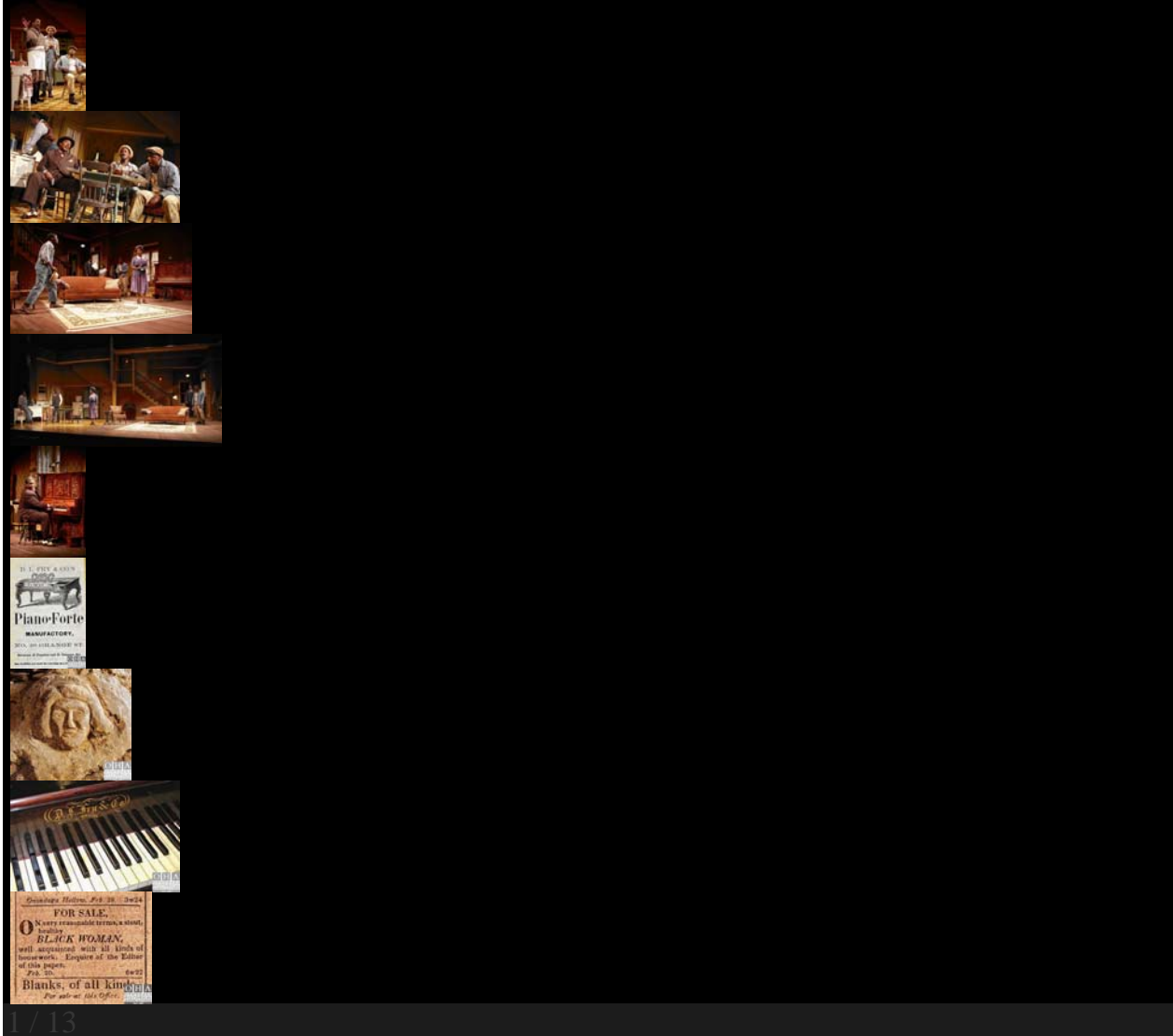


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**Syracuse Stage director calls 'Piano Lesson' a family story with a 'rich stew of characters'**





Erika LaVonn (Bernice) and Ken Robinson (Avery) in the Syracuse Stage production of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*.  
Photographer Michael Davis.  
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SYRACUSE, N.Y. -- It has been 11 years since Timothy Bond, producing artistic director at Syracuse Stage, directed **August Wilson's** "The Piano Lesson." He brings the Pulitzer Prize-winning play to Stage for its opening night on Friday. After the intervening years, Bond says "Piano Lesson" feels like a new play.

"I find the power of it overwhelming in the way that you think of '**Death of a Salesman**' or certain other plays in the American canon that just feel like they capture something about American character, about the American story," Bond said of "The Piano Lesson" last week before an afternoon rehearsal.

"The Piano Lesson" is one of the dramas from Wilson's **10-play cycle** exploring the lives of African-Americans in every decade of the 20th century. It is the fifth Wilson play Bond has directed at Stage.

The play is set in 1936 in the Hill District, the African-American community in Pittsburgh. There is friction in the Charles family between the widowed Berniece, who is living with her uncle and young daughter, and her brother Boy Willie who has arrived from the South.

The siblings are in a tug-of-war over the family piano. Panels on the piano have carved images of their slave ancestors and primitive figures are on its front legs. For Berniece, the piano is sacred because of the many tragic circumstances surrounding it. For Boy Willie, the piano is the answer to his dream for the future. If he can sell the piano, he can scrape together enough money to buy the land his ancestors once worked back home.

It's a family story," says Bond. "It's such a beautiful story about a family trying to figure out how to move forward together after these tragic events." While the piano is the lightning rod for the family's conflict, Bond says the play serves up a lot of love, food, humor, music and a "rich stew of characters."

Bond offered a few insights into "The Piano Lesson" during an interview.

**Q. What does August Wilson want us to understand with "The Piano Lesson"?**

**A.** "I think for him it's very much about legacy. I think he's asking a good question about how do we honor and use our legacy. And, in this case, the Charles family's legacy is one of having come through slavery and through **Reconstruction** in the South and the play taking place in Jim Crow period and having been owned by slave masters on a certain plot of land. How does one honor and carry forward that legacy as one is seeking self-worth?"

"The conundrum in the play is that Boy Willie and Berniece, his sister, have two very different feelings about what the legacy of the piano that has been carved with their ancestral relatives on it, what should happen to it.

"What neither of them understands is the true power of the ancestors that are depicted and the need they both have to stay connected to that legacy of their ancestors' spirits.

"I think August wants us to understand our ancestors and honor our ancestors whose shoulders we stand on is the only way we can truly move forward and find our self-worth in society."

**Q. Does the past inform the present?**

**A.** "Oh, absolutely. The past has created the conditions that we have inherited. The past has birthed us and our society and our conditions. And how people functioned and dealt with the past is the legacy that we have inherited. By understanding that the best, one has an opportunity to create a path for one's future.

"I think that's something August talked about a lot. I talked to him about it. He felt that very deeply. He's not interested in it as a history lesson. He's interested in it in a very personal, spiritual path for each individual to understand in their own family's history.

"One of the brilliant things about "Piano Lesson" is he's exploring not slavery in quotations. He's exploring the Charles' family's legacy in slavery as depicted in the piano and as living within the lore of the family's memory, by reconnecting to that memory and to the ancestral spirits that still reside in that piano, and still reside in the world and in the hearts of these characters. By reconnecting to that, they are then empowered not only to banish the ghost of Sutter \_ who is the legacy of white slavery that is causing quite a problem in the house and in the play \_ but to find their own self-worth."

**Q. Why is the piano such an important character in the play?**

**A.** "It's a powerful symbol and extraordinary object of art, of creativity, of toil, of craftsmanship, of history and has tremendous spiritual energy imbued in it. As the character Berniece says, her mother, Mama Ola, polished it every day and rubbed her blood in it. It's the blood of their ancestors. It's the blood that

was spilled to get that piano. Her father died to rescue that piano from the white slave-owning family, to take it back into their family. The great grandfather carved it out of his memory of his mother and what had been taken from them in slavery. All those spirits are living in that a piano."

## **THE DETAILS**

**What:** "The Piano Lesson," by August Wilson. Co-production of Syracuse Stage and Seattle Repertory Theatre.

**Where:** Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.

**When:** 7:30 p.m. today, preview. 8 p.m. Friday, opening night. 3 and 8 p.m. Saturday. 2 p.m. Sunday. 2 and 7:30 p.m. Wednesday. 7:30 p.m. Oct. 30 and Nov. 4 to 6; 8 p.m. Oct. 31, Nov. 1, 7 and 8; 3 p.m. Nov. 1 and 8; 2 p.m. Nov. 2 and 9; 7 p.m. Nov. 2.

**Tickets:** \$30 to \$54, adults. \$30 to \$39, 40 years and younger. \$18, 18 years and younger. To purchase, call 443-3275 or [go online](#).

**ALSO:** Onondaga Historical Association will present an exhibit in Stage's public area of the connections between some of the play's themes and Syracuse's history, including visual images of the city's role in the abolitionist movement, local piano manufacturers of the 19th century and the story of two slaves in Onondaga County.