

Gregg T. Daniel Directs August Wilson's 'King Hedley II'

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Contributing Writer

Two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson has been referred to as “America’s Shakespeare” and “theatre’s poet of Black America” for writing such plays as “Fences” and “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.”

The author of 10 plays—a collection of works called the American Century Cycle or the Pittsburgh Cycle—Wilson explores the Black experience decade-by-decade over the course of the 20th century. Given the enduring popularity of his work, it’s not hard to imagine that at any time somewhere in America, a curtain is rising on one of his plays.

Fortunately, we’re in luck. Director Gregg T. Daniel is staging Wilson’s literary gem “King Hedley II,” now showing at A Noise Within, located at 3352 E. Foothill Blvd. in Pasadena.

Performances began April 6, and will continue through April 28. The theatre is holding a Black Out Night performance on Thursday, April 11, for people who self-identify as Black. Tickets include a post-show reception. Non-Black-identifying patrons are welcome to attend.

“I’ve directed four of August Wilson’s plays. And of the four, “King Hedley II” is the most unique,” said Daniel, who won a NAACP Image



Aaron Jennings performs in “King Hedley II.”

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Award for directing “Fences.”

“In many ways, it’s like a Greek drama or a Shakespearean drama. You have a prologue performed by a

character who is outside of the drama and tells you about the world you’re about to enter. That’s really unique.

“It’s an epic play in

many, many ways in its depiction of the world of these people and the world of Hedley.”

“King Hedley II” was written in 2001, but the plot

takes place in 1985 in Pittsburgh during Reagan’s presidency, when the violence in the community was staggering,” said Daniel, who is also a professor of Dramatic Arts at the University of Southern California.

“That is really what moved Wilson to write ‘King Hedley II.’ He saw the Black-on-Black violence, the crack epidemic, and he was in despair about what was going to happen to this race of people.”

Although it is a tragedy, Wilson invokes a great deal of humor. Hedley, performed adroitly by Aaron Jennings, is struggling to make it. He wants a job and a home for his wife, who is pregnant. But the American dream is out of reach for him because he’s a Black felon just returning home from a seven-year prison sentence for killing a man.

While the ensemble packs a powerful punch, Jennings’ Hedley is the epicenter of this explosive drama layered with metaphorical meaning. Jennings has an extensive resume of accomplishments, but you may recognize him from the hilarious, short-lived comedy “Grand Crew.”

Daniel said he has enjoyed helping Jennings burrow down to create Hedley, who is like God with a gun. Hedley has killed before and he isn’t afraid to kill again in spite of the fact that he knows that taking a life should be

an act of God, not man.

This is the bell that tolls throughout the drama; this reveals the violent world hidden from the White gaze but created by White oppression.

“(Performing Hedley) isn’t easy, and Aaron has worked really hard,” said Daniel. “King Hedley is staged to be explosive and Aaron brings it every night.”

Jennings expressed mutual admiration and appreciation for Daniel.

“I was fortunate enough to work with (Daniel) on a play when I was fresh out of college called ‘Elmina’s Kitchen’ with Lower Depth Theatre,” said Jennings.

“Whenever I’ve felt lost in this process, which is more times than I would like to admit, he’s been there to assure me that I have what it takes to inhabit this role, which is such a huge undertaking. It’s nice to lean on someone for whom you can trust.”

The cast includes Verilyn Jones, Gerald Rivers, Kacie Rogers, Christian Henley, and Ben Cain.

Tickets to “King Hedley II” start at \$29, and student tickets start at \$18. Four student matinees will occur on weekday mornings (April 17, April 18, and April 24) at 10:30 a.m. Interested educators should email education@anoise-within.org.

For more information and to purchase tickets, call (626) 356-3100 or visit www.anoisewithin.org.