

A Wail and a Whelp of Joy

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Joe Turner's Come and Gone
by August Wilson,
directed by Lili-Anne Brown,
Huntington Theatre, Boston,
2022–23 season.

THERE IS an awful moment in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* when Herald Loomis—a sometime deacon released from seven years of servitude to the eponymous Turner, a “catcher” of freedmen—realizes the mark of that man is still upon him. This rueful self-discovery comes courtesy of Bynum, a fellow sojourner in a Pittsburgh boardinghouse, a “conjure man” whose incantations the other residents belittle with some frequency, but one whose authority in matters of the spirit they know, at the end of the day, not to question. At first, Herald erupts in anger at Bynum’s charged suggestion, threatening as it does his hard-won sense of freedom from the past—that necessary, deep freedom to make himself new:

“You lie! How you see that? I got a mark on me? Joe Turner done marked me to where you can see it? You telling me I’m a marked man. What kind of mark you got on you?”

Bynum knows not to offer anything like a comeback; he is meeting Herald not in the schoolyard but over the searing ground of a shared history, ground made sacred by memory. So Herald’s scared standoffishness moves him only to the grace of a song—a sharing of Herald’s burden rather than a deflection from the matter at hand. His wistful refrains, sung not too far above a whisper, are just one part of the Huntington Theatre production of August Wilson’s play that is hard to forget:

They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone
Ohhh Lordy
They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone
Ohhh Lordy
Got my man and gone.

In the way it recurs throughout the play, this verse has a way of telling us that Joe Turner, a shadowy ensnarer whom Herald labored under but has in fact “never seen” up close, is still coming and going, still threatening to make off with Bynum’s manhood as much as Herald’s, since the past is forever working its way into the present, forever laying its living claim on the memory. “Ohhh Lordy” is a plaintive cry caught just shy of deliverance, the cry of one no longer threatened in body and, for all that, too late to the scene to set things right.

When Herald shows up at Seth Holly’s boardinghouse, his daughter Zonia in tow, he’s in the grip of something he can’t quite speak, and so his words are few, though they carry an

aura that is almost unearthly. If Wilson’s stage direction has it that Herald “is at times possessed,” James Milord’s poignant performance makes that possession a going condition, imbuing Herald with an entirely believable and still eerie electricity. We sense from the first those inward distances he has traveled, the fixity of the vision compelling him on.

Seth guesses as much the moment Herald walks in, hesitating before giving him a room. “Something ain’t right with that fellow,” he later complains to Bynum. “I don’t like the way he stares at everybody.” (“He just a man got something on his mind” is Bynum’s characteristically nonplussed reply.) Herald is looking for his wife, he says, but he stints on most other details. When Bynum asks him where he and his daughter have come from, he replies, “Come from all over. Which-ever way the road take us, that’s the way we go.” It’s an answer that, by force of habit more than conscious misdirection, gets pretty swiftly away from the original question. It is spoken by a man who can no longer find repose in any place of origin, one who knows in his bones he’ll be moving on.

Herald and how many others, for the characters who populate Wilson’s Century Cycle—the inspired set of ten plays to which he devoted his life in the theater, each one exploring the lives of Black people in Pittsburgh’s Hill District during a distinct decade of the twentieth century—struggle to recover a connection to the deep past; this, in turn, would allow them to root themselves in the present and so face the future with hope as much as forbearance. The plays take us from the 1904 of *Gem of the Ocean*, when slavery is still a living memory, to the 1997 of *Radio Golf*, by which time Black people have won political office and a place in the boardroom, if an embattled one.

But for all their sense of forward progress in the face of oppression, it’s the case these plays make for the tragic as well as transformative continuities of Black experience that makes them extraordinary as a totality. This feeling of continuity explains why Aunt Ester—who survives slavery to become a biblically aged healer, more than three hundred years old—never becomes an anachronism in the life of the plays, but is instead called on by Wilson’s many searchers in undimmed need and ever-renewed expectation. The playwright came to see Aunt Ester as the moral and metaphysical center of the cycle, a sustaining witness to a spirit world that could never be crowded out by more prosaic forms of vision.

In a note at the outset of the play, Wilson lays out the historical bind faced by the sons and daughters of “newly freed African slaves”—a people whose origins that phrase makes a point of emphasizing—in their journey

north. He stresses the existential urgency of their need to connect:

Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the name of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned... Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and dispersment which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy.

Much of the pathos of *Joe Turner* comes from our dawning understanding that this play’s would-be healer and conduit to the spirit world, the conjure man and “rootworker” Bynum, is as humanly alone in his own search, as naggingly unfulfilled in his yearning, as those to whom he ministers. His own work to reconnect remains undone. What haunts him is “what I seen most when I was traveling...people walking away and leaving one another.”

True to Bynum’s tragic sense of things, Herald is far from the only person who shows up at Seth’s boardinghouse searching for some beloved who’s left them behind. Enter, for one, Mattie Campbell. “Can you fix it so my man come back to me?” she asks Bynum, having heard of his powers. His answer? A yes-and-no that moves tormentingly from serene confidence to an awful doubt. These are words that enact yet another familiar desertion, the promise that’s given and just as soon withdrawn:

The roots is a powerful thing. I can fix it so one day he’ll walk out his front door...and everywhere he step on that road, that road’ll give back your name and something will pull him right up to your doorstep... But maybe he ain’t supposed to come back. And if he ain’t supposed to come back... it’ll come up on him that he’s in the wrong place...Then both of you be lost and trapped outside of life and ain’t no way for you to get back into it.

Bynum’s picture of the reunion that isn’t meant to happen, with its attendant purgatory, is as haunting as any memory of separation. To have the power to reconnect and then not exercise it—is this humility in the face of what can’t be known, or despair in the face of what life has for too long been? An acknowledgment of the vagaries of the human heart, or a bitter concession to the legacy of history? The “long line of separation and dispersment” that shadows all those who converge on Holly’s boardinghouse forces even its resident conjure man to wonder whether he shouldn’t hold his power in check. Perhaps some people simply “ain’t supposed to come back.”

IF THE only home on offer is a temporary boardinghouse—a waystation on journeys as singular to each character as they are historically determined—the intimacies shared by the wayfarers in Wilson’s play are no less profound for being so fleeting. With Herald excepted, mirth is very much the rule at Seth’s boardinghouse. It is a sense of defiant togetherness memorably given life by the Huntington Theatre’s cast, and undiminished for

coming hand in hand with such a drivingly tragic sense of things. It begins with Bertha, Seth’s wife, and her idea that “all you need in the world is love and laughter.” She’s forever softening Seth’s invective against Bynum’s own softspoken rites, or offering her husband reassurance in the face of Herald’s strange standing apart. Her whole manner—as Wilson’s commentary has it—is a way of “chasing away the huge sadness” that might otherwise take over.

True to her spirit, a sense of connection finds its way in, however many characters have a mind to move on. It exists, for instance, between the young rambler Jeremy and the beautiful Molly Cunningham. (In one of the play’s winning comic interludes, played here to great effect, he can hardly hide his excitement when she enters the room.) It’s also there between Herald’s daughter Zonia and Reuben, the boy who lives next door, who knows she will only get away from him. No sooner has he won her permission for a quick kiss than he says, “When I get grown, I come looking for you.” He has already been schooled by the adult world to see himself, well before his time, following in Herald’s footsteps, fated to search after the woman he loves.

Herald, for his part, thinks he has seen in Mattie Campbell someone who might ease the bitterness of his wife’s separation, perhaps because each of them knows what it is to be looking for a loved one and, even more fundamentally, for some home in the world. “I ain’t never found no place for me to fit,” Mattie says. “Seem like all I do is start over.” But however kindred they might be, Herald’s own overtures come up against the hard fact of his alienation from others, the full measure of which he discovers only now. It’s one thing to be out of practice in seduction, quite another to speak of yourself in the third person. “Herald Loomis got a mind seem like you a part of it since I first seen you,” he says. “Come on and be with Herald Loomis.” If Mattie seems open to his affection, this only takes things so far, as Herald learns when he reaches toward her and as suddenly draws back: “I done forgot how to touch.” These stricken words, which bring down the curtain on a scene, pay eloquent testimony to Bynum’s earlier warning to Mattie—for what we have is a man discovering he is “trapped outside of life,” whatever intimacies the boardinghouse may offer.

How to find his way in? Wilson’s play works toward a vexed answer. Herald has been too marked by Joe Turner to wish for some blessed reunion with the woman he has searched after. What he has waited for, in the full severity of time, is to look upon Martha and bid her the goodbye that, “like Jonah in the whale’s belly,” he has “sat up in for three years.” Only thanks to the “People Finder” Rutherford Selig (a white man whose family legacy is a much more sinister kind of finding, the rounding up of runaway slaves) does Herald again lay eyes on his wife. What we witness in this moment of reunion, forestalled for years, are two awful griefs that can no longer lay their burdens down and rediscover love’s understanding. Herald cries out that when he was finally freed

his wife “was gone.” And Martha, in turn, protests that although she searched for him for a time, she ultimately left her daughter and past life behind because she could no longer carry forward the losses she had borne:

I woke up one morning and decided that you was dead. Even if you weren't, you was dead to me. I wasn't gonna carry you with me no more. So I killed you in my heart. I buried you. I mourned you. And then I picked up what was left and went on to make life without you.

In Patrese D. McClain's sensitive performance, Martha's words make for a show of resolve that is at once triumphant and tragic—a profoundly hurt self-sufficiency. It is a model that Herald seems to take as his own in the play's last moments, refusing Martha's invocations of the redemptive power of Jesus, who in his own bitter vision becomes just another Joe Turner—“great big old white man...standing there with a whip in one hand...in a sea of cotton.” He accuses Bynum of having “bound me to the road” through his incantations, and ultimately becomes able to carry on unbowed only after slashing himself with a knife, his violently pent-up frustration running every which way. He finds himself bloodied but alive, weirdly invulnerable: “I'm standing now!” is his surprised, repeated cry.

WILSON'S PLAYS achieve some of their most extraordinary poetry in his own parenthetical commentary between the characters' lines. (Perhaps fittingly, he argued that plays achieve their fullest life as words on the page). To see any production of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is to be denied Wilson's striking description of Herald in the play's last moments, though you might sense its spirit in a production as poignant as the Huntington's. “Having found his song,” Wilson writes,

the song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh, having accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world, he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions.

These lines make a soaring case for Herald's rediscovery of agency: his ability to finally put Joe Turner behind him by saying goodbye to the dearest human attachments, the very ones most bitterly corrupted by that man's—which is to say history's—brutality. But there is a voice within Wilson's play, a whole chorus of voices, not excluding Herald's own, that offer a plaintive wail alongside this “whelp of joy.” It is the wail of those who know that life, even as lived in the boardinghouse or on the road, gains substance by way of whatever saving attachments take form in the face of history's incursions. To know this is, in turn, to understand that a vital connection to the past cannot be had without committed and recommitted ties to the present—ties Herald risks forsaking at the play's close, for all his powerful resolve.

So we might, in the end, come back to

the voice of young Reuben, who promised to grant a neighbor boy's dying wish and set his flock of pigeons free, but instead has kept them as a token of his friend's presence. As he confides to Zonia: “He say, ‘Reuben, promise me when I die you'll let my pigeons go.’ But I keep them to remember him by.” This sets beside the song of self-sufficiency a song of safe-keeping, a song of memory—another one for the road's hard going. It's a way of standing fast that's a little less lonely, and no less determined. □