THE THEATRE

TRAPPED

Two plays examine the prisons of self and state.

BY JOHN LAHR

Leigh and Coleman in August Wilson's "Joe Turner's Come and Gone."

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The late August Wilson thought of himself as a bluesman. His plays are chronicles of catastrophe, told lyrically; his theatrical mission was "to articulate the cultural response of black Americans to the world in which they found themselves," a world, he said, "that did not recognize their gods, their manners, their mores." Of the ten plays in Wilson's Century Cycle—which bear witness to the African-American experience in each decade of the twentieth century—"Joe Turner's Come and Gone" (revived, for the first time since its Broadway première, in 1988, at the Belasco, under the deft direction of Bartlett Sher) was his favorite and his masterpiece, the one in which the historical, the mythical, and the autobiographical reach their most ravishing equipoise. Wilson's brooding sense of dislocation and his decade-long struggle to discover his literary voice found a profound correlative in the floundering of the haunted, taciturn Herald Loomis (Chad L. Coleman), the hero of "Joe Turner's Come and Gone." By the time Loomis wanders into a Pittsburgh boarding house, in 1911, at the start of the play, he has endured twin traumas: he was dragooned into slavery for seven years by a white plantation owner, Joe Turner, and he was abandoned by his wife, for whom he has been searching, with his now eleven-year-old daughter, Zonia (Amari Rose Leigh), for four lost years. A long gray overcoat and a hat pulled down low on his head give Loomis a defensive carapace. He is unknowable, both to others and to himself. Loomis is not only unmoored ("I been wandering a long time in somebody else's world"); he is a dismantled man "who done forgot his song," as the resident boarding-house conjure man, Bynum Walker (the vivid Roger Robinson), tells him.

Loomis's challenge—the reclaiming of his moral personality—is foreshadowed by Michael Yeargan's set, which cleverly walks the same stylistic tightrope between the luminous and the mysterious as Wilson. Six legless brown chairs are silhouetted against the huge backdrop of a mackerel city sky. The surreal image of incompletion turns out to be a trompe-l'oeil—the chairs do have legs, though they're masked from view—but the idea remains: the issue for Loomis is how to make himself whole, how to prop himself up in the world. "My legs won't stand up! My legs won't stand up!" he cries, at the end of Act I, as he is blown backward along the floor by a howling wind, which also plays as the internal tempest released by a vision of his ancestors, "the bones people," who were lost at sea in slave ships during the Middle Passage to the New World.

In this iconic boarding house, Wilson condenses the experiences of a floating population of African-Americans, who find themselves ill-equipped to survive their emancipation. "Niggers coming up here from the backwoods . . . carrying Bibles and guitars, looking for freedom," the proprietor, Seth Holly (the compelling Ernie Hudson), says. "They got a rude awakening." At a time just after Plessy v. Ferguson—according to which African-Americans were considered "separate but equal"—the separation, for the boarding-house residents, is spectacular: separation from history, from family, from education, from capital, from self. The twice-jilted Mattie Campbell (the poignant Marsha Stephanie Blake), who "ain't never found no place for me to fit," seeks in each romantic alliance "a starting place in the world." Seth Holly can't seem to make his mark on life, either; he has a sharp entrepreneurial mind and a talent for manufacturing pots, but he can't get a loan to expand his business. Bynum Walker seeks not money but a mission in the alienated landscape. Bynum's name suggests the kind of spell he casts, which is about creating community and binding people. "People walking away and leaving one another," he says. "Just like glue I sticks people together." Rutherford Selig (Arliss Howard), a white peddler and "people finder," on the other hand, exploits the chronic cultural restlessness for profit. "It's not an easy job keeping up with you Nigras the way you

move about so," he says, taking a dollar from Loomis in exchange for the promise to keep an eye out for his wife.

Wilson wanted his dramatic world to be "fat with substance." To that end, he elevated his African-American roots—what he called "the blood's memory"—to "biblical status." When the residents decide to "Juba down"—to perform, around the kitchen table, a thrilling call-and-response dance "reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves"—Wilson brilliantly demonstrates how slaves adapted the remnants of African rituals to their new Christian ones. Loomis walks in on the near-frenzy and is enraged by the sight and sound of the others chanting "Holy Ghost." "What's so holy about the Holy Ghost?" he shouts, before breaking down and speaking in tongues himself. The moment puts him in atavistic touch with his own ghosts, his lost ancestors, though it is a knowledge that he is unable to make use of until the end of the play.

At the finale, Loomis finally comes face to face with his missing wife, Martha Pentecost (Danai Gurira), in a powerful scene that turns out to be a farewell, rather than a reunion. "Now that I see your face I can say my goodbye and make my own world," Loomis tells her, handing over the bereft Zonia. The harrowing moment contains the woe of Wilson's own life. (Wilson's daughter Sakina Ansari, to whom "Joe Turner" is dedicated, was the price that he paid for the pursuit of his literary ambition; one day in 1973, he returned home to find that his first wife, Brenda Burton, who, according to his sister, thought that his writing was a waste of time, had left with their baby.) In the end, Loomis realizes that he has within him all that he needs in order to be reborn. "My legs stood up!" he says, just before he exits. "I'm standing now!" As he sets off, the air in this production is suddenly flecked with gold, a halo of sorts, meant to indicate Loomis's resurrection. I like to think of it, however, as the shine of Wilson's œuvre, "a wail and a whelp of joy" that was his hard-won and gorgeous song.

While the uneven casting of the minor roles in "Joe Turner" keeps a good production from being a great one, the excellent support of John Benjamin Hickey, Chandler Williams, and Nicholas Woodeson as backbiting Tudor courtiers in Friedrich Schiller's 1800 play "Mary Stuart" (at the Broadhurst, in an outstanding new version by Peter Oswald) gives a special wallop to the evening's main event: a showdown between the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots (the strapping Janet McTeer), imprisoned for plotting against the Protestant throne, and Queen Elizabeth I (the fine-boned Harriet Walter), who has her cousin's butt in a sling but may want her head as well.

"Mary Stuart" is an exercise in eloquence and intrigue, in which both sides box clever, right up to the inevitable, thrilling finish. As the action plays out against Anthony Ward's minimal black brick wall, with the courtiers dressed in contemporary suits and the royals in Elizabethan garb, the director, Phyllida Lloyd, imposes a dashing urgency on events. From the first beat, the play explodes before us—guards brush aside Mary's protesting servant (the excellent Maria Tucci) and break open her footlocker with an axe. In the second act, as Mary enjoys a delicious moment of freedom in the rain on the grounds of the castle where she has been incarcerated, she is surprised by a visit from the Queen. With umbrellas open, the courtiers swoop across the stage like a flock of blackbirds; when they stop and turn, the Queen is suddenly revealed among them, facing her prisoner. It is an exquisite beginning to one of world theatre's classic battles of wit and will.

To be heard, Mary must rein in her vindictiveness and her vanity; for her part, the Queen must weigh the bonds of family against the realities of power. McTeer and Walter are British actors of exemplary intelligence and sinew. They are alert and articulate; they parse every nuance of every word. As McTeer's Mary struggles to contain her fury, Walter's Queen hides a vicious heart behind her starchiness. In a rage at the Earl of Leicester's apparent betrayal, Elizabeth declares, "He will be a monument to my severity." In fact, as it turns out, Mary Stuart is that monument. By beheading her, Elizabeth solidifies her power and loses her soul. "Your rival is dead," a courtier tells her in one of the play's last lines. "Nothing to fear now. Or respect." The political pragmatism may be predictable; the theatrical pyrotechnics with which it's displayed are exceptional. ♦