INDIANA
REPERTORY
THEATRE

presents

August Wilson's
The Piano Lesson

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ENRICHMENT GUIDE

Enrichment Guide edited by Richard J Roberts & Milicent Wright
Katelyn Coyne, Ethan Kingen, Katie Norton, & Abby Weber, contributors

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Synopsis

The Piano Lesson centers around an upright piano, elaborately carved with images of slaves and Africans, weddings and funerals, births and deaths. Although Berniece no longer plays it, she sees the piano as a symbol of the Charles family heritage, a monument to its struggles and its achievements. Her brother, Boy Willie, wants to sell the piano and use the money to buy the land where the Charles family was once enslaved by the Sutter family. For Boy Willy, the piano is a means to an end, a chance to right the wrongs of the past and to secure a better future.

The play is set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1936. Doaker, a railroad cook, shares a house with his widowed niece, Berniece, and her daughter, Maretha. Berniece's husband has been dead for three years, but she still grieves, refusing offers of marriage from Avery, a preacher. The arrival of Boy Willie and his friend Lymon to take the piano brings tensions to a head. Amidst arguments about the piano's future, the sudden presence of Sutter's ghost unsettles the family. A few days later, Doaker's brother Wining Boy visits as well, and the men sing and share stories about the family history. As Boy Willie and Lymon try to move the piano, Sutter's ghost is heard again. Emotions run high as the conflict over the piano forces the family to deal with long-buried grievances and heal old wounds.

ghosts...

by Janet Allen, Artistic Director

This winter we are delighted to be producing not one, but two Pulitzer Prize–winning dramas back to back—*Doubt* and *The Piano Lesson*. Think of it as a mini-immersion in contemporary drama, quality recognition, and entertainment, all in one!

As many of you may be counting up, this is our fourth August Wilson production, and his second Pulitzer Prize winner: *Fences* (IRT production: 1996) won the award in 1987, and *The Piano Lesson* in 1990. Amid Wilson's ten-play cycle of the 20th century, *The Piano Lesson* takes us to the mid-1930s, to Wilson's own beloved Pittsburgh, and into the lives and history of the Charles family, whose roots in slavery still influence strongly the descendants and their experiences.

British novelist and essayist Elizabeth Bowen wrote: "Ghosts seem harder to please than we are; it is as though they haunted for haunting's sake—much as we relive, brood, and smolder over our pasts." This is an apt description of *The Piano Lesson*, where ghosts both real and imagined form the backdrop of the play's action. In dignifying the ghost story tradition with a startling reality, Wilson follows in a long line of exemplary African American writers: Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Maya Angelou, W. E. B. Dubois, to name a few. Drawing on deep ancestral story-telling traditions, these writers create new meaning for symbolism, the importance of superstition, and the existence of the supernatural in maintaining connections to the past.

In *The Piano Lesson*, the piano itself literally contains the history of a family, in its ornately carved exterior, and in the importance of the music that it has made over three generations. Its importance as a family heirloom—to be cherished or sold for profit—forms the central dilemma of the play. Is the piano to remain a shrine to the family's suffering, as it is for the young widow, Berniece, or, by its sale, to create the capital needed to buy financial independence for Berniece's younger brother, Boy Willie? No American playwright has created a more primal or compelling argument; as a totem, Wilson's piano is as archetypal as Williams's glass menagerie.

Beneath the familiar family story in this play are American historic concepts that too many of us may have forgotten: the plight of the sharecropper, the strangle hold of Jim Crow laws, the decades-long migration of the freed slave population to the North in hopes of finding prosperity, the particular pinch the Depression held for this struggling population, the prison work farm, the hard life of the railroad worker. Wilson recalls all these conditions with the clarity of a photographer, but the words of a poet; he threads them through the lives of the characters in ways that make them immediate and highly personal.

Once again, we are in Mr. Wilson's debt for the monumental task he undertook to chronicle black American life in each decade of the 1900s. In doing so, he took his place alongside this country's greatest playwrights: Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. By doing so, he changed American theatre forever, and made a priceless gift for generations of theatre-goers to come.

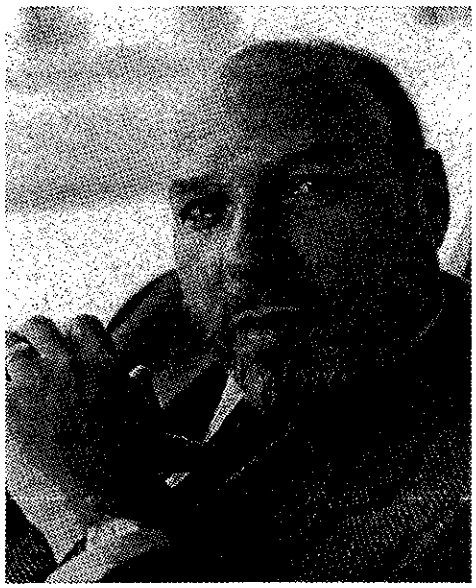
holding on ... *letting go*

A family's heirloom—a piano. What to do with it? Who has the time these days to care for family possessions that the next generation will view as outdated and "really old"? There are quilts in my family that date back to the turn of the century—the twentieth century—made by my great-grandmother and later my grandmother and great-aunts. These women quilted out of necessity, for the warmth and comfort of family members. I still use mine for exactly those reasons. Perhaps the rich legacy carved into the dark wood of the Charles family piano will help them find a measure of peace, warmth, and comfort, as they hold on to, as they let go of, their past.

by Seret Scott, Director

August Wilson

Playwright



August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which would later be the setting for most of his plays. His father was a white German immigrant; his mother was black. Wilson states that the "nurturing, the learning" of his life were "all black ideas about the world that I learned from my mother. My mother's a very strong woman. My female characters come in large part from my mother."

In the late 1950s, August's family moved to Hazelwood, a predominanty white suburb of Pittsburgh. Wilson attended Gladstone High School until 1961, when he dropped out at age fifteen. Unlike most dropouts, Wilson did not leave school because he couldn't read. "I was bored," he explains. "I was confused, I was disappointed in myself, and I didn't do any work until my history teacher assigned us to write a paper on a historical personage."

Wilson chose Napoleon because he had always been fascinated with the "self-made emperor." It was a twenty-page paper, and Wilson's sister typed it up on a rented typewriter. Since Wilson had previously done no work in class, his instructor found it hard to believe that it was his own work. He wrote both an A+ and then an F on the paper. If Wilson couldn't prove that the paper was his own, he would receive the failing grade. "Unless you call everybody in here and have all the people prove they wrote them, even the ones that went and copied out of the encyclopedia word for word, I don't feel I should have to prove anything," replied Wilson. He took the failing grade, tore the paper up, threw it in his teacher's wastebasket, and walked out of school. He did not go back.

"The next morning," Wilson remembers, "I got up and played basketball right underneath the principal's window. As I look back on it, I see I wanted him to come and say, 'Why aren't you in school?' so I could tell someone. And he never came out." Rather than tell his mother he had dropped out, Wilson spent every school day at the public library, reading some 300 books over the next four years. His reading eventually led him to pursue a career as a writer.

Wilson spent years "hanging out on street corners, following old men around, working odd jobs." Then Wilson discovered a place called Pat's Cigar Store in Pittsburgh. "It was the same place that Claude McKay mentioned in his book *Home to Harlem*," he recalls. "When I found out about that, I said, 'This is part of history' and I ran down there to where all the old men in the community would congregate."

Wilson channeled his early literary efforts into poetry, saving his nickels for a $20 used typewriter when he was 19. Around that same time, he bought a recording of blues singer Bessie Smith, and hearing this music for the first time changed his life. Later he wrote that hearing Smith's voice led to an "awakening." He began to see himself as a messenger, a link in the chain of African American culture, and he assumed the responsibility of passing stories and ideas from the past to the future. The idea of the blues as a vessel for the African American experience is one that appears frequently in Wilson's work, along with a given character's search for his song, his own personal legacy and his path in life.

In 1968, Wilson co-founded Pittsburgh's Black Horizon Theatre Company. He began writing one-act plays during the height of the Black Power Movement as a way, he says, to "politicize the community and raise consciousness." He maintains that the "one thing that has best served me as a playwright is my background in poetry." His move to Minnesota in the early 1970s served as a catalyst, permitting both the colloquial voices of his youth and his burgeoning skills as a dramatist to flourish at a remove from their geographical source.

Wilson did not think of himself as a playwright, however, until he received his first writing grant in the late 1970s. "I walked in," he remembers of his first encounter at the Playwright's Center, "and there were sixteen playwrights. It was the first time I had dinner with other playwrights. It was the first time I began to think of myself as one."

It was this grant that allowed Wilson to rework a one-act about a blues recording session into what became the full-length *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. It was this play that caught the attention of Lloyd Richards, artistic director of the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center and dean of the Yale School of Drama. Richards directed *Ma Rainey* and many of Wilson's subsequent dramas. When *Ma Rainey* ran for ten months in 1984, it was the first successful Broadway play by a black writer since Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959. Wilson's successful career opened doors for many other talented writers.

Around this time, Wilson conceived of a truly grand-scale project: He would write ten plays, one for each decade of the twentieth century, each focusing on a particular issue that challenged the African American community at that time. Over the next 20 years, Wilson faced this challenge at the stand-up desk in his basement, where he wrote and rewrote each play in longhand on legal pads. Along the way he won two Pulitzer Prizes, for *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson finished his cycle with two plays focused on the beginning of the century—*Gem of the Ocean*—and the end of the century—*Radio Golf*.

Wilson was diagnosed with liver cancer in August 2005. On October 2, 2005, he died in a Seattle hospital. Two weeks later Broadway's Virginia Theatre in New York City was renamed the August Wilson Theatre, becoming the first Broadway theatre to be named for an African American. Today August Wilson is considered not only one of the greatest African American playwrights, but also one of the greatest American playwrights of our time.

from *August Wilson* and the *African American Odyssey*

by Kim Pereira
1995 • University of Illionois Press

By the mid-thirties, Blacks had begun to settle in various cities in the northern United States. The two previous decades had witnessed the height of the migration from the South; by now, the flow of Blacks into northern towns had stabilized. The swing and big band era had hit its stride, and such artists as Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington were fast becoming household names. The cultural identity of black Americans was being defined by jazz, which, over the next few decades, would influence and shape the culture of the entire country. Before the end of the half-century, American music would be synonymous with jazz....

Despite this recognition of black artists, black people were still embroiled in a fight for survival. They continued to be treated like leftovers of history, dregs in the great melting pot of America. Musicians like Duke Ellington performed for all-white audiences at such places as the Cotton Club in Harlem, an ironic reminder of slavery when Blacks fiddled while their masters danced. Then there was the Depression, difficult enough for most Americans but devastating for Blacks who were hard-pressed to find jobs even in normal circumstances. By the middle of the decade, however, the national economic scene had begun to stabilize. It is in this time, in 1936, that Wilson sets *The Piano Lesson*.

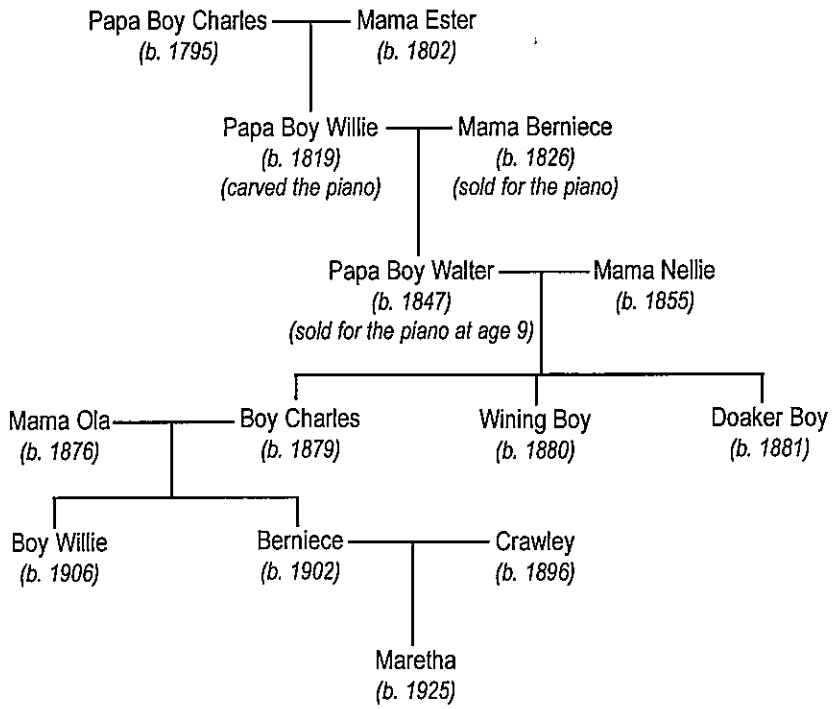
In Wilson's earlier *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (set in 1911) and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1927), migration to the North is a major theme, with characters traveling long journeys in search of jobs, relationships, and self-affirmation. In *The Piano Lesson*, we are introduced to characters eager to return to the South. This is significant, for it marks a potential turning point in the fortunes of black people. Up to now, their search for their true identities—while ending in Africa—had been accompanied by journeys to the North, away from their farms and families. For the first time a character suggests the South as a place for them to pursue their destinies as free men and women....

By 1936, several thousand Blacks had settled in the northern industrial belt, hacking out their own version of freedom, grasping for the American dream, but living an American nightmare of poverty and discrimination in a capitalist society. Years of thwarted hopes and unfulfilled ambitions had filled them with a desperation that would simmer for a few more decades before exploding into violence during the latter part of the century. The lives of many of the characters in *The Piano Lesson* exemplify this despair....

This play depicts a growing realization by Blacks that they can call the South their home, because several generations of their families grew up there and paid a great price on the plantations that built the South. Besides, they have discovered that the North is not as rosy as it once looked. The lives of the characters in *The Piano Lesson* bear witness to northern racism. The "good jobs" available are running elevators. Blacks are beginning to look again at what they left behind. After twenty-five years of wandering, during which time his wife died and he found himself alienated from his music, Wining Boy has realized that his real home is the South, for his emotional roots are buried there.

But the desire to return home does not guarantee a warm welcome. While the South may be a nostalgic salve for spirits bruised by the indifference and hostility of the North, the possibilities of a productive life there are minimal. A century of industrialization has focused the industry and enterprise of America on northern urban growth, and the rural South is no longer the land of plenty it once was. With the failure of the stock market forcing cotton plantations into desuetude, the South, which never really recovered from the effects of the Civil War, has become an even greater economic disaster. According to Doaker, the only reason why Blacks are allowed to buy land there is that it is worthless. Then there is the question of ownership. Wining Boy points out that even if a black man did buy land in the South, for all practical purposes it would still belong to the white man, who has the law on his side. The harsh truth is clear: there is no place where Blacks will be received gladly—not yet, anyway.

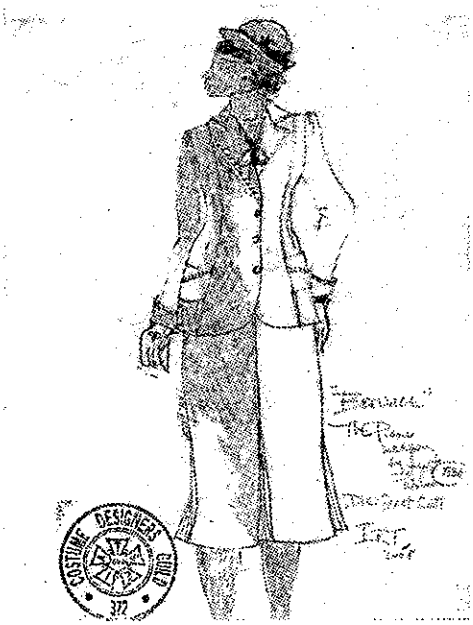
The *Charles* Family Tree



RUSSELL METHENY
Scenic Designer

There are two vivid descriptions by August Wilson in the play's beginning that set the design in motion. At the center of the Charles house is an old carved upright piano which embodies the history of a family's legacy that Mr. Wilson describes as "rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts it out of the realm of craftsmanship into the realm of Art." He describes the opening of the play as a "dawn that is beginning to announce itself but with something in the air that belongs to the night. A stillness that portends to a gathering storm." From these powerful images emerged the color palette. Grey is the dominant yet recessive tone for architectural clarity and simplicity. An earthy yellow pierces or seeps through from the outside world to energize the space. The walls of the set itself are designed to allow light either to glow or to pierce the atmosphere. A rich subtle purple emulates the hidden myths and history of the house.

With the piano as the central iconic object, all the other details, from sink to parlor chaise, become iconic as well, with their own history and character. The staircase and its windows frame the piano, allowing varying atmospheric light of day or night to bathe the room. Above the archway of the staircase, a window, closed, dark, and oddly haunting, gives a poetic mystery to the "ghost" that haunts the family's lives. The goal is to support the power of the actors' performances of Mr. Wilson's rich, lyrical dialogue and storytelling.

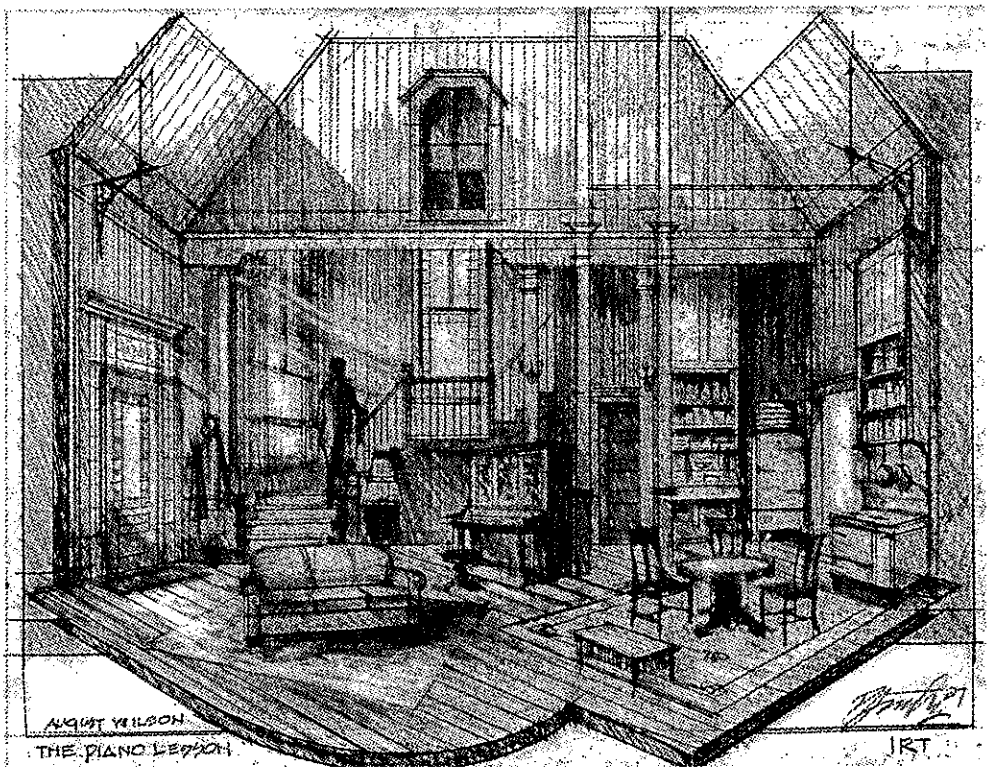


the hill district

KAREN PERRY
Costume Designer

First of all, I have to say this is one of August's funniest plays. But beyond that, he gives voice to a neighborhood, a situation, a group of people we hardly ever see. It often seems we skipped from slavery to Martin Luther King with nothing in between. August has filled in those missing decades with his epic cycle. It is an honor to design any one of his plays, and to have a body of ten plays out there being produced.... I could work on these plays the rest of my life.

Preliminary sketches
by costume designer Karen Perry
for Berniece (left)
and Lymon (below).



MICHAEL LINCOLN
Lighting Designer

I've designed other August Wilson plays, but what makes this one even more interesting for a lighting designer is the ghost story aspect. This is my first production with Seret Scott, and she is encouraging us to develop the ghost story idea visually. I've had many collaborations with Russell Metheny, who always considers lighting when he designs scenery. This time he has designed a set that will allow light to seep through the walls of the house to become a character, so I'm very much looking forward to our tech process.

Preliminary sketch
by scenic designer Russell Metheny.

The Piano Lesson
Text Elucidations

Page

3 **Sunflower**
Sunflower, Mississippi, is located in Sunflower County, 80 miles north of Jackson and 30 miles west of Greenville. There is also a Sunflower in West Virginia, halfway between Charlestown and Parkersburg.

3 **infectious**
able to spread quickly

4 **disarming**
to cause one to be off-guard, without protection

4 **Yellow Dog**
"The Yellow Dog" is a vernacular name for the Yazoo Delta Railroad; it was also associated with the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad. "Dog" or "short-dog" was railroad slang for a local or branch line.

4 **well**
a deep, open hole dug to obtain water

5 **Stoner County**
This is possibly a reference to Stone County in southern Mississippi, near Biloxi.

8 **Parchman Farm**
Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm, is the oldest prison and the only maximum security prison in the state of Mississippi. It is located on 18,000 acres in Parchman, Mississippi, and was built in 1901. A number of bluesmen have been imprisoned in Parchman Farm, and the prison is featured in a number of blues songs.

10 **Irene Kaufman Settlement house**
The settlement movement started in London. Victorian England, increasingly concerned with urban poverty, gave rise to a movement whereby those connected to universities settled students in slum areas to live and work alongside local people. Through their efforts settlement houses were established for education, savings, sports, and arts. Such institutions were often praised by religious representatives concerned with the lives of the poor, and criticized as normative or moralistic by radical social movements. The Irene Kaufmann Settlement was located in the Hill District section of Pittsburgh from 1912 to 1944. It was a prominent part of social, civic, health, recreational, and educational programs for Pittsburgh, and was the forerunner of the Jewish Community Center now located in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh.

11 **Gin my cotton.**
A cotton gin (short for cotton engine) is a machine that quickly and easily separates the cotton fibers from the seedpods and the sometimes sticky seeds. These seeds were used again to grow more cotton. The gin uses a combination of a wire screen and small wire hooks to pull the cotton through the screen, while brushes continuously remove the loose cotton lint to prevent jams. The term "gin" is an abbreviation for engine, and means "device." After Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793, cotton production increased ten-fold.

14 **Big Sandy and Little Sandy**
This could be a reference to two rivers in Kentucky and West Virginia. Also, there is a town called Big Sandy in Tennessee, while there are towns named Little Sandy in Kentucky, Alabama, and West Virginia.

14 **Marlin County**
There is no Marlin County in Mississippi today. This may be a reference to an earlier name, or it may be fictional.

18 **sugartit**
a piece of cloth containing moist sugar, wrapped to resemble a nipple and used to pacify an infant

18 **to line track**
to work on a railroad construction crew laying track

19 **telegram**
Telegraphy (from the Greek words *tele* = far and *graphein* = write) is the long-distance transmission of written messages without physical transport of letters. The first telegraphs came in the form of optical telegraphs, including the use of smoke signals and beacons, which have existed since ancient times, or semaphores using pivoting blades or paddles, shutters in a matrix, or hand-held flags. An electrical telegraph was independently developed and patented in the United States in 1837 by Samuel F. B. Morse, who also developed the Morse code signaling alphabet. Telegraphy messages sent by the telegraph operators using Morse code were known as *telegrams* or *cablegrams*, often shortened to *a cable* or a *wire* message. Before long distance telephone services were readily available or affordable, telegram services were very popular. Telegrams were often used to confirm business dealings and, unlike e-mail, telegrams were commonly used to create binding legal documents for business dealings. Telegraphy includes recent forms of data transmission such as fax, e-mail, the Internet, and computer networks in general.

21 boogie-woogie

Boogie-woogie is a style of piano-based blues that became very popular in the late 1930s and early 1940s, but had originated much earlier. The form eventually expanded from piano to guitar, big band, country and western, and even gospel. While the blues traditionally depicts sadness and sorrow, boogie-woogie is associated with dancing. It is characterized by a regular bass figure—an ostinato in the left hand that elaborates on each chord—and trills and decorations in the right hand. It is sometimes called "eight to the bar," as much of it is written in common (4/4) time using eighth notes. The origin of the term *boogie-woogie* is unknown, according to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary.* The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that the word is a redoubling of *boogie*, which was used for rent parties as early as 1913.

23 Gulf Building

Built as the headquarters for the Gulf Oil Company, the Gulf Building was completed in 1932. Now a condo complex called Gulf Tower, it has 44 floors and rises 582 feet above downtown Pittsburgh at 707 Grant Street. The crown of the skyscraper is modeled in the style of a step pyramid after the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus in Turkey. The building is one of the major distinctive and recognizable features of the downtown Pittsburgh skyline.

23 pension

the money one receives after retiring from a job

24 hobos

Hobo is a term that refers to a subculture of wandering homeless people, particularly those who make a habit of hopping freight trains. The iconic image of a hobo is that of a downtrodden, shabbily-dressed, and perhaps drunken male, one that was solidified in American culture during the Great Depression. Hoboes are often depicted carrying a bindle (a stick over the shoulder with a bag tied to the end) `and/or a sign asking for money/work/food. Hoboes differentiate themselves as travelers who are homeless and willing to do work, whereas a *tramp* travels but will not work, and a *bum* does neither.

26 ham hocks

a cut of meat from just above the pig's foot

30 Spear

Spear, Texas, is located about 50 miles northwest of Houston.

34 Sunflower County

located in northwest Mississippi, county seat Indianola, 80 miles north of Jackson and 30 miles west of Greenville

34 **where them two railroads cross each other**
The Yellow Dog (Yazoo Delta Line) crossed the Southern Line in Moorhead, Mississippi, in Sunflower County. This location is considered to be where the blues was born. According to his autobiography, W. C. Handy overheard a man in Tutwiler, Mississippi, singing a song about "going where the Southern cross the Dog" in 1903. Handy had never heard harmonies like this. This is the first documented use of blues harmonies.

44 **jumping the broom**
Jumping the broom is an African American custom relating to wedding ceremonies. In some African American communities, recently married couples will end their ceremony by jumping together or separately over a broom. This practice dates back at least to the 19th century and has enjoyed a 20th century revival largely due to the miniseries "Roots." The origins of the custom are unclear. Some believe broom jumping comes from an African tribal marriage ritual of placing sticks on the ground representing the couple's new home. Others believe the custom was developed by slaves when their masters allowed them no official wedding ceremony. Still others believe the custom originated in Europe and was adopted by slaves. At any rate, the jumping of the broom is a symbol of sweeping away of the old and welcoming the new, or a symbol of a new beginning.

45 **boxcar**
a train car with a roof and sliding doors

47 **corn dodgers**
small oval cake of corn bread, baked or fried

47 **hash**
food, particularly any chopped food

55 **Katy**
The Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad was incorporated May 23, 1870. In its earliest days the MKT was commonly referred to as the K-T, which was its stock exchange symbol; this common designation soon evolved into the Katy.

58 **Squirrel Hill**
Squirrel Hill is a large residential neighborhood in the east end of Pittsburgh. Squirrel Hill has had a large Jewish population since the 1920s, when Jewish people began to move to the neighborhood in large numbers from Oakland and the Hill District. Squirrel Hill became the center of Jewish culture in the city, with kosher butcher shops, delicatessens, Jewish restaurants, bookstores, and designer boutiques.

62 **Florsheim**
Florsheim Shoe was founded in 1892 by Milton S. Florsheim and his father Sigmund. The founders focused on the dual ideas of mass-producing shoes of exceptional quality and establishing a strong dealer network. The company provided support that enabled entrepreneurs to establish retail businesses, which made Florsheim shoes readily available to consumers in hundreds of small towns and villages across the nation.

62 **Staggerlee**
Lee Shelton (also known as Stagger Lee, Stagolee, Stackerlee, Stack O'Lee, Stack-a-Lee, and by several other spelling variants) was a cab driver (and a pimp?) convicted of murdering his friend, William Lyons, on Christmas Eve, 1895, in St. Louis, Missouri. After an evening of drinking together, Lyons snatched Shelton's hat off his head and refused to hand it back, and Shelton shot him. The crime was immortalized in a blues folk song that has been recorded in hundreds of different versions. Immortalized in song, Stagger Lee became an archetype, the embodiment of a badass black man—sly, streetwise, cool, lawless, amoral, potentially violent, defying white authority.

71 **"Old Ship of Zion"**
"The Old Ship of Zion" is a Christian hymn written by M. J. Cartwright some time before 1900, sung to a tune written by Daniel B. Towner.

76 **Queen of Sheba**
According to the Bible, the unnamed Queen of the land of Sheba heard of the great wisdom of King Solomon of Israel and journeyed there with gifts of spices, gold, precious stones, and beautiful wood to test him with questions, as recorded in First Kings 10:1-13. The queen was awed by Solomon's great wisdom and wealth, and pronounced a blessing on Solomon's God. Solomon reciprocated with gifts and "everything she desired," whereupon the queen returned to her country. The queen was apparently quite rich herself, as she brought 4.5 tons of gold with her to give to Solomon (1 Kings 10:10).

91 Rockefeller

John Davison Rockefeller Sr. (1839–1937) was an American industrialist and philanthropist. Rockefeller revolutionized the petroleum industry and defined the structure of modern philanthropy. In 1870, Rockefeller founded the Standard Oil Company and ran it until he retired in the late 1890s. He kept his stock and as gasoline grew in importance his wealth soared. He became the world's richest man and the first billionaire, and is often regarded as the richest person in history. Standard Oil was convicted in Federal Court of monopolistic practices and broken up in 1911. Rockefeller spent the last 40 years of his life in retirement. His fortune was mainly used to create the modern systematic approach of targeted philanthropy, with foundations that had a major effect on medicine, education, and scientific research. His foundations pioneered the development of medical research and were instrumental in the eradication of hookworm and yellow fever. He was a devoted Northern Baptist and supported many church-based institutions throughout his life.

100 polecat

a foul-smelling weasel or a skunk; also a slang term for a stripper or prostitute

Wilson's Cycle of Plays

In his lifetime, playwright August Wilson completed a magnificent feat. He took it upon himself to examine 100 years of the African American experience in a ten-play cycle, each set in a different decade of the twentieth century. Wilson said he did not want to write about the "historical events or the pathologies of the black community." The playwright explained, "I'm taking each decade and looking back at one of the most important questions that blacks confronted in that decade and writing a play about it. Put them all together and you have a history."

Chronologically the cycle begins with *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) set in Pittsburgh's Hill District, where most of the cycle's plays take place. It portrays a crossroads of characters still affected by the end of slavery only 40 years before. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), set in 1911, a man searches for "his song"—that elusive element which would make his life meaningful. The play centers around the sons and daughters of former slaves trying to find identity in the world as free citizens. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) focuses on a recording studio in 1927 Chicago and examines the consequences of black rage, which can find no other outlet for expression except violence; this is the only of the cycle plays not connected to Pittsburgh's Hill District. *The Piano Lesson* (1990 Pulitzer Prize winner), set in 1936 Pittsburgh, centers around a family's conflict over the legacy of an heirloom piano. In *Seven Guitars* (1996), set in the 1940s, the plans of several Pittsburgh musicians to form a group and make it big in Chicago are destroyed by an act of senseless violence.

Fences (1987 Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award, produced by the IRT in 1996), set in 1957, focuses on a former Negro League baseball player and warns of the dangers of bitterness and the importance of hope. *Two Trains Running* (1992) moves to the volatile 1960s, where a mentally impaired handyman refuses to accept the role of victim in a racist society. *Jitney* (original version 1979, revised 1996), set in 1977, focuses on a

group of gypsy cab drivers whose livelihood is threatened by urban renewal. *King Headly II* (2001) deals with the historical and financial disenfranchisement of African Americans during the economic boom of the 1980s. The last play of the cycle, *Radio Golf* (2005), centers around the redevelopment of Wilson's beloved Hill District, and the characters attempts to grab a piece of the White American pie. Specifically the play centers on the destruction of a "raggedy-ass" house at 1839 Wylie Avenue, the setting for the first play of the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean*.

Wilson believed that "the propagation and rehearsal of the value of one's ancestors is the surest way to a full and productive life." In presenting the "unique particulars of the black American culture" Wilson seeks to present a duality of attitude within the black community: one that endeavors to succeed in times when larger society "thought less [of them] then [they] have thought of [themselves]" and one that still strives to live an American dream universal to every citizen in the country regardless of race. In Wilson's words, "In all the plays, the characters remain pointed toward the future, their pockets lined with fresh hope and an abiding faith in their own abilities and their own heroics."

Wilson often told this story: "An interviewer once asked me if having written these plays I hadn't exhausted the black experience. I said, 'Wait a minute. You've got 40,000 movies and plays about the white experience and we don't ask you if you've exhausted your experience.' I'll never run out of material. If I finish this cycle, I'll just start over again. You can write forever about the clash between the urban North and the rural South, what happened when blacks came to the cities, how their lives changed and how it affected generations to come."

Sadly, August Wilson died in 2005, having finished his first cycle of ten plays but before moving on to the next.

August Wilson's Twentieth Century

Gem of the Ocean (set in 1904, first performed 2003)
A haunting, ghostlike play, conjuring tales of slave ships and the black man arriving in chains in the New World.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone (set in 1911, first performed 1986)
Set in a Pittsburgh boarding house. The children and grandchildren of slavery grapple with a world that won't let them forget the past.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (set in 1927, first performed 1984)
A volatile trumpet player rebels against racism in a Chicago recording studio. (the only play in the cycle set outside Pittsburgh's Hill District).

The Piano Lesson (set in 1936, first performed 1987)
A brother and sister battle over a family heirloom, a link to the slavery in their past. Pulitzer Prize Winner.

Seven Guitars (set in 1948, first performed 1995)
The final days of a Pittsburgh blues guitarist, telling the story of how and why he died.

Fences (set in 1957, first performed 1985)
A father-son drama of dreams denied and how that denial affects the relationship between the two men. Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award Winner.

Two Trains Running (set in 1968, first performed 1990)
The displaced and the dreamers congregate in a dilapidated Pittsburgh restaurant scheduled for demolition.

Jitney (set in 1977, first performed 1979, revised 1996)
Another father-son tale, set in a gypsy cab station, as the owner of the cab company squares off against his offspring, newly released from prison.

King Hedley II (set in 1985, first performed 1999)
An ex-con attempts to get his life back on track despite the desperation, despair and violence that surround him.

Radio Golf (set in 1997, first performed 2005)
A successful middle-class entrepreneur tries to reconcile the present with the past.

Source: The *Seattle Times*. "Wilson's 10-play cycle" October 3 2005.

A Brief History of the "Hill"

Pittsburgh's Hill District began on "farm number three," a piece of land owned by William Penn's grandson and later sold to General Adamson Tannerhill, a Revolutionary War veteran, for $20 an acre. In the late 1840s, Thomas Mellon bought a tract of farmland on the slope nearest the city. He subdivided the tract into smaller plots and sold them for a tidy profit. Thus began the Hill's development as a settled community.

The Hill is actually composed of several smaller hills, which were inhabited by three communities. Haiti was on the lower hill, inhabited by runaway slaves. The middle portion was called Lacyville, while the upper hill was called Minersville. The latter two areas were populated predominately by Germans and Scotch-Irish until the 1880s, when central and eastern Europeans began to settle there.

Blacks began arriving from the South between 1880 and 1910. During the years leading to World War I, Blacks were urged to come by industry recruiters who promised relief from the segregation laws of the South. New arrivals swelled the area and the Hill became an ethnic and racial melting pot of Russians, Slovaks, Armenians, Syrians, Lebanese, Greeks, Poles, Chinese, and Jews. The races wove a rich and vibrant tapestry for Pittsburgh city life. Hill District residents supplied the labor for mines, mills, business, and government. They toiled, raised their children, and contended with each other; they established a community that left an indelible mark upon Pittsburgh's religion, politics, and economy.

The ethnic diversity of the Hill produced a bustling business community. Wylie and Bedford avenues and Logan Street were lined with neighborhood stores. Their vibrancy lasted through the hard times of the Depression. It was through these difficult times that the Hill remained a place for music. The Hill was known on the national jazz circuit for places like the Crawford Grill, Hurricane Lounge, Savoy Ballroom, and Musicians Club. Celebrities like Rudy Vallee and Paul Whiteman came to the Hill after performing at downtown theatres and clubs to hear black musicians play. Later black musicians like Ramsey Lewis, Oscar Peterson, Cannonball Adderly, Billy Eckstine, and Lena Horne entertained nightclub patrons. In the 1940s and 1950s the Hill was brimming with interracial bars and clubs. There were blocks that were filled with life and music, with people going from club to club.

Although the Hill District continued to be a vibrant, politically active community, a deteriorating neighborhood infrastructure began to take hold. In 1943, George E. Evans, a member of city council, wrote that "approximately 90 percent of the buildings in the area are sub-standard, and have long outlived their usefulness, and so there would be no social loss if these were all destroyed." Local residents, however, suspected that the officials were using this as an excuse to create a "neutral zone" between the city's black and white neighborhoods.

In September 1955 the federal government approved the lower Hill redevelopment plan, making available $17.4 million in loans and grants. Ninety-five acres were slated for clearing, with the demolition of the first of 1,300 structures to be razed set for June 1956. Redevelopment displaced more than 8,000 residents; 1,239 black families, 312 white. Of these, 35 percent went to public housing, 31 percent to private rentals, and 8 percent bought homes. About 90 families refused to move and ended up in substandard housing. Relocatees received little compensation, with most benefits coming from the federal government.

A cultural district known as the "Center for the Arts" was originally proposed to replace lower Hill homes and businesses. The ambitious plan failed, however, as it was perceived as too far from the Downtown core. The construction of the Civic Arena (1961), although an engineering wonder, met with limited success and was abandoned by all those organizations which originally were supposed to thrive under its dome.

The Hill's fortunes took a downturn and struck bottom during the seven days of riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968. That week of rage saw 505 fires, $620,000 in property damage, one death, and 926 arrests.

The Hill District's rich legacy was leveled by botched redevelopments and riots, but it was black Pittsburghers who met and transcended these problems, and who are striving to rebuild, inspiring confidence that the Hill District will be revitalized. Crawford Square has returned residential homes to the area, with plans for retail developments and for restoring the New Granada Theatre as a jazz center. We can all hope that the Hill District again will have a bright future.

—Paul S. Korol, Pittsburgh Senior News

Spirituality in Wilson's Plays

The metaphysical presence of the spirit world has become increasingly important in my work. It is the world that the characters turn to when they are most in need.

—August Wilson

When crises erupt in Wilson's plays, the characters reclaim their African ancestors' spirits and strategies to survive critical times. Through the use of ritualized cultural practices, the characters negotiate with the spirits to create new possibilities for them to live on. This African-influenced spirituality contains healing processes that connect the everyday troubles of black life to the forces of the divine tribal gods and goddesses. In his book *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, Harry J. Elam, Jr. contends that "the ritual moments in Wilson's cycle are equally ceremonies of freedom. They speak through the spiritual to the possibilities of social, cultural, and psychological liberation in this life." In the horrors of slavery, the blacks turned to Christian beliefs in which heaven functioned as a site of liberation. But Wilson advocates for liberation in this life; and to accomplish that, he employs ritual practice that will push the characters towards new potentials. After the Emancipation Proclamation, many blacks migrated north to find jobs and stability, but they received a rude awakening with segregation, low wages, poor housing, and a litany of other abuses. It is Wilson's contention that northern migration was not the best option for the former slaves, for in their journey, they distanced themselves from their ancestral, cultural, and spiritual roots. Wilson's characters find that their faith in Christianity "is often insufficient in addressing their social ills and racial injustice." As a result, Wilson argues that African Americans "have taken Christianity and bent it to serve their Africanness. In Africa, there's ancestor worship—ghosts, magic, superstition.... Relating to the spirit world is very much a part of the African and Afro-American culture."

—courtesy of Denver Center Theatre Company

A WORD IN CONTROVERSY

The word *nigger* is used frequently in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson,* and indeed, throughout his cycle of plays covering the twentieth century.

The word was not originally used for verbal assault. It first appears in historical documents in 1587 as *negar*, an alternate spelling of *Negro*. *Nigger* was a common word in both England and America by the seventeenth century; it was considered nothing more than an alternate pronunciation of *Negro*. By 1825, however, both abolitionists and Blacks found the word offensive and began to object to its use.

It is often the case, however, that when a word is used as a slur against a certain group, members of the group will begin to use that word among themselves in order to rob the word of its negative power. Wilson's use of *nigger* in his plays reflects the way it was often used in conversation among some African Americans during the twentieth century.

Today, the use of the word is still controversial. While it may be heard frequently in rap songs and in conversation among younger African Americans, many older African Americans are deeply offended by this use. Even within generations, not everyone agrees on whether or not the word should be used within the African American community. Society at large, however, has condemned the word as a racial slur; its use by other races against Blacks demonstrates an ignorance and hatred that should not be imitated.

Check out these other **African American Playwrights**

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) Though known primarily for his poetry and short fiction Hughes also wrote more than 13 plays. He pioneered the idea of a black gospel musical with *Black Nativity,* a retelling of the classic Nativity story with an all black cast, and *Jericho-Jim Crow* based on themes of the Civil Rights movement.

Owen Vincent Dodson (1914-1983) Though at times he wrote in black dialect, he also alluded to classical poetry and drama. His plays include *Bayou Legend* and *Divine Comedy.*

James Baldwin (1924-1987) Best known for his novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, as well as his poetry and essays, he wrote such plays as *The Amen Corner* and *Blues for Mister Charlie.*

Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) She is the author of the critically acclaimed *A Raisin in the Sun,* the first play written by a black woman and produced on Broadway.

Adrienne Kennedy (born 1931) She has won Obie Awards for *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *June and Jean in Concert.* Her work encompasses an appreciation of the everyday African American experience and a consciousness of pan-African politics.

Amiri Baraka (born 1934) Born Leroi Jones, he changed his name after the assassination of Malcolm X. A political and arts activist known for his poetry and for two plays, *Dutchman* and *The Slave.*

Pearl Cleage (born 1948) Her work includes *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Flyin' West* (both produced at the IRT). Her writing often centers on issues of black life she feels need a forum for discussion and promotes practical education whenever possible.

Ntozake Shange (born 1948) Her most notable plays include *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem* and a new adaptation of Brecht's *Mother Courage.* She is known for her experimental style.

George C. Wolfe (born 1954) He directed the off-Broadway production of Suzan- Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog.* Wrote the plays *The Colored Museum* and *Spunk* (both produced at the IRT) and the musical *Jelly's Last Jam.*

Suzan-Lori Parks (born 1964) She won the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Topdog/Underdog* which ran successfully both on and off Broadway with actors such as Don Cheadle, Jeffery Wright, and Mos Def.

Lynn Nottage (born 1964) Her work includes *Intimate Apparel* and *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*, both produced by the IRT. Other works include *Mud, River, Stone* (a Blackburn prize finalist) and *Poof!*, a Heideman Award Winner.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Before Seeing the Show:

Discuss what types of things (both tangible and non-tangible) your family cherishes. To what lengths will members or your family go to protect them? What happens when your family disagrees on these things?

Discuss the absence of rights as a slave (slave codes) and the restricted rights of an African American during Jim Crow (segregation). What does the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, promise to *all* Americans? What steps have been taken in the past to deny these rights to African Americans? What laws, customs, and/or institutions still hinder African Americans today?

What does freedom mean to you? How would you feel living in a state and country where you were denied freedom?

After Seeing the Show:

Define the terms *protagonist* and *antagonist.* Would you consider Berniece or Boy Willie to be the protagonist of *The Piano Lesson*? Would that make his or her sibling the antagonist, or does this play have a different structure? What does this play have to say about family relationships, particularly sibling conflicts?

There are many American playwrights and screenwriters who have written works centering on the importance of owning, acquiring, and keeping land or real estate, such as *The Piano Lesson*, *A Raisin in the Sun,* and *Places in the Heart.* What others can you think of? Discuss why this is such a resonant theme in American works.

Words such as "nigger" and other racial and ethnic slurs are often called "red flags" because of their potential to incite high emotions. The 2006 controversy over comedian Michael Richards' use of "nigger" is a reminder that this word is still a red flag. Do you ever use such words? How do you feel when you hear such words in music or in conversation? Do you think there are times when it is appropriate to use such words and other times when it is not? How do you feel about Wilson's use of the word in his plays?

If August Wilson had lived to continue his cycle, what do you believe he might have written about for the current decade? What is the important question faced by African Americans at this time? Would this be the same question for other peoples in America? Across the world?

The Great Depression of the 1930s was difficult for all Americans, but particularly difficult for most African Americans, who were already living in or near poverty. How does this play suggest the particular challenges of this era? Look at such issues as employment, housing, politics, education, entertainment, and more.

Although his plays are set in the 20th century, August Wilson often refers to the earlier history of the African in North America, from the Middle Passage so prominent in *Gem of the Ocean* to the time of slaves and sharecroppers on Sutter's plantation in *The Piano Lesson*. Why do you believe the playwright weaves this early history into the stories and plots of his plays? What might be the greater message to us that we are to carry on?

Listed below are a few of the themes or ideas addressed in *The Piano Lesson*. Discuss those themes which are most resonant for your group. How does the play address these ideas? How does the play's treatment of these themes speak to today's society? If you are familiar with any of August Wilson's other plays, compare how some of these themes recur throughout his works.

Past & Present
Spirituality
Family & Friendship
Brothers & Sisters
Faith
The Bible
Redemption
Slavery
Rural South
Urban North
Railroads
Prisons
Jim Crow Laws
Sharecropping
The Blues
The Depression
Northern Migration
Community
Courage
Love
Legacy
Storytelling
Mysticism

WRITING PROJECTS

Write a piece about Legacy. How would you define legacy? What value do you place on it? What legacy is being left to you, and what legacy do you hope to leave behind? How is our legacy formed? To what lengths would you go to protect your legacy?

Chose one of the characters and write a character analysis. What does your character say? What does he or she do? What do other characters say about him or her? What are his or her sorrows, dreams, regrets? Who or what is the main love of his or her life? What haunts him or her? What is his or her greatest desire, and biggest obstacle?

Write about the final scene of the play, what it meant to you, its impact on you, what ideas it suggests? What do you think will happen to the characters?

Go online to our website www.irtlive.com and write your review of *The Piano Lesson*. A well-rounded review includes your opinion of all the theatrical aspects for sound, scenery, lights, direction, acting, your impressions of the script, and the impact the story/themes and the overall production had on you. How did you feel at the end of the play? Did you notice the reactions of the audience as a whole? Would you recommend this play to others? Why or why not?

ACTIVITIES

Before seeing *The Piano Lesson*, review these literary terms: personification, allegory, symbolism, foreshadowing, repetition, and metaphor. Note how Wilson uses these elements in the play.

Wining Boy, Doaker, and Boy Willie make music in *Piano Lesson*. What instruments are thought to have been brought to America by Africans? Learn about the evolution of African American music and the influence of spirituals, field hollers, slave songs, and prison work songs on the development of the blues and boogie-woogie.

How does each generation use music to tell its stories and preserve its cultural heritage? What does today's music say about the lives we live?

One of the inspirations for *The Piano Lesson* was Romare Beardon's painting of that title. Explore African and African American visual art (painting, sculpture, textiles, masks, etc.). Look at pieces across time, from early African cultures to America in the 1600s to 21st century contemporary art. What are some of the themes in the artwork? What are the purposes, if any, of the art objects?

Review what was happening in the world during the 1930s. What changes was America encountering in economics, industry, the military, politics, and equal rights?

Write your own story about a family with a ghost at the center of the conflict.

How does your family preserve and share its history? What kinds of stories do you share on holidays and reunions? What objects or artifacts from previous generations does your family cherish?

Research the lives of sharecroppers past and present. How has sharecropping changed for the better, and for the worse? Who has stepped forward to champion the rights of sharecroppers?

Learn about the customs, traditions, and attitudes regarding ghosts in different cultures and/or different eras. Look at literature, mythology, and religion. What ideas recur in multiple cultures? What are some of the different names used for ghosts? How do ghosts function, for good or ill, in various societies? In *The Piano Lesson*, how does Sutter's ghost affect the action of the play?

Join our Facebook site! Talk about issues the play raised for you. Did this play remind you of a movie or a book you have read? Share this with other like-minded theatregoers. Start a poll on which character you side with and why.

IDENTIFY THE DECADE

The IRT has produced four of August Wilson's plays, each from a different decade:
Gem of the Ocean **1900s** • *The Piano Lesson* **1930s** • *Fences* **1950s** • *Jitney* **1970s**
Identify during which decade each of the following historic events occurred.

_____ President William McKinley is assassinated.
_____ Charles M. Schulz's comic *Peanuts* is first published in a newspaper.
_____ Jesse Owens wins four gold medals in the Olympics.
_____ Arthur Ashe is the first black man to win Wimbledon.
_____ The Niagara Movement is formed to fight for Black rights.
_____ Pluto is discovered.
_____ "Roots" is televised.
_____ Polio vaccine is created.
_____ Dan McClelland's no-hitter is the first by a black pitcher in pro baseball.
_____ Amelia Earhart is the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.
_____ Dr. Suess publishes *The Cat in the Hat.*
_____ Daniel "Chappie" James is the first black four-star general in U.S. history.
_____ The Great Depression inspires a new wave of black migration to the North.
_____ The Teddy Bear is introduced.
_____ President Richard Nixon resigns his office.
_____ Rosa Parks is arrested for refusing to yield her bus seat to a white man.
_____ Kellogg starts selling Corn Flakes.
_____ Ella Fitzgerald is discovered after winning "Harlem Amateur Hour".
_____ Sony introduces the Walkman.
_____ Juanita Hall in *South Pacific* is the first black woman to win a Tony Award.
_____ *Star Wars* is released into movie theatres.
_____ Langston Hughes first collection, *The Ways of White Folks*, is published.
_____ The Memphis Players, the first modern jazz band, debuts in New York.
_____ Jackie Robinson is the first black to appear on the cover of *Life* magazine.
_____ The Kent State Massacre occurs in Kent, Ohio.
_____ Empire State Building completed.
_____ *Brown v. Board of Education* rules that segregation is illegal in the U.S.
_____ First flight at Kitty Hawk.
_____ World War II begins in Europe.
_____ The Soviet Union launches *Sputnik* into space.
_____ Richard Pryor wins an Emmy Award.
_____ The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People created.

Answers for **Identify the Decade**

Gem of the Ocean (1900s)

- (01) President William McKinley is assassinated.
- (02) The Teddy Bear is introduced.
- (03) Dan McClelland's no-hitter is the first by a black pitcher in pro baseball.
- (03) First flight at Kitty Hawk.
- (05) The Niagara Movement is formed to fight for Black rights.
- (05) The Memphis Players, the first modern jazz band, debuts in New York.
- (06) Kellogg starts selling Corn Flakes.
- (09) The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People created.

The Piano Lesson (1930s)

- (30) Pluto is discovered.
- (31) Empire State Building completed.
- (32) Amelia Earhardt is the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.
- (32) The Great Depression inspires a new wave of black migration to the North.
- (34) Langston Hughes first collection, *The Ways of White Folks*, is published.
- (34) Ella Fitzgerald is discovered after winning "Harlem Amateur Hour".
- (36) Jesse Owens wins four gold medals in the Olympics.
- (39) World War II begins.

Fences (1950s)

- (50) Charles M. Schulz's comic *Peanuts* is first published in a newspaper.
- (50) Juanita Hall in *South Pacific* is the first black woman to win a Tony Award.
- (50) Jackie Robinson is the first black to appear on the cover of *Life* magazine.
- (52) Polio vaccine is created.
- (54) *Brown v.Board of Education* rules that segregation is illegal in the U.S.
- (55) Rosa Parks is arrested for refusing to yield her bus seat to a white man.
- (57) Dr. Suess publishes *The Cat in the Hat.*
- (57) The Soviet Union launches *Sputnik* into space.

Jitney (1970s)

- (70) The Kent State Massacre occurs in Kent, Ohio.
- (74) Richard Pryor wins an Emmy Award.
- (74) President Richard Nixon resigns his office.
- (75) Arthur Ashe is the first black man to win Wimbledon.
- (75) Daniel "Chappie" James is the first black four-star general in US history.
- (77) *Star Wars* is released into movie theatres.
- (77) "Roots" is televised.
- (79) Sony introduces the Walkman.