

# South Coast Repertory

Playgoer's guide to



by **August Wilson**  
Directed by **Seret Scott**

**Barbara & Bill Roberts, Honorary Producers**

Prepared by Kelly L. Miller  
Production Dramaturg & Literary Manager

# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**Part I: THE PLAY**

**Part II: THE PLAYWRIGHT**

**Part III: THE PRODUCTION**

**Part IV: CONTEXT FOR THE PLAY**

**Part V: RESOURCES**

# Part I: THE PLAY

## Wilson Play Like Listening to the Blues

by Linda Sullivan Baity

**T**roy Maxson has spent his entire life trapped behind fences he cannot scale. He is a man at once proud and humiliated, hopeful and disillusioned, passionate and yet powerless to surmount the obstacles of racial prejudice, prison bars, family obligations and self-imposed emotional walls that block his way at every turn.

This middle-aged African-American garbage collector and legendary ex-player in the Negro baseball league is the beating heart of August Wilson's

masterwork, *Fences*. As the drama's compelling central character, Troy Maxson (a character loosely based on the playwright's own stepfather) also embodies the inequalities and injustices confronting black Americans throughout the painful course of modern history.

*Fences* is set in 1957, in the small dirt front yard of the Maxson household, "an ancient two-story brick house set back off a small alley" in Pittsburgh's impoverished inner-city Hill District. The play opens with Troy and his friend Bono rehashing a recent incident at work when Troy made trouble by complaining that only whites were allowed to drive the garbage trucks. As the stories begin to unfold and family members are added to the mix, including Troy's wife, Rose, sons Cory and Lyons, and brother Gabriel, Maxson emerges as a seriously flawed, yet in many ways admirable, hero whose compelling personal struggle transcends the boundaries of race and time to exemplify the universal human yearning for dignity, acceptance and love in the face of seemingly insurmountable barricades.

Shortly after completing *Fences* in 1985, Wilson began to see that the three dramas he had written to date were actually the beginnings of an epic literary achievement that grew to include ten plays and is often dubbed the Century Cycle. As the ambitious project developed, Wilson began to deliberately weave his plays together with overlapping themes and characters. He told *The New York Times* in 2000, "I wanted to place this culture onstage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us in all areas of human life and endeavor and through profound moments of our history in which the larger society had thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves."

Each of the ten plays is set in a different decade of the 20th century, and all but one take place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, where Wilson was born in 1945. In his introduction to the recently published August Wilson Century Cycle, critic John Lahr focuses on the playwright's talent for transforming "historical tragedy into imaginative triumph. The blues are catastrophe expressed lyrically; so are Wilson's plays, which swing with the pulse of the African-American people, as they moved, over the decades, from property to personhood."

In decade order, Wilson's "Century Cycle" plays are:



- 1900s - *Gem of the Ocean* (written 2003)
- 1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (written 1984)
- 1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (written 1982)
- 1930s - *The Piano Lesson* - Pulitzer Prize (written 1986)
- 1940s - *Seven Guitars* (written 1995)
- 1950s - *Fences* - Pulitzer Prize (written 1985)
- 1960s - *Two Trains Running* (written 1990)
- 1970s - *Jitney* (written 1982)
- 1980s - *King Hedley II* (written 2001)
- 1990s - *Radio Golf* (written 2005)

*Fences* was initially presented as a staged reading at The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's 1983 National Playwrights Conference. It opened on April 30, 1985, at the Yale Repertory Theatre in a production directed by Lloyd Richards, and the following year, the Richards-helmed Broadway premiere won every major accolade, including the Tony Award for Best Play, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the John Gassner Outer Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. That production, which featured James Earl Jones as Troy Maxson, ran for 525 performances and set a record for a non-musical Broadway production by grossing \$11 million in a single year.

SCR's dazzling cast for *Fences* features Charlie Robinson (Troy Maxson), Gregg Daniel (Jim Bono), Juanita Jennings (Rose), Brandon J. Dirden (Lyons), Baron Kelly (Gabriel), Larry Bates (Cory), Skye Whitebear and Sofya Ogunseitani (alternating as Raynell). Joining director Seret Scott's creative ensemble are Set Designer Shawn Motley, Costume Designer Dana Woods, Lighting Designer Lonnie Alcaraz and Sound Designer Michael Roth.

Previews for *Fences* begin January 22nd and performances continue through February 21st on Segerstrom Stage. Theatre Discovery Project performances on January 26, 27, 28, February 2, 3, and 4 feature standards-based activities designed to enhance the educational value for students. As space is limited for these special events, interested teachers should contact the Box Office (714.708.5555) for group reservations.



# Fences Extended Family

## **TROY MAXSON - Charlie Robinson**

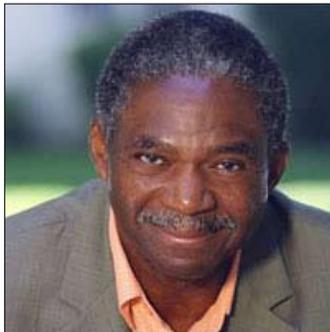
Legendary Negro League Baseball player, now working as a garbage collector. Troy is a storyteller. He is at once jovial and loving, brash and overbearing. A complicated man embittered by the racism he has experienced throughout his life.

## **JIM BONO - Gregg Daniel**

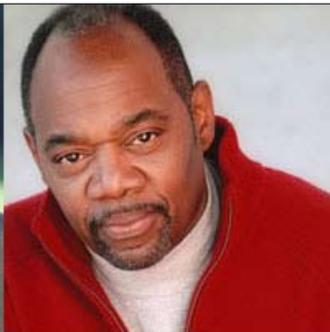
Troy's very good friend. The men met while in prison, and Bono, as he is known, has stayed with Troy through his legendary days in baseball and today works beside him as a garbage man. Like brothers, the two men love each other deeply.

## **ROSE - Juanita Jennings**

Troy's wife. A strong, supportive woman who is fiercely protective of her husband and son. A loving presence who counterbalances Troy's ferocity for life, Rose mothers almost everyone around her. She is quiet and laughs easily. A gentle spirit.



**Charlie Robinson**



**Gregg Daniel**



**Juanita Jennings**

## **LYONS - Brandon J. Dirden**

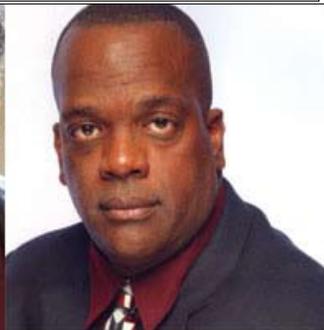
Troy's eldest son from a previous relationship. Lyons is a musician who cannot seem to keep a job. He is full of laughter and uses his charming personality to quell his father's quick anger. A grown man, he lives with his girlfriend nearby.

## **GABRIEL - Baron Kelly**

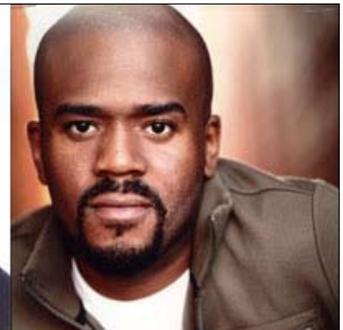
Troy's brother. After suffering severe head trauma in World War II, Gabriel is left with a childlike innocence and a deep sense of concern for his older brother. He believes with every fiber in his being that he is the archangel Gabriel.



**Brandon J. Dirden**



**Baron Kelly**



**Larry Bates**

## **CORY - Larry Bates**

Troy and Rose's son. Cory is a natural athlete like his father, eager to prove his salt to the legendary Troy Maxon. He has been playing football, hoping to catch the eyes of college recruiters, offering him the educational opportunities his illiterate father never had.

## **RAYNELL - Skye Whitebear and Sofya Ogunseitan**

Troy's daughter and youngest child from another relationship.

Character description reprinted from the excellent *Fences* Study Guide published by Penumbra Theatre Company in 2008

# Wilson's Introduction to *Fences*

*When the sins of our fathers visit us  
We do not have to play host.  
We can banish them with forgiveness  
As God, in his Largeness and Laws.*

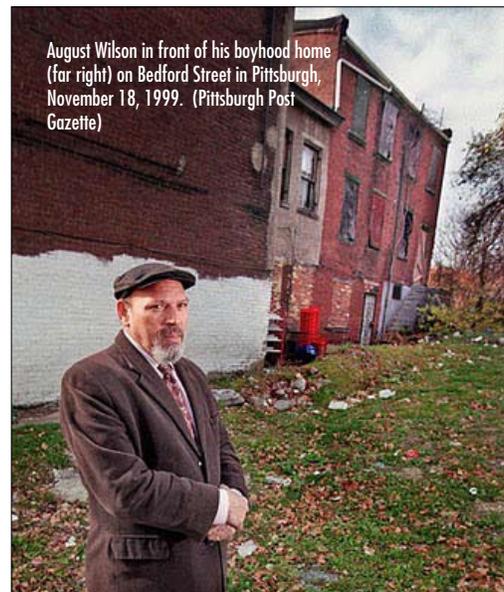
–August Wilson

Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. They swelled its belly until it burst into a thousand furnaces and sewing machines, a thousand butcher shops and bakers' ovens, a thousand churches and hospitals and funeral parlors and moneylenders. The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true.

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation. They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them, and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tarpaper. They collected rags and wood. They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies. They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole and lived in pursuit of their own dream: That they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon.

By 1957, the hard-won victories of the European immigrants had solidified the industrial might of America. War had been confronted and won with new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel. Life was rich, full, and flourishing. The Milwaukee Braves won the World Series, and the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow full.

– August Wilson's introduction to *Fences*



August Wilson in front of his boyhood home (far right) on Bedford Street in Pittsburgh, November 18, 1999. (Pittsburgh Post Gazette)

Playwright Tony Kushner paid tribute to Wilson after his death, calling him "a giant figure in American theatre... He asserted the power of drama to describe large social forces, to explore the meaning of an entire people's experience in American history," Kushner said in the *New York Times*. "For all the magic in his plays, he was writing in the grand tradition of Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, the politically engaged, direct, social realist drama. He was reclaiming ground for the theater that most people thought had been abandoned."

# Synopsis: A Scene by Scene Breakdown

## Act I

Scene 1: Friday night

Scene 2: The next morning

Scene 3: A few hours later

Scene 4: Friday, two weeks later

## Act II

Scene 1: The following morning

Scene 2: Six months later, early afternoon

Scene 3: Late evening, three days later

Scene 4: Two months later

Scene 5: Eight years later, morning

## Setting

(as written by the playwright)

The Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1957

The setting is the yard which fronts the only entrance to the Maxon household, an ancient two-story brick house set back off a small alley in a big-city neighborhood. The entrance to the house is gained by two or three steps leading to a wooden porch badly in need of paint. A relatively recent addition to the house and running its full width, the porch lacks congruence. It is a sturdy porch with a flat roof. One or two chairs of dubious value sit at one end where the kitchen window opens onto the porch. An old fashioned icebox stands silent guard and opposite end.

The yard is a small dirt yard, partially fenced (except during the last scene), with a wooden sawhorse, a pile of lumber, and other fence-building equipment off to the side. Opposite is a tree from which hangs a ball made of rags. A baseball bat leans against the tree. Two oil drums serve as garbage receptacles and sit near the house at right to complete the setting.



# PART II: THE PLAYWRIGHT

## August Wilson - A Short Biography

**A**ugust Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, to Daisy Wilson and Frederick Kittel, a white baker who had emigrated from Germany to Pittsburgh. The fourth of Daisy Wilson's six children, he changed his name to August Wilson after his father's death in 1965. The family lived in "the Hill," the Pittsburgh neighborhood that later provided the setting for most of his plays. Wilson quit school as a teenager, after a teacher wrongfully accused him of plagiarism, and educated himself in Pittsburgh's libraries, where he read such esteemed writers as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison.

Wilson began his writing career as a poet, influenced largely by the writings of political poet and playwright Amiri Baraka. His political interests led him to become involved in theater in the late 1960s as a co-founder of Black Horizons, a Pittsburgh community theater. In 1978, he moved to Minnesota and soon received a fellowship from the Minneapolis Playwrights Center.

In 1981, St. Paul's Penumbra Theatre staged his first play, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, a satirical western adapted from an earlier series of poems. In 1982, after several unsuccessful submissions, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was accepted for a workshop by the National Playwrights Conference of the O'Neill Theatre Center in Connecticut, inaugurating Wilson's association with director Lloyd Richards, the head of the Playwrights Conference. Richards would direct the first five plays in Wilson's 10-play cycle chronicling the experiences of African Americans throughout the 20th century. The winner of Rockefeller and Guggenheim fellowships, a Drama Desk Award, two Pulitzer Prizes and four New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards, Wilson would become one of the late 20th century's most acclaimed playwrights over the next two decades.

In August 2005, Wilson shocked the theater world when he announced that he had inoperable liver cancer. The playwright died on October 2, 2005, a little more than six months after *Radio Golf*, the last play in the cycle to be written and produced, was premiered.



**THE HILL DISTRICT:** Above, A group of men and women dining at the lunch counter of the B & M Restaurant in the lower Hill. Below left, A group of people boarding the 85 Bedford Trolley at the corner of Centre and Herron Avenues in the Hill District. Below right, Woogie Harris playing on a mirrored piano in Crawford Grill, a popular club which hosted local and nationally renowned musicians. Photos by Charles 'Teenie' Harris.



# The Pittsburgh Cycle

by Christopher Rawson

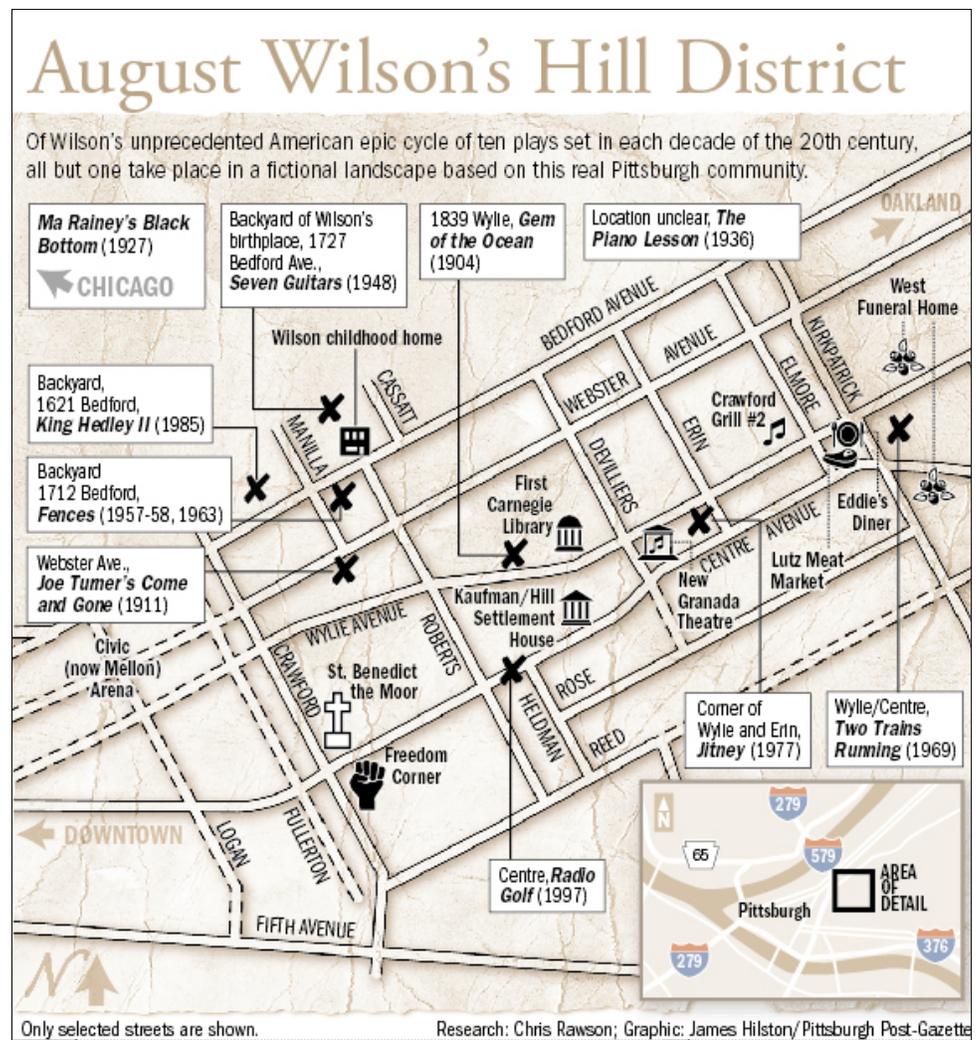
The ten plays with which August Wilson conquered the American theater are sometimes called his Century Cycle, since each is set in a different decade of the twentieth century. But they are better called the Pittsburgh cycle, since mine are set in a square mile or so of that city's Hill District and all ten are rich with the voices and places, stories and passions that Wilson absorbed in the years that he spent walking its streets and listening to the talk in its diners, barbershops, numbers joints, and jitney stations. The Hill is an active character in the cycle, as well as a literal crossroads and a metaphoric microcosm of black America.

By 1904, the real Hill District had become a multiethnic melting pot. Roughly one-third black, one-third Eastern European Jews, and one-third everything else, it grew to hold some fifty-five thousand people. For blacks, who weren't always welcome in the adjacent downtown, it was a city within a city, its commerce and entertainment spiced with music (a dozen native jazz greats), sports (baseball's Josh Gibson and the Negro National League teams the Crawfords and the Grays), and journalism (the Pittsburgh Courier, once the nation's largest black newspaper, with nationwide circulation).

But at mid-century the aging Hill was torn apart by urban renewal, followed by the fires that protested the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Wilson, who was born in 1945, witnessed this decline. He had dropped out of school at fifteen after bouts with racism, then educated himself at the Carnegie Library before doing his graduate studies in culture and politics on the streets of the Hill. By the time he moved to St. Paul., Minn., in 1978, the Hill was broken, its population having shrunk to less than fifteen thousand. In recent years it has started to come back. But, as if in cosmic compensation for history's cruelty, it already lives in Wilson's art.

The result is that we now speak of August Wilson's Hill, a gritty urban landscape transformed by art into something mythic, like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Friel's Ballybeg. Writing from the distance of St. Paul and later Seattle, Wilson said that he heard more clearly the voices from the street corners and cigar stores of his youth. And he kept coming back to Pittsburgh to dip the ladle of his art into this crucible of memory and inspiration, using history much as Shakespeare did—as raw material to mold and shape. The outcome is stories rich in the “love, honor, duty, and betrayal” that he has said are at the heart of all his plays.

Along the way, Hill names, shops, streets, and even addresses are adapted, hinted at, or disguised. First comes 1727 Bedford Avenue, where Wilson lived with his family in two back rooms, later four, until he was thirteen—a family that grew to include six children. His



memories of the gossip and the card playing in that backyard mark it as the setting for *Seven Guitars*. In front was Bela's Market, run by Eastern European Jews, and next door was the watch and shoe-repair shop of Italian brothers, making the two houses an epitome of the early-mid-century Hill.

Working on the 1999 premier, in Pittsburgh, of *King Hedley II*, Wilson identified its setting with the backyard of his mother's final house, just down Bedford. For the cycle's other backyard play, *Fences*, the best guess is that it takes place across Bedford, at the house of the retired fighter Charlie Burley, who offers a close historical model for Troy Maxson.



Centre Avenue with and Chas. W. Lutz Choice Meats on left, with Crawford Grill no. 2 on Wylie Avenue, in background, July 1957. Photo by Charles "Teenie" Harris.

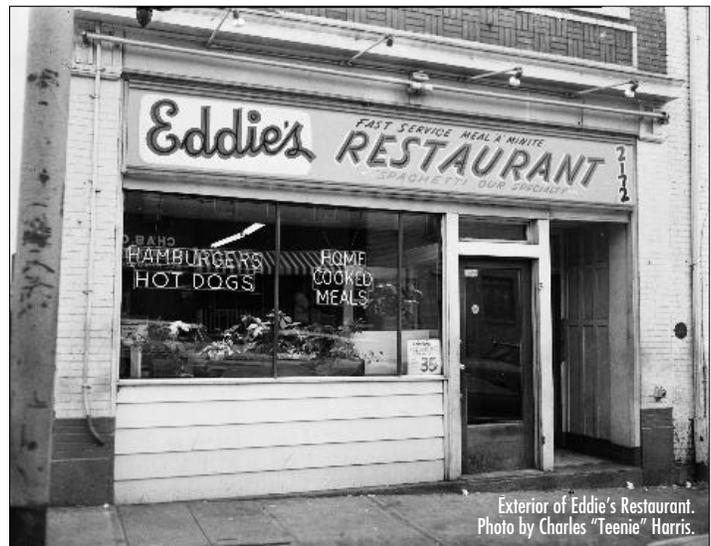
The cycle's second most important location is 1839 Wylie Avenue, the faded mansion that is home to Aunt Ester, the seer supposedly born in 1619, when the first African slaves reached Virginia. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester's house serves as a modern station on the Underground Railroad of black empowerment, and in *Radio Golf* it is central to the conflict between that past and the black middle class. Today 1839 Wylie Avenue is a grassy vacant lot with an impressive view. Whether or not a mansion ever stood there, it is both real and fictional: Wilson actually chose 1839 because it was the year of the famous Amistad slave-ship revolt.

The three Hill plays set in public spaces are naturally located in the business district on Wylie and Centre Avenues. In *Two Trains Running*, Memphis's Diner is near Eddie's Diner, Lutz's Meat Market (which still stands on Centre), and the West Funeral Home. The diner's address is later given as 1621 Wylie Avenue, many blocks away, but that number is just a tribute to the Bedford address where Wilson's mother died.

The most specific location belongs to *Jitney*, which is set in the existing jitney (gypsy cab) station at the corner of Wylie Avenue and Erin Street which still has the same phone number used in the play. Less specific is *Radio Golf*, set in a storefront office somewhere on Centre Avenue. For *The Piano Lesson*, the only clue is that Berniece and Avery take Maretha on a streetcar and drop her off at the Irene Kaufman Settlement House on their way downtown so their house must be east of there.

As for *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, since the Hill slopes down toward the southwest, references to "up on Bedford" and "down on Wylie" suggest that the Holly boarding house is between them, on Webster Avenue. "This squares with the view of Loomis standing "up there on the corner watching the house...right up there on Manilla Street."

Wilson's only play not set on the Hill is *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, his first to reach Broadway. He later said that he hadn't set the play on the Hill because, being from Pittsburgh, he didn't think it sounded important enough. He soon realized that Pittsburgh could stand for all America. He was often furious with Pittsburgh, of course, an anger that came from its streets, along with hope. But all is transformed when Wilson welds comedy and tragedy to speak with prophetic passion across the American racial divide.



Exterior of Eddie's Restaurant. Photo by Charles "Teenie" Harris.

*Reprinted with the kind permission of the author. Christopher Rawson is chair of the American Theatre Critics Association and serves on the boards of the Theatre Hall of Fame and the Best Plays Theater Yearbook. Now senior theater critic for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, he has reviewed, interviewed, and chronicled August Wilson since 1984. Some of the Post-Gazette's extensive Wilson coverage is available at [www.post-gazette.com/theater](http://www.post-gazette.com/theater).*

# August Wilson's Century - The Ten-Play Cycle

## **GEM OF THE OCEAN**

(set in 1904; completed in 2004)

Bewildered by the collapse of the old slave regime, the first generation of black Americans recently freed from slavery are unprepared for the backlash against their newly acquired freedom by whites and head north. Aunt Ester, the drama's 287-year-old fiery matriarch, welcomes into her home Solly Two Kings, who was born into slavery and scouted for the Union Army, and Citizen Barlow, a young man from Alabama searching for a new life.

## **JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE**

(set in 1911; completed in 1988)

Haunted by seven years on a chain gang, Herald Loomis appears in Pittsburgh to reunite his family. Surrounded by the vibrant tenants of a black boarding house, he fights for his soul and his song in the dawning days of a century without slavery.



- 1988 *New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play*

## **MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM**

(set in 1927; completed in 1984)

The only play in the cycle that takes place outside of Pittsburgh, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* delves into the sultry and dangerous 1920s blues scene in Chicago. Ma Rainey was a renowned vocalist, famous for her deep and forthright interpretation of the blues. When Levee, a man deeply scarred by the harassment and dismissal of his worth by white society, strays from the group to reach for a solo career, the magic of the band is broken.

- 1985 *New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best American Play*

## **THE PIANO LESSON**

(set in 1936; completed in 1990)

Produced at SCR in 1999, *The Piano Lesson* is set in the house of a family of African-Americans who have migrated from Mississippi. The conflict centers on a piano that was once traded by the family's white master for two of the family's ancestors. Siblings Boy Willie and Berniece argue about the literal and symbolic worth of the piano and whether or not to sell it.

- 1990 *Drama Desk Award Outstanding New Play*
- 1990 *New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play*
- 1990 *Pulitzer Prize for Drama*
- 1996 *Peabody Award*

## **SEVEN GUITARS**

(set in 1948; completed in 1996)

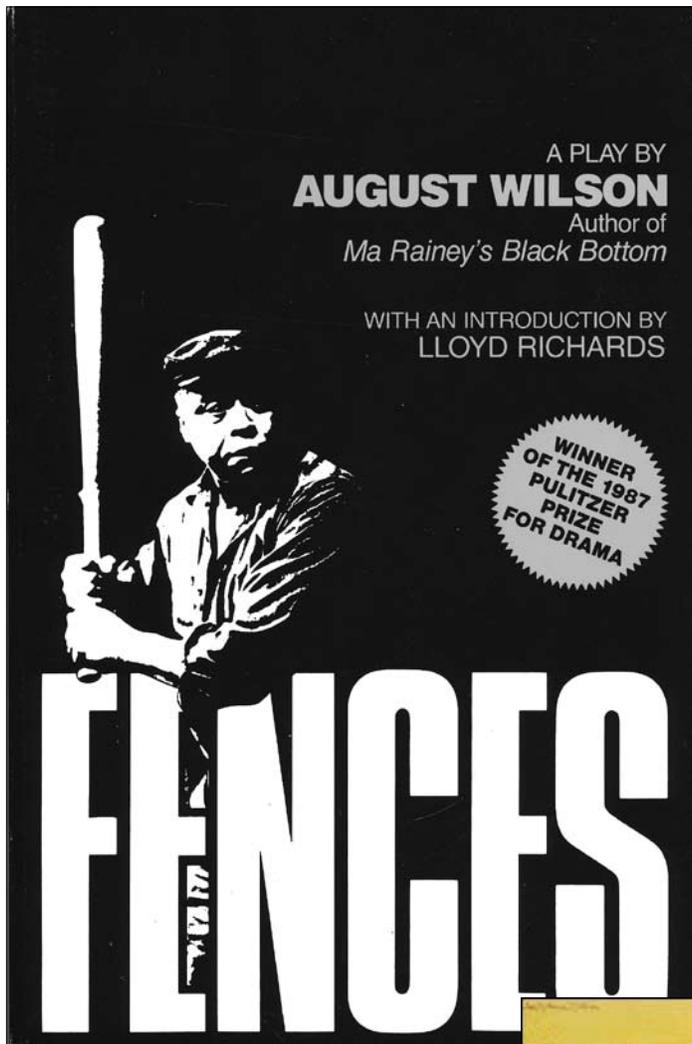
This story of blues guitarist Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton unravels in flashback after his untimely death. In the time since recording his first album, Floyd has squandered all his money, left his girlfriend for another woman, was left by the other woman, pawned his guitar, and spent time in jail after being arrested while walking home from his mother's funeral. Floyd's second chance at success beckons and inspires hope until his life is cut tragically short.

- 1996 *New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play*

## **FENCES**

(set in 1957; completed in 1987)

Baseball makes sense to Troy Maxson; a man gets three strikes and he's out. In this most American of



pastimes, Troy has found an opportunity to play by the rules and win. When his rapid rise through the Negro leagues hits the ceiling of racial prejudice, however, Troy is forced to let go of his dream of major league success.

- 1987 Drama Desk Award for Best New Play
- 1987 New York Drama Critics' Circle Best Play
- 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Drama
- 1987 Tony Award for Best Play

**TWO TRAINS RUNNING**  
(set in 1969; completed in 1992)

Memphis is hardly making a large profit with his modest diner, but the place has long sustained a small community of folks in Pittsburgh's Hill District. Developers have come for the building that houses Memphis' diner. He vows to make the city give him a fair price for his diner and is willing to go through fire

to get it. No one knows quite what Memphis has been through, but all soon realize that this is his most important stand.

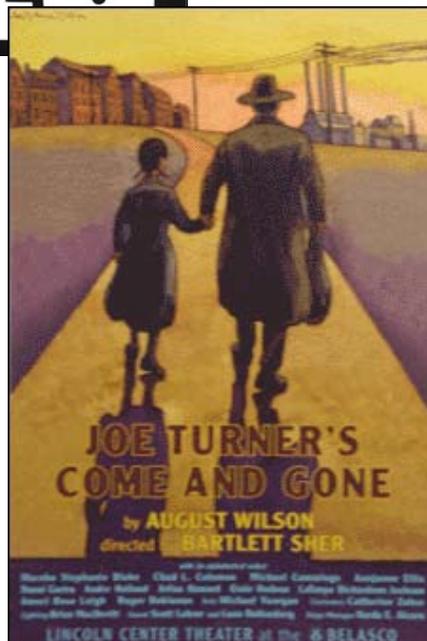
**JITNEY**  
(set in 1977; first written in 1979; rewritten and expanded in 2000)

Eager to gentrify the neighborhood, the city threatens to level a makeshift taxi dispatch office that has served as a community gathering place for years. As he tries to stave off the city, the owner of the cab company faces his own inner struggle. After a twenty-year stint in prison for murder, his son is returning home. *Jitney* tells the story of a generation recognizing its mortality while the next must face its responsibility.

- 2001 Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Play
- 2002 Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play (London)

**KING HEDLEY II**  
(set in 1985; completed in 2001)

Described as one of Wilson's darkest plays, *King Hedley II* centers on King, the son of Hedley and Ruby from *Seven Guitars*. We meet King as a grown man in 1980's Pittsburgh, fighting to survive a life that seems never to look bright. King is an ex-con; he's trying to save \$10,000 by selling stolen refrigerators so that he can buy a video store.



**RADIO GOLF**  
(set in 1997; completed in 2005)

Wilson's cycle comes full circle as Aunt Ester's one-time home at 1839 Wylie Avenue in *Gem of the Ocean* is slated for demolition to make way for a slick new real estate venture aimed to boost both the depressed Hill District and Harmond Wilks' chance of becoming the city's first black mayor. *Radio Golf* is a play in which history, memory and legacy challenge notions of progress and country club ideals.

- 2007 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play

# PART III: THE PRODUCTION

Director Seret Scott returns to SCR to direct *Fences*, after directing *The Piano Lesson* here in 1999.

## The Cast (photos and bios in program)

Troy Maxson ..... Charlie Robinson  
Jim Bono ..... Gregg Daniel  
Rose ..... Juanita Jennings  
Lyons ..... Brandon J. Dirden  
Gabriel ..... Baron Kelly  
Cory ..... Larry Bates

## The Creative Team (bios in program)

Director ..... Seret Scott  
Scenic Design ..... Shaun Motley  
Costume Design ..... Dana Rebecca Woods  
Lighting Design ..... Peter Maradudin  
Sound Design ..... Jim Ragland  
Fight Director ..... Ken Merckx  
Stage Manager ..... Jamie A. Tucker  
Dramaturg ..... Kelly L. Miller



Set rendering by Shaun Motley,  
*Fences* at South Coast Repertory,  
February 2010.

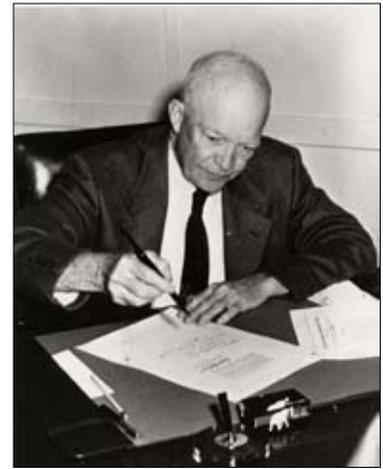
# PART IV: CONTEXT FOR THE PLAY

## History of 1957

*With Fences, August Wilson takes us to 1957 — a seminal year in black American history with events across the nation that presaged the coming civil rights era. Here's a look at major events in that year:*



“Stand up for justice,” Martin Luther King, Jr. told the crowd at the Lincoln Memorial on May 17. King was at the time known mainly for his role in the Montgomery bus boycott. He spoke many times that year, but his “Give Us the Ballot” speech was perhaps the most influential as he asked members of Congress to ensure the voting rights of African-Americans. To his fellow activists, he said: “I realize that it will



cause restless nights sometime. It might cause losing a job; it will cause suffering and sacrifice. It might even cause physical death for some. But

if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing can be more Christian.”

On September 9th, President Eisenhower signed the bill King and many others had fought to pass. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 was the first bill of its kind since 1875. Vice President Richard Nixon wrote in a letter to King: “My only regret is that I have been unable to do more than I have. Progress is understandably slow in this field, but we at least can be sure that we are moving steadily and surely ahead.” Though the act’s effectiveness had been limited by an amendment inserted by Southern senators, which required a local jury trial for any offenders of the law, the bill set off a wave of stronger legislation in the sessions to follow.

Later that same month, nine students desegregated Little Rock’s Central High School, an act ordered three years earlier when the Supreme Court decided *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Riots broke out in the weeks that followed, including on September 23rd. That same day, a home run hit by Milwaukee Braves’ player Hank Aaron clinched the team their first pennant title in franchise history. Aaron quotes a Wisconsin’s CIO News in his autobiography: “Milwaukee’s dusky Hank Aaron blasted the Braves into the World Series only a few hours after an insane mob of white supremacists took the Stars and Stripes in Little Rock and tramped it to the ground in front of Central High School...The cheers that are lifted to



Negro ballplayers only dramatize the stupidity of the jeers that are directed at those few Negro kids trying to get a good education for themselves in Little Rock.”

The year 1957 is remembered now as a landmark on the journey toward civil rights, but Wilson reminds us in *Fences* how often the effects were little felt by average citizens. He approached writing a history of African-American experience by examining the culture, rather than the events of an era. “I listen to the music of the particular period that I’m working on,” Wilson has said of his process. “Inside the music are clues to what is happening with the people.” In the 1950s, that music was the blues, a foundation of Wilson’s playwriting. “[The blues] is the greatest source of my inspiration,” he says. “I see the blues as the cultural response of black America to the world that they found themselves in, and contained within the blues are the ideas and attitudes of the culture.”



- Excerpted from *Hard Success: A Closer Look at 1957* by Charles Haugland, Huntington Theatre Company

# In Another League

The Negro League baseball teams of the mid-20th century were created in response to an 1884 “gentlemen’s” agreement that kept African American players from competing in the Major and minor leagues in America.

In 1920, Rube Foster, star pitcher, manager and owner of the Chicago American Giants, combined eight leading black teams from around the Midwest into the Negro National League. Over the next 40 years, and through three more segregated major leagues — a second Negro National League, the Eastern Colored League and the Negro American League — teams maintained a high level of professional skill and became centerpieces for economic development in many black communities.

In 1945, Major League Baseball’s Brooklyn Dodgers recruited Jackie Robinson from the Kansas City Monarchs. Robinson became the first African-American in the modern era to play on a Major League roster. While this historic event was a key moment in baseball and civil rights history, it hastened the decline of the Negro Leagues. The best black players were now recruited for the Major Leagues, and black fans followed. The last Negro Leagues teams folded in the early 1960s.

By the 1930s, Pittsburgh had become home to the second Negro National League and the only city in the country with two black professional teams, the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords.

## HOMESTEAD GRAYS

Located first in a small steel town outside of Pittsburgh, the Grays dominated the Eastern baseball scene. They were led by future Hall of Famers Josh Gibson (catcher), “Cool” Papa Bell (outfield), Judy Johnson (third base), Buck Leonard (first base) and Cuban great Martin Dihigo (second base, pitcher, outfielder). Their ace pitcher was “Smokey” Joe Williams, who once struck out 27 batters in a 12-inning game.

During World War II, the Grays played their home games at both Forbes Field (Pittsburgh) and Griffith Stadium (Washington, D.C.) when the white Major League clubs were on the road. The Grays traditionally outdrew their white counterparts, the cellar-dwelling Washington Senators.



strongest lineups in baseball history. They won the 1935 Negro National League championship with five future Hall of Famers: James “Cool Papa” Bell, Oscar Charleston, Josh Gibson, Judy Johnson and the legendary Satchel Paige.

Owned by Pittsburgh gambling and numbers racketeer Gus Greenlee, the Crawfords was the best financed team in black baseball during its early years. Revenue generated from his “business” operations allowed Greenlee to sign black baseball’s biggest names. It also enabled him to build his own ballpark, Gus Greenlee Field, in Pittsburgh’s Hill District.



Above, The Homestead Grays won nine consecutive league pennants from 1937-45. The Pittsburgh Crawfords, below, were one of the most formidable teams of the mid-1930s. Center, Josh Gibson, known as the black Babe Ruth, one of the greatest players kept from the major leagues by the unwritten rule (enforced until the year of his death) against hiring black ballplayers. Gibson played as a catcher for the Pittsburgh Crawfords (1927-29 and 1932-36) and the Homestead Grays (1930-31 and 193-46). Gibson was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1972.



## PITTSBURGH CRAWFORDS

Originally, the Pittsburgh Crawfords team was composed of amateurs from the sandlots of the city’s Hill District, but by the early 1930s, the team fielded some of the

# Wilson, in His Own Words

## **Wilson, on the play:**

"In *Fences* they see a garbage man, a person they don't really look at, although they may see a garbage man every day.... This black garbage man's life is very similar to their own, he is affected by the same things — love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty."

## **Wilson, on how he began writing the play:**

"*Fences* actually started with Troy standing in the yard with the baby in his arms, and the first line I wrote was 'I'm standing out here in the yard with my daughter in my arms. She's just a wee bitty little ole thing. She don't understand about grownups' business, and she ain't got no mama.' I didn't know who he was talking to. I said, 'O.K., he's talking to his wife.' O.K., why is he telling her this?"



"I thought, 'I can write one of those plays where you have a big character and everything revolves around him....In *Fences* I wanted to show Troy as very responsible. He did not leave. He held a job. He fathered three kids by three different women, due to the circumstances of his life, and he was responsible toward all of them."

## **Wilson, on the character of Troy Maxson:**

"I think what impressed me most about Troy was his willingness to engage life, to live it zestfully and fully despite the particulars of his past, despite the way his mother abandoned him, the way he was put out of the house by his father at fourteen, the way he spent fifteen years in the penitentiary — none of that broke his spirit."

## **Wilson, on a writing exercise he used with playwriting students:**

"I ask them to invent a painting and then describe it. That word-painting becomes the set description, but they don't know it.... I ask the students what the people in their paintings say and how they talk, and gradually they see that characters characterize themselves through their speech." NOTE: Several of Wilson's own plays found their origins in works of visual art; *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson* were both inspired by Romare Bearden's collages. In the case of *Fences*, Wilson reflected on a Bearden 1969 work titled "Continuities."

## **Wilson, on his writing process:**

"I generally start with a line of dialogue. Someone says something and they're talking to someone else. I don't always know who's talking or who they're talking to, but you take the line of dialogue and it starts from there...the more the characters talk the more you know about them."

## **Wilson, on writing tragedy:**

"I aspire to write tragedies. I don't know if I have or not, but that is what I sit down to write. Tragedy is the greatest form of dramatic literature. Why settle for anything less than that? My sense of what a tragedy is includes the fall of the flawed character; that is certainly a part of what is in my head as I write....There is a great deal of humor in human life, and I think I find the humor, but the overall intent of the plays I write is very serious."

## **More about his writing:**

"I once wrote this short story called 'The Best Blues Singer in the World,' and it went like this: 'The streets that Balboa walked was his own private ocean, and Balboa was drowning.' End of story. That says it all. Nothing else to say. Since then, I've been rewriting that same story over and over again. All of my plays are rewriting that same story. I'm not sure what it means, other than life is hard."

# PART V: RESOURCES

## Online Resources:

New York Times' topics page on August Wilson, including an obituary by Charles Isherwood:

[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/w/august\\_wilson/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=August%20Wilson&st=cse](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/w/august_wilson/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=August%20Wilson&st=cse)

Timeline of Wilson's life from the August Wilson Center for African American Culture website:

[http://www.augustwilsoncenter.org/aacc\\_pdfs/AugustWilsonTimeline.pdf](http://www.augustwilsoncenter.org/aacc_pdfs/AugustWilsonTimeline.pdf)

A collection of articles about Wilson and his plays:

<http://www.augustwilson.net/>

"The Art of Theater: August Wilson" The Paris Review, Winter 1999

<http://www.augustwilsoncenter.org/home.php>

"August Wilson's Life and Legacy" – National Public Radio tribute, October 3, 2005:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4933836>

A great article about comparing the Negro Baseball League to contemporary players. "Strat-O-Matic baseball puts spotlight on Negro Leagues", LA Times, December 21, 2009.

<http://www.latimes.com/sports/la-sp-strat-o-matic21-2009dec21,0,7468798.story>

## Other Resources

*Conversations with August Wilson* by Jackson R. Bryer (Editor), Mary C. Hartig (Editor)

*I Ain't Sorry for Notbin' I Done: August Wilson's Process of Playwriting* by Joan Herrington

*August Wilson's Fences: A Reference Guide* by Sandra G. Shannon

*From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* by John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr.

Education resource page of Negro League Baseball Museum website: <http://www.nlbm.com/s/resource.cfm>

*Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues* by John B. Holway

Baseball - A Film by Ken Burns

Burns' ten-part PBS series covering Major League Baseball from its inception through the early 1990s – parts (or "innings") four through six cover the Negro Leagues.

## Topics and Questions for Discussion

What is the significance of the play's title and it being set in 1957?

What is the significance of baseball in the play?

Discuss the historical events and subjects referenced in the play that affect its characters. For example: racial integration – in baseball and in the workplace, urban renewal/redevelopment, World War II.

Is Troy Maxson a heroic character? A tragic character? If so, what are his tragic flaws?

Compare Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* with August Wilson's depiction of the American dream.

How do "fences" (real and metaphorical) create conflict between characters in the play? Who builds these emotional "fences"? Are "fences" taken down?

How does Troy Maxson set up the direction of the play's plot; what events does he reference or allude to that will create a struggle for him throughout the course of the play?

How do the characters change throughout the play? Who changes the most; the least?

Do Troy's actions cause changes in the other characters? Is he changed by other characters' actions?

Towards the end of the play, what is the significance of Cory singing the song "Old Blue" that Troy sang earlier in the play?

What happens to Gabe at the end of the play?

Does the set look realistic? Can you tell the characters' standard of living based on the set?

How is music used in the play — both sound design and by the actors?