Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Hailing the Latest Jitney

Sylvie · Wednesday, December 4th, 2019

Decades ago, I sat in a room at the Rockefeller Foundation as a few of us, chosen from across the country, were tasked with helping the Foundation select playwrights who might receive precious grant money from a since-discontinued Fellowship for American Playwrights Program designed to support new play development.

I served on this panel for a couple of years and don't have detailed recall of those meetings, except for one discussion. It was debated at unusual length, after the informal majority opinion had determined that we should pass on this particular play and playwright. But with quiet yet unyielding determination, to the point of inciting irritation, director Lloyd Richards, a fellow panelist, insisted that we needed to reconsider.

Richards was then director of the O'Neill Playwrights Conference in Waterford, CT, and had had experience with this playwright. Like a dog with a bone, he wouldn't let go of the matter until he persuaded us to support August Wilson and his play *Jitney*.

Are we red-faced? The revival of *Jitney*, now at the Mark Taper Forum, in a beautiful staging by Ruben Santiago-Hudson, holds the answer. *Jitney*, which takes on the decade of the '70s, was the first play to be written in Wilson's ten-play Pittsburgh Cycle, each depicting an aspect of black life in America in every decade of the 20th century.

l-r, Amari Cheatom, Harvy Blanks & Brian D. Coats in *Jitney* at The Mark Taper Forum.

It focuses on an illicit car service in Pittsburgh's Hill District (where Wilson grew up), at a time when regulated cabs would not provide rides to African Americans. The service operates out of a dilapidated storefront (nice, rundown design by David Gallo) rented for that purpose by the blunt but well-intentioned Becker (Steven Anthony Jones), who maintains a relaxed and mostly benevolent grip on the business.

Its drivers are a motley group — guys who hang out daily and provide the rides as the calls come in. Their ages run the gamut, from the older Fielding (Anthony Chisholm), who relies on a steady supply of alcohol to keep going, to the youngest, Darnell Youngblood (the brooding Amari Cheatom), a Vietnam vet searching for a path to a decent life with his girlfriend Rena (Nija Okoro) and their baby in a world that refuses to cooperate.

l-r, Amari Cheatom & Ray Anthony Thomas in *Jitney* at The Mark Taper Forum.

The middle-aged others — Philmore (Brian D. Coats) and Doub (Keith Randolph Smith) — are more resigned to the status quo they have simply come to accept; it gets them through, one day to the next. Only the loose-lipped Turnbo (Ray Anthony Thomas) seems to thrive by sticking his nose into everyone else's business, even managing to instill suspicions in Rena about the amount of time that Darnell spends away from home. And finally, there is the dandy Shealy (Harvy Blanks), a self-inflated numbers guy who doesn't work there, but has appropriated the station's phone number as the one where he receives his "business" calls.

Amari Cheatom & Nija Okoro in *Jitney* at The Mark Taper Forum.

There is not much more plot than this to *Jitney*. Wilson was a words man. He not only wrote, he overwrote. He relished the music he could hear in the language of these Hill District inhabitants and, in *Jitney*, he created a chorus composed of the idle chatter of this accidental choir.

The surprise backdrop to the diurnal conversations is something Becker knows, but hasn't yet shared with the group. It seems the city plans to tear down the block and the building out of which the car service operates, an event destined to greatly alter the lives of these men if/when it happens.

Complicating matters is that, on this day, Becker's son Booster (François Battiste) is being released from jail after serving 20 years of a life sentence for murder — an incident so shattering to Becker at the time that he chose never once to visit his son during his years in prison. So tension is in the air.

Aside from the attention to period detail and the uniformly splendid cast, what makes *Jitney* tick, despite the lack of much action, are the tales these characters spin and the interplay they provoke. The phone on the wall is busier than these guys, yet we're never bored, because *Jitney* is as much a social study as it is a drama — a slice-of-life snapshot that, under Santiago-Hudson's pinpoint direction, works like a well-oiled machine. Each man may be a cog, but each has a specific role in the unspooling of the drama.

l-r, Steven Anthony Jones & François Battiste in *Jitney* at The Mark Taper Forum.

A stirring feature of this revival is the musical spine by composer Bill Sims Jr., which is a full-fledged aural participant snaking through the production. The stark, bluesy lament grabs you from the first note and never lets go. Rarely has music so beautifully complemented the slight sense of alarm in the fragile mood or become as heartbreaking when climaxing the play's peak emotional moment, not to be described here.

As a footnote to all this, it is ironic that *Jitney*, the first play written in Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle (1979) also became the last to make it to Broadway (2017). By then, Wilson and Richards had had a falling out and Richards had passed away. *Jitney*, which, underwent extensive rewrites by the playwright over the years, was the only one of his plays on Broadway that Richards did *not* direct. The director that time was Santiago-Hudson.

Top image: The cast of Jitney *at The Mark Taper Forum.*

Photos by Joan Marcus

WHAT: ***Jitney***

WHERE: Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm: Sundays 1 & 6:30pm. NO 6:30pm performance Dec. 29. Ends Dec. 29.

- EXCEPTIONS: NO performances Xmas Eve or Xmas Day.
- ADDED: 8pm performance Dec. 23 and a 2:30pm matinee Dec. 26.

HOW: Tickets: $25–$110 (subject to change), available online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, by phone at 213.628.2772 or in person at the CTG Box Office at the Ahmanson. Groups: 213.972.7231. Deaf community: Info & charge online at CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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