

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Gem of the Ocean: Salvation and Memory

Sylvie Drake · Wednesday, October 2nd, 2019

Written by three-time Pulitzer Prize-winner August Wilson in 2003, and now playing at A Noise Within (ANW) in Pasadena, *Gem of the Ocean* is a late play by this playwright and a rare one. Only *Radio Golf* came later. *Gem* garnered no significant awards, yet it remains one of his best plays out of the ten that make up his 20<sup>th</sup> century cycle—each dedicated to a different decade of the 20th century and all of them displaying varying degrees of remarkable.

*Gem* has a mystical component that is part spiritual and part a Wilson reinvention of African rites, real or imagined or perhaps only re-imagined. The overall impression is undiminished by that speculation. Because theatre loves nothing better than an edge of wonder or mysticism in any story.



l-r, Veralyn Jones, Carolyn Ratteray & Evan Lewis Smith in *Gem of the Ocean* at A Noise Within.

The ninth play to be written in the cycle, *Gem* covers the early 1900s and the tale of 285-year-old Aunt Ester (or was it 300 years?). Ester is a shaman of sorts, sought after as a “cleanser of souls,” who holds forth quietly at 1839 Wylie Avenue in Pittsburgh, in a house open to all who pass her smell test. Her reputation ensures that someone is always knocking at her door, welcome or not.

As with so many of Wilson’s plays, the plot is an entanglement of characters, colorful, wordy, complex and animated enough to fill a novel. The members of Aunt Ester’s immediate household are Eli (Alex Morris) and Black Mary Wilks (Carolyn Ratteray at the top of her game). Mary mostly runs the household, while Eli watches the door. Both are devoted to Aunt Ester (Veralyn Jones).



Veralyn Jones & Kevin Jackson in *Gem of the Ocean* at A Noise Within.

*Habitué*s of 1839 Wylie are Solly Two Kings (the powerful Kevin Jackson), an itinerant former conductor on the Underground Railroad, Selig (Bert Emmett) an old peddler of kitchen utensils, and a recent young arrival from Alabama named Citizen Barlow (the surprising Evan Lewis Smith), bewildered, a bit wet behind the ears and in search of a cleansing from Aunt Ester. All have stories to tell, especially Solly, and the only villain in this picture is Mary’s brother, Caesar Wilks (Chuma Gault), an unforgiving landlord and local constable who equates justice with greed and cruelty.

Wilson is all about words and their meaning and *Gem* is a play full of short stories within the larger one. They demand to be told with dispatch and fearless engagement, and so they are under the lively and sure-footed direction of Gregg T. Daniel. Wilson’s ancient gift is the knack for telling

stories within stories and keeping his audience hooked—not on every word in all of his plays (some are seriously overwritten), but certainly in this one. And to make a good thing better, no one is more adept at using the poetic power of black vernacular with which to tell compelling tales than Wilson. If he can be criticized now and then—and he can—it is for sometimes stepping on his own best lines.



l-r, Kevin Jackson & Evan Lewis Smith in *Gem of the Ocean* at A Noise Within.

But not in *Gem*. When a worker at the local mill is falsely accused by constable Wilks of having stolen a bag of nails, he drowns himself in the river rather than suffer being shamed as a thief. The

man's death unleashes a series of consequences that involve our Citizen Barlow, the formidable Solly, and contribute to a devastating fire at the mill that complicates everything when it turns out to be arson.

It's a major event that touches everyone in minor or major ways with a confession or two that pull Aunt Ester into the center of the action.



Evan Lewis Smith, front and center, in *Gem of the Ocean* at A Noise Within.

A climactic scene of endurance, discovery and redemption in the middle of the second half is at the heart of this play. Its demands are sizable. Director Daniel pulls it off with help from choreographer Joyce Guy and vivid illumination by lighting designer Jean-Yves Tessier, as well as sound, fury and original music by Martin Carrillo.

Our young Citizen is its focus, as he is subjected to reliving tortured episodes from the Middle Passage and a visit to the sunken City of Bones, before emerging from the trauma as the redeemed survivor of Aunt Ester's latest epiphany. This marriage of reality and dream, mysticism and myth, delivers the metaphysical edge that makes for an impressive and impressive whole.

The casting of *Gem* is astute, as are the rest of the creative decisions. These include Stephanie Kerley Schwartz's uncluttered scenic design, Tessier's complementary lighting and, notably, Angela Balogh Calin's variety of period costumes with a signature patchwork-quilt dress for Aunt Ester that puts her history in perspective. All of which makes the telling and the showing swift, effective and hard to leave behind.



Evan Lewis Smith in *Gem of the Ocean* at A Noise Within.

*Gem* is ANW's first foray into August Wilson territory, a fact that makes the production's strength all the more laudable. This company, its California roots on full display, continues to reveal itself as a powerful player on the local scene with achievements that are growing to be anything but parochial.

*Top image: l-r, Veralyn Jones, Evan Lewis Smith, Alex Morris & Carolyn Ratteray in August Wilson's Gem of the Ocean at A Noise Within.*

*Photos by Craig Schwartz*

**WHAT:** *Gem of the Ocean***WHERE:** A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107 **WHEN:** Friday, Oct. 4, 8pm (Post-Show Conversation)

Saturday, Oct. 5, 2 &amp; 8pm

Thursday, Oct. 24, 7:30pm

Friday, Oct. 25, 8 p.m. (Post-Show Conversation)

Saturday, Oct. 26, 2 &amp; 8pm

Wednesday, Oct. 30, 7:30pm (Wine Down Wednesday)

Sunday, Nov. 3, 2 &amp; 7pm (Sunday Rush)

Saturday, Nov. 9, 2 &amp; 8pm

Sunday, Nov. 10, 2pm (Post-Show Conversation)

Friday, Nov. 15, 8pm (Post-Show Conversation)

Saturday, Nov. 16, 2 &amp; 8pm

**HOW:** Ticket prices start at \$25, available online at [www.anoisewithin.org](http://www.anoisewithin.org) or by phone at 626-356-3121 or at the box office, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107. Student Rush with ID, one hour before performance \$20. Groups (10 or more): Adults from \$25-\$50 per ticket, up to 35% off; students from \$18. Call 626-356-3121 for more information and ask for Subscriber Services Manager Deborah Strang.

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