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American Masters
August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand

Premieres nationwide Friday, February 20, 9-10:30 p.m. on PBS (check local listings) commemorating the anniversaries of Wilson's birth and death and Black History Month

August Wilson Biography & Timeline

August Wilson was an award-winning American playwright whose work illuminated the joys and struggles of the African-American experience in the United States during the 20th century.

Wilson's rise from humble beginnings to Broadway was unlikely. Born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, in the Hill District community of Pittsburgh, he was the son of Daisy Wilson, an African-American cleaning woman, and Frederick Kittel, a German immigrant and baker who was mostly absent from Wilson's life. His mother raised Wilson and his siblings in a two-room, cold-water flat. Though bright and creative, he found student life difficult. Racially bullied at one school, bored at the next and accused of cheating at another, he secretly dropped out in his early teens.

For the next several years, Wilson educated himself at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh during school hours, unbeknownst to his mother. He learned to love the blues, buying old 78 rpm records at a local thrift store. There he discovered the sound of Bessie Smith's voice, which proved to be a revelation.

A voracious reader from a young age, Wilson began his artistic life as a poet. He also sought out the poetry in everyday life. He spent time in restaurants, barbershops and on the

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streets of “The Hill,” listening to the residents’ voices and stories. Wilson would later draw on these voices and histories to create unforgettable characters in his plays.

Wilson had begun writing plays — one a musical western — before relocating to Minneapolis. There he was given a fellowship to the Minnesota Playwrights Center, which led to his acceptance into the National Playwrights Conference at the O’Neill Theater Center in Connecticut.

During the conference — an intense collaboration of artists testing new works — Wilson would meet Lloyd Richards. Richards was an African-American director who served as the dean of the Yale University School of Drama and the artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre. He was a legend in dramatic circles, especially in black theatre, and would become a father figure and mentor to Wilson. Together, the two men would make a bold new statement on the Broadway stage.

Wilson’s greatest contribution to American culture would be his defining 10-play cycle, one for each decade of the past century. All but one — *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* — set in the city of Pittsburgh:

Gem of the Ocean – 1900

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone – 1910

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom – 1920

The Piano Lesson – 1930

Seven Guitars – 1940

Fences – 1950

Two Trains Running – 1960

Jitney – 1970

King Hedley II – 1980

Radio Golf – 1990

The cycle of plays combines historical fact, comedy and gritty realism with spiritual and supernatural elements of African and African-American cultures. The result is a series of dramas that entertain as well as inform.

Over the course of his life, Wilson would be honored with many awards, among them the Tony, two Pulitzers and seven New York Drama Critics Circle Awards. Even the Carnegie Library graced him with its only honorary degree.

In the late 90s, with a career spanning nearly two decades, Wilson married his third wife, costume designer Constanza Romero. The two had a daughter and moved to Seattle, where Wilson continued to work on the last plays in the cycle. In June 2005, Wilson was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. He died Sunday, October 2, 2005, in a Seattle hospital. His funeral service was held in Pittsburgh and he is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, not far from his mother Daisy.

Wilson’s plays gave voice to both the mundane and extraordinary aspects of black life. Characters and dialogue could be weighed down with the bitterness of the streets or elevated with the mysticism of a ghostly ancestry. His work helped to propel and cement the careers of a legion of actors, directors and artisans. The characters and conflicts in Wilson’s plays reflect the external influences as well as his own history: the struggles of a biracial child who experienced

racism and who grew up without a father, and the undying belief that nobility was not defined by skin color and circumstance. The result is an unprecedented collection of extraordinary dramas.

Timeline

April 27, 1945 – Frederick August Kittel is born in Pittsburgh, Pa., in the city neighborhood known as “The Hill.” The Hill is Pittsburgh’s Harlem, a hub of creativity and commerce, and in 1945, still racially mixed. His mother, Daisy Wilson, was African American, while his father, a German immigrant named Frederick Kittel, was white. He is one of seven children that will eventually be born to the couple, though Frederick would be absent for most of his children’s lives.

1959 – A student at the predominantly white, private Central Catholic High School, young Frederick is the victim of constant race-based bullying and abuse. He leaves Central Catholic for Connelly Trade school, where he feels unchallenged. He later transfers to Gladstone High School in the neighborhood of Hazelwood.

1960 – Now a 10th grader, he is assigned an essay on a historical figure. After being accused of plagiarizing his paper on Napoleon Bonaparte, the 15-year-old drops out of Gladstone High. He becomes a voracious reader and educates himself by spending his days at the nearby Carnegie Library.

1962 – He enlists in the U.S. Army but leaves after a year.

1963-1964 – He works a variety of jobs and begins writing poetry, purchases his first typewriter and discovers Bessie Smith and the blues.

1965 – To honor his mother, Frederick August Kittel changes his name to August Wilson. His biological father dies.

1968 – Embracing a heightened black consciousness, August co-founds the Black Horizon Theater with colleagues Rob Penny, Sala Udin, Maisha Baton, Claude Purdy and others.

1969 – August marries Brenda Burton. His stepfather, David Bedford, passes away.

1970 – August’s daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson, is born.

1976 – Kuntu Repertory Theater, directed by Dr. Vernell Lillie, produces his first play *The Homecoming*.

1977 – He writes a western musical play, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*.

1978 – August leaves Pittsburgh for St. Paul, Minn., with the help of his friend Claude Purdy. He is hired as a writer for the St. Paul Science Museum.

1980 – While in Minnesota, the respected Minneapolis Playwrights Center grants August a fellowship.

1981 – August marries Judy Oliver.

1982 – Pittsburgh's Allegheny Repertory Theatre stages *Jitney*. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, a play about the legendary blues singer, is accepted by the National Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. August Wilson meets Lloyd Richards, an African-American director who serves as the dean of the Yale University School of Drama and the artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre. The two men forge a friendship that results in Lloyd directing August's first six Broadway plays.

1983- August's mother, Daisy Wilson, dies.

1984 – *Ma Rainey* premieres at the Yale Repertory Theatre to critical acclaim, quickly moves to Broadway and wins August his first New York Drama Critics Circle award.

1985 – *Fences*, the story of a frustrated former Negro League baseball player, premieres at Yale Repertory.

1986 – *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* premieres at the Yale Rep.

1987 – *Fences* opens on Broadway. August wins his second New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his first Pulitzer Prize. The play goes on to gross \$11 million during its inaugural Broadway season.

1988 – *Joe Turner* wins the New York Drama Critics Circle Award after opening on Broadway. August returns to Pittsburgh to lecture at Carnegie Institute and appears on Bill Moyers' *World of Ideas*.

1989 – Yale Rep premieres *The Piano Lesson*. He is named 1990 Pittsburgher of the Year by *Pittsburgh Magazine* in his former hometown.

1990 – *The Piano Lesson* opens on Broadway and wins August his fourth New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize. *Two Trains Running* premieres. His second marriage ends and August Wilson moves to Seattle, Wash.

1992 – *Two Trains Running* opens on Broadway and wins New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play.

1994 – Hallmark Hall of Fame produces a teleplay of *The Piano Lesson* starring Charles Dutton, Alfre Woodard and Courtney Vance; it is filmed in Pittsburgh. August marries costume designer Constanza Romero.

1995 – *The Piano Lesson* is broadcast on national television. *Seven Guitars* premieres.

1996 – *Seven Guitars* reaches Broadway and August is awarded his sixth New York Drama Critics Circle Award. He writes “The Ground on Which I Stand,” his controversial essay on the need for black cultural separatism.

1997 – Wilson participates in a contentious and widely publicized debate with theater critic Robert Brustein on the funding of black theatre, color-blind casting and other topics. August and Constanza’s only daughter Azula Carmen Wilson is born.

1998 – August teaches playwriting at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire.

1999 – The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh awards August with its first ever high school diploma.

2000 – *Jitney* is produced in New York, Wilson’s first play to be staged in an off-Broadway theatre. He is awarded his seventh New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

2001 – *King Hedley II* opens on Broadway.

2002 – *Gem of the Ocean* premieres in Chicago. London’s Olivier Award names *Jitney* the year’s best play.

2003 – Whoopi Goldberg appears on Broadway in a revival of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

2004 – *Gem of the Ocean* opens on Broadway.

2005 – *Radio Golf*, August’s last play in the Century Cycle, premieres at the Yale Repertory Theatre. In June, he is diagnosed with terminal liver cancer and dies Sunday, October 2, in a Seattle hospital. His funeral service is held at Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall in Pittsburgh. He is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, not far from his mother Daisy.

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