

Actress talks about preparing to meet 'King Hedley'

By DARLENE DONLOE
Contributing Writer

Veralyn Jones remembers seeing her first Broadway play.

She was 14, and the show was "Man of La Mancha."

"I was fascinated by all of it," said Jones, who is from Carriacou, but grew up in New York. "It took you to all of these different places. I felt like I wanted to be a part of it. It was interesting and fun. I wanted to do that."

A married mother of one, Jones is currently rehearsing her latest show, August Wilson's "King Hedley II," directed by her husband, Gregg T. Daniel, and set to open at A Noise Within in April 6.

A Noise Within continues its commitment to August Wilson's "American Century Cycle."

Daniel, who has previously directed A Noise Within productions of Wilson's "Gem of the Ocean," "Seven Guitars" and "Radio Golf," returns to direct the ninth play in the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright's 10-play cycle that explores, decade-by-decade, the Black experience in 20th century America.

After seven years in prison, King Hedley re-enters society eager to rebuild his life but quickly confronts the inescap-

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Veralyn Jones performs in Austin Wilson's 'King Hedley II' at A Noise within in Pasadena beginning April 6. Jones plays Ruby, the mother of King Hedley.

Courtesy photo

able challenges facing Black men in Reagan-era Pittsburgh. King's disenfranchisement comes into conflict with the stories he's been telling himself. Yet he continues to plant seeds where nothing can grow. The show is set in 1985

A caramel beauty with impressive theatrical credits, Jones, who played Louise in A Noise Within's production of "Seven Guitars," and Aunt Ester in "Gem of the Ocean," portrays King's mother, Ruby, a former big band singer.

Jones, a theater veteran of more than 20 years, said she did

a deep dive in developing the character.

"You do all the critical analysis about the characters that are out there," she said. "You research the time, the period. Where did this character come from? What are her circumstances? She struggled to find love and connection. Did she allow herself to be used by men?"

"I've been building Ruby from a woman who used to live above me in Brooklyn, down to how she holds her cigarette. I work from instinct."

Jones said, in playing Ruby, "There is a connective tissue for

me."

"Ruby is a woman who has seen a lot of tragedy in her life," said Jones, who recently played Mama in the South Coast Repertory production of "A Raisin in the Sun."

"We first met her in Wilson's 'Seven Guitars.' When we see her all these years later, at 62, when we saw her in 'Seven Guitars,' she was in her 20s. She had led a lonely life. She was abused by men. She's had a rough way. Trying to reconcile a relationship with her son, King. She's a mother trying to connect. She's trying to make good."

Jones believes Wilson is a treasured, pre-eminent playwright.

"This is my third August Wilson play," she said. "At first I thought he didn't write for women, but I was wrong. He was very special."

The first August Wilson play Jones ever saw was "Gem of the Ocean."

"It's weighty," she said. "It's hard to describe. I have to admit, I got paranoid when I did the play and I had to play Aunt Ester. What a weight! Can I do this? You gotta gird your loins. I felt a great responsibility."

After decades of either performing in an August Wilson play or watching it as a fan from the audience, Jones said she finds Wilson's "American Century Cycle" captivating.

"It's a fascinating thing to do," she said. "I don't know any other writer who has done that. To chronicle the lives of African Americans in the 20th century is incredible.

"Before him, we hadn't seen the scope of our lives on stage," Jones added. That was something so new to us. It captured our imagination. When an August [Wilson] play comes up, it's a great opportunity to play these roles. I realize what a genius he was.

"I'm still trying to unpack these monologues. Every time you read it you get something else. The language is not simple. There's a rhythm. Shakespeare is easier."

Jones and her husband, Daniel, an actor ("True Blood") and a USC School of Dramatic Arts faculty member, have worked together on numerous occasions.

"People expect us to bicker," she said. "We leave that at the door. To be a professional, you leave it at the door. Sometimes when he says something I don't agree with, I might go, 'hmmm.' But, still, I don't bring it into the room.

"It's not always easy. I might not agree with the direction. But that happens with other directors, too. We've learned how to work together. It works for us."

"King Hedley II," also features Ben Cain, Aaron Jennings, Gerald C. Rivers, Kacie Rogers and Evan Lewis Smith.

As a resident artist, Jones, who is a member of Antaeus Theatre Company, has previously performed at A Noise Within in "Sonnets for an Old Century" (Noise Now audio play), as Hera and Woman of Lemnos in Argonautika, and as Dr. Jadine/Mme. Josephine in "The Madwoman of Chaillo."

Some of her other theater

credits include "My Wandering Boy" at South Coast Rep; "Wedding Band" at Antaeus Theatre Company; "Hamlet" at the Odyssey Theatre; "The Merchant of Venice," "Richard III" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (LA Weekly award) with the Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company; "The Old Settler" at International City Theatre; "Othello" at Boston Court Pasadena; "A Perfect Wedding" at the Kirk Douglas Theatre; "Three Sisters After Chekhov" at Lower Depth Theatre; "Neva's Tale" at The LATC (LA Weekly award); and "The Father" at the La Scala Theater in Sweden.

Film and TV credits include "S.W.A.T.," "Parenthood," "The Unit," "The Young and the Restless," "Seinfeld," and more.

Jones, who has a bachelor's degree in dance from Brooklyn College, also co-founded Lower Depth Theatre Ensemble in 2008 with her husband, Jason Delane Lee, and Yvonne Huff Lee.

"King Hedley II" is presented by A Noise Within, Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, producing artistic directors.

It is being staged at A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena. Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays; 2 and 8 p.m., Saturdays (no 2 p.m. matinee April 6) and 2 p.m. Sundays with no evening performance April 27;

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

Tickets start at \$29 with student tickets at \$18.