

Tragedies show power of classic drama

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IF the big story on Broadway these days is the reinvigoration of the musical by a hip new generation, there's also plenty of evidence that American theatre still believes in the power of classic drama. Two of the season's dramatic hits — August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* and Jon Robin Baitz's *Fair Country* — are big, talky tragedies, scripted and staged with all the naturalism of a play by Tennessee Williams or Eugene O'Neill. They are utterly conservative projects approached with self-confidence by a veteran black playwright on the one hand and a 34-year-old white writer on the other.

SEVEN GUITARS

Written by August Wilson

Directed by Lloyd Richards

Starring Keith David, Rosalyn Coleman, Viola Davis, Tommy Hollis, Roger Robinson, Michele Shay and Ruben Santiago-Hudson.

At the Walter Kerr Theatre, New York, indefinitely

Rating: ★★★

A FAIR COUNTRY

Written by Jon Robin Baitz

Directed by Daniel Sullivan

Starring Matt McGrath, Judith Ivey, Laurence Luckinbill and Dan Futterman

At the Lincoln Center, New York, until June 30

Rating: ★★★

Perhaps it's appropriate that *Seven Guitars*, set in Pittsburgh in 1948, has the veneer of a classic from that era. Wilson, who also wrote *Fences* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, is creating black tragedy for a period when none of this kind existed. *Seven Guitars* is a back-porch drama about a blues singer called Floyd Barton, who has come back from Chicago where he recorded a hit record but also got thrown into the workhouse for vagrancy. Now, he wants to pick up Vera, the girlfriend he abandoned, and go back to make a second record. Vera is torn between her love for him and her doubts about his fidelity. Her nosy neighbour, Louise, counsels her to reject him while Hedley, the crazy man who lives next door, raves about white conspiracies against the black man and a dream in which wealth comes to him. Floyd, meanwhile, needs enough money to get his guitar out of the pawn shop and re-enlist the help of his drummer Red Carter

ON BROADWAY | These two big, talky plays are scripted and staged with all the naturalism of a work by Tennessee Williams or Eugene O'Neill.



Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Michele Shay and Keith David in August Wilson's *Seven Guitars*: veneer of a classic.

and his harmonica-player Canewell, who is also in love with Vera.

In an overly long first act, Wilson spends a great deal of time establishing the voices of these characters and filling in period detail about the first generation of blacks to live in the city. As he tells us everything from the price of an alarm clock to ditties and jokes of the day, the effect becomes forced and tiresome. Nonetheless, the first act includes some powerful writing powerfully performed: Viola Davis, in particular, creates a pained and understated eroticism in a moving speech in which Vera recalls her stock-taking of each body part that her departed lover had once touched. Keith Davis's slick Floyd matches her with bravado and bragadocio that becomes increasingly

desperate as he is increasingly thwarted. By the second act, Wilson's inaction on slowly establishing these voices pays off handsomely as the plot finally starts to unfold. The authoritative cast directed by Lloyd Richards always makes *Seven Guitars* feel authentic while Roger Robinson as Hedley gives the stand-out performance in the play's last moments as the old man's mind starts to unravel.

Up at the Lincoln Center's Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre, it is Judith Ivey who has been stealing the show in the role of the mad woman. Ivey, who is being replaced this week by Joyce Van Patten, has been playing Patrice, the neurotic diplomat's wife in Baitz's *A*

Fair Country. It's a performance of both fiery intensity and huge sympathy, considering what an unpleasant character she is. In this semi-autobiographical play, Baitz, who also wrote *The Substance of Fire* and *Three Hotels*, returns to a subject he has treated before: betrayal in the family. In the end, his conclusion about the impossibility of right action in a wrong situation is hardly novel — indeed the play's classic construction is matched by its classic liberal theme — but the writer does a skillful job of blending the political and the personal.

Harry is a do-gooder U.S. cultural attaché stuck in Durban, South Africa, where his bored and unhappy wife relies increasingly on their teenage son, Gil, for emotional support. The family is already near collapse when older son Alec, a preachy liberal journalism student from New York, arrives for a holiday and Patrice starts a domestic fight that ends up with the arrest of the family's black maid. When Harry is offered a way out of South Africa by informing on Alec's political contacts, the stage is set for tragedy.

Patrice and Harry are particularly well observed, both by the playwright and by the actors: as Harry, Laurence Luckinbill matches Ivey's intense performance with his own careful charting of the diplomat's disintegration. By the end of two hours, the couple have exchanged places, with her strengthening her resolve to support her husband, a personality now in collapse. Their sons are played by Matt McGrath and Dan Futterman with confidence, but the characters are more problematic. Baitz has not written enough background for his audience to understand how they got to this point. He tends to tell rather than show: We have only the say-so of family members as evidence of Alec's political beliefs, while it would take more scenes with Gil and his mother for their weird co-dependency to be fully plausible. Richard Clarke, meanwhile, has a lovely cameo as a retired Dutch diplomat. He's the straight man for the bitchy Patrice in a bitterly funny scene where she launches into inappropriate confidences and complaints.

Tightly directed by Daniel Sullivan, *A Fair Country* is a well-crafted play with some nicely detailed characters, but in the end not enough emotional depth to make theirs a great tragedy. It's too conservative a work to become a new classic, but if the ground is already well trodden, Baitz still walks with style.

Arts Ink

Mitchell shares Nobel

Canadian folk singer **Joni Mitchell** and French composer and conductor Pierre Boulez were awarded music's Nobel Prize, the Polar Prize, by the King of Sweden yesterday. Mitchell and Boulez shared the \$150,000 cash prize, awarded this year for the fifth time.

Mitchell is famous for her soaring voice and biting lyrics, and for albums such as *Court and Spark*, *Mingus* and *Blue*. *Big Yellow Taxi*, a protest anthem against the urbanization of America, is her most famous song.

Boulez, who once conducted Wagner's *Ring* at Bayreuth, has gone on to dabble in experimental music, including collaborating with late radical rock musician Frank Zappa. — Reuters

B.C. film awards

The War Between Us, Anne Wheeler's TV film about the Japanese internment during the Second World War, took the top prize at the premiere edition of the new B.C. film awards.

The film was named best dramatic production and Wheeler received the best-director award as the B.C. film industry gathered to honour its own on Sunday in Vancouver.

The awards, dubbed the Leos by organizers at the B.C. Motion Picture Association, honour the work of Canadians working in the B.C. film and television industry.

Other winners included *Little Criminals*, which won four awards, including a Leo for Brendan Fletcher for best actor in a dramatic production over 60 minutes.

Deanna Milligan won a best actress award for her performance in *Once In A Blue Moon*. Teen drama *Madison* was named best TV series, and Sarah Strange took home the Leo for best actress in a series for her work on the show. Jim Byrnes got the nod as best actor in a series for his work on *Highlander*. — Staff