YOU LIVE MORE WHEN IT'S LIVE

INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE

AUGUST WILSON'S
GEM OF THE OCEAN

January 17–February 10, 2007 • IRT Mainstage

TEACHER'S STUDY PACKET

Teacher's Packet edited by Richard J Roberts & Milicent Wright
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Gem of the Ocean
Text Elucidations

script page #

5 **Eli** In the Old Testament, Eli was a Jewish priest and the teacher of Samuel, who became a great prophet. The biblical Eli was steady, reliable, and maintained peace and security.

5 **Citizen Barlow** His name represents the struggle African-Americans were having gaining full rights as new citizens.

5 **Aunt Ester** Her name sounds like the word *ancestor.* She is the bridge between the African past and the African American present. Her name suggests both Easter, the most holy day on the Christian calendar and the story of Esther In the Old Testament, a Jewish woman who became Queen of Persia and saved her people from genocide. This Hebrew name is from a Persian word meaning "star."

5 **Black Mary** While supervising Ester's house, she serves her and washes her feet in a ritual reminiscent of the self-abasement of Mary, sister of Martha, at Bethany during the last days of Christ.

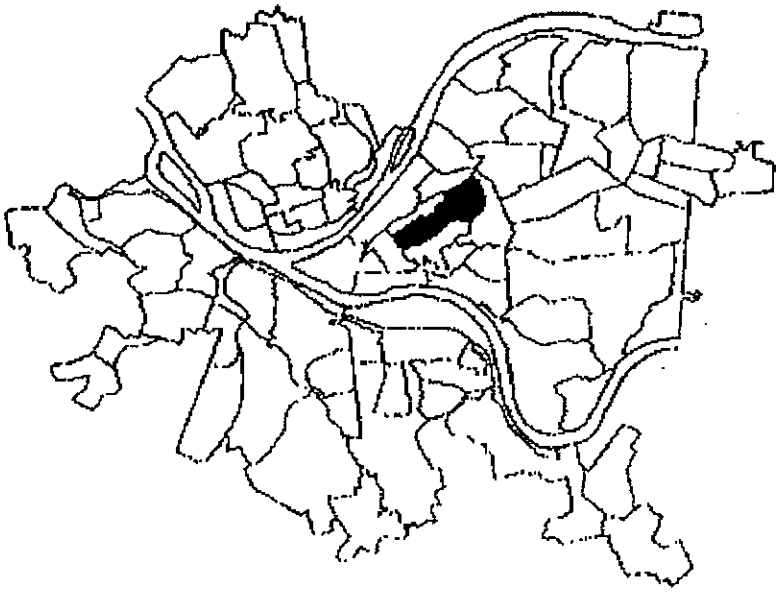
5 **Rutherford Selig** His surname means "blessed" in German. He represents the possibility of peaceful alliance in an integrated world. Selig also appears in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone.* What distinguishes Selig from Wilson's other white characters is his sense of belonging in the black community. But even this more or less positive emblem of whiteness is not without defects. Known as the People Finder among blacks, according to one perspective in the play, he keeps records of his customers in order to locate them for others in the future. "People Finder" is a euphemism in this case for those in the slave-trading business or for runaway-slave hunters. Selig does not conceal the fact that members of his family have been the arch-enemies of Africans and later African Americans, although he appears to overlook the hostility which has historically existed between his ancestors and the ancestors of the blacks in the community where he works. Selig now employs his skills in a legitimate and clean trade, yet it still is a business and his source of livelihood. Its history is far from being untainted, stretching back in time to slavery. As people with African origins were objects for material gain for Selig's ancestors, his black customers are objects for Selig to locate for money. In this regard, his business carries a strong resonance of his family's past encounters with blacks.

5 **Solly Two Kings** See note on two biblical Kings. (Page 27)

5 **Caesar Wilks** Julius Caesar was a great general and became dictator of Rome. He was assassinated in the Senate, and his adopted son, Augustus Caesar, later became the first Emperor of Rome. All Roman emperors were then called "Caesar." Particularly in the Bible, Caesar represents worldly power, government, and wealth. (Matthew 22:21 – "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.") The actions of Caesar Wilks in this play are reminiscent of plantation overseers during slavery. The character represents the progress to positions of power made by some African Americans during the Reconstruction period. Unfortunately, the rise of Jim Crow laws mostly destroyed this progress.

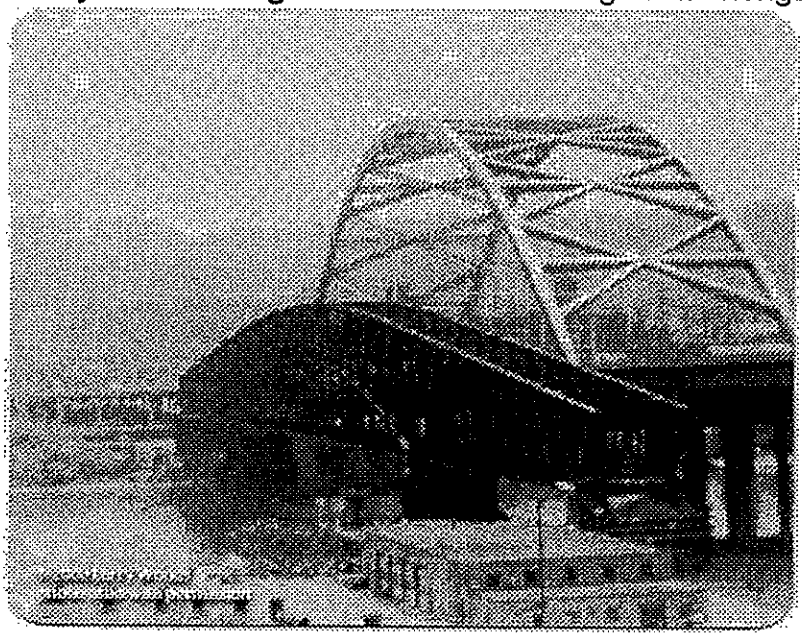
5 **Hill District (1904)** The Hill District is a sprawling 650 acres that faces Pittsburgh and was the first district in the city to develop outside the walls of the original Fort Pitt. It was originally farmland owned by William Penn's grandson. When Thomas Mellon bought the land in 1840, he divided it into individual plots and began the first planned residential neighborhood in Pittsburgh. The first occupants of the hill were mostly wealthy professionals. The ethnic makeup of the community began to change in 1870 when African Americans and European immigrants began to settle down in the Hill District, attracted by job opportunities in the steel industry. By the 1930s, the residents of the Hill District were mostly African American, Jewish, and Italian American. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the Hill District became one of the most energetic and powerful African American neighborhoods in the country. Sometimes called "the Crossroads of the World" or "Fun City," the Hill District flourished as a center for business, art, and music, and drew bustling crowds both day and night.

Pittsburgh – The Hill District



9 **clodhoppers** A big heavy shoes. The connotation is that Citizen is a clumsy, coarse person, a bumpkin.

10 **Brady Street Bridge** Built in 1895 crossing the Monongahela River:



12 **barge** a capacious, flat-bottomed vessel, usually intended to be pushed or towed, for transporting freight or passengers.

12 **"I Belong to the Band"** A traditional gospel song, which appeared in church songbooks as early as the 1830s.

13 **pure** The dung of dogs, used as an alkaline steep in tanning; also spelled *puer.*

14 **cobblestones** A naturally rounded paving stone.

14 **plantation** an estate where cash crops are grown on a large scale

15 **bondage** slavery or involuntary servitude

15 **"the colored can't buy any tickets on the train to get away"** The letter is referencing Jim Crow laws that were enacted particularly in southern states during the Reconstruction period. In an attempt to limit the rights of African Americans, this legislation often kept black Americans from enjoying the full rights of citizenship, including the freedom to travel.

16 **pig feet** Pickled pigs feet are connected to southern cuisine or soul food.

18 **smote** Past tense of the verb "to smite," a Biblical verb meaning to strike or to inflict a heavy blow

20 **Junebug** A type of beetle very common across the United States and especially in the Northeast. The beetles may swarm in early summer and are very destructive to vegetation.

22 **mill system** From 1875-1945, Pittsburgh was a manufacturing metropolis, and steel was its primary product. To produce the cheap, high-volume steel, mill owners needed a steady supply of unskilled laborers. Labor unions were formed to protect the workers. After an 1875 strike crippled the iron industry in Pittsburgh, southern African Americans were recruited to work in western Pennsylvania's mills. Many African Americans were more than ready to leave the South for a better life up north— no more farm work, better pay, and a chance to be treated as real U.S. citizens. Since African American workers didn't trust unions and weren't accepted by the white union organizers, they provided steel mill owners a potential weapon to end strikes.

25 **consumption** Tuberculosis, a serious infectious disease of the lungs.

27 **David and Solomon** David and Solomon were the second and third kings of Israel. David means "friend" or "beloved," but he was also known as a warrior when he defeated the giant Goliath. After Saul died, David became king and conquered the city of Jerusalem. Solomon was the son of David; his name means "peaceful." Known for his wisdom and wealth, Solomon expanded the kingdom of David, yet maintained peace on the newly extended borders.

27 **Opelika, Alabama** A small town in eastern Alabama, about 5 miles from Auburn. After the Civil War, the area was economically devastated.

28 **ham hocks** a small cut of meat from the leg of a pig just above the foot

29 **Lucifer** In modern and late medieval Christian thought, Lucifer is a fallen angel that revolted against God and was kicked out of Heaven. It derives from the Latin word meaning "light-bearer" and is a Roman astrological term for "morning star," the planet Venus

30 **moonshine** smuggled or illicitly distilled liquor, especially corn liquor as distilled chiefly in rural areas of the southern United States

31 **saloons** Places where alcoholic drinks are sold and drunk; taverns.

32 **the candy man** a drug dealer, one who sells illicit narcotics.

34 **Abraham Lincoln** the 16th president of the United States. President during the Civil War, and credited with the Emancipation Proclamation granting freedom to slaves.

34 **General Grant** Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885). A Civil War general who was made commander-in-chief of the Union army in 1864. He later served two terms as the 18th President of the United States.

35 **washerwoman** a woman who washes clothes, linens, etc., for hire; laundress.

36 **hoecakes** cakes or bread made of corn meal and water or milk, usually cooked on a griddle; also known as Johnny cakes

38 **Third Ward** a division or district of a city or town, as for administrative or political purposes.

43 **"...nine years old... sent me to live with Miss Tyler."** Aunt Ester's age contains a mystical quality to it. Her birth date coincides with the shipment of the first slaves to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 making her 285 years old. Aunt Ester was sold into bondage at age 12 and still possesses the bill of sale for $607.

46 **City of Bones** a mythological half-mile by half-mile area in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, "the largest unmarked graveyard in the world," containing the bones of those who died in slave ships on the journey to America (see note on Middle Passage, page 65).

46 **Monongahela River** A river running through West Virginia and Pennsylvania, including Pittsburgh. Industries such as U.S. Steel heavily use it for transportation because of its connection to the Ohio River, thus many steel mills were built on its banks.

49 **Rankin** a town several miles west of East Pittsburgh, engulfed by the great steel mills of Braddock, Munhall, and Homestead, Pennsylvania.

51 **Scotch Bottom** A neighborhood in Hazelwood where most Scotch immigrants settled in Pittsburgh

51 **buzzard** a contemptible or cantankerous person

52 **"They were the people that didn't make it across the water."** Refers to slaves who died because of the brutal conditions in the slave ships.

56 **Wheeling** a town in eastern West Virginia that served as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

56 **Birmingham** Known as the Pittsburgh of the South, Birmingham is the site of many of the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. during the time of Gem of the Ocean it strictly enforced Jim Crow Laws in order to limit the freedom of African Americans

57 **Underground Railroad** The Underground Railroad was a network of clandestine routes by which 19th century slaves attempted to escape to free states, or as far north as Canada, with the aid of abolitionists. At its height between 1810 and 1850, an estimated 30,000 to 100,000 people escaped enslavement via the Underground Railroad The escape network was "underground" in the sense of underground resistance but was seldom literally subterranean. The Underground Railroad consisted of clandestine routes, transportation, meeting points, safe houses and other havens, and assistance maintained by abolitionist sympathizers. These individuals were organized into small, independent groups who, for the purpose of maintaining secrecy, knew of connecting "stations" along the route but few details of their immediate area. Escaped slaves would pass from one waystation to the next, steadily making their way north. The diverse "conductors" on the railroad included free-born blacks, white abolitionists, former slaves, and Native Americans.

57 **Union** The name used to refer to the 23 states that did not join the Confederacy during the Civil War.

59 **caravan** A company of travelers journeying together

59 **quarry-slave** runaway slave, a slave who is being hunted or chased.

59-60 **poem** This is the last stanza of a poem called "Thanastopsis" originally written by W. C. Bryant when he was 16. This last stanza was added ten years later in 1821 and published. The title is often interpreted to mean "mediation on Death"

59 **W. C. Bryant** (1794-1878) An American poet, critic, and editor who also studied law. He advocated many reforms, including abolition. He was the editor and part-owner of the *New York Evening Post* from 1829 to 1878.

60 **Emancipation** literally, freeing someone from the control of another. Heree, Solly refers to the Emancipation Proclamation that freed all African American slaves in the United States.

60 **Billy club** a police officer's club or baton, a heavy wooden stick used as a weapon; cudgel.

63 **Gem of the Ocean** The song "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" is a patriotic song that was designated as the unofficial national anthem until the "Star Spangled Banner" was officially adopted. Columbia was understood as a poetic name for the USA at that time, derived from the name of Christopher Columbus. It includes lines such as "the home of the brave and the free" and "thy banners make tyranny tremble."

65-70 **Middle Passage (Journey to the City of Bones)** The Middle Passage was the middle leg of the slave trade route, known as the triangular trade. The first leg brought goods such as iron, gunpowder, and brandy from Europe to Africa. The Middle Passage took Africans to the Americas, where they were exchanged for tobacco, sugar, and other goods. The final leg of the voyage carried those products back to Europe. The ships carrying slaves were very overcrowded, with 300 to 400 people packed into a small space with little ventilation. Historians believe that between ten and twenty percent of Africans transported died during the voyage, from disease or suicide, and far more were severely weakened or maimed.

68 **Twelve Gates, Twelve Gatekeepers** Revelations 21:9-27 describes a new Jerusalem, a city made of gold and precious stones with twelve gates of pearl. Each gate is attended by an angel gatekeeper, each of whom is named for one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

73 **Hazelwood** Bordered on the South and on the West by the Monogahela river, this city is named for the Hazelnut trees that once flourished on the river's border.

77 **amok** In a jumbled or confused state

79 **aiding and abetting** Assisting someone in committing a crime.

FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

We move into the new year of 2007 with a magnificent play by August Wilson: the first play chronologically in his decade-by-decade ten-play examination of the twentieth century. *Gem of the Ocean* is the third of this cycle we have produced at the IRT: *Fences* (set in 1957, produced at the IRT in 1996); *Jitney* (set in 1977, produced at the IRT in 2004); and now *Gem* (which takes place in 1904 and, like nine of the ten plays, is set in Wilson's beloved Pittsburgh).

We produce *Gem of the Ocean* for you this year for many reasons, but three particular ones stand out. First, we pay our respects with this production to Wilson's untimely death in October 2005, at age 60, a death that will deny the world more luminous plays from this master of the theatre. Second, we offer it as the Indiana premiere of this recently released play (licensed for production only after Wilson's death). Thus, we join with many of our fellow regional theatres around the country, each of us creating it anew on our own stage for our own audience. Third, we are excited by the challenges presented by this particular play. It is the most mystical and lyrical of the ten-play cycle, revolving around characters whose own life experience connects us back to slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. These are issues that deeply etch the fabric of American life, sadly, still today.

In the world of *Gem*, however, this experience is not yet a legacy: it is a living reminder of the horror of human ownership, the selling block, the lash scars, the separation of families, the chains. Aunt Ester, who measures her age from the beginning of the human bondage of African people in America, is a Griot—a storyteller—and a shaman. Her purpose is no less than to gather the burden of African American suffering, carry it, and heal it, one sufferer at a time.

The particular sufferer in *Gem of the Ocean* is Citizen Barlow (a name filled with symbolism). To heal him, Aunt Ester guides him—and us in the audience—on a metaphysical journey to the City of Bones: a mythical place at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, where countless African lives were lost aboard slave ships during the Middle Passage. The purpose of this journey is to help Citizen to connect himself to the entire African American experience in this country, beginning with the rawest events of the past. Without this communal spiritual journey, Citizen—and by extension, we—cannot progress into the new century, into the experience of supposed freedom, with the necessary spiritual fortitude needed to make this freedom meaningful. It is a powerful concept: we must understand and acknowledge the worst of our cultural past to move forward, purposefully, into the future.

We invite you into this magnificent play with the hope that we will all depart from it, as Citizen does: more deeply connected to our past, and a bit more ready to face the challenges of life in a new century, where new responsibilities daunt us, but where new horizons for communal healing beckon.

—Janet Allen

THE MIDDLE PASSAGE AND THE CITY OF BONES

The Middle Passage was the middle leg of the slave trade route, known as the triangular trade. The first leg brought goods such as iron, gunpowder, and brandy from Europe to Africa. The Middle Passage took Africans to the Americas, where they were exchanged for tobacco, sugar, and other goods. The final leg of the voyage carried those products back to Europe. The ships carrying slaves were hideously overcrowded, with 300 to 400 people stripped naked, chained together, and packed tightly into small compartments with little ventilation. Historians believe that between ten and twenty percent of Africans transported died during the voyage, from disease or suicide, and far more were severely weakened or maimed. Hundreds of thousands of bodies—the dead and the near dead—were hoisted overboard, bodies left to rot in the sea without proper burial. This dark heritage inspired August Wilson to create Aunt Ester's mythic City of Bones, a sacred place at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean where the souls of lost ancestors may be found.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

In August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester guides Citizen Barlow on his journey to the "City of Bones." Is this a literal or metaphorical place? Or both? To answer that question, one must contemplate experiences that directly shape one's world.

In the world created by August Wilson, the "City of Bones" is located under the Atlantic Ocean, where countless bodies and souls of Africans were dumped during the Middle Passage. Their potent kinetic and collective energy has been held in trust—in a kind of limbo—where slaves and descendents of slaves can journey to wash away the dross formed by the psychic wounds inflicted upon them in the name of American progress.

Known as the "dark night of the soul," we all experience those dreaded trials during our lives, from which we gratefully emerge, aware that the resultant revelation would not have been gained, or have been as satisfying, had we not traveled that road of shadows.

In 2005 I had the great blessing of directing the world premiere of *Radio Golf* for Yale Repertory Theatre, the final play in the August Wilson cycle. The enormity of the task set before me of realizing the finale of what is arguably the most ambitious project in American theatre history turned out to be both an awesome and bittersweet accomplishment.

Ben Mordecai (founding managing director of the IRT), who was an intimate, close friend of Mr. Wilson, as well as the commercial producer for all of Wilson's premieres, was the one who delivered the news to me that I would have the great honor of directing that culminating play. Mr. Mordecai had also been a mentoring figure for me when I was an acting student at Yale School of Drama, and he had kept tabs on my progress after I transitioned into my directing career.

It was during my years at Yale that August Wilson's plays were introduced to the world. The first six premieres of the cycle happened at Yale Rep—I served as an understudy on the first three: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Fences, Joe Turner's Come and Gone*—and all were directed by Yale Rep's artistic director and dean of the School of Drama, Lloyd Richards.

Just days after the opening of *Radio Golf*, Ben Mordecai lost his battle to cancer. Just a few weeks after Ben's passing, August Wilson announced that he'd been diagnosed with inoperable liver cancer, to which he succumbed in October 2005. Just a few months after that, Lloyd Richards also gave up this world after a life of making extraordinary contributions to the American theater.

Giants all, in their own rights, but also figures who loom large in my creative soul as I continue to develop as an artist.

My work on this production of *Gem of the Ocean*, the genesis of the cycle, has afforded me a way of paying tribute to that triumvirate directly responsible for my development as a director. I am at once elated and humbled by the task, and its process is no less profound for me than Citizen's journey.

—Timothy Douglas

Earnest Perry Jr. and Darryl Theirse in the IRT's 2004 production of Jitney, directed by Timothy Douglas.

Playwright August Wilson

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 of 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.

—Richard J Roberts, Dramaturg

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.

Aunt Ester and the Cycle 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. Although the character of Aunt Ester did not appear in the flesh until *Gem of the Ocean*, the second-to-last play written by Wilson but the first chronologically in the cycle, she was considered by Wilson to be the unifying element of the entire series. She is only specifically mentioned in four of the ten plays, but her presence permeates the entire cycle. According to Wilson, "She represents the entire body of wisdom and tradition of the African American—going back all the way to 1619, our first presence here in America. So that memory and that experience, that tradition and wisdom are kept alive in the person of Aunt Ester. She really hovers over the whole cycle whether she's mentioned by the other characters or not. She has emerged for me as singular, she's the most important character: all the cycle characters are her children."

Wilson did not want to write about the "historical events or the pathologies of the black community." The playwright explains, "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. It is in this play that Wilson first evoked Aunt Ester as an enigmatic off-stage presence, the personification of an older African spirituality, and someone who will dispense advise if a person is willing to throw $20 into the Monongahela River. *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. Again we are reminded of Aunt Ester when the character Stool Pigeon announces that at 366 years old (the length of time that Africans had been in America), Aunt Ester has finally died of grief. Stool Pigeon laments, "She died too soon... She wasn't supposed to die at all." 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 former home of Aunt Ester and the setting for *Gem of the Ocean*.

Aunt Ester is the most important character in Wilson's cycle because of his personal expression of the belief 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," Wilson explains. "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.

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

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.

The Middle Passage

Aunt Ester's remembrance of the "people that didn't make it across the water" is a reference to those who didn't survive The Middle Passage, the most destructive aspect of the trade in human cargo that supplied slaves to America. This ocean journey received its name because it was the second leg of an intercontinental trade network that included, first, movement from Europe to Africa; second, the dispatch of human beings to the colonies in The Americas; and third, return to Europe from the Americas. To prepare for this overseas trip, the people were stripped naked, chained together, and packed tightly in highly confining compartments. Then they were forced to lie down on layers of shelving with little room for sitting up straight or moving about. For the next several weeks, the bonded men and women suffered some of the most inhumane conditions known in human history. A survivor of the journey, Equiano Olaudah, was captured and sold into slavery in 1756; this African from the Nigol Ibo region of West Africa wrote an account of his passage in a book called *Interesting Narrative.* "The closeness of the place and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspiration, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died.... The shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable." Equiano told of two of his countrymen who, chained together, jumped into the sea, preferring death to such a life of misery. Equiano envies them when he wrote, "Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself..." For each day that his situation worsened and his apprehension increased, his "opinion of the cruelty of the whites" rose. When they reached the shores of North America, another round of indignities ensued. After agents inspected their physical conditions, the slaves were transferred to a warehouse where they were allowed to eat, clean up and rest. Survivors of the Middle Passage were about to embark on more journeys in the new world.

—courtesy of The Denver Center for the Performing Arts Website

The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad, a vast network of people who helped slaves escape to the North and to Canada, was not run by any single organization or person. Rather, it consisted of many individuals—many whites but predominantly blacks—who knew only of the local efforts to aid fugitives and not of the overall operation. Still, it effectively moved hundreds of slaves northward each year. According to one estimate, the South lost 100,000 slaves between 1810 and 1850. An organized system to assist runaway slaves seems to have begun toward the end of the 18th century. In 1786 George Washington complained about how one of his runaway slaves was helped by a "society of Quakers, formed for such purposes." The system grew, and around 1831 it was dubbed "The Underground Railroad," after the then-emerging steal railroads. The system even used railroading terms: the homes and businesses where fugitives would rest and eat were called "stations" and "depots" and were run by "stationmasters"; those who contributed money or goods were "stockholders," and the "conductor" was responsible for moving fugitives from one station to the next. For the slave, running away to the North was anything but easy. The first step was to escape from the slaveholder. For many slaves, this meant relying on his or her own resources. Sometimes a "conductor," posing as a slave, would enter a plantation and then guide the runaways northward. The fugitives would move at night; they would generally travel between 10 and 20 miles to the next station, where they would rest and eat, hiding in barns and other out-of-the-way places. While they waited, a message would be sent to the next station to alert its stationmaster.

The fugitives would also travel by train and boat—conveyances that sometimes had to be paid for. Money also was needed to improve the appearance of the runaways—a black man, woman or child in tattered clothes would invariably attract suspicion. The money was donated by individuals and also raised by various groups, including vigilance committees. Vigilance committees sprang up in the larger towns and cities of the North, especially New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. In addition to soliciting money, the organizations provided food, lodging and helped the fugitives settle into a community by helping them find jobs and providing letters of recommendation. The Underground Railroad had many notable participants including John Fairfield in Ohio, the son of a slaveholding family, who made many daring rescues; Levi Coffin, a Quaker, who assisted more than 3000 slaves; and Harriet Tubman, who made 19 trips into the South and escorted more than 300 slaves to freedom.

—courtesy of The Denver Center for the Performing Arts Website

Spirituality in *Gem of the Ocean*

> *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."

Aunt Ester, unseen in Wilson's earlier plays, has the greatest spiritual power of all his characters; she signifies living embodied history. At the age of 287, she possesses the spirit of *ashe* defined as "spiritual command or the power-to-make-

things-happen." African allusions are all around her. Her front door is red, the color the Yoruban tribe of Nigeria describes as "the supreme presence of color." Her house number on Wylie Avenue is 1839, the year of an outbreak of white violence against the black community in Pittsburgh. Her practice of "laying on of hands" has a direct relationship to the Yoruba goddess, Oshun, who is the divinity of rivers. Thus, Aunt Ester asks all who come to her for counsel to throw their offerings into the river—in Pittsburgh, either the Allegheny, the Monongahela, or the Ohio. Water is a regenerative force within African and African American rituals, and it joins with Christianity in the practice of baptism. In black churches, baptism is performed at the river's edge and involves total submersion in water; thus, baptism confirms the presence of the spirit within the body of the African-American infant. Aunt Ester never dictates a course of action; rather she asks her counselees to determine their own way. She gives advice in parables that compel her advocates to interpret, think and then act. Her healing is internal and psychological and involves her troubled souls touching their past. Only by remembering the experience and lessons of the ancestors can the character move forward. In *King Hedley II*, Aunt Ester dies at the age of 367; only the prophet-like Stool Pidgeon recognizes what has been lost. His rituals are intended to revive her spirit, but all the other characters have forgotten their connection to history. Her death "is a call for African American rebirth and reconnection. Her voice—eventually heard in the cat's meow at the play's conclusion—cries out loudly from the grave."

"Aunt Ester got the wisdom. She got the Book of Life."

—Stool Pidgeon. *King Hedley II.*

—article courtesy of Denver Center Theatre Company

A WORD IN CONTROVERSY

The word *nigger* is used frequently in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean,* 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.

THEMES & ISSUES

Spirituality
Family & Friendship
Faith
The Bible
Redemption
Slavery
Civil War
Abraham Lincoln
Emancipation
Reconstruction
Jim Crow
Underground Railroad
Rural South
Urban North
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Love
Legacy
Law
Mysticism
Allegory
the Four Elements
Frederick Douglass
Booker T. Washington
W. E. B. DuBois
The Middle Passage
Spirituals

CHECK OUT THESE BOOKS

August Wilson: A Literary Companion by Mary Snodgrass

August Wilson by Harold Bloom

August Wilson: A Case Book by Marilyn Elkins

Conversations with August Wilson by Jackson R. Bryer & Mary C. Hartig

Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African American Slang by Clarence Major

The Middle Passage by Tom Feelings

Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word by Randall Kennedy

The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson by Harry J Elam

EXPLORE THESE WEBSITES

http://www.mccarter.org/Education/gemoftheocean/1.html

http://www.denvercenter.org/behind_scenes/study_guide.cfm?id_pdf=11107616

http://www.huntingtontheatre.org/season/gem/gem_dramaturgy.pdf

http://www.tdf.org/PlaybyPlayOnline/awilson/essay.html

http://www.clpgh.org/exhibit/neighborhoods/hill

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING

Words such as "nigger" and other racial and ethnic slurs are often called "red flags" because of their potential to incite high emotions. The recent controversy over comedian Michael Richard's 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?

"You don't know where you're going if you don't know where you've been." What does this statement mean to you? How can you apply this statement to your relationships with your classmates? To your family? To your community? To your nation? To your world? How can we use our knowledge of history to try to resolve or at least understand our conflicts today?

Learn about the history of African American music, as it evolved from slavery, including field hollers, spirituals, blues, ragtime, jazz, R & B, and hip-hop. How does each generation use music to tell its stories and preserve their cultural heritage? What does today's music say about the lives we live?

How does the use of music in the IRT's production of *Gem of the Ocean* affect your understanding of the play? How does music enhance the play's themes?

In the play, Aunt Ester is said to be 285 years old. Why this age? Is this a literal or a symbolic number or both? What do you think the playwright is trying to say with this idea?

Why do you suppose Aunt Ester has not left the house for 25 years?

If August Wilson had decided 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?

What are the Four Elements? How are they used in the IRT's production of this play? How does their use relate to the play's themes?

Taking personal responsibility is a theme in the play. Identify the responsibilities of each character in the play. What are you responsible for? How are you responsible to your family, your friends, your community? What happens when we avoid taking responsibility for our actions?

The ritual journey is an important rite of passage in the play. What kinds of ceremonies or rituals have you participated in? How do these events mark the journey of your life? How do these events connect you to your past, your present, or your future?