

NEWS FROM PENUMBRA THEATRE

For Immediate Release

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***The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson**
Penumbra launches Wilson's "Twentieth Century Cycle"
Presented by The Cargill Foundation

January 30, 2008; St. Paul, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company, the nation's preeminent African American theatre, proudly announces the opening of *The Piano Lesson* written by August Wilson, directed by Lou Bellamy, **February 21, 2008**. The production will run **February 21--March 16, 2008**.

A Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *The Piano Lesson* is the story of a family haunted by the living legacy of American slavery. At the center of this play is an old, upright piano, hand carved to depict the family history—an unofficial plantation marriage, birth, funeral, and the removal of two slaves from Mississippi to Georgia. The figures carved in the piano create a keepsake album, a sacred relic, a repository of family lore. The piano now sits in the salon of the Charles home and is very valuable. For Bernice, it holds the spirit of her grandparents, sold away in exchange for it during slavery. For her brother, Boy Willie, it holds the key to his freedom from the burden of sharecropping for a meager wage. The struggle between the siblings over the symbolic and literal value of the piano escalates into a conflict that threatens to tear the family apart.

Starring Ansa Akyea (Boy Willie), Thomas Ashford (Lymon), Lerea Carter (Grace), James Craven (Doaker), Natalia Gaston (Maretha), Greta Oglesby (Berniece), T. Mychael Rambo (Avery), and Dennis W. Spears (Wining Boy).

The Piano Lesson offers the opportunity to witness Wilson's work at its definitive best; the playwright himself called Penumbra's 1993 production his "favorite staging and a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work."

The 2008 production also marks the official launch of Penumbra's staging of the entire *Twentieth Century Cycle* by August Wilson. Over the next five years, Penumbra will produce each one of August Wilson's plays in the ten-play cycle that traces black American life decade by decade from 1900 to 2000. Director Lou Bellamy states, "This great playwright, who found muses in his friends and fellow company members at Penumbra, took up the mantle to create stories and characters that were worthy of the black people he knew, of the richness of the culture he saw. Penumbra is honored to host Wilson's *Twentieth Century Cycle* and offer audiences the opportunity to witness the work of a great writer staged by the artists he regarded so highly—and to rediscover a century of American Life."

The 2007-2008 Season is proudly presented by Star Tribune and Minnesota Monthly
*****MORE*****

ARTISTS' BIOS:

AUGUST WILSON (April 27, 1945—October 2, 2005) grew up in the Hill district of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His childhood experiences in this predominately African American community informed his dramatic writing. Wilson's singular achievement and literary legacy is a cycle of ten plays dubbed "The Pittsburgh Cycle." Each is set in a different decade, depicting the comedy and tragedy of the African-American experience in the 20th century. Wilson's project became more than ten poetic plays. "This cycle," notes the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's* theater critic Christopher Rawson, "is unprecedented in American theater for its concept, size, and cohesion." Called "one of the most important voices in the American theater today" by Mervyn Rothstein in the *New York Times*, August Wilson's authentic sounding characters have brought a new understanding of the black experience to audiences around the country. Wilson's work gives audiences the opportunity to go back and reexamine American history through characters that are epic, poignant and defiantly struggling against the institutionalized legacy of racism in this country.

LOU BELLAMY (Director) is the founder and artistic director of Penumbra Theatre. He has been a member of the University of Minnesota's faculty for 31 years and is currently appointed to the rank of Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance. Recent awards include the 2007 OBIE for Direction and the 2006 McKnight Distinguished Artist Award. Recent directing credits include *Two Trains Running* at the Signature Theatre in New York, and *Jitney* at Kansas City Repertory Theatre and Arizona Theatre Company. Recent directing credits at Penumbra include *REDSHIRTS*, *Get Ready*, *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, *Zooman and the Sign*, and *Black Nativity-A Homecoming*.

SANFORD MOORE (Musical Director) has been the musical director for several productions at Penumbra Theatre including *Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!*, *Get Ready*, *Blue*, *Black Nativity-A Homecoming*, and *Ain't Misbehavin'*. Select musical direction credits also include *Crowns*, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *Triumph of Love*, and *As You Like It* at the Guthrie Theater, and *Two Queens*, *One Castle* at Mixed Blood Theatre. Sanford is an adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota School of Music and Minister of Music for Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church.

ANSA AKYEA (Boy Willie) was last seen on stage as the Angel in Penumbra Theatre's *Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!* He has also appeared at Mixed Blood Theatre, History Theatre, Black Ensemble Theatre, Chicago Theatre Company, Frank Theatre, and many other stages around the country. He can be seen and heard on radio and television for Gillette Hospital, Goodwill Industries, Great Clips, Qwest, and on the big screen in movies such as *Repetition* and Zora Neale Hurston's *The Gilded Six Bits*. Ansa was named City Pages 2007 Best Actor.

LEREA CARTER (Grace) is making her professional acting debut with Penumbra Theatre's production of *The Piano Lesson*. Lerea began acting in 2005 with a role in the University of Minnesota's Crisis Point Theatre production *Embarrassed in Rarig*. She also worked with the University of Minnesota's Xperimental Theatre Company. In 2006 she performed in the University of Minnesota's main stage season in *The Master and Margarita* and *The Arabian Nights*.

JAMES CRAVEN (Doaker) is a long time Penumbra Theatre company member. Recent Penumbra credits include *REDSHIRTS*, *Get Ready*, *Zooman and the Sign*, and *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, produced in collaboration with Trinity Repertory Theatre. He also performed recently at Kansas City Rep Theater and Arizona Theater Company in their joint production of *Jitney*. James is a 2005 recipient of the Spenser Cherashore Fund. He used this grant to research Native American culture and the experiences of the Buffalo Soldiers circa 1880s in the greater southwestern United States. This research provided invaluable knowledge that James applied to the creation of his role of Craig Robe in *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*.

NATALIA GASTON (Maretha) is making her Penumbra Theatre debut in *The Piano Lesson*. Natalia has appeared in numerous commercials, television shows, independent films and several stage productions. She has studied acting and voice at Professional Actors Studio and Clark Atlanta University. She also enjoys creative writing and dance. She is the 2007 recipient of the Kathryn Coram Gagnon Fellowship in Musical and Dramatic Theatre at Penumbra.

GRETA OGLESBY (Berniece) has performed in several productions at Penumbra Theatre including *Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!*, *Dinah Was*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *A Love Song for Miss Lydia*. She has also performed at the Guthrie Theater, Goodman Theatre, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Steppenwolf Theatre, Dreamstreet Theatre, ETA Theatre, Chicago Theatre Company, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and played the role of "Aunt Ester" in the world premiere of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*. Television credits include *Early Edition* and *Unsolved Mysteries*. Film credits include *Passing Minds*, *Time Saved*, *Four-way Stop*, *The Fugitive*, *My Life*, and most recently, *Conversations with God*. Awards include the Joseph Jefferson Award and two Black Theatre Alliance Awards for Best Actress.

T. MYCHAEL RAMBO (Avery) is an actor, vocalist, and educator. He has performed at Penumbra Theatre since 1989 and is now a company member. His most recent Penumbra credits include *Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!*, *Get Ready*, and *Ain't Misbehavin'*. He has performed with the Guthrie Theater, Illusion Theatre, Minnesota Opera, Ordway Music Theatre, Mixed Blood Theatre, Park Square Theatre, Hey City Theatre, a number of regional theatre companies, at Carnegie Hall with the Minnesota Orchestra and internationally throughout Canada, Europe, Africa and Brazil. He has appeared in several local and national television commercials and in HBO mini-series including *Laurel Avenue*, *Endeavor*, and *I Led Two Lives*. Film credits include *Mighty Ducks*, *Crossing the Bridge*, *Grumpy Old Men*, *The Cure*, *Equinox*, *Wooly Boys* and *Justice*.

DENNIS W. SPEARS (Wining Boy) most recently performed in Penumbra Theatre's *Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!* Other Penumbra credits include *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Black Nativity-A Homecoming*, *Blue* and *Get Ready*. He has also performed in *Ain't Misbehavin'* at Actor's Theatre of Louisville, *Crowns* at the Guthrie Theater and *Smokey Joe's Café* at Hey City Theatre. An accomplished jazz vocalist, Dennis made his splash with the jazz vocal ensemble Moore By Four. Minnesota Jazz Music Awards named him Best Male Jazz Vocalist. He has performed in jazz festivals nationally and internationally with such legends as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Joe Williams, Carmen McCrae and Dee Dee Bridgewater. Solo recordings include "I Hear It," "Why Try to Change Me Now," and his first national release, "Evening Candlelight."

ASHFORD THOMAS (Lymon) is making his Penumbra debut. Most recently, Ashford was seen in *The Meeting* at the History Theatre where he portrayed the role of Rashad. As a performing apprentice at the Children's Theatre Company, Ashford has also appeared in *Antigone*, *Tale of a West Texas Marsupial Girl*, and *The Lost Boys of Sudan*. He also performed in the 2007 Minneapolis Fringe Festival where he played the role of AKA in *Same Difference*. Ashford is a 2006 graduate of Howard University.

MARY K. WINCHELL (Stage Manager) is in her 21st season with Penumbra Theatre. Recent Penumbra credits include *Get Ready* and *Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!* Other select Penumbra credits include *Fences* at Penumbra and the Guthrie Theater, *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, *Jitney*, *Two Trains Running*, *King Hedley II*, and *Dinah Was*. Mary has also stage managed at the Orpheum Theatre, State Theatre, Pantages Theatre, Children's Theatre Company, Jungle Theater and the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami. She has also served as production stage manager for *Dorothy Hamill's Nutcracker on Ice*, and lent her talents to Macy's Glamorama, the Aveda Corporation including Aveda's 20th Anniversary Celebration at Radio City Music Hall, and Super Bowl XXVI *Winter Magic*.

STEPHANIE LEIN WALSETH (Dramaturge) is an MA/PhD candidate in Theatre Historiography at the University of Minnesota and is pleased to be the August Wilson Fellow for Penumbra's 2007-2008 Season. Previously, she served as the Managing Director of the Minneapolis-based Asian American theatre and taiko company Mu Performing Arts. She has worked professionally as a theatre administrator, actor, director, dramaturg, and stage manager throughout the Twin Cities with companies such as Mu, Mixed Blood Theatre, the Guthrie Theater, The Playwrights' Center, Frank Theatre, Theatre in the Round, Starting Gate Productions, Theatre Unbound, Chaos Theories, CLIMB Theatre, and in Maine at the Portland Stage Company. Her writing has appeared in the *Baylor Journal of Theatre and Performance*, and she is currently serving as the Co-Artistic Director of the University's Xperimental Theatre.

MALO ADAMS (Sound Design) has designed several Penumbra productions including *Zooman and the Sign*, *Sex Diary of an Infidel*, *Dinah Was*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, and *King Hedley II*. Other design credits include *Mighty Real*, *A Slow Ride on the Big Muddy*, and *Straight as a Line* at the Hennepin Center for Performing Arts. In addition to design work, Malo is the creative force behind the critically acclaimed group Tribe of Millions. Malo has also played with Me' Shell Ndegeocello, The Black Crowes, Soul Asylum, Chaka Khan, and has worked with Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. He has also scored films including *Street Guns* and *The Visionary*, and commercials for Target Market, Target, Marshall Field's, Mervyn's, African American Adoption Agency, and Dunwoody Institute.

KEN EVANS (Scenic Design) has designed numerous productions for Penumbra including *Dinah Was*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II*, *Jitney*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, *Pill Hill*, *Playboy of the West Indies*, *Little Tommy Parker's Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show*, *Ain't Suppose to Die*, *A Natural Death*, *Soul Alley*, *Deadwood Dick—Legend of the West*, *Songhai*, *Raisin*, and *Someplace Soft to Fall*. Ken is also a prolific lighting designer. Ken's New York credits include lighting off-Broadway revivals of *Les Blancs* and *Streamers*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Two Noble Kinsmen* at the Jean Cocteau Repertory. Ken also did lighting design for Garrison Keillor and *A Prairie Home Companion*.

MICHELLE HABECK (Lighting Designer) recently designed the lighting for *REDSHIRTS* at Penumbra Theatre. Other collaborations with Lou Bellamy include *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Two Trains Running*, and *Jitney* at Kansas City Rep. Recent national credits include *Love Song* at Steppenwolf Theatre, *Carter's Way* at Kansas City Rep, *Things of Dry Hours* and *Elimina's Kitchen* at Center Stage, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf* at Alliance Theatre Company, and *Lobby Hero* at the Goodman Theatre. She has worked as associate lighting designer with Tony-award winning designer Donald Holder on *Gem of the Ocean*, *King Hedley II*, and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, among others. Michelle is a National Endowment for the Arts/TCG Grant winner for 2003-2004.

EDWARD SUMMERS (Costume Design) is a past winner of the AACT/Fest Award for Excellence in Costume Design. Penumbra Theatre credits include *Seven Guitars*, *Black Nativity- A New Rendition of a Timeless Tradition*, *The Day of the Bronx Died* and *Canned Goods*.

DOMINIC TAYLOR (Associate Artistic Director) has been a practicing theatre artist for the past 20 years, recently relocating from New York to Saint Paul. He has directed a variety of theatre projects and musicals including the new opera *Fresh Faust* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the cantata *The Negro Burial Ground* at The Kitchen in New York City. He has worked with Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, The Public Theatre, New York Theatre Workshop, Crossroads Theater, Rites and Reasons Theatre, Playwrights Horizons, and Ensemble Studio Theatre among others. He holds both a Bachelors and a Master of Fine Arts from Brown University. He has been appointed Assistant Professor in Directing at the University of Minnesota.

PENUMBRA THEATRE

Penumbra was founded in 1976 by Lou Bellamy to make socially responsible art – art that demanded a response, art with intent, art that could create change. At a time when roles for black artists were limited to stereotypes and comical representations, Penumbra produced theater that roared with authenticity through the unrestrained and rich voice of black artists and playwrights. This respect for cultural authenticity became Penumbra’s signature style – and demand for it has reached new heights from theatres around the country fostering collaborations, new productions, tours and awards. This season, Lou and Penumbra will also journey to the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota. For the latest news and updates, visit www.penumbratheatre.org.

Quick Reference

- Production:** *The Piano Lesson*
Playwright: August Wilson
Producer: Penumbra Theatre Company and Lou Bellamy
Sponsor: The Cargill Foundation
Director: Lou Bellamy
Musical Director: Sanford Moore
- Ensemble:** Ansa Akyea (Boy Willie), Thomas Ashford (Lymon), Lerea Carter (Grace), James Craven (Doaker), Natalia Gaston (Maretha), Greta Oglesby (Berniece), T. Mychael Rambo (Avery), and Dennis W. Spears (Wining Boy)
- Design Team:** Malo Adams (Sound Design), Ken Evans (Scenic Design), Michelle Habeck (Lighting Design), and Edward Summers (Costume Design)
- Dates:** February 21 – March 16, 2008
Previews February 19 & 20
Opening Night, Thursday, February 21, 2008 at 7:30 pm
- Performances:** Wednesdays 10:00am and 7:30pm
Thursdays 7:30pm
Fridays 8:00pm
Saturdays 8:00pm
Sundays 2:00pm and 7:30pm
- Tickets:** 651-224-3180 or penumbratheatre.org
Price: \$15 - \$35
- Special events:** Symposium on March 3 from 6:00 - 8:00pm at Macalester College
ASL Performance on March 1 at 8:00pm
Performance with Audio Description on March 16 at 2:00pm
- Theatre Location:** 270 North Kent Street, Saint Paul, MN 55102
- Media Contact:** Julie McGarvie, Marketing Director
651-288-6784 or julie.mcgarvie@penumbratheatre.org

The Twentieth Century Cycle by August Wilson

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|---|-----------------------------------|
| 1900s - <i>Gem of the Ocean</i> | 1950s - <i>Fences</i> |
| 1910s - <i>Joe Turner's Come and Gone</i> | 1960s - <i>Two Trains Running</i> |
| 1920s - <i>Ma Rainey's Black Bottom</i> | 1970s - <i>Jitney</i> |
| 1930s - <i>The Piano Lesson</i> | 1980s - <i>King Hedley II</i> |
| 1940s - <i>Seven Guitars</i> | 1990s - <i>Radio Golf</i> |