

THE PITTSBURGH CULTURAL TRUST & PITTSBURGH PLAYWRIGHTS THEATRE COMPANY PRESENT



Art by: Vanessa German

AUGUST WILSON'S **THE PIANO LESSON**

DIRECTED BY

Mark Clayton Southers

November 13-15 & 19-21, 2015

August Wilson Center



AUGUST WILSON'S **THE PIANO LESSON**

DIRECTED BY
Mark Clayton Southers

Production Manager
Monteze Freeland

Assistant to the Director
Stevie Akers

Scenic Designer
Tony Ferrieri

Costume Design
Cheryl Walker

Lighting Design
Bob Steineck

Sound Design
Mark Whitehead

Property Master
LaMar Darnell Fields

Fight Choreographer
Randy Kovitz

Special FX Master
Steve Tolan

Stage Manager
Marti Williams

Resident Carpenter
Diane Melchitzky

Technical Director
Alex Barnhart

Scenic Artist
Alicia Diaz

Original piano carvings
Ernest Bey

Running time: 2 hours 45 minutes
including a 15 minute intermission

Director's Notes

Every once in a while the opportunity to work on an August Wilson masterpiece comes along. This time around we are fortunate to stage this Pulitzer Prize-winning drama on the sacred stage of the August Wilson Center. We feel it belongs here. The beauty of Mr. Wilson's writing brought to life by our remarkable cast will hopefully echo off of these walls and wake our ancestors.

The Piano Lesson is a tale that deals with family values, honor and the haunting past of our African-American existence in the harsh south.

Most of our families are connected in some way to America's southern states.

A lot of families traveled north for a better life. You don't have to go back too far in your own family to understand this.

In this drama Boy Willie doesn't desire this. He wants to stay and work the land, a noble act for an African-American man during the 1930s. His sister Berniece has chosen to migrate to the north for a better life for her and her daughter and to escape the pain of losing her husband Crawley.

At the center of the struggle between these siblings is a family heirloom that Berniece brought north with her.

Mr. Wilson has crafted a very involved play with a host of interesting characters that will take you on a journey that is both dramatic and quite funny.

I hope you enjoy this production and I hope that August is smiling down on us all as well.

Mark Clayton Southers

Who's Who in the Cast



WALI JAMAL



KARLA C. PAYNE



KEVIN BROWN



MONTEZE FREELAND



BRENDA MARKS



GARBIE DUKES*



EDWIN LEE GIBSON*



NIA WOODSON



TRYSTA MIRI LEI FIELDS

Who's Who

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel, Jr. in Pittsburgh, 1945, the fourth of seven children. He grew up in the impoverished Bedford Avenue area of the city. The family moved from there when his mother remarried, and Wilson attended school. He dropped out of school at age 16 and focused on working in menial jobs, while fostering his burgeoning love of the written word with trips to the Carnegie Library. Reading the works of Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison embedded a desire within the teenage Wilson to become a writer, though his mother wanted him to pursue a career in law. Disagreements over this decision led to Wilson leaving the family home. He intended to spend three years in the army, but he left after a year and returned to Pittsburgh to work in various jobs.

After his father's death in 1965, Frederick Kittel, Jr changed his name to August Wilson, a decision made to honor his mother. During the late 1960s, Wilson became heavily influenced by Malcolm X and the blues, and he converted to Islam to sustain his 1969 marriage to Brenda Burton. They divorced in 1972. A year earlier, working with Rob Penny, Wilson set up the Black Horizon Theater, where his first plays, *Recycling* and *Jitney*, were performed.

In 1976, a production of *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* was held at Pittsburgh Public Theater. It was the first time Wilson had seen a professional play. Two years later, the budding playwright moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he worked writing educational scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota. The Playwrights' Center in Minnesota awarded Wilson a fellowship in 1980, and he left his day job a year later. Wilson continued writing plays while working as a chef for the Little Brothers of the Poor.

While in Minnesota, Wilson built a strong working relationship with Penumbra Theatre Company, which produced many of his plays during the 1980s. On May 25, 1987, the city proclaimed it August Wilson Day after Wilson won the Pulitzer Prize award that year. Wilson left St. Paul for Seattle in 1990, after his second marriage to Judy Oliver ended in divorce. While living in Seattle, the Seattle Repertory Theatre performed several of his plays.

In 1995, Wilson received an honorary degree (one of many) from the University of Pittsburgh, where he became a Doctor of Humanities and member of the Board of Trustees. He married Constanza Romero in 1994. In 2005, he was diagnosed with liver cancer, and in October of that year, he passed away.

Mark Clayton Southers is an award-winning playwright, photographer, scenic designer, theatrical producer and stage director. He and his family reside in Pittsburgh's historic Hill District. Mark is the founder and producing artistic director of the Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company, where he has produced over 140 full-length and one-act plays, including August Wilson's complete 10-play *Pittsburgh Century Cycle*. His play *Ma Noah* received the 2004 Theodore Ward prize at Columbia College, Chicago. Mark is also a published poet. In 2009, his poem play *Angry Black Man Poetry* had a successful run at Teatr Śląski in Katowice, Poland.

Some of Mark's favorite directing credits include *Paul Robeson* for Griot Ensemble Theatre Company; *Pill Hill* and *Freeman* for New Horizon Theatre; *Almost Maine* for South Park Theatre; *August in February* series for the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust; *Dutchman* for Bricolage Production Company; *Angry Black Man Poetry* for Teatr Śląski; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Radio Golf* for American Stage Theatre in St. Petersburg, FL; *Gem of the Ocean* for Human Race Theatre in Dayton, OH (named best director by the Dayton Metro News); *Passing Strange* for North Short Stage in Columbus, OH; *Papa Doc* and *Paul Robeson* for Trilogy: An Opera Company in Newark, NJ; *The Sty of the Blind Pig* for The Banyan Theatre Company in Sarasota, FL; and *Dorothy Six*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running* (one of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's top 10 plays of the decade), *Seven Guitars*, *VALU-MART*, *Jitney* (voted one of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's top 10 best plays in 2010, it broke all house attendance records at the Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre) and *Gem of the Ocean* for Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company. Mark is a four-time recipient of the AACTA Onyx award for Best Director.

After attending a master class in playwriting conducted by August Wilson at the Grahamstown Arts Festival in South Africa, Mark attended the Edward Albee Theatre Festival in Valdez, Alaska, where he did seated readings of all of August Wilson's plays with August Wilson. These encounters with August Wilson encouraged Mark to take up playwriting and devote more time to theater arts. In 2003, Mark established Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company, producing August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which received critical acclaim and high praise from the playwright himself. Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company continued to grow and thrive, and it moved to Pittsburgh's Cultural District in 2005.

From 2010-13, Mark was the Artistic Director of Theatre Initiatives for the 486-seat August Wilson Center for African American Culture. During his tenure, Mark began a monthly August Wilson Reading Round Table, featuring plays from Pulitzer Prize-winning and Pittsburgh native August Wilson, along with works by emerging playwrights. Readers included local actors and celebrities and on occasion, nationally renowned actors.

Who's Who in the Cast

KEVIN BROWN (*Doaker*) is a native of August Wilson's Hill District and is over the moon to be a part of this cast. Brown has appeared in seven of August Wilson's 10-play *Century Cycle*. Brown appeared in New Horizon Theater's world premiere *Queens of The Blues* as Thomas Dorsey, the father of gospel music. He recently filmed a remake of the classic "crying Indian" commercial for PRC's anti-littering campaign. Brown's additional theater credits include *Jitney*, *King Hedley II*, *Gem of The Ocean*, *Radio Golf*, *Comfort Zone*, *Romance*, *Do Lord Remember Me*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Gospel at Colonus*, *Beautiful Dreamer*, *Last of the Line*, *Livin' Fat*, *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, *Flight*, *Jelly's Last Jam*, *Mahalia Jackson: Standing on Holy Ground*, *Get Ready*, *Blue*, *Sophisticated Ladies* and *The Billie Holiday Story* at the Grahamstown Theater Festival (South Africa).

GARBIE DUKES* (*Wining Boy*) has been performing professionally since 1992. His television credits include *Unsolved Mysteries*, as well as a national GE Aviation commercial, several regional commercials and numerous industrial videos. Garbie's stage credits include productions at City Theatre, August Wilson Center, Opera Theater of Pittsburgh, David Lawrence Convention Center and numerous other venues. He has performed the National Anthem four times at PNC Park for Pittsburgh Pirates games. He performs as a musician in jazz and cabaret shows with John Holt Productions. Garbie has been a musician and choir director at several local churches, and is a proud union member of Actors' Equity and SAG-AFTRA.

TRYSTA MIRI LEI FIELDS (*Maretha*) is making her acting debut with Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company. Trysta is the daughter of actor LaMar Darnell Fields and is an honor student at Pittsburgh Dilworth. She enjoys singing, dancing, playing soccer and creating plays with her cousin. Trysta thanks Mark Southers for casting her in this play.

MONTEZE FREELAND (*Lymon*) is an actor and director by way of Baltimore, who has made Pittsburgh his theatrical home. A graduate of Point Park University and Artistic Director of The LAB Project, Monteze has worked with City Theatre (Young Playwrights Festival), The Pittsburgh Playhouse (*Parade*, No Place To Be Somebody, *Thou Shalt Not*), Quantum Theatre (*The Electric Baby*), The Hiawatha Project (*Camino* and *JH: Mechanics of a Legend*), Kuntu Repertory Theatre (*Radio Golf*), Prime Stage Theatre (*Of Mice and Men* and *Fahrenheit 451*), Black and White Productions (*Sweeney Todd* and *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*) and Throughline Theater Company (*Angels in America*). He earned the Pittsburgh Playhouse Jr. Award for his work in *Alice in Wonderland*, *Pinocchio* and *Ananse and The Glueman*. Monteze is thrilled to return to Pittsburgh Playwrights after last being seen in *Congo Square*, and a one-night stint in Ray Werner's *Christmas Star*. Innumerable thanks to Mark Southers for his tutelage and mentorship.

EDWIN LEE GIBSON* (*Avery*) is an actor whose theater credits include *The Royale* by Marco Ramirez (*Orange Is The New Black*), American

Theatre Company, Chicago; U.S. premiere of *Love and Information* by Caryl Churchill, Minetta Lane Theatre/New York Theatre Workshop; *Turquoise* by Deb Margolin, Dixon Place Theatre, New York; *The Bellagio Fountain Has Been Known To Make Me Cry* by Renee Philipi, Concrete Temple Theatre, New York; and *The Death of Bessie Smith* by Edward Albee, New Brooklyn Theatre. Television credits include three episodes of *Law and Order: SVU* as Counselor Orton Freeman. Mr. Gibson will make his Showtime Network debut on the William H. Macy series, *Shameless*. He recently directed *Lower Ninth* at the Kaufmann Center in Pittsburgh. Mr. Gibson is the recipient of the coveted OBIE Award (Off-Broadway in Excellence) for Outstanding Performance.

WALI JAMAL (*Boy Willie*) is honored and proud to be performing in his 10th production from August Wilson's 10-play *Century Cycle*. Jamal's past performances of August Wilson's work include: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Toledo), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (Seth Holly), *Seven Guitars* (Canewell) with Kuntu Repertory, *The Piano Lesson* (Avery), *Seven Guitars* (Hedley), *Two Trains Running* (Wolf), *Jitney* (Doub), *Gem of the Ocean* (Caesar) and *Radio Golf* (Sterling) with Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company. This production of *The Piano Lesson* makes number nine, leaving *King Hedley* to complete the *Century Cycle*. Special thanks to my good buddy, Mark Clayton Southers, who introduced me to August Wilson and his magnificent body of work. Thanks, Mark O!!!

BRENDA MARKS (*Grace*) has performed in theater productions throughout the greater Pittsburgh area for several decades. Brenda was last seen in New Horizon Theatre's production of *The Dance on Widow's Row*, playing the role of Lois. She also had the honor of performing in *The Code*, in the role of Susan, as part of Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company's annual festival.

KARLA C. PAYNE (*Berniece*) is a veteran stage actress and has appeared in countless productions, including New Horizon Theater's *The Dance on Widow's Row*, *Queens of the Blues* and *Do Lord Remember Me*. Payne's musical theater work includes *The Wiz*, *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Into the Woods*. She has made several performances of Langston Hughes' *Black Nativity* produced by Shona Sharif African Drum and Dance Ensemble. Payne is an accomplished spoken word artist. In 2012, she released her award-winning, debut spoken word recording, *Words Unspoken*, under her pen name, Spirit-Lead. In August, 2015, she released her first poetry chapbook, *From My Indigo Pen*.

NIA WOODSON (*Maretha*) is a fifth grader at Liberty Elementary school. Her acting debut was playing the role of Cordelia in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and she was cast by Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company as Raynell in August Wilson's *Fences*. Nia attends the Pittsburgh Ballet Theater and runs track and field. Nia would like to thank Mark Clayton Southers for supporting her dreams of being an actress.

* Member of Actors' Equity Association

Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company

Founded by Mark Clayton Southers in 2003, Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company is committed to developing and showcasing the works of local playwrights; from accomplished masters like August Wilson and George S. Kaufman to promising new talents. We seek to nurture a racially and culturally diverse community of playwrights, directors, actors and technical specialists to hone their craft and to network creative opportunities. Finally, we support a racially and culturally diverse management staff and board of directors who, together, promote audiences that reflect the rich variety of our Pittsburgh community. Through such sharing of talents, resources, perspectives and experiences we aspire to provide artistic enlightenment that will strengthen our civic community. For more information, visit pghplaywrights.com

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Pittsburgh Cultural Trust

The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust has overseen one of Pittsburgh's most historic transformations: turning a seedy red-light district into a magnet destination for arts lovers, residents, visitors, and business owners. Founded in 1984, the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust is a non-profit arts organization whose mission is the cultural and economic revitalization of a 14-block arts and entertainment/residential neighborhood called the Cultural District. The District is one of the country's largest land masses "curated" by a single nonprofit arts organization. A major catalytic force in the city, the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust is a unique model of how public-private partnerships can reinvent a city with authenticity, innovation and creativity. Using the arts as an economic catalyst, the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust has holistically created a world-renowned Cultural District that is revitalizing the city, improving the regional economy and enhancing Pittsburgh's quality of life. Thanks to the support of foundations, corporations, government agencies and thousands of private citizens, the Cultural Trust stands as a national model of urban redevelopment through the arts. For more information, visit TrustArts.org.

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The Power of the Blues When Vanessa and August Commune

By Tameka Cage Conley, PhD

What happens when the brilliance of multi-disciplinary artist Vanessa German collides with the inspired work of the iconic, masterful playwright August Wilson? Magic. Power. Hope. The waters of American history collide in blue harmony. The enslaved body whispers to the free one, and the free one touches back and says, "I remember you." We are reminded not only that Wilson was a treasure, but that the legacy of his work advances Black art, Black genius, and how inextinguishable and resilient humanity is, how triumphant people of African descent are, despite the devastation of slavery, institutionalized racism, gentrification, classism, the prison industrial complex and mass disadvantage in education and socio-economic opportunity. German created a mixed media painting that depicts dreams longed for and broken dreams in the human condition and in Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. She explains, "Having been in *The Piano Lesson* (as Berniece) and staged an all-female version, it influenced the piece. I've done guest artist appearances and classes where these questions come up: should Berniece let Boy Willie sell the piano or is Boy Willie wrong? I've spent a lot of time with those monologues. I've performed both Boy Willie's monologue and Berniece's monologue."

German has done some acting in nine of the ten plays, all except *Two Trains Running*. Her connection to August's work is a revolving door and an endless well of experience and meditation. She finds similar pace in Wilson's work and hers as an artist who works across mediums. "I don't always think about his work but generally I think about the truth of how many dimensions he worked in simultaneously," she says. "He was soulfully generative in the past, present, and future. I think of him being a creative human and generating real, tangible, physical things from the invisible place of the soul but with the great depths of humanity and deep creativity, as in everything original coming from a primal, eruptive, creative force. Before he would work, he would wash his hands and say 'start anywhere.' As an artist who creates in many different mediums it's really important to show up. You can't engineer the spirit of the thing. I feel fortunate as a Black artist to know that I'm not just working in my own physical being but that I'm present with a lot of other people. I think about that when I'm in the studio. To let it be and have freedom."

Yet my impression is that Vanessa is her own studio. She carries her art and so many great works of art in her spirit, her blood, her soul, and her heart, wide as the space between mountains on separate continents. She is a force of love that expands all oceans. Nothing Vanessa touches can stay the same. Like August, she breathes new life on life itself. She commands and tides roll in. She pulls from all sources of power, and there is a sense of timelessness to her work that at once inspires you and makes you wonder: what manner of artist is this? We marvel at Vanessa as we do artists, as we do anyone who takes up pen, paintbrush, and canvas and dares to make something, anything. In Vanessa's case, the creation makes us touch our hearts.

In the piece Vanessa created for *The Piano Lesson*, one is immediately struck by the calm power of blue. She sees *The Piano Lesson* as a blues. "The blues can hold a thing," she says. "And all the colors of the ocean." Vanessa explains that a friend from Iran informed her the color is called "God blue" in her culture. The blue works on so many levels, from anchoring the play and the piece in the African American blues tradition to invoking both a sense of calm and a sense of discord. Vanessa asserts, "All of these bloody, grief-stricken, wet American stories are present, but they are contained by all that blue. In the design of the piece, you can have all these layers present but they're present in all these layers of these colors." The blues vary in depth and brightness to create a contour of human experience from the triumphant to the tragic to the traumatic. Peace and loneliness live side by side. With tenderness and sadness Vanessa says, "Berniece had broken heart disease."

We see it in her depiction of a blue piano that has collage images that act as sheet music, of Trayvon Martin in the hoodie that haunts us now, as well an iconic image of an enslaved woman whose eyes are so wide and deep with pain and wonder that they transfixed Vanessa, too. She says, "I have a deep connection with the slave possession photo. There's something about the woman's eyes. I'm still trying to feel what she was saying with her eyes. The woman who lives across the street from me looks like her. I knew that I wanted to place images in the piano. I knew I wanted to use that image. I wanted to use the woman being lynched from the bridge in Oklahoma in 1911. I was thinking about the pressures of the past and present and Trayvon and dreaming and dead dreams."

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There is also a portrait of a Black family and a Black child from the past. On the floor, beneath the piano are watermelons that are a nod to European still life, but mostly a tribute to Boy Willie. She says, "I feel like the watermelon and the piano communicate with each other." She captures Boy Willie's hope to become something more, to have tangible wealth. For Boy Willie, selling the watermelons and selling the piano are pathways to success and to his destiny.

"The watermelons are a tribute to Boy Willie's dreams. I think about anybody I've heard who's done any time in prison. The prison time when they were awake was a dead time. You become a property of the state. I think of the way Boy Willie's dreams had fueled him. That's original beauty to have an idea, to tap into that idea and to move the engine of the heart to drive that dream. He wanted Berniece to see that he wasn't trying to tear anything down, but he was dreaming. I meet a lot of people who don't dream anymore, mainly people who talk to me about 'they' a lot. There's some externalization of some omnipotent power that all gets lumped together as 'they.' Handing that anonymous "they" all that power keeps [people] disconnected from their dreams."

She adds, "Inside of me, I see a little fire in people that's wondering, 'Do you think they will let me do that? You are *they*. Do whatever you want to do. I think that when we dream, we are

answers to our ancestors' prayers."

Vanessa created the piece in her kitchen, and there is an air of softness and sincerity in her voice when she recalls making the piece there. If the kitchen is the heart of a home, *Gem of the Ocean* is, from Vanessa's perspective, the heart of Wilson's ten-play cycle. "*Gem of the Ocean* holds everything else together. Aunt Ester's hands are the ship, and so every play takes place in *Gem of the Ocean*." Perhaps the eye at the top of the painting is Aunt Ester's, whose knowing travels eternally, back and forth to the dark void, to bodies in chains, and to the future and the future's future.

"I really wanted to have very specific moments in the work where you wonder, 'Did they update the Piano Lesson? Is it taking place in 2015? Oh, we're not in the thirties anymore?' I wanted to bring the sense of the weight of our story," she says. "But also the beauty that there's this play written in the '80s that represents the '30s but we're watching it in 2015. As a work of art it is a mighty machine of reckoning and healing. Aren't we so lucky to have this work of art to do what no psychologist or suicide attempt or anti-depressant can ever do for us? Aren't we so lucky to go to a theater and throw the soul of our eye on a stage and breathe and heal? Aren't we so lucky that August gave us this living, breathing thing? *The Piano Lesson* is so much more than a play."