

\$3.95 August/September 2000

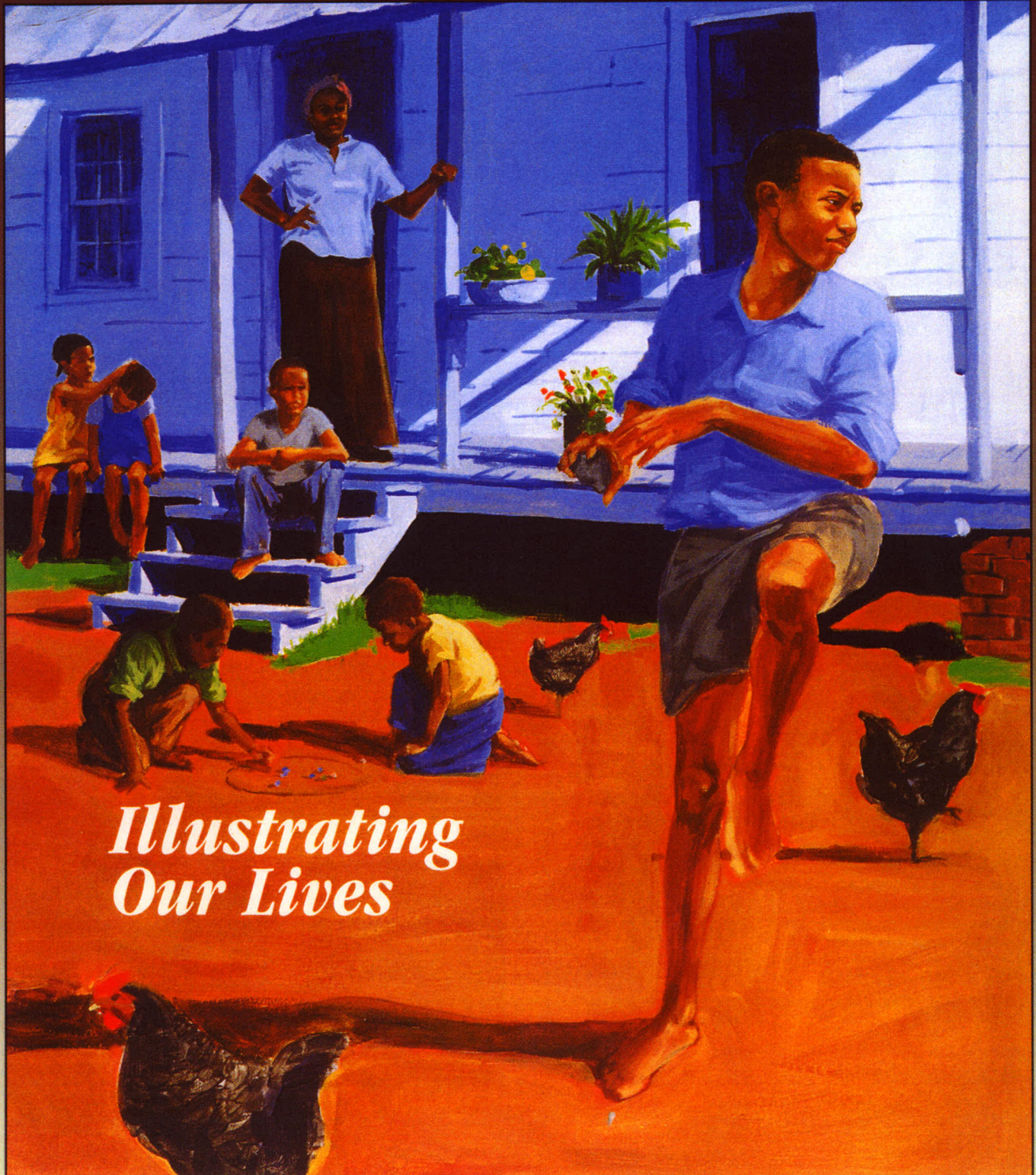
THE MAGAZINE OF AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE

American Visions

Millennium Portrait/Playwright August Wilson

Books/A Bountiful Fall Harvest

Music/Celebrating a Century of Louis Armstrong



*Illustrating
Our Lives*



MILLENNIUM PORTRAIT



AUGUST WILSON

AUGUST WILSON: THE PEOPLE'S PLAYWRIGHT

by Sharon Fitzgerald

The setting is the Edison Cafe, New York City. Located in the Broadway theater district, this 1920s grand-ballroom-turned-coffee-shop is one of playwright August Wilson's favorite haunts in Gotham. The clatter of meals being served and conversations taking place seems to suit him: Wilson has been known to write here, and it is also a spot where he enjoys receiving interviewers.

The unexcitable cafe staff is welcoming. In this homey, chandeliered, pink-and-white ode to lox, blintzes and gefilte fish, actors, producers and directors can be seen lunching, but Wilson's picture is on the wall: "On a Napkin in a Coffee Shop, Life Is Written (A Play, Too)" is the headline of a *New York Times* article about Wilson displayed prominently above an archway. A food critic's review in the restaurant's front window alerts theater fans that Wilson has his own table.

But though he can do no wrong at the Edison, New York City's indoor-smoking prohibition routinely forces Wilson, who prefers Marlboro Lights, onto the restaurant's sidewalk. Here, he indulges in a series of slow drags, observes passers-by, and reflects on dramatic events. Across the street from the Edison is the Barrymore Theatre, a pivotal location in black culture. The first play written by an African American to appear on Broadway, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, debuted there in 1959. The third of Wilson's award-winning dramas, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, was presented on the Barrymore's stage 29 years later.

Left, playwright August Wilson revisiting his childhood home in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pa. Right, Tony Award winning actor Ruben Santiago Hudson in Seven Guitars.

©1995 Joan Marcus/Courtesy the Huntington Theatre Company



MILLENNIUM PORTRAIT



AUGUST WILSON

In the turf wars of American art, Wilson holds his own. It has been only 16 years since he arrived on Broadway with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and commenced his transfiguration of the *Great White Way*. Today, Wilson's voice—much like the voices of the characters he created in such plays as *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*—seems to have been ever present. Surely, the numerous Tony, Pulitzer and Drama Desk awards have marked his success as momentous. His assertions about the importance of black theater and the dangers of colorblind casting have initiated some of the artistic community's most volatile debates. However, Wilson's impact on the theater is composed of more enduring stuff: He listens to black people, grasps the language of our dreams and fears, and weaves all that he absorbs—both characters and conflicts—into art.

"For me, the primary focus should be the celebration and illumination of the culture," he says. "The culture has not always been valued; it certainly has not been valued by white America. In terms of the value and worth of the humanity of black folks, it has been sometimes very urgently and profoundly denied."

As poet-philosopher, Wilson is thoughtful, soft-spoken. His intuitive self blends easily with the Wilson who stands assured amid complexities, like a leader of troops: reserved, yet candid and approachable. The robust physique suggests more than just a 55-year-old intellectual's preference of ideas over workouts. Inside a form built to sustain powerful and passionate insights, a muse paces, leopard-like.

Despite fame and his move to Seattle in the

early 1990s, Wilson remains a brother from Pittsburgh. His no-humbag goatee is part W.E.B. Du Bois, part Amiri Baraka. He smiles to express happiness or amusement, not to assure others that he is friendly. His eyes, an astute pair of navigators, search everywhere for truth. His well-chosen words sweep through a conversation like a rebel tornado.

He is a five-star storyteller: He remembers people, places and attitudes, where he stood, how he felt, and what he learned about human nature. Some of his life's stories are told as one-man narratives; others are fully cast, but he enacts all of the parts. The rhythms and nuances of language are adhesives for his memories, and he uses them, as he always has, with delight and abandon. He was in second grade when

the word "breakfast" first caught his attention.

"I said, That's two words: 'break' and 'fast,'" Wilson recalls, "and then you put it together. I didn't know the word 'fasting' in terms of food, but I knew that it was two words. So I started trying to put words together and to make my own words. They looked like they were a foot high, and I would just climb up inside the words. On the way to school, there was a sign that said 'hospital,' and I just liked the way that looked, so I would spell it out.

"And then when you discovered that you could concretize your thoughts—that you could think something and that there was a system by which you could let people know what you were thinking—oh, what else was there? That's the greatest thing in the world. So I was concretizing my thoughts and then going: 'Here. That's what I was thinking.' It was just the words. That's how it started."

Around seventh grade, his affair with words took flight as the result of another love interest. "I discovered that words had a certain power, because I would write

Photo by Joan Marcus/Courtesy the Huntington Theatre Company



Actors Mel Winkler and L. Scott Caldwell in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Nancy Ireland poems, but I wouldn't sign my name to them," says Wilson. "I'd watch her: She'd read them and look over at Anthony Curvin. And I'd go: 'It works. That's okay, all I've got to do is sign my name the next time. Bye, Nancy; bye, Anthony. Catherine, how are you?' So I started writing poems for Catherine Moran, and I put my name to them. That was my beginning writing thing."

Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel, on April 27, 1945, and was raised in the area of Pittsburgh known as the Hill District. His African-American mother (nee Daisy Wilson) and German father (Frederick August Kittel) had six children: three boys and three girls. August was the fourth born and the oldest son. The community that influenced his early years included working-class people of various nationalities. Until high school, he attended Catholic schools alongside the children of European immigrants.

"The Hill District at that time was like a mixed neighborhood," Wilson recalls. "It was a lot of Syrians, Jews and other people who had not made their way into American society yet. They were sort of outcasts themselves, and so they lived in the community with the black folks."

"I grew up in a time when the community was a community. Everybody in the community was your social parent, and everyone knew everyone. I'd come home from school, and the parents would be sitting out on the steps, waiting for the kids to come home. They had gathered at the local store, stood around there and talked for hours and traded recipes: 'Oh, Daisy, what are you cooking today?' 'Oh, I'm cooking' That kind of stuff doesn't happen anymore."

According to Wilson, his father, a baker, was a "sporadic presence"

within the household. The family lived in a house situated behind the store, back in the alley, with its own backyard. Wilson's mother maintained the home's balanced atmosphere.

"We did family things together," says Wilson. "Like, Monday, at 7 o'clock, the rosary came on the radio, so we said the rosary. On Tuesday, *People Are Funny* came on at 7, and we sat down and listened to that. We played games. They had the Top 40, and we all picked a song. If your song got to be No. 1, you got a nickel. We'd listen and root for our song. ... I had a wonderful childhood."

He dropped out of high school at age 15, after a history teacher accused him of plagiarizing a 20-page paper on Napoleon. He spent the day after his exit playing basketball outside the principal's office window, hoping that the administrator would notice, investigate and allow him to plead his case; no one appeared. Wilson ended his formal education, positioned himself in the library, and began a self-directed period of study that lasted four years. By the end of this sojourn, he knew that he wanted to be a writer.

"Those were my learning years," he says. "I read everything and anything that I could get my hands on, things that interested me: Anthropology was one, cultural anthropology; theology was another."

I read books on furniture making. I read everything, novels, whatever.

"I have some holes in my education, but I always say, I know a little bit about everything. There are very few things that I don't know something about, and some things I know more about than others. When I was 20, I said, OK, I'm tired of the library. I wanted to go out in the world and find life learning—what kinds of things happened when you engaged life—so I did that."

These recollections are accompanied by warnings. "Walking around with 12 cents in your pocket and holes in your shoes, I don't recommend it," he says. "Fortunately, it turned out okay. It didn't have to turn out like this, but if it hadn't, I'd still be living somewhere, writing some stuff, carrying my little tablets around, doing the thing that I do. Because I found that it was a way to live my life, and it was a joyful way to live it. I've never regretted the decision to become a writer."

What Wilson brought to those early experiences—in addition to determination and a sense of adventure—was an exacting curiosity and that love of words. As he went in search of life lessons, the Hill District proved to be a worthy laboratory. He read *Home to Harlem*, in which Claude McKay describes a cigar shop in Pittsburgh



Keith Glover, Marion McClinton, August Wilson and John Henry Redwood on the Pittsburgh Public Theater set of *Fences*.

©2000 Bill Wade/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

MILLENNIUM PORTRAIT



AUGUST WILSON

called "Pat's Place," where railroad porters gathered. Wilson was excited by the reference and ventured to this outpost, looking for answers.

"There were these old guys standing around there, in their 70s—the elders of the community—and they were talking about all kinds of stuff: the news and politics, the paper," he recalls. "So I would just stand around and listen to them. I was just trying to learn something about life. I wasn't standing there thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to be a writer.' I was just there like, 'Hey, man, how did you get to be so old, 'cause it's hard out here.' I really wanted to know how they survived: 'How do you get to be 70 years old in America? Man, this is 1965, and you were born in 1890-something.'"

"So it was that kind of thing. I would just watch them. It was just fun to hang around there. They called me Youngblood: 'Hey, Youngblood.'"

It is easy to understand why, years later, as a dramatist, Wilson has chosen the Hill District as the backdrop for most of the 10 plays through which he hopes to examine, decade by decade, the 20th-century black experience. Community life represented a dynamic fusion of struggles, secrets, fantasies and strengths. The conversations that he heard and in which he participated supplied the foundation for the intimate dialogue characteristic of his plays. The intergenerational camaraderie that he encountered among black men fashioned his perceptions.

Wilson-the-playwright describes an exchange:

"One old guy called me to him one time because I had moved, and I had my little daughter, and he said, 'You moved?'"

"And I said, 'Yeah.'"

"And he said, 'You come back and visit?'"

"I said, 'Yeah.'"

"And he said, 'Well, I ain't going to be here when you come back,

but I've been watching you.'"

"And I go, 'Yes, sir.'"

"And he said, 'Yeah. You carrying around a 10-gallon bucket. You carry that 10-gallon bucket through life, and you gon' always be disappointed.' He said, 'Get you a little cup. Carry that through life. And that way, if somebody put a little bit in it, why you got sumpn. Yeah. That 10-gallon bucket ain't never gon' be full. You know?'"

"And I go, 'Yes, sir.'"

"He gave me a dollar or a quarter, told me goodbye, and I never saw him again. I think he was dying then; he was an old guy. But just from his observation of me, he was telling me, 'Man, ... you gon' always be disappointed with that 10-gallon bucket.' So I managed to cut it down to a gallon bucket, but I never did get the little cup."

The blues and the art of Romare Bearden are two of Wilson's acknowledged influences. Like them, his dramas take familiar conflicts and metaphors and create testaments to the might of everyday black people. Do we go through life carrying a 10-gallon bucket or settle for a cup? The enduring gift of his plays has been the knowing way in which they have exposed us at such crossroads while making clear our humanity.

In *Fences*, Troy, the play's protagonist, towers above the dreams of his son, Cory; meanwhile, his devoted wife, Rose, realizes that she can exist only by assenting to her own values. In *The Piano Lesson*, the arrival from the South of a restless brother, Willie Boy, at the home of his long-suffering sister, Bernice, unleashes a host of ancestral phantoms, provides an occasion for forgiveness, and catalyzes a

re-evaluation of the meaning of inheritance.

Wilson's artistry has been shaped by the tones of particular eras, while his ear for our truths has prevailed. We cannot help feeling at home. Upon entering a theater in which a Wilson play is to be performed, the audience does not wait blankly on the other side of a curtain. Instead, on a dark and open stage, one recognizes the landscape of the tale. Wilson's characters have bared their souls in a living room, a diner, a kitchen, a recording studio, a taxi stand and several backyards. All settings have been enclosed enough to house the telling of jokes, dreams and secrets, but spacious enough to inspire each character's turmoil and growth.

Wilson the poet, sparked by an activist's spirit, discovered the theater in the late 1960s. He was determined to counter the denial of black culture by creating an arena for social and political dialogue. "I wrote poetry and short fiction," he says. "I sort of stumbled into playwriting because a good friend of mine was a director, and his best friend was a writer who wasn't writing plays, so he just kept after me."

Wilson and that director friend, Rob Penny, opened the Black Horizons Theatre in Pittsburgh in 1968. Although the stage was set, Wilson the dramatist was not yet ready to emerge. "After we had the theater, I tried to write a play," he recalls. "And I remember that I had two characters, and one guy said, 'Hey, man, what's happening?' And the other guy said, 'Nothing.' Then I sat there for 20 minutes, trying to figure out what to do, and I couldn't."

"So I said: 'All right, I don't have to write plays. Rob can write plays. I'm a director. I'm a poet, anyway.' I never even thought about writing a play then."

Wilson was no more prepared to become a director, but when he was drafted to direct, he forged ahead. "I said, 'I will,' because I knew where the library was at," he

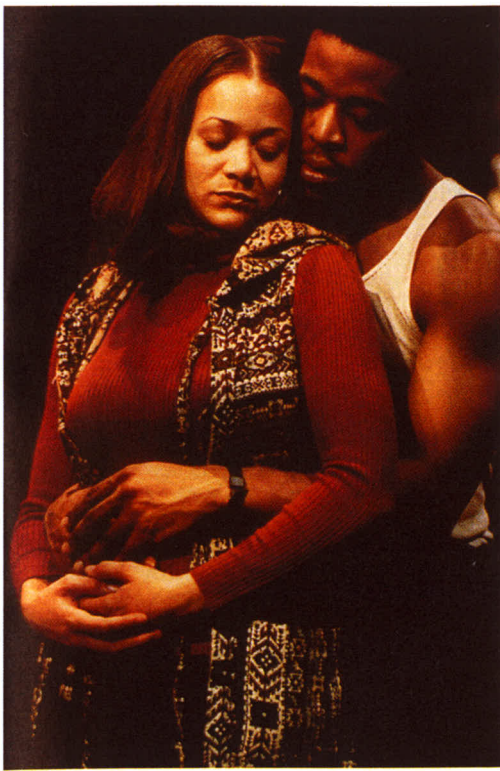


Photo by T. Charles Erickson/Courtesy the Huntington Theatre Company

Actors Russell Hornsby and Michole Briana White in *Jitney*.

recalls. "I knew that I could go to the library and get a book on how to direct a play. I went and found a book called *The Fundamentals of Play Directing*."

The theater company's first efforts were raw, but the audiences were enthusiastic and Wilson was hooked. "It let me know what the importance of theater was," he says, "how theater was a powerful conveyor of cultural values. Theater was a tool that you could use to disseminate information. You can do the same thing if you have control of a television station, but we didn't have that. But we had a vehicle to attract people: They'd sit in the seats and get information that they otherwise wouldn't have gotten, in an entertaining way."

He moved to St. Paul, Minn., in the late 1970s and worked as a scriptwriter for the anthropology division of the Science Museum of Minnesota. "I was adapting tales from the Northwest Indians and things of that sort," he says.

It was during this period that Wilson's ear allied itself with his pen: "The big thing I learned was to value and respect the way that black people talk; I'd thought that in order to create art out of it that you had to change it. It was Sékou

Touré who said that language describes the idea of the one who speaks it. That told me that you can have different language because you have different people, and they're describing the idea. I realized that there was nothing wrong with the way black folks talked; in fact, it was much more interesting to me than the so-called white dialog was."

Between 1978 and 1979, he wrote *Jitney*, the play that had its off-Broadway debut last spring. He started submitting his work to the selection committee of the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Conn. That program, a haven for developing playwrights, was under the artistic directorship of Lloyd Richards—then the dean of Yale University's Drama School and artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theater. Richards was also the first black director to take a play (*A Raisin in the Sun*) to Broadway (see *American Visions*, August/September 1998). Wilson's first two entries were rejected, but he was accepted with the third, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

"It was at the O'Neill that I learned how to rewrite a play," says Wilson. "The few plays that I had written, I'd written in a vacuum. During that first year I learned that the play doesn't jump out of your head full-blown, perfectly, that most often it needs a lot of improvement. It also was important to know that I could play at that level—on a national playing field, so to speak."

Wilson's summers at the O'Neill are now legendary. Even as he honed his craft, word of an exciting new talent was emanating from Waterford and spreading within the Broadway community. Producers visiting the conference were taken by *Ma Rainey's* blues-driven overtones, by Wilson's melodic approach to pain and revelation. It would be nearly a year before Wilson and Richards connected anew, as playwright and director,

and began a collaboration that spanned 15 years and brought five plays to the stage. When the first of these, *Ma Rainey*, reached Broadway, in 1984, Wilson—the-poet-activist-storyteller became known as one of the most outstanding American playwrights.

Yet being considered a leading dramatist has not fulfilled Wilson's ambition: His goal is to help set the records straight. By approaching his plays, as well as the black experience, as a dramatic continuum, he ensures that no period of our growth is forgotten. "There is no idea that cannot be contained by black life," he says. "Whether you are writing about love, honor, duty, betrayal, et cetera, you can find all of those universal things within the context of black American life."

"I simply look at a particular decade and see what, to my mind, was the largest idea that confronted blacks during that decade and try to write a story, a play, about that, to illustrate those flash points of American history and cultural history."

Telling our own stories in our own ways and in our own language means the world to Wilson. When shown a 1926 article from *The Crisis* on the then-incipient Negro Theater in Harlem, he identified with editor Du Bois' sense of advocacy. "If you look back at the history," Wilson says, "a lot of the so-called Negro plays of the '20s and '30s were written by white authors who took the custodianship of the Negro experience as though Negroes did not have their own voice, so a theater by us and about us is a theater that I embrace. I think it should be about, made up out of, black culture: the rituals of social intercourse, the manners of black people and all the other aspects of our culture. We should use that as the fabric, the material, with which we make art."

Sharon Fitzgerald is senior editor of American Visions.