

Jitney, review: a beautifully wrought production of an excellent, important play

★★★★★ 5/5

Set among the men who drive unlicensed taxi cabs in 1970s Pittsburgh, this is rich, poignant drama, impeccably staged at the Leeds Playhouse

By Mark Brown

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Tony Marshall and Leemore Marrett Jr in *Jitney*, at the Leeds Playhouse | CREDIT: Sharron Wallace

August Wilson’s award-winning 1982 play *Jitney* – one of his 10-drama Century Cycle about working-class, African-American life in each decade of the 20th-century – follows the travails of the black men who drive unlicensed taxi cabs (“jitneys”) in Pittsburgh in the 1970s. The jitney phenomenon arose because licensed taxi firms refused to service deprived black communities, such as the Hill District of Pittsburgh.

When we meet Jim Becker – a thoroughly decent, former steel mill worker turned proprietor of a jitney company – his business is facing eviction by the local authorities, who plan to

demolish the run-down building that houses the cab firm. On the wall of the company's modest office is a list of Becker's rules, a kind of secular Ten Commandments, which includes such injunctions as "do not overcharge" and "no drink".

The drivers required to follow these directives include Doub (a pensive Korean War veteran), Turnbo (a notorious gossip) and Youngblood (aka Darnell Williams, a young man recently returned from the war in Vietnam). The jitney station is something of a community hub, hence we meet a series of other characters, including Shealy (a slick bookmaker) and Rena (Youngblood's hard-working girlfriend and the mother of his young son).

The drama that unfolds in director Tinuke Craig's carefully crafted production for Headlong theatre company and Leeds Playhouse is a smartly interwoven series of sub-plots. Every story – from the release (after 20 years in the state penitentiary) of Becker's son, Booster, to the struggles with booze of jitney driver Fielding, who was once a tailor to the rich and famous – reflects subtly and meaningfully on the poisonous alliance between racism and poverty.

Wilson is a master craftsman and his drama, which combines an Ibsenesque social realism, a brilliant strand of laugh-out-loud humour and the abstract existentialism of Samuel Beckett, is the quintessence of the elusive “well-made play”. The characters in Jitney manage to be, simultaneously, well-rounded dramatic personas and representative archetypes.



Jitney, at the Leeds Playhouse | CREDIT: Sharron Wallace

The play encompasses personality conflicts, moving musings on the experience of war and (interestingly, in this most masculine of plays) an understanding of the particular burden carried by the women who raised and continue to love the male characters. Perhaps most impressively, although the action never moves from its single room, it evokes a constant, resonating sense of the defiant life of the community on the other side of the office door.

Craig's staging boasts a brilliantly naturalistic-yet-metaphorical set by designer Alex Lowde (a sparse taxi office, with a simple gas heater, presented within a claustrophobic, rectangular box).

It is also enhanced by an atmospheric combination of projected black-and-white photographs of African-American life in Pittsburgh in days gone by with passages of jazz and soul music.

The acting is universally superb, from the besieged dignity of Andrew French's Becker, to the frustrations of CJ Beckford's self-reforming Youngblood and Leanne Henlon's hard-pressed, future-fearing Rena. A beautifully wrought staging of an excellent and important play, this production is, quite simply, a triumph.