

AN INTERVIEW WITH AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHT AUGUST WILSON

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Interviews on 30 April and 3 May 2002

Raphael Hotel and Hallmark Corporate Headquarters, Kansas City MO

TIBBETTS INTRODUCTION TO INTERVIEW:

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel in 1945 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's Hill District, an area famous for the many black performers who began their careers there—Lena Horne, Erroll Garner, Ahmad Jamal, Earl (Fatha) Hines, and Billy Eckstine. The fourth child of six children of a baker and a cleaning woman (whose maiden name was Wilson), he was an avid reader and displayed early on a gift and a passion for poetry. But the world of theatre eventually claimed him, and he co-founded the Black Horizons Theatre in 1968 and turned to playwriting in earnest. He moved to St. Paul, Minnesota in 1978, where he began writing Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, a play about the struggle between black musicians and their white bosses in the 1920s, and Jitney, whose story was set at a taxi stand on the Hill. Wilson's career was launched when his work came to the attention of Lloyd Richards, an experienced director and head of the Yale Drama School. Thus began a creative partnership that has lasted to the present day. Ma Rainey debuted on Broadway in 1984 and was a sensational success. Despite the fact that there were many esteemed black playwrights working at the time—Amiri Baraka, Ron Milner, Richard Wesley, Ed Bullins, and Phillip Hayes Dean, to cite just a few—no African-American plays had hitherto been successful on Broadway. According to director and longtime colleague Marion McClinton, Wilson's success stimulated "one of the more major American theatrical revolutions." Critic John Lahr contends that "his audience appeal almost single-handedly broke down the wall for other black artists, many of whom would not otherwise be working in the mainstream." (John Lahr, "Been Here and Gone," The New Yorker, 16 April 2001, p. 50). Wilson followed Ma Rainey with more critically acclaimed plays that examined the African American experience in this century, each one set in a different decade, beginning in the time period of 1911 with Joe Turner's Come and Gone, and continuing with Fences, The Piano Lesson, Two Trains Running, Seven Guitars, Jitney, and King Hedley II. They form what Lahr describes as a "fever chart of the trauma of slavery" (52). That bondage is to the course of history itself, as a character in Ma Rainey declares: "We's the leftovers. The white man knows you just a leftover. 'Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don't know that we been took and made history out of."

By 1990 Wilson had become America's most produced playwright. Through his company, Sageworks, he is able to assume unusual control over the production history and development of his plays. Among his many awards are two Pulitzer Prizes, for Fences and The Piano Lesson. To date, only one of these plays has been adapted to film,

The Piano Lesson, for the Hallmark Hall of Fame. Wilson lives in Seattle, Washington, with his third wife, Constanza Romero, and a four-and-a-half year old daughter, Azula Carmen.

The following interview with August Wilson transpired over a period of several days, 30 April-3 May 2002, in Kansas City, Missouri, in the Raphael Hotel and at the Hallmark Corporate Headquarters.

Playwright August Wilson never forgets a friend. Seven years ago, in 1995 in his native Pittsburgh, he met a very special lady during the filming of a Hallmark Hall of Fame adaptation of his play, The Piano Lesson. Not a creature of flesh and blood, but a wooden construction of history and memory, this “friend” was a beautifully carved, ornate upright piano especially manufactured for the film. A powerful symbol of a family legacy in the play, the instrument held a personal appeal for Wilson.

“I wanted to have that piano,” he says, “but the Hallmark people wanted to bring it back to Kansas City.”

So, when Wilson himself came to Kansas City in April 2002 as a guest of the Missouri Repertory Theatre, it was only natural that he would pay his respects to his old friend in the Visitors Center of the Hallmark Corporate offices. And sure enough, on display and commanding attention, there she stood, elegant yet powerful, sounding out the strains of a piano rag (it’s a computerized instrument that plays by itself).

Wilson stood and listened, marveling at the action of the keys.

“Must be a ghost pianist,” he mused quietly.

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During my several visits with August Wilson, it became clear that the importance of music transcends just the instance of The Piano Lesson. Its significance as a vital part of African American social and cultural history is everywhere.

“Take jazz or blues,” he explains, settling into a chair in the breakfast room of the Raphael Hotel. “You can’t disregard that part of the African American experience, or even try to transcend it. They are affirmations and celebrations of the value and worth of the African American spirit. And young people would do well to understand them as the roots of today’s rap, rather than some antique to be tossed away.”

And yet, I suggest, the Jazz Museum and the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum here in Kansas City—just a few blocks from where we sit—are struggling to survive.

“Jazz in itself is not struggling,” he points out. “That is, the music itself is not struggling. It and the baseball history you talk about are two anchors of the African American cultural community. It’s the attitude that’s in trouble. My plays insist that we should not forget or toss away our history.” He pauses a moment, considering his cigarette. “You know, I find a very strong correlation between Kansas City and my native Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh had two fine Negro Leagues teams, the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords. And Pittsburgh was also a hotbed of jazz in the ‘30s and

'40s—Lena Horne, Billy Eckstein, Ahmad Jamal—we too had some very important musicians come out of Pittsburgh.”

“Does your obvious interest in music derive from a musical background of your own?”

“No. I don't have a musical background. But I do enjoy all kinds of music. It's an expression of the human spirit that illuminates our humanity. No question that music and dance enhance the theatrical experience, too. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is about a black blues singer. The piano in The Piano Lesson is seen by the characters as a commodity and, at the same time, as the family's legacy. The carvings represent its rituals and history. It's been in the family for generations. Now, in the 1930s, the character of Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to buy the same Mississippi land that the family had worked as slaves. So, what you have is a European musical instrument that is invested with aspects of African American life and history. After all, the history of America is black and white, and it's no coincidence, I guess, that the piano keyboard has black and white keys. In order to make music, you need both of those keys.

“The idea of selling the piano to acquire land would mean to come full circle from property to ownership, which is what Boy Willie wants to do. He embraces the piano. He's not wanting to sell his legacy so much as to put it to use. He tells his sister, Berniece, that it's ultimately just a piece of wood. Since he carries the family history in his heart; he doesn't need a piano to remind him of that. Being a practical man, he knows that with the purchased land he can gain some independence. As he says, “Land is the one thing God ain't making no more of. Once I get that, I can stand up next to the white man and talk about the weather and the price of cotton and become a productive member of society.” Berniece is the one who wants to keep from her children the history that the piano represents. She's imposed a taboo about not even touching the piano. So she's the one who's denying her past.”

This triggers questions about an interview Wilson gave a few years ago, when he claimed that he had grown up in a family that shielded him from the realities of the black experience in America.

“My parents, like so many, wanted to protect their children from the indignities which they had suffered,” he replies. “As an example, black women weren't allowed to try on dresses in department stores. When blacks made purchases in any store, they weren't given paper bags; instead, they had to carry out their purchases without a bag. If my mother had informed us of these things, it might have lessened her authoritarian presence in the world. Or, she might have come home one day to find me with hundreds of paper bags that I might stolen somewhere—‘Here's your paper bags, Ma!’ There were various reasons why they kept these things to themselves. But she should have told me. If I had been more aware of these things, I would have learned sooner just who I was and what my relationship to society was. American society as a whole has a very short memory. There are a lot of things we don't know or have allowed ourselves to forget. I was visiting a high school, Seward High School, in 1987, and one of the students in the classroom thought that slavery had ended in 1960. He was very serious about it. When some of the other students laughed, he didn't understand why. I thought it almost

criminal that he was walking around in 1987 thinking this, and that we blacks had not made sure that he knew better.

The Piano Lesson was first performed as a staged reading for the National Playwrights Conference in 1987. After opening at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, featuring a cast that included Samuel L. Jackson, it premiered on Broadway in 1990. Reviews were ecstatic. Frank Rich in the The New York Times called it “joyously an African-American play: it has its own spacious poetry, its own sharp angle on a nation’s history, its own metaphorical idea of drama and its own palpable ghosts that roar right through the upstairs window.” The screen adaptation for the Hallmark Hall of Fame—the first and to date the only one of Wilson’s plays to be filmed—was first broadcast on CBS on 5 February 1995. It was directed by Wilson’s longtime collaborator, Lloyd Richards and retained several members of the Broadway cast, including Charles Dutton as Boy Willie, Lou Meyers as Wining Boy, and Tommy Hollis as Avery. Alfre Woodard joined the cast as Bereniece. It tells the story of the Charles family in Pittsburgh and the dispute that erupts between Bereniece and her brother, Boy Willie, over the fate of its prized piano, which has been in the family for several generations.

“Samuel L. Jackson did Boy Willie for the original production at Yale in 1987,” recalls Wilson, stirring his second cup of coffee. The omnipresent cigarette sends up tendrils of smoke. “I had written the part for Charles S. Dutton, and when Jackson came to the role, he understood that afterward Dutton would take it over. Sam was in agreement with that. Of course, he fell in love with the character, and in the end he was reluctant to give it up. I can understand that. When the time came to make the film in 1995 for the Hallmark Hall of Fame, we were able to retain some of the cast members from the Broadway production. There was never any consideration of anyone other than Dutton to play Boy Willie. When the Hallmark people approached me about doing the adaptation, I told them that I would have to write and produce it, as well as retain casting approval. I insisted on doing the screenplay by myself, no collaborators. Maybe when I get older and slow down, I’ll change my mind about that. But for now, I write the adaptations myself. We went from there.”

After a moment, Wilson continues: “I had written screenplays before. I had sold the rights to Fences to Paramount in 1987 and had written the script a year later. It was the first time I ever wrote a screenplay. I insisted that a black director do that film, which seemed to hold things up. They said no black directors were available, but I think the real reason was they claimed not to know—or refused to admit—that there were any black directors out there to handle it. It wasn’t until three years later that Paramount agreed to hire a black director. But it was still difficult to find the right man—couldn’t just be anyone, just because he was black. Now, it’s all solved. There’s a new producer, and Marian McClinton has been hired to direct. I’m working on a rewrite of the screenplay. We’re scheduled to start shooting in September or October. Nothing done on the casting yet.”

I ask Wilson about the challenges of writing a screenplay as opposed to a play script.

“I have to confess that I’m not a big movie person,” he says, after a moment’s consideration. “I don’t go to a lot of films. And I don’t know very much about the history of stage-to-film adaptations. But I have learned personally while working on the screenplay for Fences that adapting a play to film can be an exciting process. Certainly it is a different thing to write for the screen instead of the stage. The way I see it, the stage tells the story for the ear, and the screen for the eye. It was a matter of selecting images to tell the story. On stage, you can’t really control where the viewer’s eye goes; there’s a whole stage picture there, and the viewer can be looking anywhere. But with the camera, if you want the viewer to look at something in particular, you can put their eye there. Also, a film gives you the opportunity to take the viewer to different places. We can see Troy at work, driving the truck, hauling the garbage on his back. You can see him with Alberta, the woman with whom he’s having an affair (she remains offstage in the play). On the other hand, you don’t want to yield to the temptation to show everything, the stage teaches us that some things are better unseen. It’s a question of artistic choices. Do you do flashbacks of Troy playing baseball, of him in the penitentiary? And you can write the scene, maybe even shoot it; but if it’s wrong, you take it out. I’m seriously thinking about visualizing the baseball stuff. Haven’t written that, yet, but maybe.

For my next screenplay, The Piano Lesson, I had to go through the same process of choices. What do we see? First thing, Boy Willie and Lymon are coming to Pittsburgh to sell watermelons. Although that action remains off stage, I can put that in the screenplay. Sometimes, it’s rather a simple decision, you know? Another example: I thought it would add a comic touch to have Boy Willie and Lymon go downtown to visit Avery at work—two country bumpkins from Mississippi who’ve never seen a big city or a building like this, who are afraid the elevator ropes might break! There was more opportunity for comedy when Boy Willie goes to the movies and meets Grace. And when the truck breaks down. None of those things would work on stage.”

I’m reminded of the endless rewrites that must go into the adapting process.

“Yes,” replies Wilson, “regardless of the medium, rewriting and more rewriting is still necessary. No one gets anything right the first time, and since I don’t write with a hammer and chisel, it’s relatively easy for me to change. It’s just words on paper. Words are free. You don’t go the store and order a pound of words, or five hundred words, and pay your three dollars. They’re free. You sit with the producer and listen to his suggestions, and if you agree, you make the changes. But you have to be careful not to overwork the thing. You have to know when it’s best to stop. The rehearsal process of a play really helps you there. And sometimes you find that your original concept, that initial impulse, was the correct one. Although I keep my own council on this sort of thing, I do ask others for advice sometimes. Like my wife, Constanza Romeo. And there’s a producer I know, Jack Viertel—I half-jokingly call him my “personal dramaturge”—whose judgment I respect. There is another temptation that comes your way that you have to resist. And that is after writing the screenplay, thinking that you might want to go back and make changes in the original stage play. I won’t do that. For

me, the original play becomes an historical document: This is where I was when I wrote it, and I have to move on now to something else.

Inasmuch as Wilson has come to Kansas City to supervise a Missouri Repertory Theatre production of Joe Turner's Come and Gone, it seems appropriate to wonder if that play might also eventually make it to the big screen.

“Yes, I still have hopes for Joe Turner's Come and Gone. I think the historical elements in the play could be fleshed out for the screen. It's the earliest play in my cycle of plays about the African-American experience in America. At one time, about ten years ago, Harry Belafonte, Danny Glover, Sidney Poitier all agreed to make the movie for New Line Cinema for scale. But it never worked out.

“What do you say to people who look in vain at the cast list for somebody named ‘Joe Turner?’”

“Joe Turner is really an offstage character. The play's not really about him. He literally has come and gone, as the title says. It works in the play as a symbol of slavery. “Joe Turney” was the name of a white man, the brother of the governor of the state of Tennessee. Actually, his name was “Pete Turney,” but of course, when black folks say “Turney,” it comes out “Turner.” And there's a song about “Joe Turner,” by W.C. Handy, about how he impressed Negroes into peonage by luring them into crap games and then hauling them away to work on his plantation. Since Turney's brother was a governor, he was able to get away with these kinds of things. I imagine that the character in the play, Herold Loomis, in his past was one of the men caught by Joe Turney. But, “Turner's come and gone,” as the title suggests, and now that's all over.

“Or is it over?”

“Yes, I think it's over. Yes.” Wilson lights up another cigarette. “Because Loomis says he's not going to let anyone ‘bind him up,’ as he says. It's a situation similar to the Jewish expression, ‘Never again.’”

Yet, translating Joe Turner to the screen raises some thorny issue. For example, what about the amazing hallucination scene, when the character of Herald has a vision of the bones of Africans lost on the middle passage across the Atlantic rising up out of the water?

“I haven't solved that one yet! I tend to think that scene is best left to the imagination. Actually depicting bones rising up and walking out the water could be problematic, to say the least!

As our time draws to a close, Wilson turns to some of his newest projects.

“I'm working on a new play called Gem of the Ocean. It takes place in 1904, a few years earlier than the Joe Turner play. I took an offstage character in Two Trains Running and King Hedley II, Aunt Esther, and brought her on stage in this play. The action takes place in her parlor. A character named Citizen Barlow is running from the local constable and takes refuge in Aunt Esther's house. He's in spiritual turmoil, and she

takes him on a journey to the City of Bones. This is an island of bones right in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, where ships run aground on those bones. Of course, the Atlantic Ocean is the largest unmarked graveyard in the world, and the bones are those of the African slaves. Esther has made a paper boat out of the slaves' bill of sale and taken Barlow there on the boat. In a vision, he sees the boat transformed into a slave ship, and he recognizes himself as a slave passenger. This is a journey that he personally has to take in order to understand the source of his personal dislocation. I'm still working on it, and I don't know exactly yet what everything is about, but I'm getting there! I'll premiere it next April at the Goodman Theatre, who has already done all eight of my plays."

Wilson agrees to meet me a few days later, and we drive over to the Hallmark Corporate Headquarters, where the piano used in the Hall of Fame production of The Piano Lesson is on display. Waiting for us is the CEO of Hallmark, Inc., Mr. Don Hall, and the president and vice president of the Hall of Fame productions, Brad Moore and Jan Parkinson. Wilson had met them in Pittsburgh seven years ago during the filming, and they now greet each other like old friends.

"In every stage version, the set designer has made his own interpretation of that piano," explains Wilson, bending over the piano to inspect the intricate carvings. "For Hallmark, the piano had to be much finer in its carvings so the closeup camera could pick up the details. There was actually quite a bit of discussion and dispute about that. You know," he pauses, looking about him meaningfully, "I wanted to have that piano, but the Hallmark people insisted it was to be displayed at their corporate headquarters."

After taking a tour of the Hallmark facilities, Wilson comes back for one last look at the piano. "I do have the piano that was used in the original Yale production sitting in my living room," he tells me as we return to my car. "I don't play, myself, you know. But when my daughter is ready for piano lessons, she'll play it. It'll become a part of my own family history, I guess."

He pauses, and a slow smile spreads across his features. "Like this piano here, it's an instrument on which you can play and record music, so that it'll mechanically play it back. People can come to visit my home, play something on the piano, and then in the future I can play it back, over and over.

"You might say it's a way my guests can leave their musical 'signature.' Maybe, in a way, it's also a 'piano lesson' for my own family."

John C. Tibbetts

