

## Review: A dazzling revival of August Wilson's 'Gem of the Ocean' at A Noise Within in Pasadena



*Evan Lewis Smith and Veralyn Jones in A Noise Within's "Gem of the Ocean." / (Craig Schwartz)*

*By F. Kathleen Foley  
Oct. 4, 2019 / 6 AM*

Set in 1904, "Gem of the Ocean" is, chronologically, the first installment in August Wilson's monumental "Pittsburgh Cycle," also known as the "Century Cycle," charting the African American experience, decade by decade, throughout the 20th century.

Wilson frequently samples the supernatural in his dramas. The revival of "Ocean" at A Noise Within in Pasadena is arguably the most mystical offering in the cycle.

The richly digressive plot covers so much ground it defies easy recapitulation. Each of the vividly drawn characters has his or her own story to tell — tales of loss and pain from times of slavery to 1904, when the African Americans of Pittsburgh stand poised for riots and labor strikes over their unjust treatment under the law.

The most brutal offender happens to be a black man, Caesar Wilks (Chuma Gault), who rose from grinding poverty to become a police officer. His sister, Black Mary (Carolyn Ratteray), disgusted by his cruelty, has found refuge with Aunt Ester (Veralyn Jones), the "soul cleanser" and apparently deathless sage frequently referenced in Wilson's plays.

Now supposedly 287 years old and counting, Aunt Ester remembers her years as a slave. So does her longtime friend and admirer, Solly Two Kings (Kevin Jackson), whose profession gathering dog waste contrasts with his essential heroism and wisdom. Aunt Ester's factotum Eli (Alex Morris), Solly's fellow freedom fighter on the Underground Railway, is another seen-it-all survivor unbowed by the horrors he has witnessed. Rutherford Selig (Bert Emmett), a peddler with a loyal heart, is a frequent visitor.



*The stellar cast in the revival of August Wilson's "Gem of the Ocean" at A Noise Within in Pasadena. / (Craig Schwartz)*

Supernatural elements aside, Aunt Ester is a practical-minded woman with a history of taking in strays. Her latest, Citizen Barlow (Evan

Lewis Smith), has come to her with a grievous sin on his soul that requires cleansing in the fabled City of Bones — a surreal sequence that summarizes the suffering of slavery through the prism of African folklore.

From the well-defined interior of Aunt Ester's home to the creaking timbers of those long-ago slave ships to the ghostly lights of the City of Bones sequence, the design elements are uniformly spectacular. Stephanie Kerley Schwartz's set, Angela Balogh Calin's costumes, Jean-Yves Tessier's lighting and Martin Carrillo's sound and original music all contribute to director Gregg T. Daniel's dazzler.

Every character in the strong cast is fully delineated and richly sympathetic. Even the monstrous Caesar evokes our compassion, thanks to the genius of Wilson, who reduces no one to obvious villainy — or, conversely, to tin-plaster saintliness.

In a staging that is alternately leisurely, suspenseful, funny and poignant, Daniel doesn't miss a beat of the possibilities in Wilson's text. The production is clarifying, terrifying and cathartic.

'Gem of the Ocean'

**Where:** A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd.,  
Pasadena

**When:** See website for schedule. Ends Nov. 16

**Tickets:** \$25-\$86

**Info:** (626) 356-3121, [www.anoisewithin.org](http://www.anoisewithin.org)

**Running time:** 2 hours, 45 minutes