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SURFING THE WAVES OF POPULAR CULTURE
BY MICHAEL GILTZ & FRIENDS

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"King Hedley II" At Signature

Sometimes critics get cheated by having to see a show early in its run. A lot of shows get much better AFTER they've been reviewed. I saw a critics' performance of Sondheim's "Passion" that was remarkable but weighted heavily towards the role played by Donna Murphy. (One of the four main characters had just replaced another actor.) I saw the show again right before it closed and the change was amazing -- a show I had loved before was much, much better with the entire cast fully integrated into the story, without any sense of one person dominating the tale. Murphy was still brilliant, but the show was much better with the others matching her blow for blow. And so to "King Hedley II." It's the third August Wilson play revived by Signature. I saw "Two Trains Running" and "Seven Guitars" and both productions were very, very good. Strong ensembles all around and of course Wilson's plays are great. The only Wilson I'd seen before this season at Signature was "Jitney" off Broadway, so I was eager to jump into his ten-play cycle. "King Hedley II" was a mess on Broadway from all I've heard, with Brian Stokes Mitchell (wonderful in "Kiss Me Kate") simply wrong for the role of King. This revival got nice reviews, with everyone feeling the play was rambling but frequently magnetic and the ensemble very good. That doesn't go nearly far enough. But it's not the critics' fault. I'm sure these actors are getting better performance after performance. Wilson's work is rich and demanding and the more they do it, the more they cohere. If the critics came back and reviewed the show I saw tonight, I'm sure they would RAVE. King is brimming with rage and righteous (but it is rarely a righteous rage), his best friend Mister is a familiar character without being a type and the genial hustler Elmore (the terrific Stephen McKinley Henderson) is endearingly clever enough to know he might just have a few moments of happiness left in him but old and wise enough to know the odds are still long. People talk and talk and talk in Wilson's plays. But when a cast like this is doing the talking, it couldn't be more satisfying. Signature hasn't announced its next season yet, but they're on a roll -- I pray they keep

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