

Trinity's Radio Golf Is Remarkable

"You score too many points, they'll change the rules."



Omar Robinson as Roosevelt Hicks and Joe Wilson, Jr. as Harmond Wilks. By August Wilson. Directed by Jude Sandy. Set design by Michael McGarty and Baron E. Pugh, costume design by Yao Chen, lighting design by Amith Chandrashaker and sound design by Larry D. Fowler, Jr. Photo by Mark Turek.

The first non-Christmas Carol show I ever saw at Trinity Rep was an unforgettable production of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* starring two local legends — Rose Weaver and Ricardo Pitts-Wiley. As I sat in my seat on opening night of Trinity's latest production — Wilson's *Radio Golf* — it occurred to me that this was their first time returning to Wilson's work since that production of *The Piano Lesson* 20 years ago. Hopefully they won't wait as long to revisit him, because *Radio Golf* is as good a piece of theater as you're going to see just about anywhere.

While it may seem like a play from an American master like Wilson would do all the hard work for you, the truth is, *Radio Golf* is not as esteemed as some of his other work, like *Fences* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Originally produced at Yale Rep in 2005 and then on Broadway in 2007, it has the distinction of being his final work. It's also the completion of the most ambitious theatrical journey ever taken by an American playwright — the 10-play "Pittsburgh Cycle" that chronicles the African-American experience over the course of a century.

Chronologically, *Radio Golf* falls at the end of that century, taking place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh in 1997, but it often harkens back to the play that comes first in the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean*, which Mixed Magic Theatre in Pawtucket is conveniently producing a reading of this month.

If you're familiar with Wilson's work, you'll notice a few differences in *Radio Golf* that may give you pause, and that pausing may make you wonder if his grand finale didn't receive as many accolades due to its feeling of ... missing something. It'll take you until the end of the play to realize that what's missing is precisely what the play wants you to be thinking about.

Much of the credit for how effective this production is needs to go director Jude Sandy, who paced it

perfectly. Wilson's work sometimes runs the risk of becoming a concert of speeches and monologues. Rhapsodic, but indulgent. Sandy makes sure that any character standing in a moment gets their moment, but when they show up, they're earned. His transitions are flawless, and he knows when a director's hand is needed and when his heavenly cast is doing just fine on their own. He injects just enough of that trademark Wilson mystique to help elevate it, while helming a production that is both literal and lyrical. Sometimes the best directors are the ones who have an understanding of what they don't want the play to be, and you get the sense from watching this production that Sandy understands exactly what he doesn't want this production to be, and so what we have is a carefully orchestrated drama that plays with the heart of a thriller. It's mesmerizing.

Everything from the intricately detailed set design by Michael McGarty and Baron E. Pugh to the '90s-era costumes by Yao Chen, the haunting and nuanced lighting by Amith Chandrashaker, to the smooth jazz, and later on, panicked static designed by Larry D. Fowler, Jr. works beautifully to create a cohesive and controlled evening of theater about a man who believes he is losing control only to wonder if he ever had it in the first place.

That man is Harmond Wilks. He and his wife Mame are ready to seize the future as soon as Harmond's real estate venture goes through, which involves demolishing a house at 1839 Wylie, the home of the great Aunt Esther, Wilson's centuries-old protagonist who served as a harbinger on the past in *Gem*, and then it starts to seem like the Wilks may not be getting where they're going so easily.

Harmond is working on a development deal with his friend Roosevelt Hicks, and with the help of Mame, he's planning on parlaying his success in business into a political career. First stop? Mayor of Pittsburgh. So yes, this is the second play in Trinity's season dealing with mayoral politics, but hey, it is an election year.

Everything seems to be going according to plan until Harmond gets a visit (not unlike in *A Christmas Carol*) from the past, in the form of Sterling Johnson, a former schoolmate of Harmond looking for work, and Joseph Elder Barlow, the resident of a house slated for demolition to make way for Harmond's big redevelopment project.

While the play isn't afraid to get down in the weeds of political maneuvering, it also adeptly marries the political to the personal and from the person goes to the moral. The language weaves effortlessly from financial jargon to real estate terminology to anecdotes to one-liners to the kinds of tall tales that only a Wilson character can tell. Wilson championed putting real people onstage by demonstrating how they could go from hilarious to heart-breaking on the turn of a phrase, and there are times when listening to *Radio Golf* where you could swear there was actual music playing behind the words.

That music, unfortunately, does not live in everyone, and when Harmond and Mame are first detailing their plans at the top of the show, you feel as though maybe Wilson got lost as he was putting together his last play, because everything feels so ... corporate. It's not until Sterling shows up that you realize Wilson isn't lost, but Harmond certainly is. What follows is a tale as old as Aunt Esther about what it takes to remember who you are, where you're from, and what you're fighting for — and Harmond is at the center of it all.

As Harmond, Joe Wilson Jr. crafts an outstanding performance as someone who spends half the play chasing one objective only to start running in the opposite direction once he realizes what's at stake if he gets what he wants. In Act One, most of his scenes are reactionary as he listens to others explain various plans to him and allows everybody else to stand in the glow of Harmond's influence. It takes a

generous lead performer to help create the kind of tight ensemble that you see in *Radio Golf*, and that's exactly what Wilson Jr. is, but once Harmond decides to take control of his destiny, it's like somebody rings a bell, and the actor comes out swinging with a passion you know has been buried deep inside his character for a long, long time. His final scene with Omar Robinson's Roosevelt is a battle royale of blistering accusation and heartbreaking realization.

Robinson's portrayal of Roosevelt Hicks is filled with that special kind of confidence that you know can turn into something much more sinister given the chance. While Harmond experiences a transformation over the course of the play, many of the other characters, Hicks included, only double down on who they are at the start of the show. Hicks is being tempted the same way Harmond is, but while Harmond resists, Hicks surrenders, and we see him go from being a jubilant right-hand man to someone who believes the only way he can get what he wants is to take it from somebody else. It would be easy to lean into the more villainous side of his character, but Robinson plays him more like Harmond's little brother. There's a real admiration there that gets shattered by the end of play, and you can see the cost of that on Roosevelt's face when he exits for the last time.

Also paying the cost for change is Harmond's wife, Mame. I admit that I find her to be one of August Wilson's most fascinating female characters, because at times she seems inspired by Lady Macbeth, but Wilson was one of the greatest writers to ever examine the relationship between men and women, and the payoff is a scene between Mame and Harmond that shares a lot with Troy and Rose in *Fences*, where Mame insists that she's standing with Harmond even as he brings her down with him, but this being 1997, you get the feeling that Mame's devotion looks very different than Rose's does as she pushes Harmond out of an attempted embrace and wipes away the tears. Tonia Jackson is a formidable Mame. She has to walk the same tightrope Robinson does or risk having the audience resent her for not being on Harmond's right side. Thankfully, Jackson's Mame is unapologetic when it comes to what she wants, but she's not unfeeling. Her husband has changed the plan without realizing that it changes everything for her too, and a job she desperately wants is snatched away from her. Other women characters in Wilson plays have gotten more stage time, but Jackson made an indelible impression by not shying away from making Mame as complex as she deserves to be.

Due to an injury in the cast, the role of Sterling was played by JaMario Stills, who had the unenviable task of having the script in hand for his performance, but still seemed as present in the character as anybody could be. His relaxed and careful physicality brought a new energy into the play after the manic idealism introduced by Harmond, Mame and Roosevelt, and he nailed every bit of humor the character had to offer, while his face-off with Robinson was a highlight of the play.

Many actors who've performed in Wilson's plays seem to learn it like a second tongue, which is why if you look at the production history of his work when done on Broadway or in big regional houses, you'll see a lot of names reappearing. There's a benefit — to the production and the audience — to see an actor embody these roles who knows how to speak Wilson's language.

That's just my way of saying that if you're going to produce an August Wilson play, I suggest you make sure Mr. Ricardo Pitts-Wiley is available first. I don't remember the last time somebody got entrance (and exit) applause at a local theater, but suffice it to say, the audience must have known what they were getting before it arrived.

Pitts-Wiley's Barlow is a character from another time who makes a point of taking his time. He refuses to be steamrolled by Harmond in the beginning, and just when you think you've got him figured out, he

drops a series of small revelations that chip away at the facade Wilkes has worked so hard to attain. In a play that rarely showcases Wilson's knack for magical realism, Barlow is all the magic you need, but it's a dying magic. A magic on the verge of extinction, and Pitts-Wiley takes that dying flame and uses it to set the stage on fire. His is a glorious homecoming both to Trinity and to Wilson's work, and we're all lucky we get to witness it. While other theaters might have made the mistake to bring in someone from out-of-state to take on such a juicy role, Trinity was smart enough to know that we have plenty of legends right here in Rhode Island who can get the job done. Let's hope that casting practice becomes a habit.

And let's also remember that Wilson may never have been a grad school darling, but he did achieve something very few of the hot new, Manhattan prep-school playwrights surely will not. He gave theatrical grandeur to the kinds of people whose lives very rarely get put in the spotlight.

Finally, let's hope continuing to produce work that tells stories existing outside of impeccably furnished living rooms, with characters who guzzle wine while they toss clever arguments back and forth at each other, falls back into favor somehow. It's season planning time, and if I have to watch one more play about upper-class, tormented liberals lamenting the state of the country while their doppelgangers in the audience nod along, I think I'll just stay home instead. Bravo to Trinity for continuing to try widening our perspectives. Clearly, that's the road that leads to greatness.

August Wilson's Radio Golf, directed by Jude Sandy, runs until Mar 1 at Trinity Rep, 201 Washington St, PVD. For tickets, call 401-351-4242 or go to trinityrep.com