

## Wilson's 'Gem': Flawed, But a Find Nonetheless



*A protracted yet powerful meditation on the stain of slavery: Linnie Godfrey and Jimonn Cole in "Gem of the Ocean" at Arena Stage. (By Scott Suchman -- Arena Stage)*

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If a play has to be a history lesson, one could do worse than have the instruction be framed by the homespun eloquence of "Gem of the Ocean," the narrative starting point for August Wilson's sprawling chronicle of black America in the 20th century.

The drama, which is making its regional debut in a finely wrought production at Arena Stage, is a lesser achievement amid the more extraordinary works in the 10-play cycle, such as "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" and "Joe Turner's Come and Gone." Tipped too severely toward the didactic -- and straining under the weight of its portentous symbolism -- "Gem of the Ocean" can be a plodding affair, clocking in at a wearying three hours.

This work was one of the last in the cycle to be completed by Wilson before his death in 2005 at age 60. Still, it is an important element in Wilson's overall design, primarily for the creation of several indelible characters and the groundwork it lays for themes and plots that will permeate the nine plays to come. When the Kennedy Center mounts staged readings a little more than a year from now of all 10 plays

in the cycle, one of the facets Wilson devotees will be treated to is how much each of the works feeds the others.

"Gem of the Ocean" is a meditation on the stain of slavery and the uncertain gifts of freedom. It's a fitting prologue for a series of plays that will look in each decade of the century at the struggles of African Americans to find a spiritual and material release from -- and communion with -- the past. With virtually every one of the plays set in the same black neighborhood in Pittsburgh, it's intriguing to note that the cycle ends in the 1990s play "Radio Golf" with a plan for the demolition of the house on Wylie Avenue in which "Gem of the Ocean" occurs, almost a century earlier.

The house is owned in "Gem" by one of the more whimsical characters in the Wilson canon, Aunt Ester, a local mystic purported to be nearly 300 years old. Played with winning feistiness by Linnie Godfrey, Aunt Ester is the embodiment of survival: She's been through the full arc of her people's sorrows, from the stark horrors of the slave ships to the harsh realities following Emancipation.

This holy woman has endured all the way into the 20th century and now, in 1904, when "Gem" takes place, her house is a refuge as well as a portal, through which others who come into her orbit gain wisdom and strength. Steeping oneself in the pain of the past is the chief way, in the world Wilson creates, to move to a higher state of self-awareness and self-esteem.

Indeed, "Gem of the Ocean" brings together people profoundly affected by slavery and those yet to understand its full impact. The play's linchpin characters are a pair of men of

disparate generations: Solly Two Kings (the warm and funny Joseph Marcell), who escaped bondage and helped other former slaves fleeing on the Underground Railroad, and Citizen Barlow, sturdily portrayed by Jimonn Cole.

Citizen, so named by his mother “after freedom came,” is a young man who has fled his native Alabama, arriving as part of the great African American migration to the cities of the North.

It is Citizen’s guilt over a desperate act of petty thievery that brings him to Aunt Ester’s door and prompts an epiphanic journey to the heart of his people’s suffering.

Melding the ethereal concerns of “Gem” to the more earthbound -- Solly Two Kings, for instance, ekes out an existence selling dog excrement -- is no simple task. But Paulette Randall, the British director recruited for the assignment, makes a fine go of it. She and her set designer, Scott Bradley, find excellent use for the difficult Fichandler Stage, placing the action on a contoured floor made up of multicolored planks. At various times it comes to represent a modest house, an undulating sea, a ship’s hold and even, given the swirl of history playing out on Wylie Avenue, a whirlpool.

Audibility in the Fich is occasionally a problem; nothing makes an evening drag like dialogue getting swallowed. But the protracted feeling has more to do with excesses of the script, with what feels like the attempt to connect too many historical currents to what is happening in the house. Some of the complications in the plot seem tacked on, such as the callous treatment of Aunt Ester by the two-bit enforcer Caesar (a solidly snarling LeLand Gantt). And the climactic, ritualized cleansing of Citizen’s soul occurs a good half-hour before the play finally wraps up.

Randall and her cast, however, are lovely instruments for Wilson’s music; Pascale

Armand does swell by Black Mary, Aunt Ester’s fiery young protege, and Clayton Lebouef and Timmy Ray James offer strong accounts of smaller roles. For those with a little patience and a large appetite for the trajectory of Wilson’s vision, Arena’s “Gem” is not a bad place to start.

*Gem of the Ocean*, by August Wilson. Directed by Paulette Randall; costumes, Ilona Somogyi; lighting, Allen Lee Hughes; sound, Timothy M. Thompson; wigs, Jon Aitchison; makeup, Sara Jean Landbeck; fight choreography, Cliff Williams III. About 3 hours. Through March 18 at Arena Stage, 1101 Sixth St. SW. Call 202-488-3300 or visit <http://www.arenastage.org>.