

August Wilson Journal

Volume 1

Issue 1

Spring 2019



"August Wilson as Fences"
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Welcome to the Inaugural Edition of the *August Wilson Journal*

By Michael J. Downing

Professor of English, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

[Thanks to] August himself for being August . . . for plying his trade as a poet and playwright so artfully as to heartfully touch so many thousands of people across the United States and around the world.

– Michael J. Downing

Abstract

A welcome to the inaugural edition of the *August Wilson Journal*, written by the editor.

Keywords

August Wilson, August Wilson Journal, Sandra Shannon, Larry Glasco, David Anderson, Patrick Maley, Chris Bell, Artisia Green, Melonnie Walker, Steven Tracy, Alan Nadel, Chris Rawson, American Literature Association, University of Pittsburgh

Gratitude

As we prepare to launch the first edition of the *August Wilson Journal*, I can only express heartfelt gratitude to so many people who have helped along the way: Sandra Shannon, Larry Glasco, David Anderson, Patrick Maley, Chris Bell, Artisia Green, Melonnie Walker, Steven Tracy, Alan Nadel, and Chris Rawson, along with all of our excellent peer reviewers and editorial advisors. I would also like to thank Constanza Romero for giving so generously of her time and of course August himself for being August . . . for plying his trade as a poet and playwright so artfully as to heartfully touch so many thousands of people across the United States and around the world. Thank you, all.



*Michael J.
Downing*

Origins

With the benefit of hindsight, I now see that this journal project got its unwitting start in 2002 when I established augustwilson.net, which was a simple website dedicated to the study of all things August Wilson. It was, as far as I know, the first and for many years the only online source dedicated to Mr. Wilson. The goal was simply to spread the word by seeking permission and then publishing various articles on the internet. It served its purpose: I answered a lot of emails back in those days from people who were interested in

learning more and the plays, sensibilities, and politics that informed Mr. Wilson and his works.

I kept the website alive for a little more than a decade but eventually wanted the online presence to be more dynamic so I started the August Wilson Blog in January 2012. That allowed me to post material more regularly by writing short pieces with links to original articles without having to worry about: 1) seeking permission to reproduce entire articles, and 2) all of the constant design and navigation adjustments associated with maintaining a traditional website. The blog still exists as a searchable database of more than 450 journalistic-style articles. It has also connected me to dozens of Wilson supporters through the years, and even some contributors (CoCo Harris; Catherine Minnick), so I persevered, knowing that this was an important next step in the process of publishing Wilson material online. In addition, working on the blog made me realize how many of August's plays were being performed across the United States, annually. In fact, for the 2016-2017 theater year, no other playwright was performed more than [August Wilson](#).

Then, in May of 2015, at the American Literature Association Conference in Boston, I officially began pursuing the idea of launching a journal dedicated to the life and work of August Wilson. Two years earlier, I had created the August Wilson Author Society through ALA (now coordinated by J. Ken Stuckey), so I was already cultivating scholarly papers for presentation. The question now was *where can we publish those essays?* I began by speaking with some representatives of Penn State University Press, who were in the publishers room in Boston and currently publishing such periodicals as *The Arthur Miller Journal*, *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, *The Steinbeck Review*, *The Chaucer Review*, and the *Journal of Bernard Shaw Studies*, to name a few. PSU publishes so many journals, in fact, that as far as new projects go, they were only interested in publishing journals edited by Penn State faculty. They did, however, point me in the direction of the University of Pittsburgh, to which, I said *of course!*

Pitt was immediately interested and we began negotiating the initial proposal, which had to be approved by various governing bodies at UPitt in order for us to proceed. I'll spare you details, but let us just say it was rigorous and tremendously time-consuming. It took about a year and a half to iron out the details of the proposal and get it approved. Then David Anderson, my managing editor, and I then had to travel to Pitt to design the website and be trained in its operation. Designing the website involved decisions at every turn: Colors, fonts, banners, art, etc. Thanks to the wonderful staff at Pitt and thanks to my wonderful and talented wife, Jackie, who designed the logo that appears at the top of each article.

Now that we are nearing the completion of the first issue, I have a full appreciation of how complicated the website is and how it is actually a form of Artificial Intelligence, coordinating collective production efforts and creating a digital "paper trail" as things progress. Like all AI, however, the downside of the journal website is it is absolutely merciless at times. We had more than a few instances where contributors could not successfully submit their work, which was, we figured out later, due to the fact that they missed a particular checkbox designating themselves as authors. Another issue is that the system—in order to keep things "blind"—automatically converts file names into numbers, which confuses the heck out of two old English professors, who prefer the 26-letter alphabet, rather than constantly-changing computer language.

But we get it. Pitt wants to make sure that all of the protocols are followed. Open Access Publishing has gotten a bad name in some circles (i.e., predatory pay to play) and Pitt wants to make sure all protocols are followed. It has reached the point, however, where David and I are ready to bring another person onto the editorial team to manage workflow and production so that I can focus on driving material to the site and David can focus on working with his team of reviewers. We need help and if you would like to assist, send me an email.

That said, everyone at Pitt has been extraordinarily kind and supportive. I think they are all excited about the idea of hosting a journal dedicated to native son August Wilson and are entirely devoted to making that happen.

Spring 2019 Edition

This inaugural edition of the journal features 22 separate submissions. Immediately following this introduction is a foreword by Professor Sandra Shannon from Howard University. She comments on the field of Wilson studies and how it has grown over the years. She is the well-published president of the August Wilson Society which has been very active over the past several years promoting the legacy and literature of August Wilson.

Managing Editor David Anderson's brief welcome essay follows. A native Pittsburgher, David and I have been friends for more than 30 years and have been studying the life and works of August Wilson since we met in 1989.

Larry Glasco's article about August leaving Pittsburgh is next. Professor Glasco is a history professor at the University of Pittsburgh and this essay is a chapter from his upcoming book on Wilson. He offers 139(!) sources and offers a detailed and nuanced perspective on the conversations and circumstances that led to August to leave Pittsburgh for St. Paul.

Long-time Wilson scholar Alan Nadel follows with his essay on reading Wilson and his characters. Professor Nadel has published two collections of essays on August Wilson and has also recently released a monograph on August Wilson.

Mark Whitaker's essay is a keynote address that stems from the 2018 August Wilson Consortium which took place at the August Wilson Cultural Center in April of that year. In his remarks, Whitaker talks about how August Wilson fits into his book *Smoketown: The Other Black Renaissance*. Whitaker has worked as chief editor at *Newsweek*, Washington Bureau Chief for NBC News, and managing editor of CNN Worldwide.

Constanza Romero has graciously lent her voice to this first issue and Sandra Shannon was kind enough to conduct the interview. We are aiming at incorporating multimedia into the journal website as often as possible and are glad to say that not only do we have the textual version of the Romero interview, we also have an audio recording.

Chris Bell's interview with long-time August Wilson friend Sala Udin follows. Sala remembers going to elementary school with August and then performing in *Jitney*.

Another goal of the Wilson Journal is to talk with dramaturgs in order to bring them into the conversation and shed some light on their world. We want the journal to be open not only to scholars and academics but also to performers, directors and the theater community at large. So Dramaturgy Section editor Melonnie Walker has conducted two dramaturg interviews from recent productions of *Two Trains Running* and *Radio Golf*.

Patrick Maley is Stage Review Editor for the journal and he has been a strong contributor, bringing four reviews, including Kelsall's review of *King Hedley II*, Ridley's review of *Gem of the Ocean*, Herron's review of *Fences*, and Bell's review of *Radio Golf*. With our stage reviews, we look to go beyond plot summaries and generalized summaries and seek more specific insights such as how the play may have been staged, how the material was treated, or other nuances related to characters or themes that emerged within any particular staging.

Long-time Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Theatre Critic Chris Rawson opens the news section with an article on the August Wilson American Century Cycle Awards, with accompanying sidebar. These awards are given to theaters across the United States that have completed the entire 10-play American Century Cycle. Rawson has also contributed a second article on the activities of August Wilson House.

The next article is written by recent Duquesne master's graduate (and previous Kutztown University graduate) Laura Quain who writes about the Duquesne Fellowship and recent recipient, Natasha Trethewey.

Following Laura's article is a bibliography compiled by Thom Addington who is an instructor of English at Richard Bland College of William and Mary. The bibliography dates back to 2016 and will be a regular feature of the journal going forward as we continue to update it. We are particularly excited this year because we are able to include a primary work of August Wilson in *How I Learned What I Learned*.

Finally, we have an official Note, which is also intended as a regular feature. This year's note calls attention to specifics related to the fluctuating terminology connected to The Pittsburgh Cycle, The Century Cycle, and August Wilson's American Century Cycle. See Note for details.

Moving Forward

In terms of our evolving vision of the journal, we would like to see and cultivate additional, traditional scholarship, but we realize that it takes time. Now that we have published our first edition, we believe the level of attraction will begin to grow. We have received a handful of essays that were not quite fully mature, so we have elected to put those into the revise and resubmit column and work with the authors to firm up the arguments and evidence. Another place that we are looking to pull from is the aforementioned August Wilson Author Society through the American Literature Association. Authors should note that I am in a position to provide feedback in order to assist in sharpening essays for publication. Then, once the author and I am more or less satisfied, we toss it over the fence to the managing editor and the reviewers for blind peer review.

Thanks to the University of Pittsburgh

I started this essay with gratitude and I want to conclude with that same sentiment. I would like to thank all of our friends at the University of Pittsburgh for agreeing to take on this project, for training us on the use of the website, and for ultimately publishing the material: Vanessa Gabler, Electronic Publications Manager; Kari Johnston, Communications Support Specialist; Lauren Collister, Director of the Office of Scholarly Communications & Publishing; Timothy Deliyannides, Director of Information Technology. It has been a long haul with numerous challenges along the way, but it is my hope that we are making history with this first edition and that this project will serve as the ongoing, official record for August Wilson studies well into the future.

Author Bio

Dr. Michael Downing is Professor of English at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, where he teaches courses in August Wilson, technical writing, journalism, literature, and composition.



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August Wilson Society President's Foreword to Inaugural Issue of the *August Wilson Journal*

By Sandra G. Shannon
Professor Emerita, Howard University

The release of the much-anticipated inaugural issue of the August Wilson Journal is yet another indicator that the journal's namesake, the two-time Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright August Wilson, belongs to the ages.

— Sandra G. Shannon

Abstract

Founder and President of the August Wilson Society reflects upon the growth of the field of August Wilson studies over the past several decades and points towards a promising future.

Keywords

August Wilson, Sandra Shannon, Alan Nadel, The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson, Robert Brustein, August Wilson Journal, The Ground on Which I Stand, The August Wilson Society, Michael Downing, David Anderson



Sandra Shannon

I discovered in the late 1980s that August Wilson was a playwright to watch. Approximately ten years later after immersing myself in extant—though limited—scholarship on his work, I had no doubt that his plays must be required reading and that no self-respecting high school or college curricula could afford to ignore his work. Buoyed by these certainties, I sought to make Wilson's canon as familiar and as accessible in *academe* as that of Shakespeare, to facilitate widespread and serious study of his plays, and to serve as a catalyst for a much-needed body of scholarship on this major American playwright. I was soon to discover that work toward these ambitious goals was daunting as I perused shelves, newspaper clippings, and databases and as I followed leads to secure key interviews and travel to sites that promised additional material to support my first book, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* (Howard UP, 1995).¹ I persevered.

Although my early-to-mid-1990s search for sources on Wilson continued to be arduous, I soon detected a slow-but-steady uptick in serious treatment of what is now known as the American Century Cycle. In 1994, I expressed a mixture of cautious optimism and alarm in my "Annotated Bibliography of Works by and about August Wilson," which appeared in Alan Nadel's seminal collection, *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson* (Iowa UP).² "Critical assessment of August Wilson's plays has

increased in scope and in momentum over the last decade,” I touted in the brief introduction to my thirty-six-page project. I went on to note the following:

Although he wrote his first play in 1973 (*Recycle*), serious attention to his work did not come until the early 1980s with the Broadway success of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1981). Now, Wilson is one of the most-written-about dramatists in America, capturing the respect and admiration of some of New York’s toughest critics and inspiring a well-spring of scholarly activity about the plays that make up his proposed ten-play chronicle of the black experience. Published commentary on his work has likewise evolved from an abundance of theatre reviews of works staged along a familiar path from the Yale Repertory Theatre to Broadway . . . Extensive though it may be, this annotated bibliography is not all-inclusive; it is instead intended as a starting place for anyone doing preliminary research on August Wilson.³

What began some thirty years ago as an overly ambitious agenda on my part has now evolved into a full-fledged formal enterprise! The release of the much-anticipated inaugural issue of the *August Wilson Journal* is yet another indicator that the journal’s namesake, the two-time Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright August Wilson, belongs to the ages. Unlike many of his fellow playwrights, Wilson famously read a lot of what theatre critics (including his nemesis, *New Republic* critic Robert Brustein) had to say about his earlier staged performances. Some of their reviews hit below the belt. Some showed blatant cultural insensitivity, racial bias, and ignorance. Fortunately, an appreciable number of reviews provided astute, objective observations and judiciously pointed out both strengths and weaknesses in the performance and, at times, called attention to perceived flaws within the playwriting itself. The seemingly misguided tenor adopted early on by theatre reviewers led Wilson to single out critics *per se* in his well-publicized 1996 speech, “The Ground On Which I Stand” speech, where he writes, “As playwrights grow and develop, as the theatre changes, the critic has an important responsibility to guide and encourage that growth . . . It is the critic who should be in forefront of developing new tools for analysis necessary to understand new influences.”⁴

While Wilson’s high-profile pronouncements originally targeted critics of staged performances of his work, they may also stand as ongoing reminders to today’s scholars who aspire to publish research on his body of dramatic literature. *The August Wilson Journal* proudly accepts Wilson’s nearly 25-year-old charge to critics by creating a publishing home for continued growth and excellence in scholarship in August Wilson Studies. On behalf of the August Wilson Society and as its President, I congratulate the founders of the *August Wilson Journal*, Michael Downing and David Anderson, and pledge our support in making it into a premiere, world-class publication.

Author Bio

Dr. Sandra Shannon is Professor Emerita at Howard University. She has published numerous books and essays on August Wilson and is the Founder and President of the August Wilson Society.

Notes

¹ Sandra Shannon. *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*. Howard UP, 1995.

² Alan Nadel. *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Iowa UP, 1994, p. 230.

³ Ibid, 230.

⁴ August Wilson. *The Ground On Which I Stand*. Theatre Communications Group, 1996, 43-44.



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Sherlock, Watson, Wilson, and the Adventure of the MDWs

By David L. Anderson

Professor of English, Butler County Community College, Retired

*Our goal is to make this journal a major voice in promoting
the legacy of August Wilson*

– David Anderson

Abstract

A welcome to the inaugural edition of the *August Wilson Journal*, written by the managing editor.

Keywords

August Wilson Journal, University of Pittsburgh, Sandra Shannon, Constanza Romero, Michael Downing

Congratulations to all of you pioneers whose research, judgments, and insights have been published in this, the one and only inaugural issue of *August Wilson Journal*. Feel free to take your share (“with advantages”) of credit for whatever success *AWJ* achieves. You have taken the chance of entrusting your work to a new journal, one unencumbered by reputation. We hope that when you see your work here alongside that of other members of the Wilson scholarly and theatrical community, you will be pleased with your choice.

We are very proud of this issue. Our goal is to make this journal a major voice in promoting the legacy of August Wilson. If you have listened to Sandra Shannon’s interview with Constanza Romero, August’s widow and Director of the August Wilson Estate, you already know that even in our inaugural issue, we are doing things that print journals typically do not do. The production of that interview involved four people in different parts of the country, two speaking and two recording, as well as technologies that we were both varied and new to us. Before, during, and after the interview Michael “Sherlock” Downing and yours truly, the digitally befuddled Dr. Watson, were called on by Destiny to confront and solve numerous MDWs (Mysteries of the Digital World). We intend to continue moving beyond the text-only approach to include audio, video, photos, and any other media that can be brought to bear regardless of the MDWs we may encounter along the way.

Especially satisfying was the variety of contributors—both literary and theatrical. On these screens you will meet nationally recognized writers, established and new Wilson scholars, directors, actors, theater critics, and people who knew Wilson intimately. In addition, we are devoted to coaching young scholars into publication, including independent scholars and young writers from underserved communities who might have important things to say and important new ways of saying them.



David Anderson

Thanks to our peer reviewers for both their time and diligence in reviewing submissions; thanks especially for your challenging remarks and insights. Special thanks go to those reviewers (You know who you are!) who specialized in rapid turnaround times. As the editor and I quickly learned as submissions arrived, peer review would encompass more than just the critical genres of thesis- and question-driven original essays. We were occasionally dismayed that some great submissions were rejected, but we soon came to understand the causes. First we were glad to learn that the system was working as intended and material that was not yet mature had been rejected by our reviewers. Second, as the variety of the critical genres represented in this issue reveals, not all submissions could be properly evaluated by a single evaluation form. We responded by creating new evaluation forms, which fortunately did not turn out to be the most difficult of the MDWs we investigated. This helped to accommodate the nuances of the various submissions and went a long way toward streamlining the evaluation process.

Thanks to those who agreed to be section editors when we realized how much content the various sections would include.

Many thanks go to the University of Pittsburgh Library System, which provided us with financial support; encouragement; and knowledgeable, patient, and user-friendly digital adventure guides: Timothy S. Deliyannides, Director of the Office of Scholarly Communication and Publishing and Head of Information Technology; Vanessa Gabler, Electronic Publications Manager; and Kari Johnson, Communications Support Specialist. They introduced us to the universe of online, open access, peer-reviewed journals and helped us to investigate and solve the MDWs we would confront along the way.

Thanks to all of the readers of our inaugural issue. Our hope is that you register as readers. “Readers” are really “subscribers,” not “peer reviewers.” Subscriptions are free and “open access.” No salesperson will call. We were advised, in hindsight quite properly, that the first issue should appear in its completed form. Our plan is to use “rolling publication” for future issues. Subscribers will be informed whenever any new material is added prior to full publication of the completed versions of those issues—another service not typical of print journals. If you like what you find here, please tell your friends in the worlds of literature and theater about us. We already have submissions in our dropboxes for our second issue, and peer reviewers are evaluating them. You may have waited a long time to see this issue, but notifications regarding posted content for Issue 2 will follow hard upon the appearance of Issue 1.

Thanks most of all to Editor Michael Downing, who has been my friend for more than 30 years. In this, our greatest adventure together, I am honored to play the role of his comic sidekick. *August Wilson Journal* was his vision and he carried the heaviest load, showing his characteristic grace under pressure.

Author Bio

Dr. David Anderson is Professor of English (retired) at Butler County Community College. He is a native Pittsburgher and has studied the life and works of August Wilson for the past three decades.



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Chapter IX: "I Can't Take It!": August Wilson Leaves Pittsburgh

By Laurence Glasco

Associate Professor of History, University of Pittsburgh

Sala Udin never forgave [Claude] Purdy for luring August away from Pittsburgh, but in hindsight believes it was time for August to move on.

— Laurence Glasco

Abstract

The story of August Wilson leaving Pittsburgh for St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978.

Keywords

August Wilson, Brenda Burton, Sakina Ansari, Claude Purdy, Elva Branson, Sala Udin, Mary Bradley, Black Horizons Theatre, Kuntu Repertory Theatre, Ron Pitts, Vernell Lillie, Sarah Dixon, Curtiss Porter, Maisha Baton, Recycled, Coldest Day of the Year, The Homecoming, Black Bart and the Sacred Hills

In the spring of 1977, Ron Pitts was parked outside The Original Hot Dog Shop, waiting for his friend August to come back from rehearsal. Vernell Lillie, the head of Kuntu Repertory Theatre, had asked August Wilson to direct Ed Bullins's play, *In New England Winter* and Pitts knew there had been tension between the two. When August got in the car, it was immediately clear that something bad had happened. In fact, he learned, August and Vernell had gotten into a row that culminated in Vernell cursing him out. To Pitts's astonishment, August announced with tears in his eyes that he was leaving, exclaiming "I can't take it! I can't do this!" At first, Pitts thought he meant he was leaving Vernell and Kuntu Repertory. "No!" August said emphatically. "He was leaving Pittsburgh," said Pitts. "He was getting out of there."¹

August's falling out with Vernell capped a series of disappointments that stretched back eight years and involved much more than the head of the Kuntu Rep. It all began in 1969 when August angrily and abruptly quit Black Horizons Theatre over financial matters and the sort of politically-driven plays the theater was staging. The break was especially painful because, less than a year earlier, August had been one of the company's co-founders.

After the break, August returned to his first love, poetry, but now, even that brought disappointment. In the mid-1960s, August's poetry—inspired by Dylan Thomas, John Berryman, and avant-garde white modernists—had drawn enthusiastic audience responses. Now, after the riots of 1968, audiences wanted a stronger black power message than August



Laurence Glasco

was delivering. Curtiss Porter, one of the founders of the Black Studies Department at the University of Pittsburgh, recalls witnessing August reciting his poems at the Halfway Art Gallery, the main venue for poetry and cultural activities in black Pittsburgh and being “rejected, dejected and almost ejected” while doing so. Porter says audiences almost felt like August “wasn’t doing black poetry.”² August himself was not happy with his poems, which were notoriously opaque and difficult to understand.

As August struggled to find what he called his own poetic “voice,” he began to re-engage—tentatively, partially, and informally—with Black Horizons Theatre. His new interest in the theater stemmed from the arrival in 1970 of Claude Purdy, a talented actor with whom August quickly bonded. Claude arrived in Pittsburgh with formal training in theater and years of acting in New York, Paris, and Nigeria. Pittsburgh actors and audiences were thrilled that Purdy and his girlfriend Elva Branson, the director of the company, were taking Black Horizons productions to a new level of excellence.

Although August was still smarting from his break with Black Horizons and refusing to have anything to do with the company, at least formally, Claude’s presence proved an irresistible attraction. August began dropping by after rehearsals, when the actors had left, and going out for drinks, food, and conversation with Claude and Elva. He loved discussing all sorts of things with Claude and valued his feedback. He listened as Claude urged him to forget his avant-garde poetry and write in the way black people actually talk. Frank Hightower, who had replaced August when he quit Black Horizons, says Purdy told August to “find himself.”³

In 1973, after two or three years of hanging out with Claude and Elva, August wrote his first play, *Recycled*. Claude and Elva planned to stage the play and had it in rehearsal at Black Horizons. However, nothing came of it because they suddenly left so that Claude could pursue a film career in Los Angeles. As they left, Elva surprised August by asking him to replace her as the director of Black Horizons. Just as surprising, August accepted the offer, a move that brought him back full circle with the company. Even so, Claude’s departure was another disappointment, depriving August of his closest friend and mentor.

1973 brought August another painful disappointment, the breakup of his marriage. In 1969, he had married Brenda Burton and had a child, Sakina Ansari. However, August’s preference for casual, part-time jobs caused problems. The jobs gave him the free time he craved to walk the city, observe, and write, but the inadequate and irregular income strained the marriage, finally causing August’s wife to sue for divorce. The breakup was especially bitter because August he dearly loved Brenda and their three-year-old daughter.

1973, however, brought a couple of bright spots. One was the composition of “Morning Statement,” August’s first poem that he felt captured his own voice in simple, straight-forward, and understandable lines.⁴ Another was the invitation of his friend Rob Penny to work with him in cofounding a series of neighborhood theaters, each based on one of the seven principles of Kawaida, Ron Karenga’s African-based, nationalist philosophy.⁵ Rob hoped the theaters would engage Pittsburgh youth with Kawaida’s uplifting principles, a goal that August found exciting and ambitious.

Rob and August set up the first theater Northview Heights, a troubled housing project on Pittsburgh’s North Side. The initiative soon floundered, however, because the neighborhood’s young people showed little commitment. They would apologize for missing a rehearsal, August says, but at the next rehearsal, “only two dudes would show up out of the six who said they were coming.” August thought the problem might be that he and Rob were from the Hill and so were regarded as outsiders.⁶ More likely, the problem was that the young people had not bought into the project because August and Rob had not asked them what kind of plays they wanted to perform.

August and Rob soon abandoned the theater in Northview Heights, but their efforts had not gone unnoticed. A community activist from Hazelwood—where August had spent his teenage years—came by Rob’s office and asked if he would set up a theater in her

neighborhood. Sarah Dixon explained that Hazelwood had little to occupy its young people, who were running afoul of the law. She and her husband hoped that a children's theater would keep the kids out of trouble and develop their reading and social skills.⁷

Mrs. Dixon arranged for August and Rob to meet with the children, parents, and some of the staff at the Glen Hazel Recreation Center. Perhaps learning from their Northview Heights failure, Rob and August asked the youngsters what sort of plays they wanted to put on. The kids enthusiastically said *Superfly*, the popular Blaxploitation film featuring Youngblood Priest as a cocaine dealer trying to quit the business.⁸ Because of the film's glorification of the drug world, August laughed at the suggestion, and so did Ron Pitts and Mary Bradley, staff members of the Recreation Center.⁹ Rob, however, did not laugh. He went home and came back the next day with a script, threw it on the table, and told the kids they could do *Superfly* on the condition that afterwards they would do the plays that he and August wanted to do. The kids readily agreed.¹⁰

Everyone wanted to be in the play, so it was easy picking the seven or eight needed for the cast. Rehearsals went well, although Mary Bradley detected tension between August and Rob.¹¹ She never figured out the reason, but was puzzled that "there wasn't the harmony" she had expected.¹² Apparently because of the tension, Rob distanced himself from the production and left most decisions to August and Ron Pitts. August enjoyed working with Ron, who was willing to do whatever would make the play a success, including chauffeuring August back and forth between Hazelwood and his apartment in the Hill District.¹³ August thought Pitts had talent, and encouraged him to act in *Superfly*, and even think about becoming an actor. Pitts was focused on completing high school and going to college, but said he would act in *Superfly* if August would do the same.¹⁴ At first, August resisted, but ultimately agreed to play the role of the white photographer while Pitts took the part of Scatter, the bar owner. In rehearsals, Pitts was astonished at August's acting ability. "He was believable! He did it well!" Pitts exclaimed.¹⁵

The community and August worked together to support the production. A sewing club made costumes. Sarah's Dixon's daughter helped with the artwork and announcements.¹⁶ August drew on skills he had acquired at Black Horizons to sketch a model of the lighting board and get the electrical shop at Connelley Vocational School to build it.¹⁷ However, like August and Rob, community members were bothered by *Superfly*'s celebration of the drug culture. A community group asked that before each performance a disclaimer be handed out saying attendees did not approve of drugs or violence.¹⁸

The reception of *Superfly* far exceeded expectations. At every performance, the audience packed the 200-seat theater at the Glen Hazel Recreation Center, with the overflow standing around the edge of the auditorium.¹⁹ "Everybody wanted to come," Pitts says. "They just kept coming. It was a beautiful sight, just a good feeling."²⁰ The production bolstered residents' sense of pride and self-confidence. Pitts says: "We did it! It was all homemade, but it was ours. We ... could look around and be very proud ... It wasn't a rich theater. But it was ours."²¹ And, he says, it gave people something to think about instead of the riots.²²

Parents thanked Rob and August for helping keep their kids occupied and out of trouble.²³ The mother of Gilbert, who played the lead role, said the experience had transformed her son. "When he got involved in this theater," she said, Gilbert "became a whole different person. He got confidence in his self ... and turned his life around." She told August, "I can't thank you enough for what you've done to my son."²⁴ The young actors loved the experience. One, however, gave mixed reviews of August, describing him as "encouraging ... a great guy [someone] we were just crazy about," but also someone who was "stand-offish ... wouldn't play with kids ... didn't laugh that much ... looked like he always had things on his mind ... [was] real serious."²⁵

Superfly was a success, but was so exhausting that August and Rob dropped any idea of making it the first of seven Kawaida theaters.²⁶ However, in deference to their original

idea, they christened their Hazelwood initiative “Ujima Theatre”—Ujima being the third principle of Kawaia and the Swahili term for collective work and responsibility.

After the success of *Superfly* came the need to decide what plays to do next. The young people kept their promise and agreed to act in whatever plays August and Rob wanted to do. These turned out to be three classics from the Black Arts repertory: Amiri Baraka’s *Black Mass*, Ed Bullins’ *The Corner*, and Benjamin Caldwell’s *Prayer Meeting*. In addition, August seized the chance to stage his own play *Recycled*, which had been in rehearsal at Black Horizons when Elva and Claude left for California. That August chose to stage the play at Ujima suggests he was not devoting much time or energy to Black Horizons.

Recycled was a one-act play that August both directed and acted in. August had directing experience from his time with Black Horizons, but other than his minor role in *Superfly*, he had no experience acting.²⁷ The plotline was inspired by a gruesome scene August had witnessed earlier that year. A bartender and a patron got into an argument in which the bartender pursued the man into the street and shot him. A crowd gathered and, in an effort to revive him, a nurse began beating on his chest. Someone standing nearby said, “No need you beating on the man’s chest. That man dead. His brain laying right there on the car.” August followed the nurse, who crossed the street. She went into Pope’s Restaurant, and told Pope, “The niggers are killing one another these days.” Pope asked matter-of-factly, “Yeah, is he dead?” The nurse replied, “Yeah, I beat on his chest. He’s dead.”²⁸

That true-to-life exchange became part of the play’s opening scene. The setting is a bar in which a shot is heard off-stage. A man, played by August, enters the bar, and a woman says to no one in particular “The niggers are killing each other.” Later, toward the end of the play, the woman says something that informs the audience that the man who was shot at the play’s opening has been “recycled” into this bar.²⁹

Recycled continues the figure of the outsider, a trope which had long intrigued August. In the opening scene, when the man comes into the bar, the woman looks at him and asks, “Where did you come from?” He replies, “Down the street lady. And did you forget?” She asks, “Forget about what?” To which he expounds, “Forget about everything. Long dancing one afternoon. ... All the mean shit we gotten together.” Coldly dismissing the overblown rhetoric, the woman replies, “Nigger, I don’t know you from a lump of coal. You got a woman? Why don’t you go home to her.”³⁰ The phrase “I don’t know you from a lump of coal” turns the man into an outsider, an unloved stranger. Some of the play’s dialogue retains the flowery, enigmatic language of August’s early poetry, but much of it captures the cadence and flow of black vernacular. Like August’s poem “Morning Statement,” which also was written in 1973, the play demonstrates he had listened to Claude Purdy and was becoming more skilled in capturing the way blacks talk.

In addition to being inspired by an actual tragedy, *Recycled* references August’s recent divorce. August says that, at the time, he was suffering the breakup of his marriage, and the play was “a way to get [the anger] out of me, kind of find a way to purge that, to write about that in poetry and whatnot.”³¹ However, the anger caused August to overact, sometimes dangerously. At one point, his character was to strike the female antagonist, played by Maisha Baton. August hit her so hard that people wondered whether his emotions had gotten the better of him. Years later, Maisha could be philosophical about the incident, but clearly had not found it funny at the time. “We only did it that one time,” she laughs. “I wasn’t going to let him hit me again!”³² Despite fairly realistic and understandable dialogue, people were baffled by the plot. “What’s it about?” they asked. “Where is he going with this?”³³ The first night’s performance at the Recreation Center had a large turnout because people thought it was going to be like *Superfly*. But Pitts needed only one word to describe attendance at the second performance: “Phew!”³⁴

August was beside himself. Trying to figure out why his play had failed to connect, he asked Pitts for advice. But Pitts was not about to offer any. August, he says, was so

"moody" and "intense" that it seemed he was "going to explode."³⁵ Not long afterwards, August did explode. During a rehearsal for Ed Bullins' play, *The Corner*,³⁶ he became irritated by several actors who were not taking things seriously. They resisted directions and argued over minor points. "I'm not going to do this part. I'm not going to do that part."³⁷ The most troublesome was Rodney, who had been part of the original group that asked Rob and August to do theater in Hazelwood. Rodney always had a story to tell while actors were trying to rehearse. Finally, August lost patience and said firmly, "Hey man, we're rehearsing." Rodney's reply, "Oh man, we can do it later," enraged August, who picked up a chair and hurled it through a window.³⁸ Pitts was shocked. "I had never seen August get that mad," he says. "I could see the frustration building up in him. I could see it, but I did not know what he would do. And when he walked over to the chair and picked it up and threw it through the window, everybody stopped." Pitts feared August might do the same to Rodney. "This guy's crazy," he said to himself. August went on for quite a while, cursing at Rodney and finally ordering him to "get the hell out of here!"³⁹

After the disappointment of *Recycled*, August waited three years before writing another play. But in 1976 he wrote *The Coldest Day of the Year* and staged it at Ujima. Directed by Rob and featuring August and Maisha performing together once again, the one-act play was patterned after Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*. The setting is a cold winter day in which an elderly man engages in tortured conversation with a woman waiting for someone at a bus stop.⁴⁰ The play deals with male-female relations and, August says, was partly inspired by a breakup with his girlfriend of the time. The play's theme was engaging, but the dialogue contained such forgettable lines as "Our lives are frozen in the deepest hate and spiritual turbulence." As one can imagine, the audience hated the play, and it closed after one performance.⁴¹ Realizing once again that audiences did not like his plays, August shelved a third play he was working on, "Rite of Passage," which to this day remains unpublished, undated, and unperformed.⁴²

With their egos bruised, August and Rob lost interest in Ujima. The theater, in August's words, "just like faded out"⁴³ and closed later in 1976.⁴⁴ The experience taught August that political theater, as well as theater with esoteric dialogue and complicated plotlines, would not connect with the public, especially with the sort of grassroots public that he wanted to reach.⁴⁵

Frustrated that audiences had so soundly rejected his plays, August tried something new: incorporating music and dance into the play. The idea emerged when August began hanging out with Bob Johnson, a talented newcomer with a combined interest in dance and theater. "BJ," as he was called, came to Pittsburgh in 1970, and brought with him a wide-ranging interest in dance, theater, and cinema. Born in 1938 in New York, he had worked with such major troupes as the Alvin Ailey Studio, the Katherine Dunham School, the June Taylor Dance Studio, and the New Lafayette Theatre Workshop. He had performed in the original New York Shakespeare Festival production of *Hair* and acted in Ed Bullins' *Goin' a Buffalo* at the American Place Theatre.⁴⁶ He had even appeared in the film *Midnight*, the sequel to the Pittsburgh-made film *Night of the Living Dead*.⁴⁷

Recruited by the Black Studies Department in 1970, Johnson founded a number of well-regarded initiatives.⁴⁸ One was the student-based Black Horizons Dance Ensemble that performed around town and at productions of Black Horizons Theatre. Two others were the Bob Johnson Dancers and the Harambee Dancers, which also drew enthusiastic audiences.⁴⁹ BJ's most important group, the Black Theater Dance Ensemble, was founded in 1972, and boasted two members of the Alvin Ailey Studio as instructors.⁵⁰ The word "theater" in the name reflected BJ's desire to combine theater with music and dance. The Pittsburgh Theater Dance Ensemble quickly became a leading feature in Pittsburgh's Black Arts movement.

In addition to his dancing skill, BJ had what August called a "warrior spirit." He demonstrated that spirit during an unforgettable outing with August, Rob, and other poets to Western State Penitentiary. The men had been invited to perform for the inmates, but

unfortunately, BJ did not bring along the female members of his company. When the inmates realized this, they vigorously let their unhappiness be known.⁵¹ August and Rob came out to read poetry, and the inmates made it clear they didn't want to hear any poetry. BJ started dancing, and the men let it be known that they didn't want to see him dance. They wanted the women. Finally, in a move that August never forgot, BJ went out on stage and, in front of four hundred very unhappy men, danced a solo tribute to baseball great Roberto Clemente with such power and feeling that, by the time he finished, the inmates were applauding and calling for more.⁵²

August admired BJ for his "warrior spirit" that had been on display at the penitentiary. August was overjoyed when BJ established Theatre Urge in 1975 and asked him to direct Phillip Hayes Dean's play, *Owl Killer*, for the company. He considered the chance to work with BJ "a great experience." Apparently BJ did not feel the same, for he never again asked August to direct a play for him, to August's great disappointment. "I thought that BJ would ask me to do other stuff," August lamented. "I used to go home and think about plays I would direct. And then the next play he did, he had some group from Philadelphia come in and direct it and I was wounded by that."⁵³

August regretted this rebuff by BJ, but he continued to engage with theater, now with a new company at the University of Pittsburgh, Kuntu Repertory Theatre. Under the direction of Vernell Lillie, a newcomer to the city, Kuntu quickly became the city's leading producer of black theater. Born in 1931 in the Brazos Bottoms region of Texas, Vernell earned a degree in speech and drama at Dillard University and taught in the Houston public schools. There, she and her husband founded a theater with a nationalist agenda that sought to raise racial consciousness through literary readings and dramatic collages.⁵⁴

In 1969, Vernell came to Pittsburgh to pursue graduate studies at Carnegie-Mellon University, concentrating in psychodrama.⁵⁵ She was completing her doctoral program when, in 1973, Curtiss Porter recruited her to teach in Pitt's Black Studies Department.⁵⁶ Vernell agreed to do so, but had no intention of starting a theater. She simply wanted to finish her dissertation and return to Houston. However, despite misgivings, in 1973 she founded Kuntu Repertory Theatre.⁵⁷ Kuntu had a nationalist orientation and was self-consciously part of the Black Arts movement. The company's very name is derived from a Central African word for "way" or "mode," a term popularized by German scholar Janheinz Jahn, whose book *Muntu* argued that Africa has a unified cultural essence and esthetic.⁵⁸

Vernell quickly bonded with her colleague in Black Studies, Rob Penny. She liked that his plays focused on the lives of the marginalized and provided what Vernell called positive "propaganda" aimed at getting black men "to think about their responsibilities."⁵⁹ She also admired Rob's portrayal of women. "He can create women with such beauty," Vernell says, even "better than most ... female writers."⁶⁰

Vernell had reservations about August, who she felt was not a committed black nationalist. "I don't remember August dealing at all with the ideas of Baraka," she says, "or the other black writers."⁶¹ Vernell felt August did not measure up to Rob as a playwright,⁶² and she was not alone in that regard. Most black Pittsburghers considered Rob the city's premiere black playwright, and ranked August a clear second. Mary Bradley, who had worked with both men at Ujima, says Rob was the one who was always getting the recognition. "Never August." Years later, Bradley was surprised that it was August, not Rob, who became nationally famous.⁶³

Vernell came to know August because he spent so much time in Rob's office—even when Rob was not there. August was in Rob's office so much that Brenda Berrian, a new faculty member, at first confused the two men. "He lived there!" she exclaims.⁶⁴ August also palled around with two of the department's other theatrically inclined members, BJ and Maisha. The three developed what Berrian calls a "little clique ... really tight ... like brothers and sisters."⁶⁵ Almost every noon, they would head over to Pace's Restaurant nearby in Oakland and spend lunchtime "solving the world's problems."⁶⁶

August began stopping by Kuntu Repertory rehearsals, working with the actors and helping them learn their lines. As usual, he remained the outsider, staying on the periphery, not saying much, not asking many questions, and carefully observing.⁶⁷ When Rob told Vernell that August had experience as a director, she asked him to direct two plays for her, *The Corner* by Ed Bullins and *Prayer Meeting, or The First Militant Minister* by Ben Caldwell. She was impressed with August's directing skills, feeling that he exhibited "sophisticated approaches" to blocking, character development, plot nuances, social purposes of the author, and the capabilities of each actor.⁶⁸

When Rob told Vernell that August also wrote plays, she asked him if he had anything that Kuntu might stage. August told her that he had three plays, two of which—*Recycled* and *The Coldest Day of the Year*—were still being revised. But a third one, *The Homecoming*, was "complete."⁶⁹ In 1976, Lillie staged *The Homecoming* at Schenley High School and at Ujima in Hazelwood.⁷⁰

The Homecoming is a fictionalized account of two men's reactions to the death of their friend, blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson. Called Blind Willie Johnson in the play (ironically there was an actual blues singer by that name), Jefferson was a Texas-born bluesman and guitarist who sang for a pittance on street corners and at social gatherings. Sometime in the late 1920s, Paramount Records asked him to come to Chicago and make some recordings. Considered by many the "Father of Texas blues," Jefferson complained of exploitation by the record company.⁷¹ Legend has it that, one morning after a recording session, he was found dead on a cold, wintry street.⁷² The play is set in an abandoned train station in rural Alabama where two men, Obadiah and Leroy, are waiting for the arrival of Blind Willie's coffin. Two white agents from a Northern record company happen to be in the station, and tell Obadiah and Leroy that they are looking for bluesmen to come North and record. With fresh memories of what happened to their friend in Chicago, they gain revenge by killing the agents.⁷³ A play about black men settling racial scores through violent retribution makes *The Homecoming* August's first play to fully embody the sort of racial violence and nationalism championed by Baraka and others of the Black Arts movement. In addition, its characters bear identity traits that August admired and are part of his own identity, those of the warrior and the race man. Obadiah and Leroy are poor, uneducated, and rural, the sort of traditionally subservient blacks that Baraka wanted black theater to convince of the need to strike a blow for revenge and racial retribution.

However, August was not comfortable with plays that project such an overtly political message. As a result, *The Homecoming* became his first—and only—play fully in the tradition of Baraka. August recognized as much when he said that he liked Baraka, and in his early one-act plays—presumably *The Homecoming*—he tried to imitate Baraka. But then, he says, he realized he "wasn't [Baraka] and that wasn't going to work."⁷⁴ *The Homecoming* taught August that he couldn't, or didn't want to, do political theater. It should also have taught him that his dialogue remained opaque and unnatural. *The Homecoming* was full of such forgettable lines as, "Well, I'll tell you, it's cold up North, all right. That's what I hear anyway. Froze to death! Don't make much sense. Yessir, that's something the way they treated Blind Willie."⁷⁵ Vernell had grave misgivings about *The Homecoming*, and concluded that August had a future as a director but not as a playwright.⁷⁶

I had no idea that he was going to emerge as the great, great playwright. I really thought he was going to emerge on the national scene as a tremendous director. And I still say that maybe the secret to his success as a playwright is that he was just so good as a director, and that he saw people on stage. It doesn't matter whether or not he had the words to go in their mouths. He saw them on the stage. He saw them in conflicts. He saw them needing to make change. And then he saw their flaws as well.⁷⁷

In addition to harboring doubts about August's skills as a playwright, Vernell did not warm to him personally. "[I]t was not that I was denying August," she says. "[Y]ou must

keep in mind that, at this point, August Wilson was not at all involved in playwriting. He had only written one play.” And, she adds proudly, “I was the first one to ever produce [that first] August Wilson play.”⁷⁸ Similarly, August had ambivalent feelings about Vernell, and minimizes their relationship. “I didn’t really have a relationship with Vernell,” he says, “other than the fact that ... she discovered that I wrote this one-act play that she wanted to do And so she said she wanted to do it, and I said okay.”⁷⁹

Disappointed at his failed efforts in theater at Black Horizons, at Ujima, with BJ, and now with Vernell, August once again turned back to poetry. He did so at a Black Studies initiative, the Kuntu Writers Workshop, founded in 1976 by Rob and Maisha, and meant to provide a space where playwrights could come together, support one another, and get feedback. Once the workshop started up, Rob realized that poetry remained popular, so much so that he opened it to poets as well.⁸⁰ Rob did not mind August’s focus on poetry because he considered himself a poet. Vernell says that Rob and August both thought that “the highest honor was to be called a poet, and they would correct you on not calling them a poet.”⁸¹

Maisha Baton, the other leader of the Workshop, had worked with August at Ujima and brought considerable experience to the project. Born in 1939 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Maisha (née Shirley) had moved to New York at the age of seventeen, planning to become a nurse. Realizing that she did not like nursing, she took a variety of jobs that paid the rent for an apartment in the East Village.⁸² While living there, Maisha never met Baraka, but did attend poetry readings by Beat poets, including Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso.⁸³ Their writing appealed because “It had a rhythm, it had a beat that was more like the old poets, John Donne and Baudelaire. ... [They] were saying, ‘Bam Bam Bam Bam, I saw the best minds of my generation,’ you know, Ginsburg, ‘destroyed by madness, starving, naked, dragging themselves.’” Maisha committed to poetry once she realized that poetry doesn’t have to be “that little quiet Emily Dickinson thing.”⁸⁴ She liked the Beats but, being shy, did not participate in their poetry readings.⁸⁵ In 1969 or 1970, she moved to Pittsburgh, where a cousin lived, and settled in the Hill. In short order, she joined Black Horizons Theatre, where Claude Purdy was directing.⁸⁶ Maisha liked that Pittsburgh had a strong sense of community and featured a number of places where writers, artists, and actors gathered regularly.⁸⁷ Along with August, Rob Penny, Sala Udin, BJ, and others, Maisha hung out Eddie’s Restaurant, where in the 1970s she wrote a play, *Tears for Living Children*, which BJ later staged at the Laboratory Theatre Center.⁸⁸

Maisha and August began dating on and off. As she recalls, “What happened was he was obsessed with writing and I was interested, [but] not as obsessed as he was. But still in love with the writer and the writing and the potential ... so we hung out together a lot.”⁸⁹ August and others especially appreciated that Maisha had a car. “That was another reason they liked me,” she says, laughing. “If somebody needed to go somewhere, if there was a theater thing ... I would drive.”⁹⁰ Like August, Maisha was struggling to find her own voice, sometimes in ways that took on humorous aspects. One snowy night, while driving August and Claude back from a poetry reading, Maisha stopped the car, turned around, and announced to one and all: “I must not be a poet because I don’t sound like them. Something’s wrong.”⁹¹ Claude said a bit nervously, “we’ll talk about it later.” But Maisha wanted to talk about it then and there. “I’m really worried about it. I don’t have the voice, the rhythm,” she said as the car went into a snow bank. August and Claude started hollering, “keep going, keep going,” but Maisha did not move. She needed “to think this rhythm thing” through. Years later, she could laugh about that evening. “I’ll never forget those guys shouting and trying to make me get out of that snow.”⁹²

Maisha touched August’s life in a variety of ways. When he joined the Kuntu Writers Workshop, August became one of three co-leaders, focusing on poetry while Rob focused on fiction. The workshop met every other Saturday at the Black Studies Department. August still worked at temporary, low-paying jobs, and often did not have

money for bus fare, so he had to walk two miles from his apartment in East Liberty. But as a true bohemian he didn't mind. "I walked and I said that's okay because when I get there I can get fifty cents from Rob and ... get me some cigarettes. And Rob will give me a ride home, and I'm cool man. That's all I needed, that's all I wanted. To get ... cigarettes and then talk about poetry."⁹³

August and Maisha had misgivings about the way Rob ran the Workshop. Rob's easy-going personality made him reluctant to critique others' work, whereas August thought feedback was very important. In addition, August and Maisha disliked that Rob did not make participants bring original work to the Workshop.⁹⁴ Especially aggravating to August was the political nature of the writing that Rob encouraged. Natalie Bazzell, a member of the Workshop, noticed that August's poetry was distinctly less political and Afrocentric than Rob's. "A lot of the poetry at that time," Natalie says, "was very rhetorical, very black black black power, nigger nigger nigger. It was more than that, but it had a lot of that in it." Natalie adds that Rob's poetry was like that, but August's was very different.⁹⁵ August enjoyed the Writers Workshop, but his writing was still floundering. His poetry lacked the political militancy that was popular. His directing had not impressed BJ. His plays had not appealed to general audiences. And his one overtly political play had not impressed Vernell.

August was looking for a new approach, and turned to the advice of his old friend, Claude Purdy. Claude always had high regard for August's talent, but for years had urged him to try something different, something that would be artistic but also would have popular appeal. Acting on Claude's suggestion, August tried writing a musical satire. The effort began in 1973, just before Claude left for Los Angeles, with a long poem about the exploits of a black bandit in the old West, entitled "Black Bart and the Hills."¹ August at first was unsure what to do with the poem, and had given it as a present to his girlfriend, Barbara Evans. However, soon afterwards, he apparently decided to develop the poem, and asked Barbara to return it.⁹⁶

August's desire to convert "Black Bart" into a musical may also have been inspired by BJ. In 1975, Johnson planned to have Theatre Urge stage a musical about Stagger Lee, the mythical black renegade of the early twentieth century whose adventures were celebrated in song and folklore. BJ wanted the production to include dance and music, and so contacted August and a local musician, Nelson Harrison, to work with him. The three met frequently to discuss creating such a work. It was decided that Harrison would do the music, BJ would sketch out some scenes, and August would write the script. In the end, however, nothing came of the idea.⁹⁷ One more disappointment.

However, working on Stagger Lee may have given August the idea for converting his poem about a black cowboy into a musical, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. Originally titled "Black Bart and the Hills," the poem invoked the memory of an actual historical figure, Charlie Bolles, a white Englishman and stagecoach robber whose place in the folklore of the American West ranks just behind Jesse James and Billy the Kid.⁹⁸ Bolles' name and notoriety were the only things "black" about him, but he had remarkable flamboyance, a sense of humor, and open disdain for the elite. After each robbery, he would leave behind a poem that had the sort of impudent, sardonic humor that August loved. One example:

I've labored long and hard for bread,
For honor, and for riches,
But on my corns too long you've tread,
You fine-haired sons of bitches.

*Black Bart, 1877*⁹⁹

¹ Although long poem titles are typically placed in italics, we are going to keep the poem version of "Black Bart" in quotation marks to distinguish it from the play, which will be placed in italics.

While August was working on *Black Bart*, his old friend Claude Purdy, after several years in Los Angeles, shelved hopes of breaking into the movies and joined Penumbra, a newly formed black theater company in St. Paul, Minnesota. Then, in 1977, just as August was working on *Black Bart*, Claude and Elva returned to Pittsburgh and joined the Pittsburgh City Players, an experimental, integrated theater on the North Side.¹⁰⁰

Upon their return, Claude and Elva learned that Black Horizons Theatre no longer existed. They tried to learn what happened, but August and others spoke only in the vaguest of terms.¹⁰¹ The theater seems to have faded away with no formal death notice.¹⁰² Curtiss Porter thinks it closed “around” 1972; Rob Penny says it was functioning “off and on” as late as 1973.¹⁰³ Those dates suggest that Black Horizons closed not long after Elva appointed August to head it.

One night after their return to Pittsburgh, Claude and Elva went to the Crawford Grill to hear August read “Black Bart and the Sacred Hills.” Claude liked the poem, and thought it had commercial possibilities. He was aware that in the late 1960s, black cowboys had become all the rage following the republication of *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, the 1907 autobiography of a black cowboy nicknamed Deadwood Dick. In 1976, Fred Hudson and Roger Furman of New York’s Black Theatre Alliance announced plans to do a play about Love.¹⁰⁴ Penumbra Theatre was interested enough that it staged *Deadwood Dick: Legend of the West* as part of its 1979-1980 season.¹⁰⁵

Claude urged August to convert “Black Bart” into a musical or, even better, a movie that he would direct. “Hey man we could make this into a film!” he said excitedly.¹⁰⁶ August liked the idea, and plunged into the challenge. Once August got excited about something, says his friend Lee Kiburi, he was like a little kid in terms of his enthusiasm.¹⁰⁷ “[N]ot knowing any better,” August says, he sat down and, working almost non-stop, converted his poem in just one week into a 137-page, single-spaced musical satire.¹⁰⁸

Because a musical score requires collaboration, August brought in Maisha and BJ to work with him and Claude. The four held brainstorming sessions at Maisha’s apartment and occasionally at Kuntu Writers Workshop.¹⁰⁹ Maisha tape recorded some of the collaboration. On one tape, Claude can be heard encouraging August: “Come on, let’s do it ... I know you can work that up. Have Bart saying blah blah blah.” August replies, “Let me try it this way,” and others join in with their own suggestions.¹¹⁰

Black Bart shows that August was starting to follow Claude’s suggestions about writing dialogue that reflects how people actually talk. He had begun doing this in his short, 1973 poem, “Morning Statement,” but now he was doing it in a much longer work. Elva noticed approvingly that with Bart, August had begun to write dialogue “just the way he heard it.”¹¹¹ Maisha also noticed the change. She says that August’s early plays—*Recycled* and *The Coldest Day of the Year*—were written in his “James Joyce voice” in which the characters speak “classic” English. However, in Bart, the characters “talk, and talk shit.” Years later, Maisha says, the Bart voice takes over and “becomes *Ma Rainey*, becomes *Two Trains [Running]*.”¹¹²

Bart, the musical’s central character, is a black cattleman who is angry that the government has built a railroad through his ranch. Turning to rustling as a form of revenge, he gets caught and thrown in jail. After taking a course in magic, Bart escapes and settles in a retreat he calls the Sacred Hills, where he begins making gold out of water, aiming to flood the world with so much of the precious metal that it would lose its value. Bart hangs out with a zany, interracial cast of characters with wickedly funny names. Master Divine—a spoof of Father Divine, the founder of a black religious cult in the 1920s—is a preacher and self-admitted “fake prophet.” Pharaoh Goldstein, the Mayor of Little Egypt, is a member of the Culturally Independent Adults (C.I.A.) and financial overseer of the Nile Valley Pyramid Construction Company. Horsefeathers, the all-knowing Indian narrator, can be found sitting atop a barrel in front of the “Hoedown in the John” saloon, owned by Chauncey Riff Raff III.

Mother Principle is the madam who oversees the female workers at the Hoedown saloon, also known as the "Ain't No Ho' Down in the John" saloon.¹¹³

The musical's dialogue captures the cadence and lilt of black speech, as in this interchange between Horsefeathers and Sweet Delight, one of the "fancy ladies" at the Hoedown saloon:

H F: Just call me stranger.

S D: Okay. Stranger.

H F: I put your key on the dresser.

S D: Okay stranger. You sound kind of different.

H F: You do too. You sure I'm in the right room?

S D: Sure, daddy. You write [sic] where you belong.¹¹⁴

Nelson Harrison, who composed the music, was extraordinarily talented and something of a Renaissance man. As a child, Harrison had played trombone with the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony. Later he played for the likes of Dionne Warwick, Nancy Wilson and James Brown when they came through Pittsburgh. Along the way, Harrison composed original musical scores, most notably "Isis au Noir," a reinterpretation of the Egyptian legend of Isis and Osiris.¹¹⁵ The songs Harrison composed for *Black Bart* included gems with such ironic titles as "The Last Stop Camel Feed and Water Company," "The Hoedown in the Gambling Hall," and "The Nile Valley Pyramid Construction Company."

August, Pitts, and the other actors felt good about the musical. BJ's Theatre Urge was chosen to stage it, with Claude directing and Ron Pitts playing the role of Black Bart.¹¹⁶ Given this enthusiasm, one can understand August's great disappointment when, at the last minute, he had to tell the group that the performance was cancelled. He had been unable to raise the necessary financing.¹¹⁷

1977 August leaves Pittsburgh

The collapse of *Black Bart* was one more in a long list of disappointments. To make matters worse, the musical's closing was followed by a confrontation with Vernell. In 1977, Vernell had asked August to direct Ed Bullins's play, *In New England Winter*, for Kuntu Repertory. The play was to open in late June at the University's Studio Theatre, with a cast drawn both from Kuntu and BJ's Theatre Urge.¹¹⁸ August was thrilled. He considered this the biggest project he had ever done.¹¹⁹

Unfortunately, the personal chemistry was not good between the two. Vernell had a reputation as being strong-willed and insistent, and the same was true of August. Vernell apparently became unhappy with August, or with his directing, or both. The upshot was that the two clashed sharply one evening, and Vernell cursed him out. This was the confrontation that occurred while Ron Pitts was parked outside Oakland's Original Hot Dog Shop waiting to drive August home. August got in the car, visibly agitated, and related what had happened. With tears in his eyes, he announced he was leaving, and exclaimed, "I can't take it!"¹²⁰

Pitts was astonished. He found August's announcement "surreal, almost like a play he was writing." When August confirmed that he was serious, Pitts pleaded, "Man, you got to finish what you started." Pitts knew this was not the first time August had said he was going to leave. "But this time," Pitts says, "you could see it in his face. He was going to be with Claude Purdy somewhere in Minnesota. He was through with everything—Ujima, Kuntu—anything that had to do with theater in Pittsburgh."¹²¹

August, in fact, had been in touch with Claude, who by then was happily ensconced in St. Paul, directing plays for Penumbra. Claude loved Penumbra. He loved St. Paul. And he very much missed August. Wanting to work together again, he sent August an airplane ticket around Christmas, 1977, inviting him to come to St. Paul and revise *Black Bart*.¹²²

August found the invitation too good to resist. He said to himself, "A free trip to St. Paul? What the hell."¹²³

The following January, August left for St. Paul. Before he did, he stopped by the home of his old friend, Thad Mosley, to tell him about his plans. Most people think August left Pittsburgh in order to work with Penumbra, but that is not what August told Thad. "I can remember as plain as day," Thad says, "he told me he was going to Minneapolis to go to the Tyrone Guthrie drama school."¹²⁴ The Guthrie would have been attractive to someone with August's ambitions. Founded in 1963 and located just across the Mississippi River from St. Paul, it staged plays of the highest quality while avoiding the cut-throat commercial environment of Broadway.¹²⁵ Elva Branson confirms that August's goal was the Guthrie. She says August wound up at Penumbra because that was "Claude's connection," but he always had his eye on the Guthrie. "I know that."¹²⁶

Thad was stunned at August's leaving, but he was even more stunned at the reason August gave for leaving. "I'm stopping writing poetry," August said. "You don't get anything back from poetry."¹²⁷ Thad considered this an astonishing statement from someone who had always considered himself first and foremost a poet.¹²⁸ It was a sign that, after so many disappointments, August hoped that, with revisions and further work, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* could achieve the sort of popular and critical success that had long evaded him.

On a snowy winter's day in early January, 1978, August caught a plane to St. Paul.¹²⁹ On his way to the airport, he stopped by to see Maisha.¹³⁰ While there, he asked her for some Valium to ease his anxieties about flying.¹³¹ "He left for Minnesota," Maisha says, "practically from my house."¹³² As August left, he implored Pitts to keep Kuntu going. "Man, you got to do it. You're what's going to keep theater going in Pittsburgh." Pitts declined, partly because he didn't want to deal with Vernell.¹³³

August's departure left his friends despondent. Sala Udin never forgave Purdy for luring August away from Pittsburgh, but in hindsight believes it was time for August to move on.¹³⁴ August's leaving added to the decline of Pittsburgh's Black Arts movement. "It was a thriving scene for a while," says Ralph Proctor, a major collector of African art, "but when the movement died, it all died. Everybody just scattered and went their own way."¹³⁵

August had been only on the periphery of the Black Arts movement, but he regularly expressed his commitment to cultural nationalism. Despite that avowed commitment, *Black Bart* distanced him even further from the movement. The play has elements of protest, but satire is not designed to politicize the masses and raise their consciousness—certainly not in the way that Baraka or Karenga wanted. *Black Bart* illustrates the argument of Sandra Shannon that August embraced the politics of empowerment and cultural affirmation, but his writing "was not to be the belligerent, vindictive voice of Baraka or Bullins but the subtly provocative ... voice of a playwright with some thoughts of his own."¹³⁶

There is no question that things had not worked out as August had wanted. His lack of formal education had limited his job prospects. His marriage had failed because he couldn't provide for his family. His poetry and plays had been poorly received by the public. His efforts at a musical had been canceled for lack of funding. He was a distant second to Rob Penny in the local theater scene. And now he had fallen out with Vernell, the most important figure in black theater in the city.

Leaving was difficult, for Pittsburgh was August's home town. He loved the city, but the two had what he called a "love-hate relationship." He told his friend and theater critic Christopher Rawson, "This is my home and at times I miss it and find it tremendously exciting, and other times I want to catch the first thing out that has wheels."¹³⁷ In this case, August left in something that has wings. But he left nonetheless. Afterwards, August would return for visits, but he never again lived in Pittsburgh.

In St. Paul, August suffered several disappointments before he finally achieved success. That success, however, would be based on the continuing influence of Pittsburgh.

This is because, in a real sense, August never left. Years later, when asked about leaving for St. Paul, he replied: "I never really left. You carry your home with you wherever you go. ... I carry [Pittsburgh] around in my heart with me."¹³⁸ Pittsburgh remained for August "the deep well of memory into which he kept dipping the ladle of his art."¹³⁹ "I can't take it!" became "I can do it."

Notes

- ¹ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ² Curtiss Porter, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 November 2007.
- ³ Frank Hightower, interview by author, 12 November 2013.
- ⁴ Vera Sheppard, "August Wilson: An Interview," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), p. 103.
- ⁵ Rob Penny, interview, interview by Lee Kiburi, 18 August 1998.
- ⁶ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ⁷ Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.; Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007; August Wilson interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ¹¹ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007. The cast, as best Pitts can recall, consisted of Robbie Dixon, Greg Jones, Joyce Dixon, Eileen, Kenny Robinson and his brother, plus a few others.
- ¹² Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ¹³ Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011; Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ¹⁴ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. The daughter was Joyce. Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ¹⁷ Rob Penny, interview by Lee Kiburi, 18 August 1998.
- ¹⁸ Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ¹⁹ Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ²⁰ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ²¹ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999 .
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Noel McCarroll, interview by Lee Kiburi, 30 July 2013.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Elva Branson, interview by the author, 8 May 2017.
- ²⁸ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ²⁹ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ³⁰ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Shannon mentions 1976 and 1977. For 1976, see Sandra Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1995), p. 30 (hereafter cited as Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*). For 1977, see Sandra G. Shannon, "August Wilson Explains His Dramatic Vision," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), p. 122.

⁴¹ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.

⁴² Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, p. 241. Shannon lists the full set of Wilson's unpublished plays, including those written for the Science Museum of Minnesota.

⁴³ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.

⁴⁴ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.

⁴⁵ Ujima was a failure for August, but for Pitts it was transformative. After finishing his studies at the University of Pittsburgh, Pitts took a job with an optical firm in Columbus, Ohio. There, inspired by his years at Ujima, he joined a theater company that, ironically, also bore the name Ujima. Ron Pitts, interview by the author, 13 February 2015.

⁴⁶ Allegheny Repertory Theatre, Press Release, 1982-09-23 for the premiere of August Wilson's *Jitney* at the Fine Line Cultural Center, 3300 Fifth Avenue in Oakland. University of Pittsburgh Theater Archives, Hillman Library.

⁴⁷ Walter Ray Watson, "Choreographer Bob Johnson Remembered," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 Oct 1986: 6.

⁴⁸ "Spotlight on African Art Folk Festival," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 16 May 1970: 3.

⁴⁹ "BAS Slates Black Week," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 November 1970: 8.

⁵⁰ "Ailey Dancers Teach Master Class at Local Center," by Greg Mims, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 16 March 1974: 17.

⁵¹ "Choreographer Bob Johnson Remembered," by Walter Ray Watson, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 October 1986: 6.

⁵² Ibid. The present author saw BJ dance once, in a solo rehearsal. The performance was so moving, it brought me almost to tears. Johnson's talent and power had to be seen to be appreciated.

⁵³ Johnson does not include the play in his resume. See Bob Johnson Papers, University Arcives, University of Pittsburgh. August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.

- ⁵⁴ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 9 June 2007.
- ⁵⁵ Lillie's education options were all in the North. Universities in the South did not admit black students, but Southern states provided scholarships for blacks to do graduate work in the North. Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 9 June 2007 and 15 November 2007.
- ⁵⁶ Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 9 June 2013.
- ⁵⁷ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 April 1998.
- ⁵⁸ Kuntu showcased the works of Rob Penny, who was the theater's playwright-in-residence. In 1975, Kuntu's first year of operation, Lillie staged four of Penny's works—*Little Willie Armstrong Jones*, *Just Rob Penny* (a collage), *The Depths of Her Star*, and *Slow Lives on the Humdrum*. The plays were staged at the University of Pittsburgh in the Stephen Foster Memorial Chapel, as well as in several community locations. Lillie CV, in Black Studies Department, 1978.
- ⁵⁹ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 April 1998.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 7 and 9 June 2013.
- ⁶² Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 22 May 2014.
- ⁶³ Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ⁶⁴ The department had relocated from its original office on Craig Street to a suite of offices on the second floor of a building on Forbes Avenue, across from the old police and fire station. Brenda Berrian, interview by the author, 8 September 2013.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Diana Nelson Jones, "Obituary: Maisha Baton/Nurturing Poet, Playwright, Therapist and Teacher," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 28 March 2012.
- ⁶⁷ Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 7 June 2013.
- ⁶⁸ Vernell Lillie to August Wilson, 26 January 1976, in the August Wilson papers, by courtesy of the August Wilson estate.
- ⁶⁹ Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 15 November 2008; August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999; Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 9 June 2013.
- ⁷⁰ Staged in 1976. Vernell Lillie, cv, 1978
- ⁷¹ Marilyn Elkins, "Wilson, August," in William L. Andrews, et al., eds., *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, accessed 6 July 2015. Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, pp. 35ff has a summary of the play.
- ⁷² Robert Uzzel, *Blind Lemon Jefferson: His Life, His Death, and His Legacy* (Austin, Tex.: Eakin Press, 2002), pp. 45-46.
- ⁷³ Joan Herrington, *I Ain't Sorry for Nothin' I Done: August Wilson's Process of Playwriting* (New York: Limelight Press, 1998), p. 25.
- ⁷⁴ David Savran, "August Wilson," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), p. 23.
- ⁷⁵ "The Homecoming," by August Wilson. Courtesy of the August Wilson Estate.
- ⁷⁶ Lillie says she still has a copy of the play but declines to share it because of its relatively low quality. Sharing it, Lillie says, would be a disservice to August's memory. Lillie, interview by the author, 7 June 2013, 9 June 2013.
- ⁷⁷ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 15 November 2008.
- ⁷⁸ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 April 1998.
- ⁷⁹ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ⁸⁰ Rob Penny, interview by Lee Kiburi, 18 August 1998
- ⁸¹ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 April 1998.
- ⁸² Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.

- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid.; C.V. in Bob Johnson Papers (Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh); Geri B. Ransom, "Theatre Urge Stages 'Black Happenin'," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 6 June 1981; A3.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid.
- ⁹⁰ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ⁹¹ Ibid.
- ⁹² Ibid.
- ⁹³ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ⁹⁴ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ⁹⁵ Natalie Bazzell, interview by the author, 30 August 2013.
- ⁹⁶ Barbara Evans, interview by the author, 2 July 2018.
- ⁹⁷ Nelson Harrison, interview by the author, 26 July 2013.
- ⁹⁸ When August lived in Los Angeles, he may have seen the 1948 film that celebrated Bart's exploits. See "'Black Bart' Arrives," by Philip K. Scheuer, *Los Angeles Times*, 25 February 1948: 18.
- ⁹⁹ Wikipedia, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Bart_\(outlaw\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Bart_(outlaw)), accessed 17 February 2013. See also Frederick Nolan, *The Wild West: History, Myth & the Making of America* (London: Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2003), p. 133.
- ¹⁰⁰ Rohan Preston, "Claude Purdy Gave August Wilson His Break in St. Paul (obituary)," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 28 July 2009, online; Nelson Harrison, interview by the author, 26 July 2013; Nelson Harrison email to the author, 25 March 2014. Macelle Mahala, *Penumbra: The Premier Stage for African American Drama* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 21 (hereafter cited as Mahala, *Penumbra*); *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, misc. items, Feb-May 2017.
- ¹⁰¹ Elva Branson, interview by the author, 8 May 2017.
- ¹⁰² Years later, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* dated its demise as 1971. Ervin Dyer, "Obituary: Robert Lee 'Rob' Penny," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 18 March 2003. Curtiss Porter says Black Horizons ended "about 1972" (Curtiss Porter, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 November 2007.)
- ¹⁰³ Rob Penny says it was still functioning "off and on" in 1973, when he and August established Ujima Theater. Rob Penny, interview by Lee Kiburi, 18 August 1998.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Jet Magazine*, 27 May 1976: 64.
- ¹⁰⁵ Mahala, *Penumbra*, p.27.
- ¹⁰⁶ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ¹⁰⁷ Lee Kiburi, interview by the author, 31 July 2017.
- ¹⁰⁸ Bonnie Lyons, George Plimpton, "August Wilson, The Art of Theater," *Paris Review* #14 (Winter 1999), accessed on-line 12 January 2018.
- ¹⁰⁹ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹¹ Elva Branson, interview by the author, 8 May 2017.
- ¹¹² Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ¹¹³ Script and comments for "*Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*." in Bob Johnson papers, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

- ¹¹⁴ "Black Bart," 125 MS, Box 28. Quoted courtesy of August Wilson estate.
- ¹¹⁵ Gifted intellectually as well as musically, Harrison went on to earn a Ph.D. in psychology and teach in the Music Department at the University of Pittsburgh. Today, he runs the Pittsburgh Jazz Society, dedicated to the promotion of jazz in Pittsburgh. The web site is at <https://pittsburgh.jazznearyou.com/pittsburgh-jazz-society.php>.
- ¹¹⁶ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ¹¹⁷ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ¹¹⁸ Vernell Lillie, CV 1978. The play ran 23-26 June, 1977. (University of Pittsburgh) *University Times*, 16 June 1977. Also Vernell Lillie, CV, Black Studies Department.
- ¹¹⁹ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ¹²⁰ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ¹²¹ Ibid.
- ¹²² Justin Maxwell, "August Wilson and the Playwrights' Center," *Minnesota History*, (Winter 2006-07): 133-142; Rohan Preston, "Claude Purdy Gave August Wilson His Break in St. Paul," (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune*, 28 July 2009, accessed online. Purdy later became an expert interpreter of Wilson plays, directing them in such cities as Pittsburgh, Houston, San Francisco and London.
- ¹²³ David Savran, "August Wilson," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), p. 22.
- ¹²⁴ Thad Mosley, interview, 30 April 2013.
- ¹²⁵ In fact, the Guthrie would not have been a good fit for August. The theater was self-consciously interested only in established playwrights with outstanding national and/or international reputations. Only after August established himself as a major American playwright did the Guthrie stage his plays. See Daniel Gabriel, interview, 31 July 2014.
- ¹²⁶ Elva Branson, interview, 8 May 2017. Jacqui Shoholm, Purdy's widow, says August came with the intention of working with Claude in St. Paul. Jacqui Shoholm, interview, 25 August 2017.
- ¹²⁷ Thad Mosley, interview by the author, 30 April 2013.
- ¹²⁸ Thad Mosley, interview by the author, 23 May 2014.
- ¹²⁹ Date per Jacqui Shoholm, widow of Claude Purdy.
- ¹³⁰ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ¹³¹ Ibid.
- ¹³² Ibid.
- ¹³³ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ¹³⁴ Sala Udin, interview by the author, 7 June 2013.
- ¹³⁵ Ralph Proctor, interview by the author, 24 June 2013.
- ¹³⁶ Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, p. 26.
- ¹³⁷ Christopher Rawson, "The Power Behind the Plays: August Wilson Has Changed the Way Theater Approaches Race," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 6 June 1999.
- ¹³⁸ August Wilson, "Feed Your Mind, the Rest Will Follow," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 28 March 1999; Elaine Effort, "Pittsburgh Profiles," KQV radio, 25 September 1987.
- ¹³⁹ Christopher Rawson, "August Wilson, Pittsburgh Playwright Who Chronicled Black Experience," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 3 October 2005.

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Reading August Wilson's Character and His Characters: A Suggestive Introduction

By Alan Nadel

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By maintaining staunchly that he not enable others to take away what was rightfully his, Wilson, whether rich or poor, was honoring the spirit of his mother, Daisy Wilson.

– Alan Nadel

Abstract

In this short piece, Nadel argues that it is crucial for Wilson's characters, like Wilson himself, to control the terms and conditions of their existence.

Keywords

August Wilson, Alan Nadel, American Century Cycle, O'Neill Center, Daisy Wilson

If the ten plays in August Wilson's American Century Cycle are not historical dramas, that is, plays based on historical events and figures, they are nevertheless historical context, in that they give cultural dynamics of African American life specific to each decade of the century cogent dramatization. Similarly, although none of Wilson's plays is autobiographical, they understandably draw on the array of warriors, entrepreneurs, hustlers, accommodators, madmen, and shamans who infused Wilson's life. In this context, I believe, briefly considering an aspect of Wilson's his personal ethos, his character, provides an apt and paradigmatic introduction to the historicity of his characters.

In 1982, when *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* won the national competition that entailed its being workshopped at the O'Neill Center, Wilson, at the time working as a cook for \$84 a week, was offered a \$25,000 advance to stage the play on Broadway. When he read the contract, however, he discovered it required his ceding artistic control; the producers could bring in additional authors and to turn the play into a musical. When he called the producer, he was told, "in this business we go a lot on faith; just sign the contract and we'll work out the details later," to which Wilson responded, "as long as the words don't mean what they say, why not write the contract my way." Not surprisingly, he did not sign the contract and instead accepted Lloyd Richards's offer to put on the play at the Yale Repertory.

More than a decade later, after *Ma Rainey* had had a successfully Broadway run on Wilson's terms, as did four more of his plays, after he had won numerous prizes (including two Pulitzer Prizes and six Drama Critics Circle Awards, and after *Fences* had become the



Alan Nadel

most lucrative drama in the history of American theater, Wilson was still in prolonged negotiations with Hollywood over the screen adaptation of *Fences*. In the late 1990s, he told me that it was Hollywood's way to fly you out there, put you up at the Ritz Carleton, chauffeur you around in luxurious limos, and shower you with expensive meals and drinks, "then they start to take it away, and they've got you." Wilson's response was to refuse the Ritz Carlton in favor a motel and shun the limo in favor of a taxi. "It makes them crazy," Wilson told me. "They don't know what do with me."

By maintaining staunchly that he not enable others to take away what was rightfully his, Wilson, whether rich or poor, was honoring the spirit of his mother, Daisy Wilson. When he was a child, she won a new washing machine in a radio phone-in contest, but the station, upon discovering she was black, instead gave her a Salvation Army coupon for used washer. Even though Daisy at the time was doing laundry for a family of six by hand, she refused to accept the used washer instead of the one she had rightfully won but would never receive.

Both of these stories from Wilson's biography echo of Troy Maxson's refusal to allow Cory to play football, because, he believed, sports opportunities (like Hollywood luxuries) were things that could be taken away by white industry and media. Yet Troy's attitude also indicates the intersection of Wilson's character with the historicity of his characters. When those characters assert unflinching control over what is theirs, they reveal the internalized historical legacy that informs the 20th-century cycle, because the right to control property distinguishes humans from objects: you can own your dog, but your dog cannot own you. (BTW: This principle does not apply to cats.) Hence, taking away something that belongs to a person disavows his or her humanity in favor of another person's more privileged property rights. This form of disavowal—whether it entails material goods, a proper name, or the capacity to bear witness—was inherent to slavery, foundational to Jim Crow, and intrinsic to a plethora of racialized practices throughout the 20th century.

From this perspective, in *Two Trains Running*, Hambone's relentless demand for his ham, like Ma Rainey's persistent control over the conditions by which her voice may be commodified, or, in *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Charles's dying to reclaim the piano for which his grandmother was traded reflect not just Wilson's character but the myriad historical struggles that conditioned his characters. Aunt Ester's bill of sale, as she points out in *Gem of the Ocean*, is worthless, but the fact that she possesses it is invaluable in the same way that, in *Jitney*, the jitney drivers' right to control the terms and conditions of their rides is crucial to their identity. Wilson's cycle and his century concludes in 1997, when Harmond, in *Radio Golf*, forfeits a promising political career to subordinate his personal aspirations to Old Joe's rightful ownership of Aunt Ester's house.

The triumph of capitalism, we must remember, originated not in the protection of property rights from royal fiat, but from the inclusion of human flesh with the realm of property. The surplus capital that the Industrial Revolution's textile industry produced supported investment in a broad spectrum of imperial endeavors, including, but not limited to, the harvesting and commodification of Africans and their labor. That capital vitalized shipping, railroads, banks, and factories of every sort, in both slave-holding and non-slaveholding parts of the globe, all benefitting, directly or indirectly, form the cheap cotton that slavery made possible, out of which affordable textiles and immense profits were made.

Near the end of *Fences*, Troy Maxson speaks directly to Death:

I'm gonna take and build me a fence around this yard. See? I'm gonna build me a fence around what belongs to me. And then I want you to stay on the other side. See? You stay over there until you're ready for me.

Incisively framing Troy's life and parental obligation in terms of property ("what belongs to me"), Wilson externalizes, with the aid of a baseball bat and a fence, Troy's internalization of the historical conditions under which his character was forged.

Daisy Wilson's right to win a new washing machine, like her son's right to control his own writing or Hambone's right to his ham or King Hedley II's right to his proper name, thus dramatizes Wilson's character as a characteristic of his characters' claim on the rights usurped under the fabric of human piracy, in the interest of cheap fabrics.

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Celebrating August Wilson's Legacy in *Smoketown*

By Mark Whitaker

Author of Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance

Keynote Address delivered at the 2018 August Wilson Colloquium,
August Wilson Center, Pittsburgh PA, April 26, 2018

Abstract

In his opening address to attendees of the August Wilson Colloquium, Mark Whitaker—from his perspective as author of *Smoketown*—discusses the research he conducted and the subsequent incorporation of the topic of August Wilson into his book. Beginning with the assertion that that Wilson's family story "fits the larger pattern of migrants from the northern part of the Old South who arrived in Pittsburgh with a respect for literacy and religious discipline," Whitaker contrasts the history of black Pittsburgh as reported in the pages of *The Pittsburgh Courier* with the metaphorical representations in Wilson's American Century Cycle.

Keywords

August Wilson, Mark Whitaker, Smoketown, Pittsburgh Courier, Hill District

I'm very honored to be here to address this colloquium, but I'm also a bit embarrassed. I'm looking out at a room full of people who have studied August Wilson and his plays for far longer than I have. So let me begin by making clear that I don't pretend to be a Wilson expert. Instead, I'm here as an author who has written a book about the larger cultural and political legacy of black Pittsburgh in the middle decades of the 20th Century. I do address in my book, *Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance*, how Wilson, who was born at the height of that community's influence but wrote his groundbreaking plays in the decades after its economic and physical decimation, fits into that larger picture. But as far as I'm concerned, the best thing about being asked to speak first thing this morning is that I'll get to spend the rest of the day listening to real Wilson scholars and intimates.



Mark Whitaker

In order to explain my perspective, it might be useful to describe how my thinking about August Wilson evolved as I was working on *Smoketown*. From the beginning, even before I knew exactly what shape and direction the book would take, I saw Wilson as the metaphorical elephant in the room. For two reasons. First, if readers had any sense of black Pittsburgh in the last century, it was likely because they had had seen one or more of the nine plays that Wilson set in the Hill District. In that sense, it was as though I was setting out to write a book about Danish politics at the turn of the 17th Century. An original enough sounding project—except for the fact that a genius named Shakespeare wrote a play about it called *Hamlet*.

Second, I knew that I would have to grapple with the fact that for all their extraordinary power and sweep, Wilson's Century Cycle plays ignore important segments of

black Pittsburgh in the decades on which I planned to focus. Even before I began my research, I knew this from my father's family, which because they were middle-class business people Wilson would have viewed with distrust. When asked why his plays were populated almost exclusively by struggling members of the working class, Wilson made no bones about the fact that he considered them more culturally authentic than middle-class blacks. "America offers blacks a contract that says, 'If you leave all that African stuff over there and adopt the values of the dominant culture, you can participate,'" he once told literary scholar Bonnie Lyons. "The ones who accept go on to become part of the growing middle class and in some areas even acquire some power and participation in society, but when they finally settle where they arrive, they are no longer the same people. They are clothed in different manners and ways of life, different thoughts and ideals. They've acculturated and adopted white values."

Although my father's family was middle class, I knew their story hardly fit that description. Like a character in one of Wilson's plays, my grandfather, Cleophaeus Sylvester Whitaker Sr., the eleventh child of former slaves from Texas, arrived in Pittsburgh as a teenager in the first wave of the Great Migration, around the time of World War I. He started out working in lowly jobs in the steel mills and as a chauffeur for a white undertaker, and may well have roomed in boarding houses like the one in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. But then Granddad went into the mortician business himself and became relatively prosperous. Never rich and rapacious like the undertaker West in *Two Trains Running*—in fact, Granddad eventually had to moonlight selling milk and shining shoes in a white country club—but, for a time, relatively prosperous.

My grandmother, Edith McColes Whitaker, was the only child of "OP's," or "Old Pittsburghers," as the black folks who arrived before the Great Migration were called. Her father, John McColes, worked as a steel company messenger, and her mother Emma—whom I would know as "Gram"—was a homemaker. They were hardly rich, either, but they were comfortable enough to live in Sugartop, then the most expensive neighborhood on the Hill. Grandmother Edith was a member of the first generation of black students to attend Schenley High School in the 1920's, played piano at the Carnegie Library Recital Hall and had her engagement party at the Loendi Club, the gathering place of the black elite. When the first Whitaker Funeral Home in Rankin became profitable enough, she encouraged Granddad to move it to Homewood so my father and his sisters could attend its highly regarded integrated high school, Westinghouse.

Yet my father's family was as proudly black as any other in the Pittsburgh of the day. The Grandmother I knew in my childhood cooked chitlins, played the numbers every day, went to Bethany Baptist Church on Sundays, and greeted me with down-home commands like: "Give me some sugar, child, or I'll jump down your throat and dance on your gizzard!" She also worked her arthritic knees to the bone keeping the funeral home going after Granddad suffered a stroke, and often resorted to selling Avon products door to door to pay the grocery and utility bills.

As I began to work on my book, I discovered further evidence of a black Pittsburgh not found in August Wilson's plays in the photographs of Teenie Harris. In fact, the day I decided to write the book that became *Smoketown*, I was browsing the internet and stumbled upon two photographs of my grandparents in the Teenie Harris Archive of the Carnegie Museum of Art. Granddad, dressed in a suit and tie and polished patent leather shoes, was presiding over the burial of a black military veteran at a graveyard outside Pittsburgh. Grandmother, wearing pearls and one of her big church hats, was attending a ladies' luncheon in Homewood.

Then, as I clicked through the rest of the archive, there was Joe Louis hanging out in the newsroom of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. There was Louis Armstrong grinning at a corner booth at the Crawford Grill. There was Lena Horne singing at the Loendi Club. There were Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, and "Honi" Coles gathered around an upright piano at the

Stanley Theater. There was Satchel Paige shooting the breeze with Gus Greenlee in Gus's lair atop the Crawford Grill. There was Josh Gibson squatting in a catcher's crouch in his Homestead Grays uniform. There was Jackie Robinson leaning on a bat at Forbes Field, looking right at home, during his rookie year as a Brooklyn Dodger. And on and on and on.

In other words, there on my computer screen was visual evidence of a black Pittsburgh so vibrant and influential that it was once known as "Little Harlem" and "the Crossroads of the World." Yet as I investigated further, I discovered that the full extent of that influence had been captured only in fragments, in Teenie's photographs and in individual biographies, sports and jazz books and academic studies. No one had pieced together the full story of how this relatively small black community—less than a quarter the size of Harlem's, and a third the size of Chicago's—had left such a profound imprint on Black history, and American history, in the brief but glorious period of its heyday from the 1920's through the 1950's.

So that's the story I set out to write in *Smoketown*. But because I still didn't know what I was going to say about August Wilson, I put him in a box. Quite literally. You see, when I write my books I keep research materials for my chapters in separate Bankers Boxes, those cardboard storage containers you can buy at Staples or on Amazon. So I bought anthologies of Wilson's plays and collections of his interviews and put them in a box. Every time I did an interview or came across an article that touched on Wilson, I put the notepad or the clipping in the box. And I left the box untouched until I had written the rest of the book—nine chapters in all—and was finally ready to wrestle with the elephant in the room in my last chapter.

When I finally opened the August Wilson box two years later, I discovered that much of the story I had written in the rest of the book was indeed absent from his plays. As reviewers of *Smoketown* have noted, the heart of the book is the story of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, which was the best-selling black newspaper in America from the mid-thirties until the early sixties, with 14 regional editions and a circulation that peaked at more than 400,000 copies at the end of World War II. And at the heart of that story stand two Southern migrants who were extraordinary entrepreneurs. Cumberland Posey Sr., known as "Cap," was a riverboat deckhand who became the first black man to engineer a steamboat. Posey then founded a shipbuilding company and invested in coal mines and was the richest Negro in Pittsburgh when he bought stock in the *Courier* and became its first president in 1910. Robert Lee Vann was the son of a plantation cook from North Carolina who traveled alone to claim a scholarship for colored students at what is now the University of Pittsburgh. After becoming its first black law school graduate, Vann accepted the editorship of the *Courier*, and from 1910 until his death in 1940 he transformed the paper from an eight-page pamphlet of local news to the powerful national weekly it became.

Yet nowhere in Wilson's plays set in those decades do you get a sense of just how powerful the *Courier* was, or how much pride and swagger that gave the black folks of Pittsburgh. *Seven Guitars* refers to the Joe Louis's epic battle with "The Pittsburgh Kid" Billy Conn. But there is no sense of the role the *Courier* played in making Louis a hero to black America and a sympathetic champion to whites in the 1930's. *Fences* deals with Troy Maxson's bitterness at the racism that cost him a shot at pro baseball when he was playing in the Negro Leagues. But there's no hint of the part that *Courier* sportswriter Wendell Smith played in crusading for baseball integration, and then introducing Branch Rickey to Jackie Robinson and serving as Robinson's travel companion, confidant, and spokesman in his tense first years in the Dodgers' organization. The politics of the Depression and World War II provide a backdrop to several Wilson plays, but they don't capture how the *Courier* turned Pittsburgh into ground zero for the migration of black voters from the Republican to the Democratic Party under FDR, or its "Double Victory Campaign" that mobilized black support for the war after Pearl Harbor.

While Wilson's plays are full of music and musicians—*Seven Guitars* and the Chicago-based *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, in particular—you wouldn't know from them that Pittsburgh produced a dozen of the greatest jazz musicians of the 20th Century. They included not just stellar performers but trailblazers in their musical disciplines: Kenny Clarke and Art Blakey on the drums, Roy Eldridge on the trumpet, Ray Brown on the bass, George Benson on the guitar, Billy Strayhorn as a composer and arranger, and Billy Eckstine not just as crossover crooner but as a big band leader who mentored future bebop pioneers such as Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Sarah Vaughan, Dexter Gordon, Fats Navarro and Gene Ammons.

Because my Grandmother Edith played the piano, I was particularly taken in my research with the profound impact of Pittsburgh musicians on that instrument. They include Earl "Fatha" Hines, who set a new standard for the jazz piano in his early recordings with Louis Armstrong; Mary Lou Williams, the "little piano girl of East Liberty" who grew up to become one of the greatest female instrumentalists of both the swing and the bebop eras; and Ahmad Jamal, who is performing and recording award-winning albums to this day. And, of course, Erroll Garner, who in the fifties and sixties was one of the most sought-after concert performers and late-night TV guests in the world of jazz. During his many appearances on *The Tonight Show*, Johnny Carson liked to kid Garner about the fact that he couldn't read music, as though he was some kind of inexplicable natural genius. But as I point out in *Smoketown*, Garner was simply a genius who grew up in the unique musical culture of Pittsburgh, and learned to play by ear imitating his sisters' piano teacher and his many talented classmates at Westinghouse High.

By the way, I also tell the story in the book of how we have that piano heritage to thank for one of the greatest *bass* players of all time. Like so many black Pittsburgh kids in his day, Ray Brown, who was born in 1926, grew up taking piano lessons. But when he arrived at Schenley High in his mid-teens, he was one of twenty-eight pianists who auditioned for the school orchestra. Ray had to wait all week just to get fifteen minutes of rehearsal time. So one day, he was waiting his turn when he spied a big string instrument in the corner of the room.

"What's that?" he asked the music teacher.

"A bass," the teacher replied.

"If I played that instrument, would I be in the orchestra all the time?" Ray asked.

"Yes, we're looking for a bass player," the teacher responded.

And that's how the great Ray Brown took up the bass!

Again, you won't find the names of Ray Brown or those legendary Pittsburgh pianists in Wilson's plays. However, I do like to think that there's at least an acknowledgement of that rich keyboard tradition embedded in *The Piano Lesson*. After all, Wilson said that he got the inspiration for the play from a painting by Romare Bearden, who also grew up in Pittsburgh in the era when the piano was a prized possession in so many black homes.

Despite these historical omissions, however, as I immersed myself in research about August Wilson, I came to see how firmly he stands in the broader cultural tradition I trace in *Smoketown*. In the introduction to the book, I talk about the three social forces that—like Pittsburgh's three great rivers—converged to make its black community so unique. The first was where the Southern migrants came from, and the kind of knowledge and values they brought with them. Second were the unique educational opportunities available to black folks in Pittsburgh in the late 19th Century and first half of the 20th Century, thanks to those Pitt scholarships and the Gilded Age philanthropy that helped make the city's integrated public high schools like Westinghouse and Schenley among the best-funded in America. The third was the spirit of entrepreneurship that, along with the stench from the steel plants, hung in the air in Pittsburgh, setting it apart from the more literary and less business-minded culture of Harlem.

All three of those formative strains run deep in the August Wilson story. The rest of *Smoketown* is filled with characters who hailed from the northern and eastern parts of the Old South, where blacks were most likely to have learned to read books and music and to acquire other habits of cultural sophistication. As it turns out, a remarkable number came specifically from North Carolina. They include Robert L. Vann, the *Courier* editor; Gus Greenlee, the racketeer who owned the Crawford Grill and the Pittsburgh Crawfords; Billy Strayhorn and Mary Cardwell Dawson, the founder of America's first black opera company; and Evelyn Cunningham, the charismatic *Courier* reporter who covered the early battles of the Civil Rights Movement. And, sure enough, August Wilson also had North Carolina roots. His mother, Daisy, was born there and migrated to Pittsburgh in her teens with Wilson's grandmother, Zonia. In fact, it's been said that Zonia was so determined to get to Pittsburgh that she made the journey on foot—a story that, alas, my friend historian Larry Glasco assures me is apocryphal.

Daisy Wilson learned to read but Zonia never did, and the daughter watched her mother's living as a North Carolina farmer suffer as a result. So when Daisy arrived on the Hill and took up with a white German immigrant named Frederick Kittel, known as Fritz, she was determined that the children she had by him learn to read as early as possible. When her first son was born, named after his father but called "Freddy," Daisy took him to the Carnegie Library on the Hill to get a library card when he was just five years old. Soon Freddie had devoured all the Hardy Boy novels and his older sisters' Nancy Drews. With the same determination that Billy Strayhorn's mother, Lillian, showed in moving her family to Homewood so Billy could attend Westinghouse High, Daisy sent Freddie to Catholic Schools on the Hill to be taught by nuns. As a moody teen, Freddy kept getting expelled from public schools, but he had so thoroughly internalized his mother's reverence for learning that he resolved to educate himself by hiking to the Carnegie Library in Oakland every day and reading hundreds of books on its shelves.

So Wilson's story fits the larger pattern of migrants from the northern part of the Old South who arrived in Pittsburgh with a respect for literacy and religious discipline. In his own way, he was also the beneficiary of the unique opportunities for schooling—and for self-education—that were available to Pittsburgh Negroes. And if you think about it, Wilson was a shrewd businessman, too, no matter his views on capitalism. Who else but a born marketer would, after deciding to become a writer at the age of 21, type out every variation of his name to come up with a better literary moniker than Frederick Kittel Jr.? And then settle on a pen name, derived from his middle name and his mother's maiden name, that conjured both cultural distinction—Au-gust!—and Everyman ancestry—Wil-son! Who else but a natural entrepreneur would, no sooner than he had scored his first successes as a playwright, after years of struggling as a poet, decide that he wasn't going to stop until he produced a play for every decade of the 20th Century?

As I reported and wrote Wilson's story, I couldn't help but compare his visionary ambition to that of Cap Posey, the deckhand who dreamed of becoming a steamboat engineer. Or Robert L. Vann, the editor who willed a local pamphlet into a national newspaper. Or Gus Greenlee, the racketeer who brought Satchel Paige to Pittsburgh, raided Josh Gibson from the crosstown Grays, and launched the "East-West Classic," the all-star baseball game that became the biggest sports event in black America. Or Billy Strayhorn, who composed a professional musical in his first year out of high school, before he ever met Duke Ellington. Or Evelyn Cunningham, who talked her way off the Women's Desk at the *Courier* by pitching a "widow angle" that convinced her editors to send her to cover the aftermath of a brutal racial murder in 1948 Georgia and launched Cunningham's career as a civil rights reporter.

As for the strains of working-class anger and frustration in so many of Wilson's plays, they also made sense when I considered the period in black Pittsburgh's history that shaped his worldview. For the flipside of the happy convergence that created "the

Crossroads of the World” was the perfect storm that destroyed it almost overnight. In the late fifties, the city of Pittsburgh tore down the Lower Hill, the heart of black social and business life, in the name of urban renewal. In the late sixties, the riots that followed Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination destroyed much of the Middle Hill and other black enclaves. The decline of the steel industry disproportionately devastated black folks, who couldn’t get cheap loans to move to the suburbs like their white ethnic neighbors. *Black flight* took a toll, too, as ambitious, well-educated blacks who in the past would have stayed to become community leaders left and never came back—people like my father, Cleophaeus Sylvester Whitaker, Jr., Westinghouse Class of 1952.

This connection between the historical destruction of the Hill and the artistic point of view of Wilson’s plays was so evident that I entitled my last chapter “The Bard of a Broken World.” Here’s some of what I say about it. After describing the 1969 death of Jesse Vann, Robert L. Vann’s widow and successor as publisher of the *Courier*, and the fact that Jesse had once appeared as a guest on the TV show *This is Your Life*, I write the following:

No one August Wilson came into contact with on the Hill in the late 1960’s would ever have qualified for that distinction. They were the folks that the city’s declining manufacturing economy and the downtown “Renaissance” had left behind: the steel and coal workers who had lost their jobs; the cooks and waiters who worked for minimum wage and tips; the garbage men and janitors who clung to lowly rungs on the city payroll; the hustlers and pushers who turned to selling pyramid scheme products and street drugs to get by. But the blues made Wilson yearn to hear their stories, and he went about finding places where he could eavesdrop on them. Wilson sat for hours in a booth at Eddie’s Restaurant, nursing cups of coffee and scribbling down overheard conversations on napkins. He hung out at Pat’s Place, a cigar store with a billiard table in the back where pensioners passed their days and where August came to be known as “Youngblood.” Day after day, he ate lunch at a diner called Pan Fried Fish so that he could listen in on the conversations of gypsy cab drivers who worked out of a storefront “jitney station” next door—a collection of young hustlers and loquacious retirees who spent as much time telling tall tales and ribbing one another over games of checkers as they did answering the phone on the station wall that rang with calls for cheap rides around town.

It was these notes and memories, once Wilson moved to Minnesota in the late 1970’s and began writing for the theater full-time, that became grist for his first Century Cycle play—a one-act version of *Jitney*—and the eight others that followed. Because Wilson littered those plays with so many references to actual addresses, businesses and figures in the Hill District, much as been written about how historically accurate he was, or wasn’t, in those details. The family of the real Undertaker West, for example, complained about Wilson’s heartless fictional character in *Two Trains Running*. Friends of the man who inspired the white butcher in the same play, the owner of Lutz Meat Market on Centre Avenue on the Hill, pointed out that in real life Lutz was a supporter of black rights who never would have welched on the debt of a ham.

But in *Smoketown*, I avoid such nit-picking because I think it misses the point. If you read Wilson’s interviews and commentaries on his plays, it’s clear that he never saw himself as a historical realist. He freely admits that he didn’t do much factual research, or even attend much theater. Instead, he talks repeatedly about Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which deals with the use of language to define character and dramatic structure to distill the tragedy and comedy of human existence. Wilson’s essential genius, it seems to me, is in the way he took the everyday banter and street life of black Pittsburgh and elevated it to the level of universal poetry. He may have had his own controversial personal views about who was and wasn’t authentically black, but he was enough of an artist to produce dramatic experiences that could be shared by people of all economic and racial backgrounds. In this sense, August Wilson was every bit the heir to the cultural tradition that produced Billy Strayhorn, Mary

Lou Williams, Romare Bearden and so many other figures in my book, artists who took the specific cultural influences of Pittsburgh and used them to create work that transcends place and time and speaks to the entire world.

One final theme in Wilson's plays links him to the legacy I celebrate in *Smoketown*, and that's community. Wilson liked to say—provocatively, as usual—that relationship to community was what set the races apart. “The basic difference in worldview between blacks and whites can be expressed as follows,” he once said. “Western culture sees man as being *apart from* the world, and African culture see him as a *part of* the world.” It was why Wilson always said that his most famous play, *Fences*, with its solo “tragic hero,” was his least favorite, while his favorite was *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, that symphony of characters in a World War I era boarding house. At the end of my book, I repeat Wilson's observations because they echo the larger point I wanted to make about black Pittsburgh as a whole in its glory days. While I tell the story through individuals, I hope readers come away with a sense that the “Other Great Black Renaissance,” as I call it, was made possible above all else by the dynamics of community—by the inspiration, fellowship and competitive motivation that its heroes and heroines received from each other.

Let me finish with more confession about my book-writing process. Until the very end, I didn't have a citation page—you know, that page at the front of books with a quote that is supposed to capture the essence of what you are about to read. I personally think citations have become somewhat of a cliché, so I didn't bother to include them. But just before the book was about to go to press, my editor informed me that the pagination had gotten screwed up, and the easiest way to solve the problem would be to add a citation page. So at the eleventh hour, I started scrambling for a suitable quote.

In the end, I found three. The first was from Lena Horne, who I write about in the book because she spent her early twenties in Pittsburgh. “You have to be taught to be second-class; you're not born that way,” Lena said. The second, from Billy Strayhorn, was the plucky motto with which he bid friends goodbye. “Ever up and onward!” Strayhorn liked to say. And the third, thanks to theater critic Christopher Rawson, was from August Wilson. When *King Hedley II*, the eighth play in the Century Cycle, closed on Broadway in 2001, after mixed reviews and a two-month run that fell short of his earlier triumphs, Rawson interviewed his friend August for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. “You can only close if you opened,” Wilson said philosophically. “We were there . . . you're not going to stay open forever.”

“You can only close if you opened.” What a terrific line! I thought. What a perfect way to sum up the spirit of ambition and creativity that I tried to capture in *Smoketown*! And what a fitting way for me to end this talk today. You can only close if you opened, and it's been my privilege and pleasure to help open this colloquium on the immortal legacy of August Wilson.

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Author Bio

Mr. Mark Whitaker is an American author, journalist, and media executive. He was the editor of *Newsweek* magazine from 1998 until 2006, the first African-American to lead a national news magazine. From 2004 to 2006, Whitaker served as President of the American Society of Magazine Editors. He was Senior Vice President and Washington Bureau Chief

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Constanza Romero on August Wilson's Legacy: Past, Present, and Future

Interview by Sandra G. Shannon
Professor Emerita, Howard University

I think he deserves the best talent, the best funding, the best production values that this country has to offer, alongside all of the other greats that have been produced, and that also goes for theatre and film.

– Constanza Romero

Abstract

The following interview occurred on Tuesday, December 4, 2018 at 5:00 p.m. EST (2:00 p.m. PST). Dr. Sandra Shannon, Professor Emerita, Howard University, conducted the interview from Washington, DC, on behalf of the Journal. Constanza Romero, Director of the August Wilson Estate and August Wilson's widow, spoke from Seattle, Washington.

Keywords

Constanza Romero, Sandra Shannon, Wilsonian Warriors, Yale School of Drama, August Wilson Estate

SS: Good afternoon again,¹ Constanza.

CR: Thank you. Good afternoon, Sandra.

SS: On behalf of the August Wilson Society and the soon-to-be-launched *August Wilson Journal*, I'm honored that you approved this interview so that you can add your voice to our inaugural issue of the *August Wilson Journal*. The *August Wilson Journal* identifies itself as the first peer-reviewed, open access, online scholarly journal promoting the study, teaching, and performance of Mr. Wilson's work. The journal invites scholarship on August Wilson, including literary analyses, biographical research, performance studies, historical research, interviews bibliography, notes and book / performance reviews. We are so excited about this upcoming spring 2019 debut. My questions today center around August's literary legacy and, of course, this call is being recorded.

CR: Yes.

¹ Professor Shannon had contacted Ms. Romero just prior to the live call to verify readiness. That's why Dr. Shannon says, "Good afternoon, again," on the recording.

SS: As Wilson's wife and current executor of the August Wilson Estate, can you talk about some of the initiatives that you have overseen--or have been part of--to preserve August's legacy and, on a scale from one to five, five being the highest, how are things going with that?



**Dr. Sandra
Shannon**

CR: Oh my God, that's a hard thing [laughter]. You're asking me to grade myself on my work. Let's see what grade I give myself at the end of the interview. After August's passing in 2005, a lot of people came together and really pooled their forces to have *Radio Golf* be performed on Broadway, thus completing all ten plays of August to be performed in New York and those ten plays being, of course, The American Century Cycle. Then that same wave of energy went into the Kennedy Center reading,² and I don't know if you attended that or not.

SS: I've attended several of them, yes.

CR: It was what I call the "Wilsonian Warriors" coming together and celebrating and at least saying August's words and marking them on the stage of the Kennedy Center. It was amazing.³ Then we've also taken *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Fences*, and *Jitney* to Broadway and for those three plays, I was definitely involved in those, more or less, in a participatory role than others. As you have already stated, we have published all ten plays of the American Century Cycle. Many of the productions of August's plays I do spend at least a little time with, thinking who's directing them, who's in them. Several directors have come up and have made a name for themselves directing August Wilson. I find fantastic. The most recent is Brandon Dirden who has been directing his plays at the Two River Theatre (Red Bank, NJ).⁴ There's been a couple of other directors, including Phylicia Rashad and a couple others, that I have sort of said, "Hey, how about directing?" and sort of open the door to have them say, "Hmm, let me try it." It's very exciting.



**Ms. Constanza
Romero**

SS: Like Ruben [Santiago-Hudson] has, as well.

CR: Yes, Ruben too. So there's actors that have. Also Stephen McKinley Henderson has been directing and so actors have sort of had a little step forward to go that step . . . that much closer to August's work, and especially since they have been able to be the people who were with him in the room. So, to tack on that kind of wisdom is really terrific. And then . . . what else have we done? We've just completed the first round of compiling all of August's papers into one archive that's being housed at a very state-of-the-art facility here in the Seattle area. We have published a book on August's monologues for the August Wilson

² From March through April of 2008 the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. staged readings by 41 actors of all ten plays of Wilson's American Century Cycle.

³ The "Wilsonian Warriors" (sometimes "Wilson Soldiers") are not an official or recognized group or organization. The term designates theatrical and film actors, directors, artists, producers, and technicians who have participated in multiple or significant Wilson productions and projects, and who thus represent a significant body of knowledge and experience regarding Wilson's *oeuvre*. This includes such actors (unless otherwise noted) as Mary Alice, Dwight Andrews (musical director), Anthony Chisholm, Stephen McKinley Henderson, Wali Jamal (who has appeared in the entire American Century Cycle), James Earl Jones, Delroy Lindo, Phylicia Rashad, Michele Shay, Mark Clayton Southers (director), Courtney Vance, and Denzel Washington (actor and director).

⁴ Brandon J. Dirden, American actor and director, has portrayed Boy Willie in Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* and Booster in *Jitney* and has directed Wilson's *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*.

Monologue Competition and other purposes for students and professionals. I have been teaching. This is something that is very close to my heart. I have been going to Yale to teach the first years just for a small section of time, but while they are working an August Wilson project. And the reason I'm doing that is because they are young designers who may not have had an opportunity to design for August Wilson before, and I think that me sharing with them all of the little details that are important within the text of August Wilson, as opposed to them just designing something because it's a project at school or using the same research as everybody else. I really, really have them get in touch with who they are as designers and what they can add to the work. So, I've been doing that, and I, of course, was involved with the movie *Fences* and participated in the national promotional tour. I travel still too many parts of the US and London in the UK representing the Estate, and what I wanted to also underline was that at this point it's 13 years later and a lot of the initiatives, a lot of the projects that I am thinking about are things that are a little bit more removed from the time after August's passing. All these people came together and rallied to say, "Let's not forget August Wilson." And so, now, I feel that my mission is a little bit more abstract. There are legacy projects which I can speak about later, and I need people behind me to be able to get these things off the ground. But managing August's legacy and estate, I've never run out of ideas. I never think, "Oh, my gosh, what else is there to do with August's work? It is infinite."

SS: Wonderful. Well, I will venture to give you a grade, Constanza. [Laughter]. Based upon all that I know you have done and are involved in right now, you will get a five plus.

CR: Oh, Sandra, that's lovely [laughter].

SS: I'm sure your classes are wait-listed at Yale.

CR: They're for the graduate students, so they're all there.

SS: Yeah, what is the title of that book you referenced that you compiled . . . on monologues?

CR: Oh yeah, the title of that book. It was printed by Samuel French. It's called *Dangerous Music: The Monologues of August Wilson*.⁵

SS: Available on Amazon?

CR: I'm sure it is.

SS: Okay, great. I'll take a look at it. Thank you so much for that. Over the years, August's critically acclaimed plays have had several names. I've seen several names. They've been called The Pittsburgh Cycle, the August Wilson Century Cycle, and The American Century Cycle. Which name does the Estate endorse and why?

CR: Well, just yesterday I wrote on a piece of paper "August Wilson's American Century Cycle." But truly, I am the one who has been really standing 100% behind the name "The American Century Cycle," and I feel very strongly about this because, first of all, any story of

⁵ <https://www.samuel french.com/s/62503/dangerous-music-the-american-century-cycle-monologues-a-tool-for-actors>

the oppressed as it existed in August's plays, stories about oppression. Any story about the oppressed is also a story about the oppressor.

SS: Yes.

CR: These are American stories. These are an incredible canon of work that touches so many pieces of the 20th Century. Therefore, in its life in Pittsburgh for those nine plays and life in Chicago for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* . . . that small town [of Pittsburgh] represents all of America. Another reason I feel strongly about naming it The American Century Cycle is because, August, many times, was . . . he read somewhere in an article that he was one of the best "African American playwrights," and I know that that kind of got to him a little bit because he really wanted . . . and he aimed to be one of *America's* best playwrights, and I think that he is and his work proves it.

SS: Absolutely. I'm sure you're constantly bombarded with questions about access to August's work. What goes into your decisions to grant or deny access to Wilson's plays by producers, scholars, or other interested parties. What are some of your criteria?

CR: Well, I don't really have criteria yet. Most of his archive is here in Seattle. I mean, there's little bits like programs and little things like that scattered all around the country, I'm sure. But the bulk of it we have here. I granted very limited access to some of August's papers to a gentleman by the name of Laurence Glasco,⁶ because he's an academic from Pittsburgh, and he's writing a book on August as a young man . . . about August as he lived in Pittsburgh . . . as he lived and grew in Pittsburgh. But I like to first, more than anything, I'd really like to get an official biography together so that we can use a lot of the material . . . we have so much rich material to put together that official biography. The papers . . . I just don't feel like they should be open, especially for people that are writing unauthorized biographies of August Wilson.

SS: I wonder who you have in mind [laughter].⁷ In April, of course, we made that announcement. What has transpired since then? Have you begun to organize that effort?

CR: Well, I've been . . . yes, I have been asking around for somebody to write this book with. It's very difficult. Of course, I want it to be someone who is an African American and I'm not saying that there's no African American writers, but what I am saying is that it has to be somebody..just the right person and, so far, that person hasn't appeared to me. I have been searching with the help of my estate agent at William Morris [William Morris Agency]. Her name is Susan Weaving, and every time we come up with a possibility or an idea, we pursue it, but it doesn't really lead to just the right person, but I know they are out there. But at the same time, I am jotting down, every day--little bit by little bit--little things that I feel are important for the biography. So when it is a go, I really want it to be a real go.

SS: Understood, understood. Can you share some of the details about your own professional background and award-winning work as costume designer?

⁶ Associate Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh

⁷ On February 26, 2017, *The New York Times* ran an article announcing that Patti Hartigan, theater critic for *The Boston Globe*, was under contract to write a biography of August Wilson with the "full cooperation" of Constanza Romero (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/26/books/patti-hartigan-august-wilson-biography.html>). However, at the August Wilson Society 2018 Colloquium, held at the August Wilson Center in Pittsburgh, PA, April 26-29, Constanza Romero announced that the Hartigan biography was not authorized and that she (Ms. Romero) would be handling the biography herself, with the help of a yet-to-be identified professional writer, preferably an African American writer.

CR: Oh my gosh.

SS: You did a fabulous presentation in Pittsburgh.⁸ When the conference was over, I realized I was on stage, so I didn't get to see the whole presentation. But can you talk about some of the projects that you're currently involved in and how you balance your work as mother, estate executor, and costume designer--and is there room for you to put on just one more hat?

CR: [Laughter] Well, there's always room for one more hat, especially for costume designer.

SS: No . . . no pun intended.

CR: No pun intended, of course. Yes, my background is very much steeped in the arts. My dad was an artist and is still an artist; he's still alive. I had lots of color and vibrancy around me all the time when I was little, and I always knew that I was going to be an artist of some kind. I studied art. I was going to be an art major, not really knowing what my future medium was going to be, but up until my early 20s, I just knew I was going to be an artist. I was living in Amsterdam at the time, and I started to see a little bit of theater, and I caught the bug. I came back to the United States and said, "I need to work in collaborative art" because I'm a collaborative person. I like to talk about ideas; I like to have a deadline. So that's how I started to study design and I ended up at the Yale School of Drama and that's how I met August Wilson. The projects that I have designed in the American Century Cycle have curiously been the early ones. Not necessarily all of them on Broadway, but I have designed *Gem of the Ocean*, *Ma Rainey*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, *Fences* and a very small production of *Jitney* in New Jersey. Those are the plays of August that I've designed.

SS: Do you have a favorite among those?

CR: Gosh, I probably have two favorites. One is *The Piano Lesson* because that's the show I was designing when I met August Wilson, and it was so magical for me to hear the inside stories . . . the ideas from the inside of the plays through August Wilson.

SS: Right.

CR: By getting to know him. Then my other favorite is *Seven Guitars*. It was the first play that he wrote while we were together here in Seattle.

SS: Oh, okay.

CR: And I just feel that I know all those characters.

SS: Yeah.

CR: Because August would both quote them and speak about them always while we were here, and it was a very magical journey for me to have gotten to see the play from its very conception to the end. So, I think that's why those two are my favorites.

⁸ The August Wilson Society 2018 Colloquium in Pittsburgh, PA, at the August Wilson Center included on April 27 the plenary session "A Conversation with Constanza Romero," moderated by Sandra Shannon. She focused on the collaborative process of designing costumes for Wilson's plays and on her role as Executor of the August Wilson Estate and papers.

SS: Wow.

CR: But let me see . . . I have been doing a little less designing recently, and I think it's because I feel so much that my work with the Estate and with the legacy of August Wilson is so important, and I feel that there is so much to do. However, next year (2019), I will design one show and that's here in Seattle, so I can stay close to my daughter, because you're right, I am also a mom. And no matter how old your kids get, you're destined for a lifetime of watching over them.

[Laughter]

CR: Yes, indeed. I think another reason why I haven't been designing as much is because I do want other hats. I just want to be involved in producing some of these plays and making decisions that are exciting and fresh. I also have been wearing another hat, which is translator for one of August's plays. We're having a reading here in Seattle . . . *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in Spanish with Latino actors and I am directing that reading.

SS: Oh, wow.

CR: Speaking of hats . . . [laughter]

SS: Translator! Oh, my goodness. You're quite busy and doing a wonderful job. Now I remember in the documentary, you were talking about August's idiosyncrasies as a writer, like circling his desk.

CR: Yeah.

SS: Can you share any other interesting things . . . rituals, *per se*? Did he ever ask you to be a sounding board or to proofread?

CR: *Seven Guitars* was first play that I call a "baby play." I saw it in the baby play form. And when he showed it to me, it was like "hmmm." He hadn't put in all his weighty, heavy . . . heavyweight monologue. He hadn't filled it up with the August Wilson muscle that a lot of the plays have. So, I thought, "This is an August Wilson play?" But I realized immediately. Right after that, I said, "This play has just been born. I get it. It will grow and is going to become one of the masterpieces in August's canon." And it did.

SS: You felt that early on, huh?

CR: Yeah, yeah.

SS: Oh, wow.

CR: What was it? Let's see. It was his sixth play or fifth play. I can't remember.⁹ It was the fifth or the sixth play. So, I had already seen *Fences*. I had already seen *The Piano Lesson*. I

⁹ Published in 1995, *Seven Guitars* is technically Wilson's seventh play, in written order (see "List of August Wilson Plays" at the end of this interview). However, *Jitney* is sometimes not counted in that progression, as it was written in 1979 and then re-written extensively in 1996. So, if Ms. Romero is counting from *Ma Rainey*, she would be remembering *Seven Guitars* as August's sixth play, as written.

had already seen *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Jitney*, so I knew it was going to get to that level.

SS: Great.

CR: Another one of the things that he did was--I don't know if I spoke about it in the documentary--but he worked really late into the night and into the early hours of the morning, so it was always while I was sleeping.

SS: Yes.

CR: So, I would wake up and see a whole bunch more, like a monologue written, two monologues written, another twist in the story. I would see that, and I would say, "When did he do that? It was like, seamless."

SS: I guess the Muses come out at night.

CR: The Muses came out at night, exactly. And another thing that he did was, when he finished a play, he would clutch it really close to him, as though it was this precious child he had just given birth to.

SS: Oh, my goodness.

CR: I think he also knew, being a writer, everything springs from the writer. He also knew that, once anyone else read it, it was going to become the property also of other people, like this is going to become the work of the director. This is going to become the work of the actors. This is going to become the work of the designers . . . even the ushers, so he sort of protected it for a little while, and he would carry it around with him.

SS: Oh, that is precious. I know I've not heard that. I can understand it, as well.

CR: Yes.

SS: Many people seem surprised that in addition to writing poetry and plays, August experimented with other genres. Can you talk about some of these little-known writing projects and do you have any access to any of these forays into other genres?

CR: Yeah, yeah. I mean, we have everything. I think that what you mean is maybe early on in his career, he wrote museum plays for the Museum of Science, the Science Museum in Minneapolis. He had little vignettes and those are really precious. He, of course, also did some drawings. His drawings were mostly done with pastels, because he loved that medium. He was a very prolific drawer. He mainly drew characters and people that were very distinct, and I always thought he was drawing people from his plays . . . people from the world of his plays. He didn't necessarily draw one character, but people from the world of his plays. Then he also wrote some short stories while I was with him here in Seattle for a charity called Bedtime Stories. I don't know if you know about that.

SS: No.

CR: It was for several different writers that were local. They would all get together and read these bedtime stories that had certain themes and his friend, Charles Johnson, got him involved in that and it was called "Bedtime Stories" and it was a charity for adult literacy.¹⁰

SS: No, I hadn't heard about that.

CR: Yeah.

SS: I had heard about the Four Minute Plays for the Dramatist Guild,¹¹ but I had not heard of this.

CR: Right, right.

SS: Interesting. Bedtime Stories, huh?

CR: Bedtime Stories. They still do it but, of course, we're not involved in it any more.

SS: August often shared that he had not read and, in some instances, *chose* not to read certain canonical texts, such as Hansberry's *Raisin*, Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, what do you think was behind this admission?

CR: He was asked, many times, the question, "When you were growing up in Pittsburgh Hill District, did you see an old guy playing an old trumpet? Or . . . they would not give him the credit for his incredible imagination and incredible story-writing skills, and that got under his skin, for sure. So, it was important for him to say, "No, I have not read *Death of a Salesman* or *A Raisin in the Sun*," because *Fences* comes from that same mythological, epic style of telling a man's life. But it is so different. It's so different a story. The story of African Americans and how they deal with the American Dream.

SS: Right, right.

CR: And all of those stories, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Fences* are about the American Dream, but told from totally different points of view. I think it was important for August to say, "I have an imagination. I have the power of invention, and all men stand equal in front of a white piece of paper."

[Laughter]

SS: Wow. I'm writing that down, even as you speak. That's great.

CR: I just thought of it.

SS: Did you really? But he also admitted to having read or having seen performances of Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and Phillip Hayes Dean's *Sty of the Blind Pig* and Ed Bullins's *The Taking of Miss Janie*. There were some works that he proudly admitted to having seen. But I guess he was drawing . . . [unclear; competing voices].

¹⁰ Noted author of fiction and non-fiction works, most notably *Middle Passage*.

¹¹ <https://www.dginstitute.org/>

CR: Yeah, I think that he was also saying, "Of course, I do read. Of course, I am current on what is happening in American theater." I dragged him to almost everything I have designed and he saw a production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?

[Laughter]

SS: You're using the word "dragged," Constanza, what do you mean?

CR: Well, many times he probably really didn't want to go, but I made him.

SS: Yes.

CR: And he loved it. He loved it, but he had never read it before. And the same goes for *Richard II* and a lot of other Shakespearean plays that we saw at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. It was a little bit of "dragged into," but once we were sitting down, we very much enjoyed it.

SS: You referenced earlier that you had completed the process of sorting through August's material and boxing them up. Without jeopardizing any negotiations that may be underway, can you give us an update on where the papers may find a home?

CR: Well, I cannot give you an exact place. All I can say is that there are interested parties that would love to have the papers and my biggest and most important priority in that are that they treat the material with the utmost respect and the utmost care. Also, of course, that it be somewhere where people can get access to the papers in a very easy way. I also want his material to be treated in the same . . . on the same level as all the most important playwrights of the 20th Century, such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill. His name spoken in the same breath. I want it to be with the same amount of respect.

SS: Did August ever talk to you or mention anything about scholarship? I know he talked in his speech, "The Ground on Which I Stand," he talked about critics.

CR: Oh, yes.

SS: He said that critics need to evolve. As the playwrights come up with new work, the critics had a responsibility of evolving in terms of their education to be able to write about those works. How important was that to him, as far as you can recall?

CR: August had a tremendous amount of respect for all critics. A few names that come to mind are Ben Brantley, Frank Rich, and Michael Feingold from *The Village Voice*.¹² I remember him reading all those articles--all those reviews, shall I say--very carefully. He would take a lot of things in mind . . . a lot of the criticism in mind for going from one stage of development to another. But I think what he meant in his speech is more of a sense of the power that a critic has in terms of deciding what it is that is out there in the ether. What people see. What people are going to experience. Therefore, African American work is going to have a different narrative, a different aesthetic, a different style of telling the story. A lot of critics would say, "Ugh, his plays are so wordy . . . it's just so many words." And yet

¹² Ben Brantley, chief theater critic of the *New York Times* since 1996; Frank Rich, theater and film critic, op-ed columnist, essayist, and television producer in a variety of media; Michael Feingold, theater critic of the *Village Voice*.

those same critics will sit through several hours of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* or several hours of many Shakespeare plays. So, it is a different way of telling a story, and you cannot judge all works by the same aesthetic and the same sense of what is art.

SS: Got you, got you. He was aware that scholars were on to his work, as well?

CR: Oh, definitely.

SS: So, was he concerned about the growth of scholarship on his plays.

CR: Absolutely. He loved nothing more than to sit down and talk to other writers. People such as yourself, Peter Wolf, Joan Fishman, Alan Nadel, Harry Elam . . . all taking his work so seriously as to spent time reading it, writing about it, finding other meanings, finding where it fits in the cosmology of our existence was very exciting to him. Hopefully, there will be many, many more.

SS: Absolutely. I remember early on when I was writing on him, I would share some of my early ideas, and as a beginning scholar, I was looking for him to say, "Wow, that's great, that's great." He'd always say, "Well, you know what, I never thought of it that way." And I was wondering whether he was [laughter] . . . he probably said that to everybody . . . "That's another way to look at it. I never thought of it that way." But he seemed very receptive.

CR: Oh yes. Very open.

SS: Yes, yes, yes. Okay, so I really enjoyed visiting the August Wilson House last April during that major press briefing, if you can recall, in the backyard there?

CR: Of course!

SS: How are the renovations . . . I think that was to celebrate the final phase of renovation. Can you talk about the status of the August Wilson House now and what's the overall vision for it?

CR: Well, I think a few people think that the Estate and the August Wilson House are one body. But they are actually two separate entities.

SS: Okay. Got you.

CR: However, I love the idea, and I love the support that the August Wilson House has gotten, and I am 100% behind its mission to bring culture, and study, and art into the Hill District of Pittsburgh and to also be aware of the August Wilson history and presence in Pittsburgh, so I love everything that they're doing, and I am so joyous for the support that they have received, and it looks like it will be opening and running for many years to come. So, I love that.

SS: Yes. Pittsburgh seems to be having a Renaissance in terms of August Wilson, his legacy, and I'm thinking of the August Wilson Center, as well. What are your thoughts about that institution?

CR: Oh gosh, I'm just so thrilled. I'm going to be involved in their gala next year. And the programs they have put together. There's jazz festival, there's a blues festival, there's a film festival and all of the beautiful art. I saw pictures of a recent exhibit of art that they have in

their gallery. It's really a top-notch institution in the City of Pittsburgh, and it's going to make a big name for itself because I don't know if there are any other institutions like it . . . a cultural center for all African American art. I'm just thrilled with the person who is running the Center, whose name is.¹³ So, yes, Pittsburgh is going through a Renaissance.

SS: Phenomenal, phenomenal job. In a 2016 interview with TCG's *American Theatre*,¹⁴ you said that you were really focusing on re-imagining, re-envisioning a new chapter for the American Century Cycle. Can you share that vision for this new chapter?

CR: Yes. Right here in my phone I have my mission statement, which I know you have, also, but I'm going to pull it up.

SS: Sure.

CR: I think that August Wilson's plays still say as much about today as they did when they were written, and I think that we need more August Wilson in this social climate, rather than less. I happen to believe that--and I know that you do, too--because of this journal you're putting together.

SS: Yes, of course.

CR: The list that you read [to] me of all the things that you would like to have shared and published and exchanged. I think that is fantastic. So, because we need August Wilson, now more than ever, I would really love it if you and younger artists were to tackle his plays with what is happening today in mind. And it's part of what I'm trying to do, also, with the designers at Yale, that I will be working with. What is it that we can see so that the same production with the same kind of set design or acting style that we've seen before is something to build on? I mean, I'm not saying scrap it, but let's build from that point forward so that it stays current in the American theater.

SS: Absolutely.

CR: So that's what I'm trying to do and if you wanted to publish the mission statement along with my answer for this question, that would be great¹⁵.

SS: Duly noted. We'll definitely do that. Well, Constanza, is there anything else that you'd like to add? Maybe a question that I didn't get to . . . although this list is pretty thorough. But there may be . . .

[Laughter]

CR: It is very thorough.

¹³ Wilson (not a relation of August Wilson) has been President and CEO of Pittsburgh's August Wilson Cultural Center since 2017.

¹⁴ *American Theatre Magazine*, a publication of the Theatre Communications Group

¹⁵ Mission Statement: "The Estate of August Wilson seeks to preserve and advance Mr. Wilson's universal legacy, including The American Century Cycle, by educating audiences and theater artists of all ages and walks of life. Building on traditional interpretations, we encourage artists to explore his plays with a fresh approach, and continue to create deeper levels of meaning. We strongly hold Mr. Wilson's words as an important instrument in the affirmation of our humanity, in this changing, and often challenging world."

SS: . . . but is there anything else?

CR: Yes. One of your questions was really so poignant. I really liked it: "What kind of recognition do you think August Wilson deserves?"

SS: Yes, yes.

CR: I, of course, think that my husband deserves the world. But as a theater artist and the Executor of the August Wilson Estate, and as someone who thinks about August's plays a lot, as I said before, I think he deserves the best talent, the best funding, the best production values that this country has to offer, alongside all of the other greats that have been produced, and that also goes for theatre *and* film. And I think that he also deserves to be continued to be taught and to be read by students at an early stage of education. I think that anytime August Wilson is read by a young person, he or she will have something said to them, something very important. I also really feel that training for actors needs to be on the same level of, let's say . . . you know there's some actors that train as Shakespearean actors. I think that some actors should be trained as Wilsonian actors.

SS: Oh, okay.

CR: People such as Stephen McKinley Henderson and people who have been taught by him. I think that fountain of wisdom needs to be brought into the present for those actors.¹⁶ I sometimes see Stephen and I think, "Oh, if I could only just get everything that's inside him."

[Laughter]

SS: Oh, wow. Phenomenal.

CR: Because he's such a master . . .

SS: Yes, he is.

CR: . . . master teacher and actor. And because August said, "All art is beautiful," I think all of his work still has something to say to us. So, because I believe in the great power of theater and its ability to transform all people, I really feel that he deserves to be performed--I've already said this but I'm going to say it again--with the most talented people and the best production values of this country. And when I go to London, people say, "Oh, August Wilson. He's your American Shakespeare." So that's what I think he deserves.

SS: Absolutely. Yes, absolutely. Well, Constanza, thank you so very much for your generous time. Thank you for your ideas, and I want to assure you that the *August Wilson Journal* is right on point in terms of preserving, promoting, teaching, sustaining August's legacy. Thank you so very much and happy holidays to you and your family.

CR: Thank you. Same to you and Michael. Happy holidays one and all.

¹⁶ Henderson—actor of screen, television, and stage—played Bono in the 2016 film of *Fences* as well as on stage. Other Wilson stage roles have included Slow Drag in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and Stool Pigeon in *King Hedley II*.

Michael Downing: Thank you so much. Bye.

SS: Bye.

CR: Bye.

[End]

Author Bio

Dr. Sandra Shannon is Professor Emerita at Howard University. She has published numerous books and essays on August Wilson and is the Founder and President of the August Wilson Society.



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A Front Row Seat: Sala Udin Remembers August Wilson

By Christopher Bell

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The language of the characters in August's plays talked exactly the way we did on the street. And we had never seen that before.

— Sala Udin

Abstract

Lifelong friend of August Wilson, Sala Udin, shares his memories of knowing the playwright from their childhood in the Hill District until the dramatist's death in 2005. Written as a narrative, Udin's account of his friendship with August Wilson offers a unique glimpse into Wilson's development as a writer and a poignant look into the playwright's affection for his hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Keywords

August Wilson, Sala Udin, Hill District, Chris Bell, Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre, St. Richard's School, Rob Penny, Civil Rights Movement, Black Horizons Theater, Pan Fried Fish

Any understanding of the American playwright August Wilson begins with an understanding of the Hill District. Here, in the historically black neighborhood that borders downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel in 1945 at



Sala Udin

1727 Bedford Avenue. Known as Freddy, the young Wilson was raised in a two-bedroom apartment that eventually housed him, his mother, and six siblings. Wilson experienced the radical changes that occurred in the Hill during the next thirty years, as the once solidly working-class neighborhood decayed slowly, the victim of broken promises from local government. In Wilson's much celebrated *American Century Cycle*, ten plays that chronicle the black American experience of the twentieth century, the dramatist depicts the lives of Hill District residents



Chris Bell

as they struggle to live in a world that appears to have willfully turned its back on their existence. This is especially true of the plays set in the decades after the 1950s. The fidelity with which Wilson writes about the Hill District is complemented with a fiery political subtext centered on principles the playwright embraced before he achieved success as a mainstream playwright, principles rooted in the ideology of the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s. Although Wilson's childhood story and its link to the Hill District is fairly well told, one individual who offers unique perspective is Sala Udin, whose birth name is

Sam Howze. He was born in the Hill District in 1943. Udin figures as a kind of Zelig in the life of August Wilson. The two went to elementary school together. Later, Udin and Wilson stood shoulder to shoulder as participants in the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960s. In 1982, as Wilson slowly worked his way to mainstream success, the playwright tabbed his friend to play the lead in his first major regional production, *Jitney*. When Wilson was struck with terminal cancer, he enlisted Udin to play a role in ensuring his burial wishes. Ultimately, Udin's recollections about August Wilson are tied inextricably to memories of the neighborhood the dramatist immortalized, memories that are, to quote *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, "both a wail and a whelp of joy."

The Hill District: 1940s and 1950s

Sam Howze first met Freddy Kittel when the two attended Holy Trinity Catholic Elementary School, located on Fullerton Street in the Lower Hill District. Kittel lived in the Middle Hill, walking a few blocks to and from. Both the school and the street are gone now, but Udin fondly remembers the bustling area filled with bars, jazz joints, restaurants, movie houses, and even brothels. Udin insists the environment was safe for children: "There was no static between police and residents of the Lower Hill. And everybody worked." At this time, the Hill was a largely multiethnic neighborhood, a mostly conflict-free mixing of Syrians, Jews, Italians, ethnic Germans such as Wilson's father, and African Americans, amongst other ethnicities. Although Fullerton Street was the Hill District's pulse, Udin notes that Wilson experienced the electricity despite living on Bedford Avenue several blocks away, if for no other reason than he walked the streets almost daily. But at Holy Trinity, Freddy Kittel stood apart from his classmates. Udin remembers he "was kind of different from most kids. He didn't do a lot of running around and wrestling and physical stuff like that. He tended to stand just outside the circle of activity and observe everybody and what they were doing but did not participate as much."

The vibrancy of Fullerton Street was soon obliterated. City planners decided the Lower Hill needed a facelift, believing the area depressed. Udin admits his memories of Fullerton Street are rather halcyon. The area needed improvement, especially many of the buildings. Some were over a hundred years old and in a state of disrepair. But Udin adamantly denies the area was blighted. The city's opinion differed, and the planners brought wrecking balls. The Lower Hill was demolished, several hundred businesses were destroyed, and several thousand residents displaced. Most actually moved out of the Hill, relocating to the Homewood neighborhood. The Howze family, coincidentally, found itself coincidentally at the Bedford Dwellings housing projects on Bedford Avenue, several blocks from where the Kittels lived behind Siger's Grocery, although the young Sam Howze did not know this at the time. The two found themselves at St. Richard's School. Udin recollects, again, that Freddy remained mostly quiet, sometimes with the suggestion of a grin on his face as he observed his classmates.

At this point in their lives, outside forces were shaping both young men in ways neither could have known. Despite a promise to rebuild the Lower Hill, city planners reneged. Virtually no affordable housing replaced that which had been obliterated, and Fullerton Street was wiped clean from city maps. Instead, the Civic Arena, a multipurpose entertainment complex, became the enduring legacy of the Lower Hill's destruction, along with several parking lots built to accommodate visitors, most of whom came from areas of the city other than the Hill District. By the end of the 1950s, Sam Howze and Freddy Kittel had left the Hill. They would find themselves side by side a decade later with a shared purpose of raising the conscience of their community and revitalizing their neighborhood.

The Hill District: Late 1960s and 1970s

By the late 1960s, the Hill District had dramatically changed. Urban renewal planners had leveled the Lower Hill, and the Middle Hill was dramatically overpopulated, leading to worse housing conditions. Tension between the police and the local black populace was palpable. Employment, especially for young black males, was scarce. And while Hill District residents managed to stop a second wave of urban renewal that targeted the Middle Hill, the damage city planners had already wrought seemed irreparable. Then, in the spring of 1968, riots occurred in response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The neighborhood burned for days. In time, the riots came to be seen as the final blow to the neighborhood's near annihilation.

August Wilson and Sala Udin, no longer Freddy Kittel and Sam Howze, stepped into this cauldron with a shared focus on how to solve the Hill District's problems. They had become, according to Udin, "soldiers in the Black Liberation Movement." By the late 1960s, Udin was something of a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement, having been present at the National Mall when King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. But by the end of the decade he had become radicalized, aligning himself with the Black Power Movement. Wilson had undergone similar changes. Approximately two years after leaving the Hill, Wilson had dropped out of high school and educated himself by reading voraciously at the Oakland branch of the Carnegie Library. Most importantly, he discovered the Negro section of the stacks and began imagining his own contributions on the shelves. Both Wilson and Udin adopted new identities as well. A local Iman gave Sam Howze the name Sala Udin, who historically "was a north African emperor [who] was a scholar and very inquisitive student, and the people of his land honored him by putting his name in the dictionary to define one who seeks knowledge." Meanwhile, Freddy Kittel formally embraced his mother's heritage by taking her surname, rechristening himself August Wilson. Udin comments on the effect of adopting a new identity during this turbulent time:

It was keeping step with a trend among progressive African Americans in my age group who were adopting African-centered cultural norms across a broad array of practices. Name changing was one. Religion changing was another. Hair style changing was another. Clothing changing was another. We were participants in a Black Liberation Movement that was centered in African culture, and so it would be expected, especially among leaders, that European names would be dropped and replaced with either African names, or, if there was an Islamic bent to the Africanization, then a kind of African-Islamic name would be selected.

Although Wilson did not take an African-centered name or start wearing such clothing, Udin still says the change from Freddy Kittel to August Wilson was transformational: "Any change from the slave tradition was fine, and so August acknowledging his mother's lineage made sense."

The primary identity Wilson adopted was that of writer. In the late 1960s he saw himself as a poet, although a reluctant one. He remained the insular child Udin remembered from some fifteen years earlier when the two were schoolmates:

August was a shy person. He was vocal and verbal whenever he decided to speak, but he was ordinarily shy and reserved and quiet, the same way we were raised, the same way I had known him from the old days. He read his poetry only reluctantly. He had to be asked several times to read his stuff, and then he would read it. He was serious, deeply intellectual, but always with an eye out for the humorous. He liked laughing, especially at irony or satire.

Little remains known of the poetry Wilson wrote in the late 1960s. Udin admits too much time has passed for him to recollect its content. Although the future playwright published a couple of poems at this time, they remain little more than curiosities of a young writer trying to find his voice. But Wilson was determined. Although Udin was not active, he

recollects that Wilson was part of a group that christened themselves Poets in the Centre Avenue Tradition, which met to share their work and support each other at the Halfway Art Gallery, another building long since demolished by the city of Pittsburgh.

For Wilson and Udin, the shared interest in knowledge, art, and black activism crystallized in their work for the Black Horizons Theater. Wilson co-founded the company with Rob Penny and University of Pittsburgh student activists and professionals. Penny, a Hill District resident, poet, and professor at the university, was a mentor of sorts to Wilson. Although Wilson said in later interviews that he was the company's director, Udin, who was involved from the company's inception as its lead actor, says Penny directed and Wilson was more of an assistant director or dramaturg: "You can't have two directors," he notes with a chuckle. Whatever their individual roles, Udin notes with fierce pride, all were "soldiers in the Black Liberation Movement." Black Horizons was largely influenced by Amiri Baraka "and the black theater movement that he created in Harlem and Newark, New Jersey. We went there several times to see the Spirit House Movers and to be influenced by Baraka. So when we began to put together Black Horizons Theater, it was with the Spirit House Movers as a model of what we were trying to recreate here in Pittsburgh." Looking back on the experience, Udin says, "It was groundbreaking."

But the work was also exhausting and expensive. Like many community theaters, Black Horizons was self-funded, and they rehearsed at night, following a regular work day. Udin himself, for instance, helped run a drug rehabilitation center as his day job. Therefore, in the early 1970s, when a woman named Vernell Lillie stepped in and essentially folded Black Horizons into what became the Kuntu Repertory Theatre, Udin was relieved. Kuntu became ensconced within the University of Pittsburgh, effectively solving its financial problems. And while Rob Penny (who already had tenure at the university) and Wilson continued working with Lillie, Udin "drifted away into more political work. My plate was so full that I said, 'If I can let anything go, I need to let some things go. I've done my due in black theater. I'm really interested in getting involved with the university theater. I don't have any theatrical professional ambitions. So I'm out of here.' I went on to continue doing the political work that I was doing."

Importantly, during his time with Wilson in Black Horizons, Udin saw important changes in Wilson. He began to grow out of Rob Penny's shadow. Although "August continued his assistant director role when Kuntu began, he was beginning to develop his own approach to theater direction." He also began writing plays but remained reticent about his work. "He physically carried his stuff with him, and you could never convince him to show his plays. He would read his poetry from time to time." Then, "He allowed one or two of his plays that he had secretly written to be removed from the safe." But just as this new work began to emerge, Wilson left Pittsburgh for Minnesota. The leaving created a void within Wilson that he would fill by putting black Pittsburgh on the stage some five years later. Udin found himself reluctantly front and center.

The Hill District: 1982

At the dawn of the 1980s, the Hill District of Sala Udin's and August Wilson's childhood was a memory. The problems that plagued the neighborhood throughout the 1960s and 1970s had decimated the area. Employment was at an all time low at the dawn of the Reagan Era. Tensions with the local police continued to increase. Open air drug markets were common. Conditions were so poor that there was not even a full service grocery store in the Hill, the beginning of a thirty year period in which residents lived in a "Food Desert," a condition in which healthy food choices are nearly impossible to find, while the expensive, unhealthy kind of sugar-laden food found at corner markets is the primary option. And while Udin says that the kind of rampant violence depicted in popular media centered on black neighborhoods in the 1980s was not the reality, many young black men met their fate

at the hands of their peers, a reality far removed from Udin's experience growing up in the area.

By 1982, Wilson had been gone nearly for nearly five years, although he came back to Pittsburgh frequently. During one of these visits, Wilson tracked Udin down and learned he himself was planning on leaving for California. Wilson protested and countered with an interesting proposal: he had a new play he was preparing for production, and he wanted Udin to play the central character. Udin balked. He hadn't been on the stage in nearly ten years. Wilson was insistent. Udin recounts their conversation:

I said, "August, I haven't been on stage in a long time. I haven't been on stage since Black Horizons Theater."

"This is you in this play," Wilson replied.

"I'm leaving town. I'm on my way to California."

"Yeah, but I developed this character with you in mind."

"Well, maybe we can work together to find somebody to fill that character."

"I developed this character with you in mind. Let's take one step at a time. Read the script."

Wilson's command did the trick. Udin found the play so compelling that he knew immediately he could not turn down the opportunity to perform in it.

The play was titled *Jitney*. Set in the 1970s, the drama has two central conflicts. The first reflects that which engaged Wilson and Udin in local activism some ten years before Wilson wrote the play. The central character, Becker, the one whom Wilson wanted Udin to play, operates a marginally illegal cab service in the Hill District. Such a business was a necessity in the Hill District, as licensed cab companies would not serve the area. Early in the play, Becker announces that the City of Pittsburgh plans to demolish the building he uses to run his operation, and the drivers must decide if they want to find a new base of operations or stand up to the city. The characters ultimately choose the latter, a defiance rooted in their frustration at the city's decades old practice of leveling what they perceive as viable dwellings, be they homes or businesses. Interestingly, however, Udin does not mention this aspect of the play when he discusses how he came to agree to perform. He points to the second conflict: "I read the script and became captivated by it because of the conflicted relationship between Becker and his son. That caught me." This conflict centers on Becker's son Booster's release from prison after serving twenty years for murdering his then-nineteen year old white girlfriend, who, when caught by her father in a consensual sexual relationship with Booster, claims rape. Booster, believing he will go to prison for a crime he did not commit, kills the young woman, claiming if he is going to be locked up, it must be for an actual offense. Twenty years later, even after his release, he refuses to apologize for his actions. His father, believing his academically gifted son threw away his future, refuses to reconcile when his boy tries to do so. Ultimately, Becker dies with the tension between the two unresolved.

Certainly, Udin would have been motivated by the subtle political component of the play. It dramatizes the kind of issue he had been engaged in his entire life and is reminiscent of the kind of theater Black Horizons staged a decade before Wilson wrote *Jitney*. But Udin's more intense attraction to the father-son conflict hints at what audiences would come to admire most about Wilson's dramas once they became a national phenomenon: the heartbreaking humanity he imbues in his characters, the laughter that accompanies the tears, the lack of apology for even the most damaging choices they make, and, most important, a fidelity for the Hill District and its residents that jumps off the page. This latter characteristic of Wilson's drama did not surprise Udin because he had witnessed it. Udin says that during Wilson's visits to Pittsburgh after his move to Minnesota, the two, along with Rob Penny, met often at a restaurant they dubbed "Pan Fried Fish," as the owner, Cliff, and his brother "were too ornery to give the place a name. And Cliff didn't like people. But he needed to sell fish sandwiches to make a living, so he sold fish sandwiches. But he didn't

feel the need to give the place a name. He just put a sign in the window that said 'Pan Fried Fish.' A sign written on a piece of cardboard." The kind of affection Udin describes for the curmudgeonly Cliff is what he recognized in the characters when he first read *Jitney*. He elaborates on the get togethers at Pan Fried Fish: "Whenever Rob Penny and I arrived to meet at Pan Fried Fish, August would have already been there. But he wasn't at Pan Fried Fish. He was next door at the jitney station, sitting on the floor, with his pad and pencil in his hand, laughing." The burgeoning playwright was recording the conversations of the men in the station, mostly community elders:

They talked about their achievements in the Negro League, about statistics, you know how those barbershop arguments go, about their exploits with women. All lies. But August loved it. He loved sitting there listening to them talk. And so when he told me that the name of the play was *Jitney* and it took place in a jitney station, it made absolute sense, because that jitney station is usually where we could find August whenever we agreed to meet at Pan Fried Fish.

For Udin, *Jitney* was a near documentary of the neighborhood where he had lived nearly his whole life. And this was why he agreed to return to the stage. "And I called my friend who I was about to leave with for California and said, 'Man, we gotta delay our departure date. We gotta do this play.' And I told August, 'I will do it.'"

The local reaction to *Jitney* mirrored the experience Udin had when he first read it. Udin elaborates on the experience:

When the play opened, the audience was only half full. But the word then went around that an August Wilson play was opening. And it had the names of Hill District characters, and streets, and locations. And it was funny as hell. And it was gripping dramatically. And the language of the characters was street language. It wasn't cleaned up like we were accustomed to seeing on television. The language of the characters in August's plays talked exactly the way we did on the street. And we had never seen that before. And we loved it. And by the third week the house was full. The shows were sold out. And by the time we had gotten to the fourth week, which is what our original commitment was, it took that long for the word to get around, and people demanded that the show be extended. And I said "August, I'm on my way to California, man. I can't stay." He said, "two more weeks. Two more weeks." So I gave him two more weeks. And the show finally closed, and I packed up and left Pittsburgh for California in 1982.

Although Udin was only gone from the Hill District for a decade, both his and Wilson's lives continued to change in more dramatic ways than perhaps either could have predicted when their friendship began in earnest in the late 1960s, even as Wilson ceased to belong to the Hill District and began to belong more to the world.

The Hill District: Late 1990s and Early 2000s

By the late 1990s, the steady decline of the Hill District appeared to have peaked. Many began to suggest the Hill was showing signs of significant improvement. When asked about this perspective, Udin demurs. He returned to the Hill permanently in the 1990s, and his subsequent election to city council sparked some positive change. He worked to close some of the more notorious after-hours spots in the neighborhood, spearheaded improvements between the police and Hill District residents (centered mostly on making officers more accountable for aggressive behavior), and worked in support of various other progressive causes.

Udin watched from afar as one of the Hill District's former residents, August Wilson, became the most acclaimed American playwright of the late twentieth century. Even as *Jitney* became Wilson's first regional success in 1982, his national reputation was beginning to brew. At the same time Udin inaugurated the role of Becker in *Jitney*, Wilson's

play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which would prove to be his breakthrough success, had already been accepted at the prestigious Eugene O'Neill Playwright's Conference. He had also written an early draft of *Fences*, which would win Wilson's only Tony Award and the first of two Pulitzer Prizes. Udin was privileged to read both nascent versions of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Fences*, but after *Jitney*, the two became, in Udin words, "distant." Wilson's profile skyrocketed, and he began what essentially became a life on the road. His plays became part of a workshop cycle wherein each was honed in regional productions throughout the country before finally premiering on Broadway. Subsequently, Wilson returned less often to the Hill District. Udin's connection with his friend continued through the playwright's work. Ever the reluctant performer, Udin still found time to perform in *Fences*, *Two Trains Running*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Udin distinctly remembers one of Wilson's visits to Pittsburgh in 1999. The Pittsburgh Public Library system honored Wilson with a high school diploma in 1999, the first of its kind. At the ceremony, Udin says, Wilson "told the mayor, 'I think Sala Udin should be the mayor.'" Later, "We hung out in Shadyside. We got drunk. And I have no idea how we got home." This turned out to be the last time the two friends saw each other.

August Wilson died on October 2, 2005, less than a year after being diagnosed with liver cancer. The playwright was specific about his funeral arrangements, and he enlisted Udin to help ensure his wishes be granted. Before Wilson died, Udin received a call from Wilson's wife, Constanza Romero. He learned that before Wilson died, "he left explicit instructions about who was to do what, what his funeral was to be like, and where he was to be buried." Udin was to serve as the emcee of the funeral and arrange for it to take place at St. Paul's Cathedral, where many prominent Pittsburgh Catholics have been laid to rest over the years. However, the playwright also said, "I don't want no Catholic mass. I want a black funeral at St. Paul's Cathedral." But when the bishop of the church rejected that request, Udin was forced to move the service to the Soldier's and Sailor's Memorial Hall, located on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh. The rest of the playwright's wishes went as requested. Dwight Andrews, a professor of music at Emory who had composed the score for several Wilson plays on Broadway, delivered the eulogy. Many prominent theater professionals and academics attended. Just as Udin appeared satisfied that his friend's send-off went as planned, something unexpected occurred that deserves repeating verbatim as Udin recalls it:

As we are wrapping up, I hear a horn backstage. And I figured, "Oh damn. Somebody who is using this space next is rehearsing while we are wrapping up." So I sent somebody backstage to tell them to hold up until we were done. But the music kept playing. And then I recognized the tune. Somebody was on a trumpet playing "Danny Boy." I had no idea what was going on, and I was supposed to be in charge. And the music became louder. And out from backstage comes the trumpet player Wynton Marsalis. Constanza had snuck him back there. He comes out blowing "Danny Boy." There was not a dry eye in the room. And then at the end of "Danny Boy" he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a white handkerchief and starts waving it and starts playing "When the Saints Go Marching In." And he led everybody off stage, down through the audience, and to the casket. And the pall bearers took the casket up the aisle and out of the auditorium. Marsalis led everybody from behind the casket, and everybody who had a handkerchief was waving their handkerchiefs, laughing and crying, as we left Soldier's and Sailor's Memorial Hall.

This climactic moment was followed by a funeral procession through the Hill District, as locals said goodbye to their most famous resident and favorite son. As the procession wound through streets Udin and Wilson had walked together as young men, people held up signs that read "WE LOVE YOU AUGUST" and "WE MISS YOU AUGUST," coupled with others that bore the names of Wilson's plays. The funeral party finally went out to Greenwood

Cemetery, where generations of black Pittsburghers are buried, including Wilson's mother, and laid the playwright to rest.

Yet Wilson's funeral was not the last time Udin bonded with his friend. In 2010, Udin found himself reprising the role of Becker in *Jitney*, the play he reluctantly helped Wilson inaugurate in 1982. This time the performance was more personal. When he first played Becker, Udin jokes that the role required significant makeup and practice "learning how to walk like an old man." In 2010, Udin was actually older than how Becker is written, and "I didn't need no makeup in my hair, and I didn't need no practice in how to walk like an old man." Beneath these humorous recollections, however, lay something far more serious. In a twist of fate that one might think could happen only in a piece of fiction that a writer such as Wilson might pen, Udin's son Patrice Howze, "my baby," was found dead on Centre Avenue, less than twenty-four hours after Wilson's funeral. He was murdered. Udin says, "He had gotten into that drug life. The thug life. And the ultimate end that comes to so many visited him." Udin found himself again connecting with the father-son conflict at the heart of *Jitney*, remembering the struggle between him and Patrice during "most of his teenage years and young adult years, as I was trying to pull him out from the streets and from negativity, and he was determined to do what he wanted to do. And the conflict between Patrice and I was so similar to the conflict between Becker and Booster that the play took on a much more personal meaning and deeper meaning." When asked how all this affected his performance, Udin says, "I cried real tears on the stage. And the line at the end of act one, when Becker says to Booster 'You just another nigger on the street,' was like a dagger to the heart."

The Hill District 2018

On April 28, 2018, a cold, overcast day, the third annual August Wilson Block Party commenced along Bedford Avenue, the same street Wilson and Udin roamed as children. For several years, various media reports have touted what appears to be a sustained revitalization of the Hill District. Udin expresses a reserved optimism. While a grocery store finally opened on Centre Avenue in 2013, Udin points out it is not a major chain, expressing skepticism about its possibilities for success. The long-time activist was prescient: A few months after this interview, in March of 2019, the Shop 'n Save closed, rendering the Hill District a food desert once again. When asked about reports celebrating the opening of a full-service pharmacy in the Hill, Udin points out that these stories are misleading, as the pharmacy is operated by Duquesne University, with limited, inconvenient hours for many. And while housing has improved in the Middle Hill District, that change remains incremental at best. When asked if reports of the positive changes in the Hill District distort the reality that still faces a host of problems that accompany most low socioeconomic communities comprised of mostly African Americans, Udin agreed.

Yet all that seemed far in the background as hundreds of residents celebrated what would have been August Wilson's seventy third birthday. Udin says the event was "off the chain." The event also featured the groundbreaking of the newly named August Wilson House at 1727 Bedford Avenue, where Wilson grew up with his six siblings. The building, already listed on the National Register of Historic Places, will serve as an artist's residence and cultural center once fully refurbished. Also at the Block Party were members of the August Wilson Society, a group of academics and theater professionals dedicated to preserving the legacy of the playwright.

The highlight of the festivities was the Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre company's production of *King Hedley II* in the very backyard of the building Wilson was raised some seventy years prior. Sala Udin, ever the reluctant performer, was to play Stool Pigeon, one of Wilson's famed "Spectacle Characters," individuals who appear mentally unbalanced yet also possess seer-like wisdom. *King Hedley II*, set in 1985, is often noted as Wilson's darkest play,

one with an apocalyptic vision of the state of the African American community at this time in history. Udin notes that this is the hardest of all the Wilson characters he has tackled because of the play's relentlessly bleak tone. "It was bad," Udin says with a chuckle, "but it wasn't *that* bad." Unfortunately, bad weather canceled the opening weekend of the show and several performances in the coming weeks, but reviews of the productions that went on were positive. Udin himself was pleased with the production. It seemed another example of what he had witnessed his whole life. That while forces may seek to drag down what those who live and work in the Hill District try to accomplish, the final knockout blow still has not come. And it appears that blow cannot be delivered. For while August Wilson may belong to the world, he still belongs to the Hill District, and as Sala Udin has witnessed his entire life, both the plays and the neighborhood in which they are set possess an endurance that cannot be outrun.

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August Wilson Estate, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and August Wilson House Establish August Wilson Century Cycle Awards

By Christopher Rawson

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[August] remains most at home in the people, places and stories from what we call August Wilson's Hill, and in the theaters that bring them to life. The August Wilson American Century Cycle Award celebrates the conjunction of the two.

—Christopher Rawson

Abstract

August Wilson House, the August Wilson Estate, and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* have teamed-up to celebrate the work of August Wilson by co-sponsoring the August Wilson Century Cycle Awards for those theaters that have successfully staged all ten plays of the Cycle.

Keywords

August Wilson, American Century Cycle Awards, August Wilson Estate, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, American Stage, Hattiloo Theatre, Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre, Goodman Theatre, Yale Rep, Huntingdon Theatre Company, O'Neill Theater Center, Pittsburgh Public Theatre, Penumbra, Christopher Rawson

August Wilson's creative imagination and the rich life of his native Hill District can take his 10-play American Century Cycle only so far. The Cycle can complete its full journey only in what has proved to be its ultimate home, the mainly not-for-profit theaters country-wide. So while interviewing and reviewing Wilson since 1983 for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and teaching an August Wilson course at the University of Pittsburgh (which he urged me to do), I began tracking which theaters had completed their own Cycle.

Flash forward, and to celebrate those theaters, the *Post-Gazette*, supported by August Wilson House and with the collaboration of Constanza Romero Wilson and the August Wilson Estate, established the August Wilson American Century Cycle Award. It's just a plaque, but there's nothing "just" about a theater's commitment that it measures. At present, some 17 theaters have qualified (see the adjacent list). If we'd started when the first theater completed its Cycle, we could have honored each theater in its turn, but now we're playing catch up, presenting each award as travel and schedules allow, at a ceremony arranged at each theater's convenience. Soon, a



*August and
Chris Rawson*

larger plaque listing all the qualifying theaters will hang in August Wilson House at 1727 Bedford Avenue, when the current restoration is completed.

So far we have presented seven awards. The first was to American Stage in St. Petersburg in 2017, just as they completed their Cycle with *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. I went to Seattle Rep in early 2018, when they were doing their second *Two Trains Running*. Ms. Romero joined in that presentation, as she did for Mark Clayton Southers' Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre on April 27, 2018, Wilson's 73rd birthday. The next month I was in Houston to present the award to Eileen Morris' Ensemble Theatre, which threw a great reunion and party, and then Memphis when Ekundayo Bandele's Hattiloo Theatre was doing completing its Cycle with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Pittsburgh Public Theater received its plaque last summer on the night it welcomed its new artistic director, Marya Sea Kaminski. In November, the Anthony Bean Community Theatre in New Orleans threw itself a fund-raiser and received its plaque from Pittsburgh's Wali Jamal, the only actor to have completed a Super Cycle – the 10 plays plus Wilson's autobiographical *How I Learned What I Learned*. (In time, we hope to honor actors' and directors' Cycles, but theaters first.)

Going back, the first to complete the Cycle was Chicago's Goodman Theatre, beating Seattle Rep by just three months. Those two the jump because they were in a small group with the Huntington and Mark Taper Forum as part of Wilson's unofficial tryout circuit, staging each new play while he was polishing it before its eventual arrival on Broadway. The even smaller group staged premieres, just three theaters, is led by Yale Rep, which did six, *Ma Rainey* through *Two Trains* and then *Radio Golf*. The Goodman did *Seven Guitars* and *Gem of the Ocean*, and the Pittsburgh Public, *Jitney* and *King Hedley II*. The first *Jitney!* (it had an exclamation point) had its premiere in 1982 at Pittsburgh's small semi-pro Allegheny Repertory Company, but the Public staged the revised, professional premiere in 1996, so you could say *Jitney* had its premiere in Pittsburgh twice. The Public then persuaded Wilson to delay writing *King Hedley II* so it and the new O'Reilly Theater could debut together in 1999.

As this suggests, Yale Rep has a good claim of being Wilson's theatrical home. So does the Huntington (as they say), since it staged the most of the plays pre-Broadway. But Wilson had several homes. Biographically, it was Pittsburgh. He was born in the Hill, lived there for 13 years, then moved a few miles to Hazelwood for a couple of years before leaving for the army and some teenage wandering. At 20 he was back on the Hill, where he embedded himself in its artistic, social and political life until he was 33. The experience of those years is the core of the Cycle, even of *Ma Rainey*, the only play not set in Pittsburgh. He said since it was his first play on Broadway he thought it needed a more important city, but it's just as full of the people he met and conversations he overheard in Hill diners, barbershops, backyards and jitney stations, on its street corners and porches. The Hill provided the rich brew into which he dipped the ladle of his transforming art.

However, Wilson didn't really commit himself to playwriting until he left for St. Paul, where he lived from 1978 to 1990, writing the first five plays (six, counting *Jitney!*); St. Paul, its Playwrights Center and Penumbra can also stake a claim (and they do) to be his theatrical home. So does Seattle, where he wrote the other plays and lived his final 15 years, until he died in 2005. There was another preeminent home along the way: Connecticut, of all places, home not just to Yale Rep but the O'Neill Theater Center. Minnesota, Connecticut and Washington: three predominantly white states where he said he could more clearly listen to those voices from the Hill.

When Wilson returned to Yale in 2005 to premiere *Radio Golf*, a few days before his 60th birthday, it had the feel of a reunion of the far-flung Wilson actors, some now famous, who had come to call themselves Wilsonian Soldiers. That night in New Haven was further evidence that Wilson had many homes. In the cities where theaters have dedicated themselves to his work, communities of Wilsonian actors and audiences flourish. Even

Broadway is one such community: he worked there on eight plays, with two to come after his death. The Edison Hotel and its coffee shop considered him a resident.

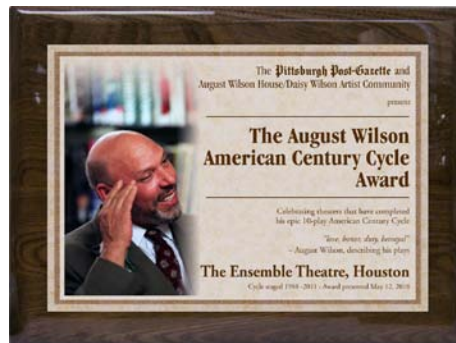
Wherever else he was working, from Boston to Kansas City, St. Louis to L.A., he found similar stage doors and diners where he could hang out. His angry testimonies about racism, the indignities of being black or just trying to get a check cashed--all evidenced his argument with America, but he was thoroughly at home in the continent-wide American theater. I was the first to call his plays the Pittsburgh Cycle, but American Century Cycle makes the justifiably more expansive claim.

At the end, Wilson was at home in Seattle, where he died, and once more in Pittsburgh, where he was brought (by his direction) for his funeral at Soldiers & Sailors Memorial and burial in Greenwood Cemetery. But he remains most at home in the people, places and stories from what we call August Wilson's Hill, and in the theaters that bring them to life. The August Wilson American Century Cycle Award, presented jointly by his hometown newspaper and his childhood home, celebrates the conjunction of the two.

Author Bio

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Photos



The AWACC Award plaque given to Houston's Ensemble Theatre, similar to those being gradually given to theaters that qualify.



Ekundayo Bandele, founder of Hattiloo Theatre in Memphis, accepts the Cycle Award from Chris Rawson in May, 2018.



Pittsburgh Public Theater managing director Lou Castelli and artistic director Marya Sea Kaminski are presented with the Cycle Award by Chris Rawson in August, 2018.



Pittsburgh actor Wali Jamal (right) presents the Cycle Award to Anthony Bean, founder of the theater in his name. Between them is Wilsonian actor Will Williams. At left are several of the company's supporters.



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Theaters That Have Completed August Wilson's American Century Cycle

By Christopher Rawson

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Keywords

August Wilson, American Century Cycle Awards, Broadway, Christopher Rawson

From the author: The theaters are listed in the order each completed its tenth play in the cycle. Dates are when they staged their first and last play in the cycle.

In parenthesis is the number of productions pre-Broadway. This list is a work in progress: please send corrections or additions to cchr@pitt.edu.

1. Goodman Theater, Chicago, 1986-2007 (7)
2. Seattle Repertory Theatre, 1986-2007 (5)
3. St. Louis Black Rep, ?-2008
4. Pittsburgh Public Theater, 1989-2008 (2)
5. Denver Center Theatre, 1989-2009
6. Penumbra Theatre, St. Paul, 1984-2009 (1)
7. Huntington Theater, Boston, 1986-2012 (8)
8. Ensemble Theatre, Houston, 1985-2012
9. Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre, 2003-13
10. Anthony Bean Community Theatre, New Orleans, 2001-13
11. The Actors Group, Honolulu, 2004-15
12. Lower Bottom Playaz, Oakland, 2011-16
13. M Ensemble, Miami, incomplete information
14. American Stage, St. Petersburg, 2007-2017
15. Broadway, 1984-2017 ¹
16. Hattiloo Theatre, Memphis, 2008-18
17. New African Grove, Atlanta, 2009-2018

¹ Counting the off-Broadway "Jitney" of 2000, New York City completed the cycle in 2007, but Broadway itself had to wait until 2017. Broadway isn't a theater company, but in a way it is, so why not award it a plaque, wherever it might hang?

Author Bio

Mr. Christopher Rawson is senior theater critic at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, an emeritus member of the Pitt English Department, and an officer of August Wilson House.



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Welcome to the Dramaturgy Section of the *August Wilson Journal*

By Melonnie Walker

*Master of Arts, Theatre History
University of Missouri, Kansas City*

Welcome to the Dramaturgy Section of the *August Wilson Journal*. My name is Melonnie Walker and I am the Dramaturgy Editor. The goal of this section is to connect our readers with the real experiences of production dramaturgs who are working on productions of August Wilson's plays. By sharing different approaches to the work of Mr. Wilson, we dramaturgs align ourselves with the journal's mission of promoting the study, teaching and performance of his plays in an effort to preserve his legacy.



Mel Walker

Author Bio

Ms. Melonnie Walker has served as research dramaturg for regional theatre productions for more than ten years. She is also an active member of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, which is an organization that holds the belief that theater is a vital art form that has the power to "nourish, educate, and transform individuals and their communities and that dramaturgy is central to the process of theater-making."



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Dramaturg Interview: Soyica Colbert on *Two Trains Running*

By Melonnie Walker

Dramaturg and Social Media Coordinator for the August Wilson Society

In Two Trains, we found that Wilson's grappling with questions about self-determination and justice at the heart of the black power and black arts movements continue to inform political and artistic organizations today.

– Soyica Colbert

Abstract

An interview with Soyica Colbert, dramaturg for Arena Stage's (Washington, D.C.) production of *Two Trains Running*.

Keywords

August Wilson, Arena Stage, Washington, D.C., Two Trains Running, Pittsburgh, Hill District, Dramaturgy, Broadway, Soyica Colbert

In the spring of 2018, Arena Stage in Washington, DC, collaborated with Seattle Repertory Theatre to co-produce *Two Trains Running* in DC. The run was originally scheduled for March 30 through April 29, but, due to its success, was extended through May 6, 2018. The production was directed by Juliette Carrillo and the production dramaturg was Dr. Soyica Colbert.



Soyica Colbert

This play is August Wilson's seventh installment in his ten-play American Century Cycle, premiering on Broadway in 1992. The play is set in 1969 in a neighborhood diner that serves as a gathering place for residents of Pittsburgh's Hill District. Contextually, the backdrop for this play is the turbulent decade of the 1960s, which encompassed race riots, the ongoing Vietnam War, the March on Washington, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Through the characters in this play, Wilson



Mel Walker

explores themes of unity and pride, contrasting life principles, and how communities and individuals choose to create their path forward.

I interviewed Dr. Colbert about her process for this production of *Two Trains Running*, and asked her to share her experience working with the cast and crew. I was

specifically interested in any challenges, surprises, or special requests that may have occurred.

MW: What kind of research goals did the director provide for you? Such as certain historical context, or certain script references, etc.

SC: In consultation with the Artistic team at Seattle Repertory Theatre, we provided research about August Wilson's Century Cycle, *Two Trains Running's* place in the cycle, Pittsburgh in the 1960s, Gentrification, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Black Arts Movement.

MW: Were there any particular challenges or surprises that came up during the process?

SC: The main question we returned to again and again was how the questions of the play resonate with contemporary issues. In *Two Trains*, we found that Wilson's grappling with questions about self-determination and justice at the heart of the black power and black arts movements continue to inform political and artistic organizations today.

MW: Do you have a favorite scene or section of dialogue from *Two Trains Running*?

SC: There are several powerful moments. My favorite line is when Memphis says, "Freedom is heavy. You got to put your shoulder to freedom. Put your shoulder to it and hope your back hold up." The moments of intimacy between Sterling and Risa are also striking because they point to political collaboration emerging by way of friendship and trust.

MW: Can you tell our readers about other relevant events that took place around 1969, when this play is set, that may have influenced the characters, or even the playwright?

SC: In June 1966, Carmichael declared that "1966 [was] the year of the concept of Black power." Soon after, SNCC, headed by Stokely Carmichael, rejected its historical strategy of nonviolence and embraced the notion of Black Power which emphasized Black nationalism and self-reliance. This led to the decline of interracialism within the organization. On October 15, 1966, in the wake of the assassination of Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in West Oakland, California. In 1968, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizon Theater Company with friend Rob Penny in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968. As we note in the dramaturgical workbook, the Black Power Era was the time period when Wilson came of age as an artist. As a result, this play is not only a reflection on the decade but also the contexts that formed him as an artist.

MW: Did you have any personal revelations about the play as you were researching it?

SC: It is striking how play resonates so profoundly with ongoing questions about spatial justice and gentrification in Washington D.C.

MW: During your interactions with the cast and crew, what were the definitive themes about *Two Trains Running* that you felt a need to emphasize, or particular ideas that you wanted to highlight?

SC: Because we worked on the notebook for the Seattle Rep. production first, we did not have much opportunity to interact with the cast and crew for that production. We did enjoy

collaborating with the literary managers at Seattle Rep and Arena Stage to develop the workbook and respond to questions from the artistic teams.

MW: In scheduled talkbacks, or engaging with the audience, what can you tell our readers about audience response?

SC: In a talkback at Arena Stage, two of the student research assistants, Skylar Luke and Taurjhai Purdie, answered questions about the play and its history. It was useful to hear how audiences responded to the politics of the play and to the way it foreshadows many of ongoing struggles of urban America regarding corporatization of businesses and segregation.”

MW: Are there any other plays in August Wilson’s American Century Cycle that you have served as dramaturg for, or would like to?

SC: I have not served as a dramaturg on any of Wilson’s other plays but would welcome the opportunity.

MW: Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us.

Dr. Soyica Colbert is the Chair of the Department of Performing Arts, Director of Theater and Performance Studies and an Associate Professor of African American Studies and Theater and Performance Studies at Georgetown University. She is the author of *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance and the Stage* (Cambridge UP, 2011) and *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics* (Rutgers UP, 2017). Dr. Colbert has published articles and essays in *American Theatre*, *African American Review*, and the collection of essays edited by Alan Nadel, entitled, *August Wilson: Completing the Twentieth-Century Cycle*.

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Author Bio

Ms. Melonnie Walker is a dramaturg and social media coordinator for the August Wilson Society.



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Dramaturg Interview: Martine Kei Green-Rogers on *Radio Golf*

By Melonnie Walker

Dramaturg and Social Media Coordinator for the August Wilson Society

I just love the fact that Wilson somehow manages to create families out of production teams.

– Martine Kei Green-Rogers

Abstract

An interview with Martine Kei Green-Rogers, dramaturg for Court Theater's (Chicago) production of *Radio Golf*.

Keywords

August Wilson, Chicago, Court Theatre, Radio Golf, Pittsburgh, Hill District, Dramaturgy, Martine Kei Green-Rogers

For its 2018-2019 season opener, Chicago's Court Theatre produced *Radio Golf*, the tenth installment in the American Century Cycle. *Radio Golf* addresses the internal conflict of the black middle-class in pursuit of the American dream. Set in a Hill District redevelopment office in 1997, the story follows Harmond Wilks, a real estate mogul and emerging mayoral candidate who believes his commercial development plan will revive the old neighborhood. In this play, Wilson tackles the issue of gentrification in historic neighborhoods, and at what cost a community's improvement will upset its integrity.



**Martine Kei
Green-Rogers**

The production was directed by Ron OJ Parson, who led the team through a successful and extended run from August 30-October 6. The production dramaturg was Dr. Martine Kei Green-Rogers, who shared a rich account of her experience on this show.



Mel Walker

MW: I know you and Ron Parson have a long history of working together at the Court Theatre. How many plays in the American Century Cycle have you worked on together?

MGR: Yes, I have worked with Ron in almost all of my other Court Theatre productions, including eight of the ten plays in the Cycle.

MW: Did you begin your process of researching this play with any specific goals in mind from the director?

MGR: Because our last production of Wilson together at Court was *Gem of the Ocean*, we knew we were setting up the bookends of the Cycle for our audience. We knew that the last thing they would remember was 1904, and Ron wanted to make sure we were being super clear about where we are now and what has happened in the numerous decades since the last time we visited Pittsburgh. Also, Ron was really interested in the geography of the Hill District area, and wanted to be very specific about it. For example, since the set was designed in a way that allowed audience members to see the outside of the redevelopment office, he wanted to have an address added to the exterior wall of the set. With some deductive reasoning, I decided that it had to be somewhere within walking distance of the neighborhood, since people are coming in and out. Also, since the script refers to Centre and Kirkpatrick being “up on the corner,” the office had to be downhill from those streets. That was actually one of the challenges of this play, because at times Wilson is both very specific, and yet not specific enough. In other plays of the cycle, we have very specific addresses, and names and anchors of places. So it was a little harder to do some of this work than it would normally be. But it just took a little bit of detective work to narrow it down.

MW: Did the cast and crew have any discussion about historic context from 1997, when this play is set?

MGR: We discussed what upper middle-class life looked like in the 1990s in Pittsburgh. And we were surprised by things like how far we’ve advanced in technology since then. For example, we kept forgetting how much time had passed and the fact that you no longer have to pull your antenna out of your phone. But I think in a lot of ways we were considering more philosophical questions rather than historical events. Like what does this play have to say about black life now? At the first reading, I remember that moment when Harmond talks about the person being killed by the officer, and the officer still getting his bonus and his thanksgiving turkey. Those conversations just really hit us in ways that I don’t think any of us realized they would. So if anything, we found that even though the events were rooted in 1997, little has changed.

MW: Did you have any definitive themes about *Radio Golf* that you felt a need to emphasize with the cast and crew?

MGR: Yes, specifically about the place that this show holds in the overall canon. So back to this idea of it being part of the bookends and literally at the end of his career because of his death. So we discussed what that means for the play and the conversations it brings up. We are wrestling with some of the same things today, which is fascinating because the play is set over 20 years ago. We also spent a lot of time talking about the wrapping up of the history of 1839 Wylie, and the generation and the legacy. And connecting those moments when we discover Aunt Ester in *Two Trains Running* is the mother of Elder Barlow in *Radio Golf*.

MW: Were there any scenes or parts of the play that really resonated with you personally or became a favorite?

MGR: My favorite moment of the entire play is the very end with the fight between Roosevelt and Harmond. The reason is that Wilson really hit the nail on the head for some of the issues that we are still debating right now. For example, at what cost in our contemporary society does success have? And what does that mean when you’re from a historically under-represented and/or marginalized group? Does success equal being able

to replicate white life and status, or is it something different? And I think the argument between those two ideas are very compelling. I remember when I first read the play years ago I thought Roosevelt was so terrible. And not that I necessarily agree with Roosevelt now, but looking at him in today's context, there's a part of me that could see how someone could get to that point in a way that I could not have fathomed ten years ago.

MW: What did you anticipate the audience response would be during talkback sessions based on your previous experience at Court Theatre?

MGR: The thing that's interesting about Court Theatre talkbacks, is that since Court sits on the University of Chicago's campus, there's a lot of campus engagement with their productions. So it's a very learned audience. And I would say that about 80% of the people would have read this play, if not the entire Wilson cycle. So you definitely don't get the standard talkback questions, like "how did you learn all those lines?" Court audiences are more likely to ask questions like, so "I see you made this choice in Act II, scene i," and actually make script references while giving their feedback.

MW: How would you describe the actual audience engagement after previews? Did the audience members have any poignant questions or maybe concerns that we still face today regarding gentrification?

MGR: This is such a juicy question. Our audiences were both shocked and intrigued by how timely this play is, considering when Wilson wrote it. Many, including Chris Jones of the *Chicago Tribune*, realized the play was extremely prophetic. Our audiences were really interested in the conversations we had to prepare for this production. And they also wanted to dig into some very specific regional issues like what does it mean for this play to be done on University of Chicago's campus, which has its own interesting history of gentrification on the south side of Chicago.

MW: Is there anything else you'd like to share with readers about your dramaturgical experience working with the cast and crew?

MGR: One of the things that I think Wilson is really good at, that just transfers into any rehearsal process, is his sense of community. I have never worked on a Wilson play after which somehow we don't all become family. It's so interesting because I have done plenty of shows where everyone is kind and cordial and friendly, but I would say 99% of the time if you're working on a Wilson piece you're going to be hanging out with these people after rehearsal, going out, cooking food together and doing all sorts of things that you normally would not do in shows written by other authors. So I just love the fact that Wilson somehow manages to create families out of production teams.

MW: Yes, I've been watching the posts on Court Theatre's Facebook page, where you allow your followers to get a peek of your rehearsal process and I saw that you all went golfing together. What was that like?

MGR: That was so great, and almost everyone in the production team participated. Even people that didn't necessarily have to be there, like one of the assistants and a few people from marketing, but everyone wanted to participate and hang out. And as we were there talking about the show and Roosevelt's radio segment, there were other people on the golf course listening and they wanted to know what we were talking about. Before we knew it, we had a crowd of people around us and we were able to pass out information about the show. So even being out together to learn about golfing, we managed to create a community

with the people who were there. And I think that is something very special that Wilson does. He just figured out, somehow beautifully, how to create family out of people.

MW: What a fitting observation about Wilson's work and the impact it has on people. Thank you so much for sharing this experience with us. I believe fellow dramaturgs will benefit from hearing your perspective.

Dr. Martine Kei Green-Rogers is currently President of the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas and an Assistant Professor at SUNY New Paltz. She obtained her PhD from the Department of Theatre and Drama at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Prior to studying at UW-Madison, she received her B.A. in Theatre from Virginia Wesleyan College and her M.A. in Theatre History and Criticism from The Catholic University of America.

Her dramaturgical credits are extensive, and include the following works by Wilson: productions of *Radio Golf*, *Gem of the Ocean*, *Seven Guitars* at the Court Theatre (Chicago, IL); productions of *Fences* at the Pioneer Memorial Theatre and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (Ashland, OR).

Her most recent publications include the article "Talkbacks for 'Sensitive Subject Matter' Productions: The Theory and Practice" in the *Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* and the upcoming publication of "'Translating' Shakespeare: A History of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* through the University of Utah and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's *Play on!* Project" in *Theatre History Studies*.

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Ms. Melonnie Walker is a dramaturg and social media coordinator for the August Wilson Society.



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Welcome to the Stage Review Section of the *August Wilson Journal*

By Patrick Maley

Associate Professor of English, Centenary University

The work of August Wilson comes alive most fully in the theater. A poet as much as a playwright, Wilson wrote dialogue with musicality and crafted worlds with texture and nuance. He has given to American theater both a gift and a great burden: his plays teem with potential, but a reaching their greatest heights relies on teams of theater professionals.

August Wilson Journal has a commitment to exploring and engaging with productions of August Wilson's work on stages across the country and the world. We would love to hear from scholars and advanced students of Wilson who are eager to respond to productions and share their views with the world of Wilson scholarship.

Our reviews strive to be short essays that engage with the productions as objects of analyses. Our reviewers are experts speaking to other experts. Reviews might consider the production and its approach within cultural, historical, political and aesthetic contexts, and might strive to contextualize the production within the play's performance history and traditions.

In short, performance reviews in *August Wilson Journal* intend to unite the fields of Wilsonian scholarship and Wilsonian theater with the goal of advancing all of our intellectual and aesthetic engagement with Wilson's work and legacy.



Patrick Maley

Author Bio

Dr. Patrick Maley is Association Professor of English at Centenary University where he teaches courses in Shakespeare, drama, classical literature, the history of the English language, and the Bible.



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Stage Review of *King Hedley II*

Two River Theater; Red Bank, New Jersey

Marion Huber Stage

November 10-December 16, 2018

Directed by Brandon Dirden

By Cameron Patrick Kelsall

Professional Theatre Critic

The decision to produce the play on the tiny Marion Huber Stage, which seats fewer than 100 people, drew the audience into the action, causing them to eavesdrop for three sprawling hours.

— Cameron Patrick Kelsall

Abstract

A review of *King Hedley II* by August Wilson, staged at Two River Theater in Red Bank, New Jersey from November 10-December 16, 2018.

Keywords

August Wilson, King Hedley II, Brandon J. Dirden, Hill District, Reaganomics, Signature Theatre Company

King Hedley II bears a title that evokes Shakespearean grandeur. Wilson worked on a grand scale throughout his career, but *Hedley* seems particularly willing to wade into the messy questions of lineage, generational trauma, and an uncertain future. These themes occupy Wilson elsewhere in the Century Cycle, but they feel especially centered here, with characters who always have an eye cast toward the past.



Cameron Kelsall

Those backward glances may be a reaction to the uncertain times that form the play's setting. *King Hedley II* takes place in 1985, amidst the rise of Reaganomics and urban blight. But what may be more troubling than the reality of the country is the diminution of the community in Pittsburgh's Hill District, which no longer holds the vibrant snatches of life it retained even in the grimmest moments of earlier Wilson plays. Instead, "the people wandering all over the place," says the prophetic Stool Pigeon in the prologue. "They got lost. They

don't even know the story of how they got from tit to tat."

Brandon J. Dirden's intimate production for Two River Theater (Red Bank, New Jersey) answered the question of how the Hill District got from tit to tat with middling success. The decision to produce the play on the tiny Marion Huber Stage, which seats fewer than 100 people, drew the audience into the action, causing them to eavesdrop for three

sprawling hours. It reminded the observer that a sense of history hinges on bonds between people, even in grand-scale works.

Dirden, a fine Wilson actor in his own right, returned to Two River after directing *Seven Guitars* in 2015. (The company has produced five of Wilson's plays since 2012, with plans to complete the full cycle.) His production created a visual world that communicates the playwright's sense of downmarket American life in the mid-eighties. Michael Carnahan's set, dotted with fading Reagan campaign posters and rocky patches of dirt, suggested the crumbling society at the play's core. The two houses at the center, occupied by King (Blake Morris) on one side and Stool Pigeon (Brian D. Coats) on the other, looked proud but worn, like a boxer struggling to find his footing after a knockout punch.

Most of the production's action took place between the houses, with the characters considering how they ended up in this particular spot. *King Hedley II* serves as a companion to *Seven Guitars*, with some character overlap and similarities among the protagonists. Although King's nominal father Hedley appears in *Seven Guitars*, he shares more in common with Floyd Barton, the tragic bluesman whose life and death form the play's narrative. Both men spent time in prison and returned to a changed world where their ambitions couldn't easily be achieved, no matter how they strived. Both men felt caged by their place in society, even while technically free.

But where Floyd operated with smoothness, King leads with unapologetic rage. His ire rises to volcanic levels over seemingly insignificant matters. This presents a challenge that Dirden and Morris didn't always meet. The operatic emotional scale can seem almost comical in its overstatement, but when a production gets it right – as Derrick Sanders' staging for Signature Theatre Company did in 2007 – it's downright terrifying. But Morris, who tended to deliver his lines with breakneck haste, only located King's blinding anger, with little sense of the suffering and disappointment underpinning it. There was little sense of King as the quasi-religious figure Wilson intended, as the repeated image of a halo around his head failed to make the right poignant, metaphorical impression.

That balance of realism and spirituality failed to register throughout Dirden's production. Kathy A. Perkins's high-key lighting literally bleached away the sense of nuance and ambiguity (it also suggested that most scenes take place at exactly the same time every day, contradicting the text.) Stool Pigeon's prophecies came across more like unwanted insertions than necessary commentary tying beginning and end of the play together, largely because Dirden kept Coats separate from the main action. The impetus might have been to paint him as a holy figure existing outside society, but it caused a lack of gravity in crucial moments – as when he announces Aunt Ester's death, which also represents the true death of the community.

This caused the play to dip uncomfortably into melodrama – reinforced by one-note performances from Elain Graham (as Ruby, King's mother) and Brittany Bellizeare (as Tonya, King's long-suffering wife). Wilson gave each woman a rich backstory, which Dirden largely ignored in favor of outsized characterization and overstated line readings. The choice to portray them as semi-comic, almost stock figures severely limited the female perspective of the play – and it dissipated the power of its denouement, which finds King dying by his mother's hand.

It is perhaps not inaccurate to call *King Hedley II* melodrama – the word, after all, derives from a Greek root meaning music. Like so many of Wilson's works, even when no character actually sings, the poetry hums to a rhythmic beat. Here, the characters lived in prose. The audience came to understand how the Hill got to be a place “all grown over with weeds,” as Stool Pigeon describes the once-clear path to Aunt Ester's home. But for a play the balances grace and grit, the telling lacked majesty.

[Editor's Note: This production marks the halfway point in Two River Theater's commitment to stage all ten plays of August Wilson's American Century Cycle.]

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Author Bio

Mr. Cameron Patrick Kelsall is a theater critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Broad Street Review*. He is also an editor and contributor for the website *Exeunt NYC*, where he writes about the theater scene in New York City.

Production Photos

All Photos by T. Charles Erickson



Blake Morris (King Hedley II) and Harvey Blanks (Elmore)



Brittany Bellizeare (Tonya)



Blake Morris (King Hedley II)



Elain Graham (Ruby)



*Charlie Hudson III (Mister) and
Brian D. Coats (Stool Pigeon)*



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Stage Review of *Gem of the Ocean*

Round House Theatre; Bethesda, Maryland

November 28-December 30, 2018

Directed by Timothy Douglas

By Leticia Ridley

Master's Candidate, University of Maryland, College Park

The wooden planks that covered the stage, including the high ceilings and the back wall adorned with candles, captured the magnitude of its presence within the community and the mysticism that sits inside of it.

– Leticia Ridley

Abstract

A review of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, staged at the Round House Theatre in Bethesda, Maryland, from November 28-December 30, 2018.

Keywords

August Wilson, Gem of the Ocean, Timothy Douglas, Goodman Theatre, Round House Theatre

Round House Theatre's production of *Gem of the Ocean* exemplified the brilliance, artistry, and significance of August Wilson's work in the American theater. Produced fifteen years after its original production at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, *Gem* resonated with American audiences, not only by artfully grappling with the effects of American Slavery and the unfulfilled promises of emancipation, but also by reminding us of the persistent ways that the law continues to overpolice and regulate Black life. Wilson's characters dramatize how African American history can simultaneously empower and confine the Black community, a sentiment best described by Solly Two Kings's question: "What is freedom if you can't do nothing with it?" Staged on a traditional proscenium, the production reinforced the audience's role as voyeurs of the lives of these characters—complemented aptly by the historically credible costuming—that situated us to the post-emancipation era.



Leticia Ridley

Under the direction of Timothy Douglas, a frequent director of Wilson's work (he has directed nine of Wilson's American Century Cycle plays at major US regional theatres), Round House's production captured the specificity and musicality in Wilson's rich dialogue. The lush language of Wilson became specifically activated during the scene where Citizen attempted to voice his attraction to Black Mary. As Citizen Barlow and Black

Mary, Justin Weaks and Stori Ayers captured the texture of their characters. This could primarily be seen through Citizen's muttered and breathy speech or in Black Mary's swift and stoic responses to Citizen's words of affection.

The wooden planks that covered the stage, including the high ceilings and the back wall adorned with candles, captured the magnitude of its presence within the community and the mysticism that sits inside of it. Douglas also masterfully grasped the camaraderie among these characters and the refuge that they take with one another, capturing an important implicit claim of *Gem*: that sanctuary is not merely a physical, but is also a community of people. This is best reflected in the action taken collectively by the residents and visitors of the house to help Solly escape from Caesar. While the production represented the largeness of 1839 Wylie Avenue through its design choices, the direction solidified the notion that Aunt Ester's home is not entirely immune from the intrusion of outside forces. Instead, it is the relationships built inside of the house that protect its residents. Solly, played charismatically by Alfred Wilson, showed this most explicitly. Alfred Wilson infused Solly with humor and conviction. Recounting his and Eli's past helping runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad, Wilson hit the gravity of this horrific history of American enslavement while also maintaining the play's comedic moments.

The antithesis to Solly is Caesar Wilks, the proclaimed "boss man" of the Hill District. KenYatta Rogers' embodiment of Caesar reflected the intensity of the character. Each movement and action made by Rogers offered access to the interiority of Caesar. The rigid and upright posture of Rogers throughout the performance magnified the authority that Caesar feels he must enforce in order to lift himself above others. Rogers imbued Caesar with complexity, a difficult feat for the antagonist of the play. Douglas's direction, alongside the other production elements such as Kasey Hendricks' props, reinforced the idea that the interconnectedness of the lives of these characters cannot be separated from one another. For example, Solly's walking stick is introduced as an aid to help Solly get around and an instrument to avoid captivity by Caesar. But it serves its most significant function as Citizen assumes the walking stick after Solly's death, signaling his deliberate choice to carry Solly's legacy. Each prop designed by Hendricks was impressively incorporated into the production.

Throughout the play, Wilson conjures ancestral links through the figure of Aunt Ester (whose name, as critics often point out, conjures the sound of "ancestor"). The success of any production of *Gem* relies on the dynamic portrayal of Aunt Ester, a demand that actress Stephanie Berry fulfilled, if not exceeded. Berry's depiction embraced the assured ancestral knowledge with which Wilson infuses Aunt Ester, a wisdom she has gained from her experience of enslavement and African cosmology. Acting as an ancestral conduit and spiritual guide, it is only through Aunt Ester that Citizen Barlow can visit the City of Bones. Culminating the show's dramatic apex, Citizen's metaphysical journey to the City of Bones was the stand out moment of the production. Under the thoughtful direction and choreography of Douglas, the quaint kitchen/dining area (designed by Tony Cisek), became engulfed in ethereal, blue light (designed by Andrew R. Cissna), while Black Mary, Eli, and Solly sung (accompanied by original music of Justin Ellington) and served as witnesses and support for Citizen's journey. Weaks captured the pain in confronting and experiencing the harsh conditions of the Middle Passage. After Citizen confesses that he stole the nails, the stage illuminated with candles that had been out of site for the majority of the performance as he experienced the reverence and beauty of the City of Bones. Engulfed with this new knowledge, Citizen's soul has been cleansed and he returned to the celebratory song of his fellow witnesses.

The Round House production of *Gem of the Ocean* revived the potent legacy of enslavement that continues to structure the life of Wilson's characters, a thread continued throughout his American Century Cycle. Moreover, Wilson's play has further resonance for our current political climate, one that has witnessed an ever-proliferating increase of

violent, racialized attacks on Black people and other marginalized communities in the United States. Accordingly, Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* offers us a timely instruction to take up the respective calls of our ancestors and continue to fight for Black liberation, freedom, and life.

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Author Bio

Ms. Leticia Ridley is a second year M.A. student in Theatre and Performance Studies of University of Maryland, College Park. She is a playwright, dramaturg, and scholar with interests include Black theatre and Performance, American Popular Culture, and Black Feminism with an emphasis on the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality.



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Stage Review of *Fences*

Cincinnati Shakespeare Company
 Otto M. Budig Theater; Cincinnati Ohio
 January 25-February 16, 2019
 Directed by Christopher V. Edwards

By Graley Herren

Professor of English, Xavier University

The dramaturgical danger for any production of Fences is that the play will collapse into anticlimax, ending not with a bang but a whimper...

— Graley Herren

Abstract

A review of *Fences* by August Wilson, staged by the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company at the Otto M. Budig Theater in Cincinnati, Ohio from January 25-February 16, 2019.

Keywords

August Wilson, Fences, Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, Christopher Edwards, Raisin in the Sun, "ranney"

For over a quarter-century now, the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company has been staging some of the most provocative plays in the city. Alternating between productions of Shakespeare, non-Shakespearean classics, and creative stage adaptations of works from other media, "Cincy Shakes" (as we locals prefer to call it) is a sparkling jewel in the theatrical crown of the Queen City. On January 25, 2019, I attended the opening night of *Fences*, the company's first attempt at an August Wilson play.

Director Christopher V. Edwards brought back much of the cast from his successful 2017 production of *A Raisin in the Sun* and added in a star turn from the performer known simply as "ranney," in his CSC debut as the indomitable, infuriating, intoxicating Troy Maxson. Scenic Designer Shannon Moore gave the performers the perfect set to work with, and Edwards chose to make the backstairs the focal point of the production. Characters were constantly bounding up and down these rickety steps, shuttling to and fro between the packed-dirt backyard and the cozy kitchen, as if crossing a bridge out of the cruel world that oppresses and denies them and into a domestic sanctuary that welcomes and revitalizes their flagging spirits. Installed as gatekeeper of this liminal threshold sat Troy Maxson, a king of shreds and patches on his hard-scrabble throne, at once the defender of the family home and the chief threat against



Graley Herren

it. Sometimes “ranney” sprawled out on these stairs, slugging back gin and regaling us with hilarious tall-tales. Other times he crouched and scowled like a hell-hound ready to pounce. And sometimes “ranney” sang. Damn, can that man sing! He sang the tunes marked as such in the script, but he also discovered music in other passages masquerading as prose. “ranney”’s voice was a catalyst for revelation, reintroducing me to this familiar play in completely unexpected ways.

First a damning confession: I have never liked the song “Old Blue” in *Fences*. I mean, I get its function in the play. The song is a family heirloom passed down through the generations like the piano in *The Piano Lesson*. Lyrically the song makes sense. Reportedly composed by Troy’s father, though in fact Wilson’s variation of an old American folk song, “Old Blue” links Troy to his youth and his sharecropping roots in the rural South. Troy identifies with Blue, not just because he is “worked like a dog” and dehumanized at times by his experiences up North in industrial Pittsburgh, but also because Troy shares Blue’s persistence and resilience. I get all that. I’ve just never heard the song delivered in ways that make it very effective musically *as a song*. I do appreciate the rhythm and musicality in



Fences at Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, 2019

Wilson’s work, his great ear for dialogue and his deep inspiration from the blues. That’s why it is always disappointing how flat “Old Blue” routinely falls in productions I’ve seen. For all their considerable talents, these past Troys just didn’t have the chops to pull it off. Then I heard “ranney” sing the blues. His sonorous voice is charismatic and alluring, and he slowed the song down more than I’ve ever heard before. *Oh*. I can hear it now. “Old Blue” is not chiefly about the lyrics at all. Forget the words and the symbolism and the foreshadowing. It’s aural alchemy. The song is a time machine.

I am not merely complimenting “ranney” for having a good voice and knowing how to sing the blues, though he certainly deserves that much credit and more. I’m talking instead about the way his vocal delivery helped safe-crack my appreciation for the integral part “Old Blue” plays in *Fences*. The song went from being a heavy-handed contrivance to serving as the glue which binds together the final scene. That scene needs glue: it’s always on the verge of falling to pieces. There is of course the notorious difficulty of figuring out how to actualize Wilson’s inscrutable stage directions when Gabriel (somehow!) opens the gates of heaven (a herculean task tackled with wounded dignity by Geoffrey Warren Barnes II). But the abiding challenge throughout the requiem is how to sustain momentum now that Troy is dead and gone, the pumping heart of the play stilled, and the animating life force conspicuously silent and absent. The dramaturgical danger for any production of *Fences* is

that the play will collapse into anticlimax, ending not with a bang but a whimper. What fully restored the life force of CSC's *Fences* was the reprise of "Old Blue," first sung solo by Cory (a gripping performance by Crystian Wiltshire), and then in duet with Raynell (an utterly captivating debut by Morgan Olivia Reynolds). Again, the song has always served a clear purpose here, almost too obviously so. Cory announces he will boycott Troy's funeral; Rose can't talk him out of it (though the enchanting Torie Wiggins could coax water from a stone); then brother and sister sing their dead father's song, and it gives Cory the peace he needs to pay his final respects to Troy. So much for functionality. However, because the song has always fallen flat for me *as a song*, I've always had trouble accepting it as a vehicle capable of bearing the weight of such an epiphany. Not so this night at CSC, where the song opened up the play and the gates of heaven for me.

Chris Edwards's direction snatched the scene outside of naturalism for a moment. Cory and Raynell stared straight at each other in all seriousness, without either character seemingly willing it or expecting it, and without a touch of the aw-isn't-that-sweet sentimentality which sabotages this encounter in lesser productions. In this moment and through this song they channeled the spirit of dead Troy and raised him from the dead. These praise-singers echoed "ranney's" trademark cadences and slow delivery, casting a musical trance. They allowed me to finally hear what I'd been deaf to before, what I suppose had been lying dormant in the play all along. Troy's song isn't just his bridge to the past but also a premonition of the future. I don't mean that in a broad generic sense of knowing that, like all of us, he will die someday. What I mean is that "Old Blue" functions sonically and temporally much like the backstairs function spatially, as a liminal threshold, crossing dimensions and connecting worlds. When Troy sings the song earlier in the play, he is channeling that future moment when his children will sing his funeral dirge. And when Cory and Raynell later revive the song in duet, they are serving as instruments of resurrection, giving Troy life again by allowing him to sing through his descendants. *Oh*. So Troy is *not* absent from the final scene. We can't see him, but we can hear him if his song is sung right and if we know how to listen. That's the long-deferred lesson this Cincy Shakes production finally taught me. What a magical, transformative, redemptive revelation.

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Author Bio

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A Stage Review of *Radio Golf*: New African Grove Completes the Cycle

New African Grove Theatre Company
South Fulton Arts Center; College Park, Georgia
July 13-22, 2018
Directed by Natasha Young

By Christopher Bell
Associate Professor of English, University of North Georgia

*... it can be difficult to train performers in the demanding
rigors of Wilson's language.*

– Keith Franklin, Artistic Director

Abstract

A stage review of August Wilson's *Radio Golf* at the New African Grove Theatre Company in College Park, Georgia, July 2018.

Keywords

August Wilson, Radio Golf, New African Grove Theatre, Pittsburgh, American Century Cycle, William Shakespeare, David Mamet, Natasha Young, Keith Franklin, Nic Starr

August Wilson most certainly would have appreciated the performance of *Radio Golf* by the New African Grove Theatre Company on July 21, 2018, which took place at the South Fulton Arts Center in College Park, Georgia, which is a former public school. The location is fitting, as it reflects Wilson's own nascent work with Black Horizons, a community theater he helped found in the late 1960s that was dedicated to raising the consciousness of the black populace and whose performance space was the A. Leo Weil Elementary School on Centre Avenue. New African Grove is also a small community theater committed, according to the company's Artistic Director Keith Franklin, to staging plays centered on the African diaspora. And while Wilson's work has reached the heights of Broadway and London's West End, his work centers on characters struggling day to day to have their voices heard and dignity recognized, much like the tireless efforts of this small outfit that stages shows for a peak audience of eighty. What Wilson would have found most delightful about this New African Grove performance is that it marked the company's completion of the entire American Century Cycle, one of the few theaters in the country to accomplish this feat.



Chris Bell

I asked Franklin what the most difficult part of completing the cycle was. He said that because the company draws many actors from the community it can be difficult to train

performers in the demanding rigors of Wilson's language. These performers are in some ways more obligated to that aspect of the playwright's work, as the set and costuming are constrained by a limited budget, not to mention the South Fulton Arts Center stage is tiny. The director for this production, Natasha Young, also points out with a chuckle that the actors' compensation is meager, not even "What would allow anyone to go on a shopping spree." These actors and the crew are truly dedicated to bringing August Wilson's voice to the community and that dedication was evident in the production.

It's the connection to the characters, a community of people forgotten by the city of Pittsburgh and largely unknown to the world outside the city, that New African Grove captured in its performance of *Radio Golf*. When asked what was most satisfying about completing the American Century Cycle, Young said it was "the joy of knowing that we have provided a service to the community." That service is honoring the legacy of August Wilson, himself a fifteen-year-old high school dropout who eventually left the troubled streets of his youth to become one of America's great playwrights, but took the mostly ignored members of the Hill District community with him and put them on stage.

As noted, the New African Grove performers showed great care for Wilson's work. Nic Starr in particular stood out as Sterling, playing the role with an abundance of humor. When needed, however, the actor, a physically imposing man, convinces the audience that Sterling is a threat to Harmond and Roosevelt, two businessmen whose current venture includes a plan to tear down a house they purchased illegally from its rightful owner, Old Joe Barlow. When Sterling learns of this plan, Starr turns off the charm and becomes threatening, bearing down on the other characters: "If you fuck with Mr. Barlow's house . . . if you move one goddam pebble . . . you gonna have to answer to me on the battlefield." As the lights come down on the first act with these lines, the audience audibly exhaled, clearly moved by Starr's sudden turn in demeanor.

Sterling's main target becomes Roosevelt, and Paris Crayton plays the latter character how Wilson draws him, as an overly ambitious businessman who only cares about how much money he can stack in a metaphorical wheelbarrow. Roosevelt has some of the most unseemly lines in Wilson's drama, such as his dressing down of Sterling, after the latter accuses of Roosevelt of holding back the black community by not giving back to it, despite his obvious means to do so: "It's not my fault your daddy's in jail, your mama's on drugs, your little sister's pregnant and the kids don't have any food 'cause the welfare cut off the money . . . Get up off your ass . . . quit stealing . . . get a job . . . pay your taxes." While none of these things are true for Sterling and are horrific sweeping generalizations of the black community itself, Crayton delivered them as needed, with the conviction of the character himself, one who glances at a person once and believes he can tell the individual's entire history.

In the middle of the fray stands Franklin, the aforementioned artistic director of New Grove, who plays Harmond, the play's protagonist. An ambitious man, Harmond seeks to revitalize the run-down Hill District with his business plan, while simultaneously running for mayor. Ultimately, Harmond decides neither the commercial venture or mayoral candidacy is worth more than Old Joe being allowed to keep his house. Although Franklin plays Harmond as initially bewildered as he loses control of his business and political aspirations, he later turns decidedly defiant. When Roosevelt tells Harmond he plans to purchase the controlling stake in Bedford Hills and will use a white man's financial backing as a silent partner, Harmond calls Roosevelt, a lifelong friend, "The shuffling, grinning nigger in the woodpile." Franklin perfectly captures the character's disgust. The actor also convincingly shows that Harmond is a changed man at the end of the play, one who relishes the opportunity to stand with a group of local activists, led by Sterling, protesting the imminent destruction of Old Joe's House.

New African Grove's performance of *Radio Golf* was splendid. More importantly, that the production served as the company's completion of August Wilson's American Century Cycle seems fitting. The play stresses that black leaders are needed to fight for the

community, not strip it of its vitality, as Roosevelt attempts to do. The work is Wilson's most overtly political drama, and, as the last play he composed before his death in 2005, it serves as a reminder that the playwright's first experiences were with a community theater that sought to raise the consciousness of the black community. The dramatist would have been pleased to know of a similar troupe so dedicated to presenting his work to that same community, which, despite its financial limitations, has managed to complete all ten of his magnificent plays in fine fashion.

And what's in store next for New African Grove? It plans to start a second run of the American Century Cycle, beginning with *Gem of the Ocean* in July of 2019.

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Author Bio

Dr. Christopher Bell is Associate Professor of English at the University of North Georgia where he teaches courses in American Literature, African American Literature, and World Drama.



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A Status Update on August Wilson House¹

By Christopher Rawson

*Professor Emeritus, University of Pittsburgh
Theater Critic, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Officer, August Wilson House*

We expect August Wilson House to repay a debt to the Hill.

– Christopher Rawson

Abstract

August Wilson House strives to preserve the legacy of August Wilson by sponsoring and supporting such efforts as the annual Hill District Birthday Block Party, backyard productions of August's plays in collaboration with Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre, and Visiting Fellowships in collaboration with Pittsburgh universities, such as the initial partnership with Duquesne University.

Keywords

August Wilson, Daisy Wilson, August Wilson House, Bedford Avenue, Hill District, Paul Ellis, Rob Pfaffmann, Denzel Washington, Visiting Fellowships

For years, 1727 Bedford Avenue sat as a rebuke to Pittsburgh—derelict, crumbling, windows rotting. Visiting theater artists and other pilgrims were shocked at Pittsburgh's seeming indifference to the childhood home of a great American. Born Freddy Kittel, he is known as August Wilson.

But behind the scenes, the Daisy Wilson Artist Community, Inc., named for the mother to whom he gave credit for teaching him to read when he was four and raising him with tough love, was in formation, led by August's lawyer nephew Paul Ellis and well-known preservationist architect Rob Pfaffmann. A board of directors was formed. August Wilson House (AWH) was landmarked at the local, state and national level, and it gradually raised the early funds that allowed stabilization of what would have otherwise been bulldozed into oblivion.

Starting in 2011 there were initial reconstruction projects—shoring up floors and walls, masonry patches, a temporary roof. In 2014 there was a careful reconstruction of the street façade. In 2016, there was restoration of the exterior to its appearance when August lived there, 1945-58. Severely deteriorated masonry was restored brick by brick. But the interior was still a jumble.

And then Denzel Washington came to town to film *Fences*, and he promised to raise the \$5 million necessary for the major reconstruction (which will involve a support

¹ Editor's note: Rawson explains that the intended style is to use "August Wilson House" without the "the" (capitalized or not). This aligns with other places that do not take a "the," such as Fenway Park, Hull House, Yale University.

building and other exterior work). He made this gift public at the AWH Ground Blessing ceremony last Sept. 26: it includes \$1 million each from him, Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry, and substantial six-figure amounts from Samuel & LaTanya R. Jackson, Stephanie Summers, Laurence Fishburne, Shonda Rhimes, Antoine Fuqua and John McClain (or their foundations). The capital fund was just further augmented by \$1 million from the R.K. Mellon Foundation.

Along the way there has also been steady support for pre-development, planning and stabilization both physical and operational from The Pittsburgh Foundation, Heinz Foundation, Hillman Family Foundations, African American Action Fund, McCauley Ministries plus other foundations and governmental programs, local, state and national—more than can fit in this brief status report. All this before starting a public campaign to support operations and programs so AWH won't suffer the fate of similar historic houses or small museums that open to fanfare and soon run out of funds.

While here in 1999, August visited his moldering childhood home, as the photo on this page shows. He said that if it were to be preserved, he hoped it would not be as a memorial but as "something useful." We consider that a compact between us. In addition, we've adopted a phrase of his: "Claim what is yours." We expect AWH to repay a debt to the Hill. It nurtured August and gave him the rich material for his plays, and in return the fame of its mid-20th century glory days has been revived. But AWH hopes to provide the Hill with something more substantial than that.

Programming began several years ago. The first signature program was an annual Birthday Block Party, which in its fourth year has become a Hill tradition which drew 100 vendors and close to 6,000 celebrants. The second was backyard productions of August's plays in collaboration with Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre, starting with *Seven Guitars* (imagined by August as taking place in that very backyard), followed by *King Hedley II* (which August imagined just down the block), and continuing this summer, if all the permits come through, with *Gem of the Ocean* staged at Aunt Ester's actual address, 1839 Wylie Avenue. The third major program is Visiting Fellowships in collaboration with Pittsburgh universities and other institutions. The inaugural fellowship, in partnership with Duquesne University, brought poet laureate Natasha Trethewey to the Hill. Future fellows in literature, art, theater or music will lean toward those younger, starting their careers.

This is a house. The spaces will be intimate, like the rooms in August's life and plays. In both, he tackled large questions of self-identity, racism and justice, but at their heart the plays dramatize conflicts between generations and within families. As a place to explore these cultural narratives, AWH will support literature and other arts on the personal scale that August first encountered them. The family's original two rooms will be as close to a memorial to Daisy and August as our compact with August will allow. By late 2020 or August's birthday in 2021, AWH will be open to both pilgrims and those drawn by workshops, roundtables, small classes, performances and, we hope, the kind of gatherings that ignited the artistic and social concerns of the young August Wilson, fired in the kiln of the Black Arts and Black Power movements of the 1960s.

We think August would find that useful.

Author Bio

A member of the board of directors of August Wilson House, Mr. Christopher Rawson is the senior theater critic at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* where he interviewed August Wilson and reviewed Mr. Wilson's plays throughout his career. An emeritus member of the University of Pittsburgh English Department, Rawson for many years has taught a full course in August Wilson. He and Laurence A. Glasco wrote and published *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in his Life and Plays* (2015).



The Ground Blessing in September, 2018, when Denzel Washington announced the funds he had raised. From left: Chris Rawson, Denise Turner, Rob Pfaffmann, Paul Ellis, Richard Butler, Sakina Ansari (August's daughter), Terri Baltimore, Mark Southers, Denzel Washington, Chuck Timbers.



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Part of the crowd of approximately 6,000 at the April 27, 2019 AWH Birthday Block Party.



*Curtain call for the 2016 production of *Seven Guitars* in the backyard of AWH, where the play is actually set.*

August Wilson House, Duquesne University, Nancy Beard Foundation Team Up to Support Emerging Artists through August Wilson Fellowship

By Laura E. Quain

*Duquesne University Master's Graduate
Corporate Communication and Integrated Marketing Communication*

Abstract

August Wilson House, Pittsburgh's Duquesne University and the Nancy Beard Foundation have partnered with to create a fellowship aimed at supporting scholars and artists of color, in an attempt to bring August Wilson's creative legacy "full circle."

Keywords

Duquesne University, August Wilson House, August Wilson Fellowship, Nancy Beard Foundation

In early 2018, a \$100,000 fellowship program was established between The August Wilson House and Duquesne University. The program will allow scholars and artists of color to engage in literary, cultural, and artistic expression that will both advance their own work and serve the interests of the university and the community, according to a Duquesne University press release. The fellowship is fully supported by a grant from the Nancy Jones Beard Foundation.

Beginning in fall 2018, the three-year grant allows two Duquesne University students per academic year to live as "scholars-in-residence" in a Duquesne University apartment, while developing their art, participating in research using university resources, developing presentations, teaching, and participating in educational events both on and off campus. All work created by students will be featured in Wilson's Hill District childhood home at 1727 Bedford Avenue.



Laura Quain

The program furthers Duquesne's partnership with The August Wilson House, in efforts to support education in the humanities. "This gift helps bring August Wilson's legacy full circle by honoring his extraordinary career while encouraging the work of great artists and scholars of the future," said Duquesne University President, Ken Gormley. "It allows the University to strengthen its engagement with the Hill District and its commitment to advancing the arts and culture in Western Pennsylvania."

The intention is that the home, which is currently being restored, serve as a community arts center and eventually house fellowship recipients. According to the August Wilson House website, the restoration project aims to celebrate the personal memory and community history of August and The Hill, celebrating Wilson's legacy by "advancing the art and culture of the African diaspora and impacting the cultural landscape." The two-room home, restored to its 1950s look, will become an "intimate interpretive site," with various rooms housing digital and audio displays and artifacts about Wilson's life and plays.

A series of small artist studios and community gathering spaces is also planned. Outside space will be used for annual productions of the American Century Cycle plays, perhaps "growing into a biennial August Wilson Festival."

Through the August Wilson Visiting Fellowships, both local and national artists and scholars will be provided immersive work, research, and community exchange opportunities in return for partnering with Hill District organizations and Pittsburgh arts groups and universities. Ultimately, the Wilson House will be a catalyst in the Hill's re-emergence, linking with other Hill institutions (some being restored themselves) into a network of revival.

According to Sairah Aslam, a staff writer for *The Duquesne Duke*, the fellowship was created to help relieve some of the uncertainties associated with artistic endeavors by providing a platform through which underrepresented artists can showcase their work to the Duquesne community, the Hill District, the City of Pittsburgh and beyond. The partnership works to connect the work of emerging artists to the legacy left by Wilson. "As a young artist, he [August] didn't receive the support he deserved," said Paul A. Ellis, Jr., executive director and general counsel of the August Wilson House, and Wilson's nephew. "This program will allow fellows to work in the same community as August [did] and draw inspiration from it to create immersive and enduring work."

The first fellow, Natasha Trethewey, was announced in September 26, 2018. Trethewey is a poet and Pulitzer Prize recipient, has served twice as the Poet Laureate of the United States, and is currently a Board of Trustees Professor of English at Northwestern University, according to a Duquesne University press release. As Poet Laureate, Trethewey



Natasha Trethewey

held an official position, was expected to present one major poetic work, and to appear at certain national ceremonies. This announcement was a part of a ground-blessing ceremony at which Duquesne University President, Ken Gormley, joined actor/director Denzel Washington and area dignitaries at the August Wilson House. The event celebrated the completion of the first phase of fundraising toward restoration of the house. As of now, the founders of the fellowship plan to sustain the program for the first few years as is. They will eventually look towards expanding it both by the number of fellows and the type of work they do, according to Aslam.

According to Duquesne University media relations manager, Ken Walters, university Honors College students have held an active role in the refurbishment of the 1727 Bedford home since a strategic plan was developed in 2011. This has included developing effective programs, one of them being their annual block party in The Hill District, which usually happens on or around Wilson's birthday, April 27. By hosting the annual block party, organizers hope to bring the community together. Students also work in collaboration with the Daisy Wilson Artist Community, Inc., which was named after the playwright's mother, who created a home for her family in The Hill. There, August grew up inquisitive, loyal and an incessant reader, eventually becoming a Black Nationalist, then poet and playwright.

Professionally, Wilson won two "Best Drama" Pulitzer Prizes for his plays about the African-American experience in each decade of the 20th Century. Nine of his plays were set in Pittsburgh, with the exception of *Ma Rainey*. "This work changes our students' lives by encouraging them to look outward—the community is their classroom," said Kathleen Roberts, professor of communication and rhetorical studies and director of the Honors College at Duquesne University. "Students can develop a reverence for Wilson's work and also learn how their skills have a use beyond the profession they choose."

Additionally, students' skills benefited The August Wilson House outside of refurbishment, as they worked to create the organization's website and Facebook pages, planning events, engaging with other community groups, and developing sponsorship opportunities. According to the Honors College website, participating students analyze the needs of a community near Duquesne University; select and carry out a project that will meet an important community need and contribute to their own academic growth; reflect on their experience and examine their work in light of what others have written about civic engagement and service-learning; and document their project, studies, and reflections to assist others who are interested in forging links between universities and communities. Each semester, Duquesne students engage in a social justice seminar wherein they work together to improve or call attention to the social problems of the Hill District.

According to the Daisy Wilson Artist Community website, the partnership aims to offer educational and service opportunities for Duquesne students and staff in The Hill District, promote the arts both at Duquesne University and in The Hill, preserve and advance the artistic legacy of August Wilson, and help The Hill community flourish.

The 2012 Honor Seminar students sought to outline a plan for the Signature Partnership of the Duquesne University Honors College and The Daisy Wilson Artist Community over a five-year period from 2012-17. The plan addresses three main goals: the reintroduction and promotion of the arts will revitalize the culture of Pittsburgh's Hill District, preservation of the August Wilson Boyhood Home to help preserve August Wilson's legacy and philosophy, and academic and service opportunities to strengthen connections between Duquesne University and the Hill District.

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Bibliography for *August Wilson Journal*: Spring 2019

Compiled by Thomas Addington

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Keywords

August Wilson, Bibliography, 2016-2019

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Notes

Keywords

August Wilson, Pittsburgh Cycle, Century Cycle, American Century Cycle, Constanza Romero, August Wilson Estate

Note #1

American Century Cycle

This note relates to the Journal's terminology involving the cycle of ten plays that August Wilson wrote commonly known as the "Pittsburgh Cycle" or the "Century Cycle." At the 2018 August Wilson Society Colloquium held at the August Wilson Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Constanza Romero, August's widow and coordinator of the August Wilson Estate, said to the group that her preference, going forward, is that the phrase "August Wilson's American Century Cycle" be used to refer to those ten plays. Being Pittsburghers, David and I you both love the term, "Pittsburgh Cycle," but we also understand that it is not entirely accurate as *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is set in Chicago. Therefore, all references to Wilson's cycle in the *August Wilson Journal* will be standardized as the "August Wilson American Century Cycle," "August Wilson's American Century Cycle," or shortened to "American Century Cycle."



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