



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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