

THE PIANO LESSON

By August Wilson

Virginia Stage Company

Jan.15-Feb. 3, 2008

Tickets: (757) 627-1234 or (757) 671-8100

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large. Find a very good play, a group of superior actors with a sensitive director and you make clear why people are willing to fork over fair amounts of cash to go to the theatre. The experience is unique. And, so it is with this presentation of August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize winner.

Wilson's death in 2005 was too early. He was only 65. The American Theatre lost one of its greatest contemporary voices. THE PIANO LESSON is an example of the honesty, truth and intimacy that define his work. He makes the spectator an unseen presence in the place where the action is happening. He lets the simple human facts of the story replace the rant of angry rhetoric.

The time is 1936 Pittsburgh. Boy Willie and his sister Berniece battle over an ancestral piano decorated with unique carvings done by their enslaved grandfather. Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to buy himself a farm, a place in the white man's world. Berniece is adamant that it remain forever in the family as a shrine to their heritage. It has a prominent physical presence in the home, and a mythical, spiritual life as well, but it's rarely played. Maybe it's a burden, an impractical luxury. Could its sale help the family move on and up the economic scale? Well, Wilson doesn't take sides but in his gentle, often humorous manner, "the lesson" of the issue is made clear, and there is a resolution.

T'Keyah Crystal Kemah captures Wilson's strong-willed woman Berniece with subtle but determined, dignified demeanor. One senses an intense, concealed inner emotional struggle in her daily acts of coping. Alvin Keith (Boy Willie) is a bold, exciting, daring actor who follows his impulses with freedom and abandon to deliver a highly charged, captivating performance. The very likeable Bowman Wright is Boy Willie's friend called Lymon. He makes this shy, country lad a charming waif who just might become a man of accomplishment. Broadway veteran Don Mayo is Wining Boy, who brings lots of humor to the proceedings. Raphael Peacock and Kim Sullivan are excellent, stalwart anchors of reality and eleven year old Alexis Ricks is believable as Berniece's guarded daughter.

Regge Life, the director, has shaped this troupe of very fine players into an outstanding ensemble. They seem to wear the skins of their characters and, even, breathe their breaths of life. Beowulf Boritt's skeletal set is dominated by a stair way to paradise but functions well under Michael Giannitti's quite realistic lighting.

I've not told you about the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog or the white ghost of Sutter because of time limitations. In fact I've only barely touched upon the myriad dramatic treasures you'll discover when you visit the wonderful Wells Theatre.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.