by Teagle Bougere with his daughter in tow as he searches for his wife, Martha, missing for over ten years.

The circumstances of his missing wife and just why his attitude is so threatening to the point that the ultra-pragmatic Seth refuses to tell his lodger where he believes his wife is staying help create a nice little tension of intrigue.

Wilson's genius is in the portrayal of what and how and process without necessarily pointing accusatory fingers. We see the pain and terrible consequences of racism on individual human beings through the effects of immediate events, individual deeds that result in long-lasting injury.

A high point in the play arrives at the end of the first act, when Loomis abruptly interrupts a joyous "Juba" with a mad outburst in which he relates a vision of seeing bones rise up from a body of water, walk across it and take on flesh as they arrive to shore, still walking as they become people. But Loomis is tragically separated from this "evolution" as he falls exclaiming with despair as he writhes on the floor "My legs won't get up! My legs won't get up!"



(l to r) At Berkeley Rep, Barry Shabaka Henley, Kim Staunton, Don Guillory and Brent Jennings star in Delroy Lindo's production of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Wilson suggests here, and in other places in the play, the real injury is the internalization of learned helplessness as a consequence of racism. The evocation of the black-sailed slave ships and the boneyard of the Atlantic is emotional and wrenching.

Loomis is an interesting figure in his pent-up rage and borderline madness waiting years for his cultivated obsessions and the repressed "song of himself" to awake, a madness that is a consequence of living with impossibility right against the skin, so close. Bougere gives an humanity to a fairly common figure that often seems wildly inscrutable at first glance, the sort of haunted figure who literalizes metaphors, often with violence.



Teagle F. Bougere stars in Delroy Lindo's production of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* by August Wilson.

"You want blood? I'll give you blood!" he shouts as he rips open his shirt and slashes himself with a butcher knife.

He is a man whose identity was removed by force, and who searches for his lost wife so that he can begin his life. But for ten years of searching, he has postponed living for so long, he has become a tense wire of a man possessed of sullen silences split by sudden outbursts.

Yes, the play is intense, for all of its two hours, thirty minutes and focussing intently on such a minute space in the livingroom (save for a couple segments involving the children out in the yard) really creates at times a sense of compression as well as a sense of a great deal of personal history having happened prior to all the current events. Everyone on stage, saving the children, comes on with a load of historical baggage that needs to be dealt with by each in their own way.



Binder (Brent Jennings in a complex, powerful performance) falls back on his African roots and, among all the characters is the one who probably was born

under slavery, casts magic spells to connect people together. Rutherford Selig (played with amiable doofiness by Dan Hiatt) hails from the Old South and makes money selling the pots made by Seth while acting as a "finder" for people trying to locate missing people. His ancestors were people who chased down and located runaway slaves, an history that does not bother Selig in the slightest. "Heck, my people used to find your people for the White landowners. Now I just find the same people for you people."



(l to r) At Berkeley Rep, Teagle F. Bougere and Dan Hiatt star in Delroy Lindo's production of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* by August Wilson.

It can be said that Wilson's play possesses such rich evocative language and construction that it practically directs itself with only a push on the tiller here and there from Delroy Lindo.

One mention should be made of Scott Bradley's impressive set which features an impossibly long staircase behind the main area and a stylized view of the Ohio River waterfront with skyline and bridges as backdrop. Folks who know something of stage falls in theatre will have a great deal of sympathy for the actors and actresses who traverse that 1.5 story high staircase.

The play has been deservedly well reviewed, and we also throw in our endorsement for the revival of a masterpiece of theatre, well acted and well produced in conjunction with the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre.



(l to r) At Berkeley Rep, Barry Shabaka Henley and Kim Staunton star in Delroy Lindo's production of Joe Turner's Come and Gone by August Wilson.

Many of the critics have remarked that a separation of time and the recent Presidential Elections allow us to be thankful for changes in society. Well, the changes are indeed welcome, but there are plenty of Harold Loomis's still out there, and the damage of what was done persists down through the generations, systemically and within individuals. So patting oneself on the back may be a bit premature. A single act simply cannot erase, mollify, or heal well over 400 years of institutionalized horror and one will expect persistent consequences as one hopes for gradual healing as the song returns to the man who finds it in himself.

Interestingly there was an unintended strong evocation of a very different sort of "finding the song" as dramatized next door by Zimmerman's Arabian Nights during the musician's quest story told by Scheherezade. The Scheherezade story concerns a man who learns that the song is something granted by a Higher Power, and that the nature of himself is one bound to God.

Loomis, by contrast, needed to find the individual song of himself, that thing which sets him apart both as worthy and as connected to humanity.

There is a lot in the play. Go see it.

Personnel:

August Wilson, Playwright
Delroy Lindo, Director
Scott Bradley, Scenic Design
Reggie Ray, Costume Design
Cliff Caruthers, Sound Design
William H. Grant III, Lighting Design
Dwight Andrews, Music Director
Douglas A. Jones, Jr., Dramaturg
Cynthia Cahill, Stage Manager
Amy Potozkin, Casting
Alan Filderman, Casting

Victoria Northridge, Studio Teacher
Taura Musgrove, Assistant to the Director

Cast (in order of appearance):

Barry Shabaka Henley, Seth Holly Barry
Kim Staunton, Bertha Holly
Brent Jennings, Bynum Walker
Dan Hiatt, Rutherford Selig
Don Guillory, Jeremy Furlow
Teagle F. Bougere, Herald Loomis
Inglis Amore Hills, Zonia Loomis
Nia Reneé Warren, Zonia Loomis
Tiffany Michelle Thompson, Mattie Campbell
Keanu Beausier, Reuben Mercer
Victor McElhaney, Reuben Mercer
Erica Peeples, Molly Cunningham
Kenya Brome, Martha Pentecost