

Cultural Daily

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August Wilson's *Jitney* Finally Drives Onto Broadway

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 18th, 2017

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It's hard to pick one, but *Jitney* is probably my favorite in August Wilson's decade-by-decade, ten-play cycle of the African-American experience in the 20th Century. It's kind of the underdog of this mammoth collection and maybe that's why I like it best. There are no star parts. There are no flashy elements of mysticism which can be found in *The Piano Lesson* and *Gem of the Ocean*. *Jitney* was one of Wilson's early plays, written even before his first breakout hit (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*). It was the first Wilson play to premiere in NYC in an Off-Broadway theater (Second Stage in 2001) and is only now making its Broadway debut in a dynamic revival from Manhattan Theatre Club.



John Douglas Thomas, Michael Potts, Anthony Chisholm, and Brandon J. Dirden in *Jitney*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

While other Wilson works contain powerhouse central roles and have attracted big names such as James Earl Jones and Denzel Washington (*Fences*), Whoopi Goldberg (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*), Phylicia Rashad (*Gem of the Ocean*), and Brian Stokes Mitchell and Leslie Uggams (*King Hedley II*), *Jitney* is a true ensemble piece with the dramatic weight almost equally distributed among its nine characters—the original won Drama Desk and Obie Awards for the entire company. The setting is a rundown Pittsburgh car-service station in 1977 (David Gallo, who designed the 2001 version, returns with a different but equally arresting and detailed environment). Taxis don't travel to this section of the city, so residents rely on unlicensed cabs for transportation. Becker, who runs the station, provides moral support as well as wheels. He's an unofficial leader of the community, finding jobs for nephews and cousins attempting to get their lives in order and organizing his fellow businessmen to protest a city plan to tear down their buildings. But while he's a figurative father to the neighborhood, his own family is in ruins. His son Booster is being released from prison after 20 years and their strained reunion is one of many threads in the vivid tapestry of the play.

The drivers and their steady clients come and go, telling stories and dreams, living out their personal narratives which sometimes cross over each other. There's gossipy Turnbo, constantly inserting himself in others' dramas; alcoholic Fielding, barely scraping by on his fares and subsisting on visions of the past; wily Shealy, using the station's pay phone to run his numbers operation; and fiery Youngblood, a Vietnam vet struggling to hold down three jobs to support his

girlfriend Rena and their infant son.

There are flaws—obvious exposition and a silly subplot involving jealousy and secrecy between Youngblood and Rena. But Wilson creates a rich, fully-inhabited group portrait of a community struggling to define itself in the shadow of bureaucratic and corporate white America. The symbolism and poetry are subtle and the characters are brilliantly alive.



Harvy Blanks, Michael Potts, Brandon J. Dirden, and Andre Holland in *Jitney*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Director Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who won a Featured Actor Tony Award for Wilson's *Seven Guitars*, brings out more humor than Marion McClinton did in his 2001 staging. Costume designer Toni-Leslie James' splashy 1970s outfits for Shealy draw audience guffaws with his every entrance. The more serious moments are equally intense. A minor dispute over a cup of coffee can escalate into near tragedy. A confrontation between father and son becomes an earth-shattering debate over the black man's dignity and how to achieve it.

John Douglas Thompson, one of our best actors in classical roles, turns in his usual stellar work as Becker, skillfully displaying the man's strength and his heartbreak. Brandon J. Dirden is a worthy opposite as his struggling son Booster. Anthony Chisholm, a veteran of the 2001 production, is deeply affecting as the tipling Fielding, particularly as he recounts a dream about his estranged wife. Michael Potts captures the anger underneath Turbo's pettiness and the reliable Keith Randolph Smith makes a wise Doub, a driver who shares his wartime experiences with Youngblood. Andre Holland and Carra Peterson clash and connect with conviction as Youngblood and Rena. Harvy Blanks and Ray Anthony Thomas provide comic support as Shealy and Philmore, customers with woman trouble.

Since Wilson's death in 2005, few African-American playwrights have gotten their work produced on Broadway—interestingly most have been women. Katori Hall, Suzan-Lori Parks, Lydia R. Diamond, and Danai Gurira have had one or at the most two shows on the Main Stem, and Lynn Nottage will make her belated Broadway debut this spring with a transfer of her play *Sweat* from Off-Broadway. Wilson's voice remains one of the most important in all American theater, but it speaks volumes that he is the sole African-American author to have had a consistent presence on the country's main commercial stage for the past three decades. We should be grateful that *Jitney* has driven onto New York's most popular theater thoroughfare and more audiences will be exposed to it, but more productions from new young authors of all races will truly reflect our national psyche.

Jan. 19—March 12. Manhattan Theatre Club at Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, 261 W. 47th St., NYC. Tue, Wed, 7 pm; Thu—Sat, 8 pm; Wed, Sat, Sun, 2 pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$60—\$140. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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