



Kenzie Ross (Candice) and Michelle Wilson (Sandra) in *Confederates*. Photo: Monique Carboni.

remains embedded in the contemporary workings of the institution.

Although Morisseau unmistakably implies that the misogynoir that Sandra encounters in the university emerges, in the words of Christina Sharpe, “in the wake” of American chattel slavery, the production stopped short of drawing a direct analogy between Sara’s and Sandra’s navigations of slavery and academia, respectively. Yet savvy moments of repetition and an increasingly porous and madcap border between time periods foregrounded the enduring affinities between the women’s experiences. The intersectional biases of misogynoir demand from Black women—among many other things—unflinching strength, undervalued caretaking and emotional labor, and an otherworldly composure in the face of frustration. The heightened scrutiny, the way racist and sexist institutions work to divide and isolate individuals who might otherwise form effective coalitions, and the foreclosure of self-determination: the struggle against these, apart from the more overt forms of racist oppression and violence that Black women experience, “to be a war,” to quote LuAnne. One of the great strengths of Morisseau’s newest play is her ability to render this facet of the war absolutely clear without straying into didacticism.

But the war is not only fought through conflict: it is also fought, *Confederates* ultimately suggests, in moments of unexpected or pointed levity, and in meaningful connections forged within and in spite of systems of oppression. The production ended with moving declarations of autonomy from Sara and Sandra, who finally came face-to-face, united across time. The conclusion, which might feel saccharine in the hands of a less capable director and without the leavening benefit of Morisseau’s piquant dialogue, offered a powerful vision of solidarity.

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THE PIANO LESSON. By August Wilson.
Directed by LaTanya Richardson Jackson.
The Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York.
September 23, 2022.

Set in 1936 amid the turmoil of the Great Depression and the promise of the Great Migration, August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* stages rich conversations about the significance of history, legacy, and inheritance in African American life. Thirty-five years after its premiere at the Yale Repertory Theatre, the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama received an absorbing revival on Broadway that demonstrated the enduring power of Wilson’s cultural insights and theatrical imagination. The revival marked the Broadway directorial debut of Tony-nominated actor LaTanya Richardson Jackson, who now holds the distinction of being the first woman to helm one of Wilson’s plays on the Great White Way. Richardson Jackson assembled a remarkable cast of veterans and newcomers to the New York stage—including her husband of more than four decades, celebrated film star Samuel L. Jackson—who revealed new layers of meaning and humor in Wilson’s language and his singular dramaturgy.

Jackson, who originated the role of Boy Willie at Yale Rep, anchored the revival with a good-natured and earthy performance as Doaker Charles. A respected family elder who has spent much of his adult life working for the railroad system, Doaker lives with his niece Berniece and her daughter Maretha in the Pittsburgh home that becomes the source and site of many of the tensions animating the domestic drama. Wilson centers *The Piano Lesson* on the conflict that arises from the divergent views that Berniece and her brother, Boy Willie, hold about what to do with a prized family heirloom, the piano of the play’s title. Because it is an emblem of great joy and tremendous pain, Boy Willie maintains that the instrument, which features intricate carvings of



John David Washington (Boy Willie) and Samuel L. Jackson (Doaker) in *The Piano Lesson*.
Photo: Julieta Cervantes.



Danielle Brooks (Berniece) in *The Piano Lesson*. Photo: Julieta Cervantes.

multiple generations of the Charles family, should be sold so that he can purchase a plot of land from the white family that once owned his. Berniece, on the other hand, contends that, given the sacrifices their relatives made to acquire it, the heirloom should remain in the family. While Jackson's Doaker mostly remained neutral in the sibling's feud, he also pushed them to confront the history of the piano before making any decisions about its future. In so doing, he created space for both the sparring duo and the audience to renegotiate their relationship to the traumatic history and legacy of slavery and its afterlives.

Jackson had wonderful scene partners in fellow screen stars John David Washington (Boy Willie) and Danielle Brooks (Berniece). Washington brought particular heat to his portrayal of Boy Willie, a character who has some of the densest and most poetic passages in Wilson's American Century Cycle. Brimming with urgency and ambition, his Boy Willie often punctuated his aspirational declamations with a beaming smile, thereby highlighting the character's relentlessness and charisma. He also displayed a clear hunger to make freedom mean something to the Charles family. While much more subdued in her take on Berniece, Brooks proved to be a formidable interlocutor for Washington. Her Berniece rejoined Boy Willie's hyperactivity with a no-nonsense as-

sertiveness and clarity that served to elucidate the character's unwillingness to be silent about the pain and grief she and other women in the Charles family had to endure because of the poor decision-making of their male relatives.

Ray Fisher (Lymon), Trai Byers (Avery), Michael Potts (Wining Boy), and April Matthis (Grace) joined Jackson, Washington, and Brooks in ensuring the revival overflowed with inspired and inspiring moments. Fisher was especially endearing as the overly eager and sincere Lymon, who, despite the many racist obstacles he encountered coming of age in the South, remains hopeful about the possibility of making a new life in the industrial North. Byers managed to surface the lyricism in Avery's preacherly dialogue, which endowed the character with a magnetism that made clear why, despite her ambivalence about marrying again after the brutal murder of her husband Crawley, Berniece did not completely rebuff his romantic overtures.

Death is a constant refrain in the lives of the Charles siblings, who lost their own father, Boy Charles, when the boxcar he was traveling in after retrieving the piano from the Sutter household with Doaker and Wining Boy was set on fire. Though no one is ever charged with the violent crime, Sutter himself, who drowns sometime before Boy Willie

makes the trip northward with Lymon to sell their truckload of watermelons, was the likely culprit. Sutter's ghost haunts members of the Charles family throughout *The Piano Lesson*, which culminates with Boy Willie battling the apparition. These otherworldly moments are a signature of Wilson's dramaturgy and demand that productions resist becoming too seduced by the playwright's profound ability to dramatize the rhythms and sentiments of everyday Black life in realist dialogue. Richardson-Jackson powerfully used the play's forays into the supernatural to underline key themes about the essential importance of confronting the past to the project of Black liberation. Strong design work by Beowulf Boritt (set), Toni-Leslie James (costumes), Japhy Weideman (lights), Scott Lehrer (sound), and Jeff Sugg (projections) helped amplify those themes by establishing a visual vocabulary that seamlessly synthesized the realistic and the symbolic.

Among the most striking aspects of the revival was its ability to encourage its audience to reckon afresh with the questions Wilson poses about how best to make use of the past in the present. Rich in humor, emotional resonance, and symbolic meaning, the production powerfully demonstrated the continued relevance of these questions while also affirming why the American Century Cycle remains a landmark achievement in American drama and theatre.

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DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN. By Wole Soyinka. Directed by Tawiah M'Carthy. Tom Patterson Theatre, Stratford Festival, Stratford, Ontario. September 24, 2022.

The first African writer to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, Wole Soyinka remains the continent's preeminent living dramatist. Yet, despite his global stature and renown, Soyinka's plays rarely have taken the major stages of Britain, Canada, or the United States. His 1975 masterpiece *Death and the King's Horseman* has received few productions in the Global North apart from the productions Soyinka himself directed at the Goodman Theatre (1979) and Lincoln Center (1987). Indeed, its most recent major stagings in Britain and the United States occurred more than a decade ago, in 2009, at London's National Theatre and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Nevertheless, in 2022, Soyinka has enjoyed a flurry of interest. In addition to the Stratford Festival's first production of *Death and the King's Horseman*—which also served as the first production of an African play

in the festival's history—Soyinka's modern classic received a parallel premiere in Biyi Bandele's posthumously released feature-length Netflix adaptation, *The King's Horseman*.

This renewed attention to Soyinka is both welcome and overdue, as it allows audiences to engage with Soyinka's complex dramaturgy and his distinctive hybridization of Greek tragic form and Yoruba ritual. Loosely based on a historical event, *Death and the King's Horseman* unfolds in the British colony of Nigeria in 1943, centering on Elesin Oba (Anthony Santiago in the Stratford production) as he prepares to commit ritual suicide to fulfill his duty as the horseman to the recently departed Yoruba king of Oyo. Elesin elects to spend his final moments in the Yoruba market, where he is accompanied by his Praise-Singer (Amaka Umeh) and the women of the market. Prophetically, the "Mother" of the market women, Iyaloja (Akosua Amo-Adem), warns Elesin to loosen his attachments to the world of the living to prepare for his transition to the ancestral realm. Elesin dismisses her advice and instead takes a new bride the very night of his passage. Meanwhile, the colonial functionary Simon Pilkings (Graham Abbey) and his wife Jane (Maev Beaty), interrupt their preparations for a Masque ball to hatch a plan to prevent Elesin's ritual suicide. With their plans in place, they proceed with the Masque, where they unexpectedly encounter Olunde (Kwaku Adu-Poku), Elesin's son, who left Oyo to study medicine in London but who has returned to honor his father. No sooner does Olunde return than he learns that—whether due to colonial machinations or Elesin's enduring attachments to the living—his father has not fulfilled his duty. Elesin's failure to complete his prescribed function leads to the play's tragic climax: Olunde commits ritual suicide in his father's place and, in response, Elesin belatedly follows his son into the ancestral world.

Music, dance, and ritual are integral to Soyinka's dramaturgy. Although *Death and the King's Horseman* is most often read as a literary text, it benefits tremendously from full embodiment, costuming, choreography, and musical orchestration. Director Tawiah M'Carthy gave full weight to these performance elements, staging a vital and sonorous production. The scenes set in the market were captivating, featuring Jaz 'Fairy J' Simone's intricate ensemble choreography and Sarah Uwadiae's lavish costuming sourced from Nigeria. Yet, the play's soundscape was the foundation for this production. Drawing upon his 2021 radio play version that he developed with the Toronto-based Soulpepper Theatre Company, M'Carthy emphasized the musicality of Soyinka's lyrical dialogue, which tightly interweaves Yoruba proverbs and ritualistic symbolism. Moreover, Adékúnlé Olórúndaré's musical arrangements