



Denver Center  
Theatre Company

# Inside Out

PRODUCED BY THE MARKETING DEPARTMENT OF THE DENVER CENTER THEATRE COMPANY JANUARY 2003



Photo by Gary Isaacs

## king HEDLEY II

Jan. 9 - Feb. 15 • The Space Theatre

**I**t is 1985. Ronald Reagan is in the White House and the nation is in the midst of an economic expansion. You'd never know it in Pittsburgh's Hill District. Here, as in many of America's inner cities, life is hard. Unemployment is on the rise; drugs, gangs and violence fill the streets. This is the world of King Hedley II. At 36 years old, this ex-convict is at war with his past, his present and the uncertain future. He is scarred, grieving, raging and determined to find dignity and bring something good and new out of his aching world. He plants seeds in the dirt of his tenement backyard, feeds his dream of owning his own business by any means necessary and fights for the life of his unborn child. King is a man reaching for success, colliding with the limitations of the world around him and those within himself.

In the eighth play of August Wilson's "living time-line" of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the audience returns to the tenement backyards of *Seven Guitars* as the thread of some of its characters are picked up 40 years later. King's mother, Ruby, the former nightclub singer, is 62 and being recourted by Elmore, an old lover, a slick, rambling gambler. The harmonica player, Canewell, is now called Stool Pigeon and serves as the prophet, keeper of the key and seeker of the song. Drummer Red Carter is gone, but his son Mister is a constant in King's life as the mysteries of *Seven Guitars* are revealed and he is untethered from the self he'd come to know.

**"Every night I would sit in the theatre and (Ruby) would say, 'If it's a boy, I'm going to name him King.' And I would always think, 'Why would you want to put that legacy on a kid? – What if he was named King – what would his life be like 36 years later?'"**

**August Wilson**

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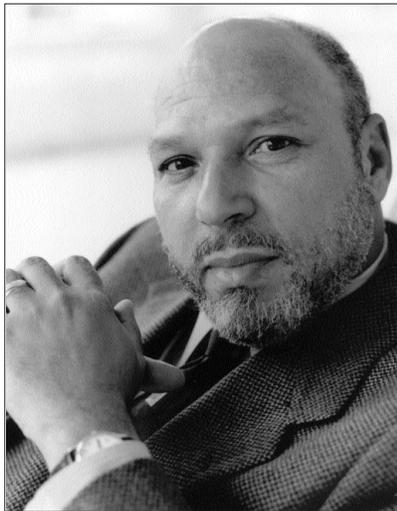
# August WILSON

**"It's August's language – the rhythm of hurt, the rhythm of pain, the rhythm of ecstasy, the rhythm of family – which sets him apart and is why we call him the heavyweight champion."**

Marion McClinton <sup>1</sup>.

Frederick August Kittel was born in Pittsburgh's Hill District in 1945. His father was a white, German immigrant who by Wilson's accounts was difficult, an alcoholic and mostly absent. Raised by his mother, Daisy Wilson, he says "the culture I learned in my mother's household was black."<sup>2</sup> Her dream was to insure her children had an education and August attended Catholic schools. As the only African American in his high school class, he was the victim of the cruelty that youth bestows upon each other and the open racism of the times. Every morning he found the same hateful note on his desk and each afternoon tried to avoid the taunting and beatings he knew would come. At the age of 15 a teacher accused him of plagiarizing a paper he wrote on Napoleon. He dropped out of school, preferring to spend his days in the Carnegie Library, reading everything – sociology, anthropology, theology and fiction. He'd return home every day at 3pm after school let out and no one was the wiser. Or so he thought. When his mother learned the truth she banished him to the basement. He began to write poetry and discovered the music of the blues with the purchase of a Bessie Smith record. Music and lyric were etched in Wilson's mind as each of his plays is influenced by the notion of "finding a song."<sup>3</sup>

Enlisting in the army for three years, he left after one and returned to the Hill District in 1963. After the death of his father in 1965, he took his mother's maiden name to become August Wilson. With writer Rob Penney and a group of friends who were part of Pittsburgh's Black Power Movement, he started the Black Horizon Theatre. Their mission was to raise consciousness through the voice of the theatre. But it was a 1976 production of Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* that inspired Wilson to view the theatre as something other than entertainment. Fugard, the South African playwright/activist, used his plays to portray the horrors of South Africa's racist apartheid system, while crafting its political and social issues in clear, compelling language through unforgettable characters. August Wilson saw the power of the theatre to inform and move an audience to action while touching their emotions.



In 1978, Wilson moved from Pittsburgh to St. Paul, Minnesota and began to write drama seriously. With the help of a friend he landed a job writing science-related children's plays for the Science Museum of Minnesota, and in 1980 he was awarded a Fellowship at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis.

His big success came in 1982 when the National Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill Theatre Center accepted *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. It was here he met and established his long-standing relationship with O'Neill chief, Lloyd Richards, who went on to direct six of his plays on Broadway. His play, *Jitney* was staged by the Allegheny Repertory in Pittsburgh. Two years later *Ma Rainey* opened in New York and in 1985 won the New York Drama Critics Award. With the success of *Ma Rainey*, Wilson gave himself the mission to chronicle, decade by decade, the African-American story in the 20th century.

By the time *Fences* opened on Broadway (1987), August Wilson was solidly established as a powerhouse voice in American Theatre. *Fences* grossed \$11 million in its first year, breaking all records for a non-musical. It won Wilson his first of two Pulitzer Prizes, the second came in 1990 for *The Piano Lesson*. The rise of August Wilson in the American theatre helped bring down barriers for many black artists. Actors Charles S. Dutton, Samuel L. Jackson, Courtney Vance, Angela Bassett and playwrights Suzan-Lori Parks, Keith Glover, Sam Kelley and Carlisle Brown finally heard a voice that resonated within them.

In 1995, Wilson broke with his mentor, Lloyd Richards, and chose Marion McClinton to direct *Jitney* for the Pittsburgh Public Theater. McClinton had done many inventive second productions of Wilson's earlier plays and their collaboration is one of mutual trust and respect, both having a say in the rehearsal process. They work more as brothers rather than the father/son relationship that was part of his work with Richards.

Though he has yet to write plays about the first and last decades of the 20th century, Wilson has begun to reevaluate his life. In 1994 he moved to Seattle and with his third wife, Constanza Romero, he now has a three-year-old daughter, Azula. After one of her father's long absences, it is said she questioned if he really lived in the house. He is quoted as having said that "the work is the most important thing, because that's how I live. That's what – what keeps me here and that's the whole purpose of my life. And I fit everything else into that. And family, of course, comes second, actually, to the work. And – yeah, art first. Life first."<sup>4</sup>

# GRIOTS

Though they are often termed oral historians or storytellers, Thomas Hale in his book *Griots and Griottes* writes that their activities “contribute to a portrait of an extremely dynamic profession that enables societies to cohere.”<sup>1</sup>

In the play *Stool Pigeon* collects newspapers, saving them as a kind of history book so

**“MISTER: Why you save all them newspapers?  
What you gonna do with them?”**

**STOOL PIGEON: See I know what went on. I ain’t  
saying what goes on – what went on.  
You got to know that. How you gonna  
get on the other side of the valley if you  
don’t know that?”**

**-August Wilson, *King Hedley II*, p. 28.**

that future generations will know “what went on.” With his prophetic prologue and braiding of wisdom into the plot, *Stool Pigeon* serves as a “griot” in the play. Though the list of griot functions is many, the most widely known outside of Africa is that of genealogist. *Roots* author, Alex Haley, learned of his ancestor, Kunta Kinte, through the recitations of the village griot. Genealogies bind tribes and families by their re-creation of the past that legitimizes those in the present. As oral historians, when an African griot recounts for several hours the “multi-generic narrative that includes genealogies, praises, songs – oaths, proverbs, he is also recounting the past – the history of a people.”<sup>2</sup>

Griots also act as spokespersons, diplomats and interpreters to chiefs or rulers. While rulers generally express themselves in soft voices, the griot will clarify his words, embellish upon his ideas and, as an ambassador, convey messages to the chieftain in a much

broader context. As an interpreter, the griots have great facility with language and are likely to have learned most of the dialects in the multicultural areas where they live. He or she must not interpret simply the words, but also the meaning behind the words; in this sense, the griot uses what is known about the past to apply to what is happening in the present.

Though the school has replaced this function, griots have acted as teachers, reciting the oral traditions. They are present at civil ceremonies as “witness” or representative so that a town, clan or family will later be able to report on the event and remember it.

Within the complex musical culture of Africa, griots acted as praise singers, exhorters – a voice for the people. In the United States, part of African American music’s conversational nature invites the audience to interact with the singer or band. In a modern incarnation griots are the rappers of today, telling stories in a language we understand. Rap is the news, commentary and opinion on the events that surround us. In the words of Chuck D., rapper and member of Public Enemy, rap is “Black America’s CNN and the Black American folktale.”<sup>3</sup>

Whatever functions griots are performing, they act as a kind of social glue in a society. By their efforts to inspire, interpret and facilitate, “they seem to operate as secular guides to

**“AZULA: Daddy, why you a writer?  
“WILSON: To tell the story.”<sup>5</sup>**

human behavior and as social arbiters. ... No other profession in any other part of the world is charged with such wide-ranging and intimate involvement in the lives of people.”<sup>4</sup>

# Surviving REAGANOMICS

The 1980s began with great tension, as Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan and were met with fierce resistance. President Jimmy Carter called the invasion a “serious threat to peace,” restricted United States grain trade to the USSR and called for a boycott of the upcoming Moscow Olympics in protest.

Carter had bigger problem on his hands with the 1979 detention of US Embassy hostages in Iran. He broke off trade and diplomatic relations with the country and on April 25, 1980, a rescue mission failed, killing eight Americans when a helicopter collided with a transport plane. With a spiraling inflation rate, rising unemployment, an oil shortage and the persistence of poverty, the country felt it was time for a change. Ronald Wilson Reagan was voted the 40th President of the United States in 1980. At age 69, this former actor and governor of California was the oldest man ever elected to the presidency.

As a candidate, Reagan promised the African American community that he would place blacks in high office, though this promise was largely unmet. His one African American cabinet member was Samuel Pierce, Jr., appointed to head the Housing and Urban Development Authority. This department’s budget was slashed from 33 billion dollars in 1981, to 14 billion by 1987. “Reagan’s White House also replaced half of Carter’s Black ambassadors. Seasoned diplomats were assigned to dull desk jobs at the State Department. Black foreign service appointments fell from 8.4 percent under Carter to 6.3 per cent under Reagan.”<sup>11</sup>

Reagan’s agenda revealed itself in the program known as “Reaganomics.” It began by reducing taxes for the poor by eight percent, for the wealthy by 35 percent and for corporations by 40 percent. This practice of cutting taxes for business and the wealthy was supposed to stimulate the economy with the “trickle down” effect. In theory, businesses and the wealthy would provide more jobs and benefits for the less privileged. The problem was that to balance the budget and increase military spending (Reagan’s pet project, to destroy world communism), the new administration would have to drastically cut domestic spending. “These cuts then became excuses to trim programs such as food stamps, Medicare, student loans, child nutrition, legal services for the poor and Aid to Families with Dependent Children.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, by 1982 the administration had cut 80 percent of funds for the Youth Employment Demonstrations Project, 20 percent from the Summer Youth Program and 27 percent for day care centers established for children of working parents. A job-training program that had aided 500,000 people in 1981

was ended. For the poor, including many people of color, life became even grimmer.

Throughout the prosperous 1980s black men and women experienced unemployment rates that more than doubled those of whites. As early as 1982 the African American unemployment rate reached 18.9 percent compared to the 8.4 per cent for whites. Even though the economic picture improved over the next three years, the African American unemployment rate hovered at 16.3 percent. “In 1983, Americans living in poverty increased by almost a million a year and the total rose to 35,300,000, the highest in 18 years.”<sup>13</sup> The number of homeless increased along with a seemingly unreachable urban “underclass,” which consisted largely of minorities. Living on city streets, in parks, subway stations and begging for money and food, these people unsettled American sensibilities but had little effect on public policy.

To African Americans the unkindest cut of all came in the form of reversing Civil Rights gains made in the 1960s. For example, a think tank, the Lincoln Institute for Research and Education in Washington, DC, encouraged African Americans to challenge liberal arguments. It blamed minority unemployment on lack of education or poor skills for the job market. Reagan’s Justice Department took an especially dim view of enforcing civil rights legislation during the 1980s. It attacked affirmative action programs as reverse discrimination and made it more difficult for women, the elderly and minorities to sue employers accused of job discrimination. The 1985 Voting Rights Act that assured African Americans federal protection in registering and voting was targeted for elimination by the Reagan administration; the Congress renewed it however and the Justice Department declined to investigate many allegations of interference. We have seen the effects of these policies even today.

Finally, Reagan persuaded Congress to bar most public funding for birth control and to stop Medicare from funding abortions for poor women. Instead, the administration advocated “providing funding for religiously oriented ‘chastity clinics’ where counselors advised teenage girls and women to ‘just say no’ to avoid pregnancy.”<sup>14</sup>

Many people credit Reagan with bringing optimism and patriotism back to America after the darkness of the Vietnam war and the stagnation of the 1970s. Despite his insensitivity to minorities and the poor, the 1980s was dominated by Ronald Reagan.

# VIOLENCE *in* *the* 1980s

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The 1980s saw an increasing awareness of violence and hardships in America's inner cities. The decade began with the fatal shooting of musician John Lennon by Mark David Chapman. In 1981, nine weeks after his inauguration, President Reagan was shot and wounded by a crazed John Hinckley and Pope John Paul II was attacked in May in St. Peter's Square in Rome.

"In 1987 the United States Department of Justice reported that in 1986 African Americans accounted for 44 percent of all murder victims. Between 1978 and 1987 the average annual homicide rates for young Black males were five to eight times higher than for young white males."<sup>1</sup> Jesse Jackson, leader of the Rainbow Coalition, pointed out in many of his public addresses that more black men were dying at the hands of other black men "than were killed in the entire history of lynching."<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this violence have been discussed and written about at length, but in their book, *The Unknown City*, authors Michelle Fine and Lois Weis interviewed inner city males to get their perspective. Most blamed the chronic unemployment or expendable jobs in the expanding technology economy. Others complained about negative experiences in school that forced them to drop out. Others attributed the crime rate to the absence of a father in the household and the dissolution of the family structure. Still others pointed to police harassment and the conservative nature of government on state and national levels. Other causes included: an overwhelming segregated urban existence; a community flooded by addictive drugs, disease and firearms; and the influence of TV and mass advertising, which encouraged consumerism even when financial resources are limited. With few avenues open for change, many minority men felt a sense of personal powerlessness and turned to violence to assert male identity.

Amos N. Wilson in his book *Understanding Black Adolescent Male Violence* discusses a syndrome called "reactionary masculinity," a condition provoked by oppressive circumstances which is extremely detrimental to the African American community and the young men themselves. Characteristics include: a lack of sense of social responsibility or interest; a tendency to be

excessively self-interested, self-centered and stubborn; the act of being very opinionated and to view every social encounter as a test of his masculinity; the willingness to injure, kill or seek revenge as masculine traits; a perception of cooperation or concession to other males as an insult; the motivation to be defined as a loner or self-alienated, and "a lack of self-control, discipline, persistence and high frustration tolerance, and the absence of long-term goals and commitment to pro social values."<sup>3</sup> Surely, some of these traits are recognizable in both King and Elmore.

For many African American males the ideal is to possess power, control and emotional detachment, or "cool." This "cool" refers to America's slang use of the term as meaning calm, controlled and self-assured in the face of dwindling resources, rising costs and/or unemployment. But when "cool" is placed ahead of acknowledging and dealing with true fears or needs, pent-up emotions and frustrations result, which are then released in aggressive behavior toward those who are closest to the black male – other black males."<sup>4</sup>

**"...And now the only duty our young men seem ready to imagine is to their maleness with its reckless display of braggadocio, its bright intelligence, its bold and foolish embrace of hate and happenstance. If we are not our brother's keeper, then we are still our brother's witness. We are co-conspirators in his story and in his future."**

**August Wilson, introduction to  
*Speak My Name* by Don Bolton.**

# HipHOP*and*Rap

“Yo, hip hop is a way of life.  
It ain’t a fad. It ain’t a trend.  
Not for those of us who are true to it.”  
-Rapper/producer Guru

**H**ip hop is an African American cultural movement, which encompasses such elements as break dancing, graffiti, clothes, rap and even magazines. It began in New York in the 1970s when street gangs used graffiti for self-promotion, marking territorial boundaries and intimidating other gangs. Using spray paint and, later, magic markers, gang members wrote their names or “tags” on buildings, sidewalks and subway cars. Later, names merged into murals, especially on subway cars; however, the Transit Authority did not look kindly on this unsolicited art and the cars were sprayed with large amounts of petroleum hydroxide and the murals and writings were buffed out. Though graffiti muralists painted for the pure pleasure of it, two artists, Fred Brathwaite and Lee Quinones, decided to form a group called the Fab 5 that would paint murals at the rate of five dollars per square foot. Influenced by new wave artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, the group submitted five canvasses to an art show in Rome. The five canvasses sold for a thousand dollars apiece. Slowly but surely, graffiti art began to receive the recognition it deserved and entered the mainstream of the art world in the 1980s.

At the same time a new type of music was being heard. “Rap is a musical form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by rhythmic, heavily synthesized music.”<sup>1</sup> Its history began in Africa where drums have been a vital tool of communication for centuries and are considered sacred. “Drums are the heartbeat of the song and the heartbeat of the spirit,” says rapper/producer True Master.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the pioneers of rap recreated the heartbeat by mixing and scratching sounds from old records and combining beats electronically on drum machines. From Africa, too, came the legacy of the griot who conveyed lessons through music, song and story – which is what rappers do. Rap also has roots in African American music that preceded it. Spirituals, a kind of black religious folk song, drew their text from the teachings of the Bible. Their messages of overcoming hardships and finding freedom are often found in rap. The blues, born in the beginning of the 20th century, contributed to rap with the riff – a single rhythmic phrase used repeatedly as background to the melody. It developed into the booming bass line of many hip hop tracks. Jazz styles, such

as bebop and jazz fusion, tapped into new sounds and technology, an essential ingredient of rap. Finally, rap owes an allegiance to Jamaican music. Jamaican disc jockeys frequently talked over the music they were playing; this was a device called “toasting.” There are four areas where Jamaican “toasting” and American rap converge. First, both types of music rely on pre-recorded sounds; second, both genres use a strong beat; third, both speak their lines in time with the rhythm of the records, and fourth, the content of the raps is similar. Just as raps can be boasts, insults, news, messages, nonsense and party, so toasts can be the same.

**A**lthough rap descends from a variety of other music, there are individuals who were instrumental in introducing and developing the unique sounds. Clive Campbell, aka DJ Kool Herc, brought the concept of “deejaying” from Jamaica to New York and originated hip hop’s version of rapping based on the toasting practice in Jamaica. Afrika Bambaataa (Keith Donovan) played music on two turntables simultaneously and became a spokesman for the hip hop culture. A former gang member, he formed the Zulu Nation, a positive youth group. Grandmaster Flash (Joseph Saddler) became an expert at “punch phrasing” – hitting a particular break on one turntable while the record on the other turntable is still playing. Punch phrasing is used to accentuate the beat and rhythm for the dancing crowd. The technique known as “scratching” – spinning a record backward and forward very fast while the needle is still in the groove – was accidentally discovered by Grand Wizard Theodore. When he was 13, his mother shouted at him to turn down the music. Wearing headphones, Theodore could not hear her. When she angrily opened the door to his room, he stopped the record with his finger while the turntable was still spinning. He liked the sound and realized he could use it as a new kind of break; soon other DJs were using the innovation.

Sound systems and sound engineers are very important to the new music and back the artists who rap the message such as Public Enemy, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Queen Latifah, Snoop Doggy Dog and others. While much rap music has been criticized for its content, its defenders say the “intention is not to glorify acts of violence but to speak of reality to an audience who can relate.”<sup>3</sup>

# IMPORTANT Events of the 1980s

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## 1980

- Ronald Reagan is elected President of the United States.
- John Lennon is shot and killed in New York City.
- CNN debuts its 24-hour news channel.
- Voyager I sends back the first pictures of Saturn.

## 1981

- Scientists identify the AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) virus.
- Iran releases the 52 American hostages held since 1979.
- Anwar Sadat, Egyptian president, is assassinated by soldiers at a military parade.
- England's Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer are married in a royal wedding at St. Paul's Cathedral in London.
- President Reagan gives the CIA permission to begin paramilitary operations against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.
- First computer "mouse" is introduced by Apple computer. IBM introduces the personal computer.

## 1982

- Illinois General Assembly fails to ratify the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution.
- Directed by the CIA, the Contras blow up two bridges in Nicaragua and begin the Contra revolution.
- The first permanent artificial heart is transplanted. Its recipient, Barney Clark, dies 112 days later.
- The Vietnam War Memorial is dedicated in Washington, DC; the names of more than 58,000 dead are inscribed on the black granite wall.

## 1983

- Harold Washington, a former state legislator and Congressman, is elected the first African American mayor of Chicago.
- Dr. Sally Ride became the first American woman in space, beginning her ride aboard the space shuttle "Challenger."
- Start of the cellular phone networks in United States.
- President Reagan calls the Soviet Union an "evil empire."

## 1984

- Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, is assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards.
- Reagan defeats Walter Mondale in 1984 Presidential election.
- United States signs a free-trade agreement with Israel that includes, among other items, a requirement that Israel would have to discuss all its industrial policies with US before carrying them out.
- By the year's end, 70 banks fail in the United States.

## 1985

- TWA airliner is hijacked by Arab terrorists and 39 American passengers are held for 17 days.
- In November Reagan and Prime Minister Gorbachev of Russia meet for a two-day summit in Geneva.

## 1986

- A nuclear accident at a power plant in Chernobyl, Russia releases radioactive pollution.
- Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres visits Egypt for talks with President Mubarek.
- The Space Shuttle Challenger explodes 74 seconds after lift-off.
- United States (supported by Great Britain) bombs Libya.
- The national debt rises to 2 trillion dollars.

## 1987

- CD Rom drives are introduced by IBM.
- Gorbachev introduces the term "glasnost" (openness) and "perestroika" (reconstruction).
- The Iran-Contra hearings begin with Lt. Col. Oliver North as its chief "star."
- Reagan visits Berlin and urges Gorbachev to "tear down this wall."

## 1988

- Palestinians in Occupied Territories begin prolonged active resistance (Intifada) to Israeli rule.
- George Bush, Republican, defeats Michael Dukakis, Democrat, for US presidency.

## 1989

- Clarence Page of the *Chicago Tribune* is the first African American columnist to receive the Pulitzer Prize.
- The last Soviet troops leave Afghanistan.
- A United States delegation demands that Iraq privatize its oil industry and Iraq refuses.
- David Dinkens (Dem) is elected New York City's first black mayor.
- After 28 years of keeping Eastern Germany from freedom, the Berlin Wall comes down and the fall of Communism is in full tilt.

# 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 dollars 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.

African Americans 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 mix of races wove a rich 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 while establishing a community that left an indelible mark upon the city’s religion, politics and economy.

The ethnic diversity of the Hill produced a bustling business district. Wylie and Bedford Avenues and Logan Street were lined with stores and the neighborhood’s lively personality lasted through the Depression. It was through these difficult times that the Hill established itself as a place for music. The Hill was well known on the National Jazz Circuit with places like the Crawford Grill, Hurricane Lounge, Savoy Ballroom and Musicians Club. Celebrities such as Rudy Vallee and Paul Whitman 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 50s the Hill was brimming with interracial bars and clubs with patrons participating in the life and music as they hopped 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, Pittsburgh city council member, George E. Evans, 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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 areas.

In September 1955 the federal government approved the lower Hill redevelopment plan, making available 17.4 million dollars 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 8000 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 sub-standard housing. Those who relocated received little compensation, with maximal benefits coming from the federal government.

The Hill’s fortunes took another blow, hitting bottom during the riots that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968. From April 5, 1968 to April 12, a week of rage brought 505 fires, 620,000 dollars in property damage, one death and 926 arrests.

The Hill district’s rich legacy has been leveled by so many botched redevelopments and the riots, but it was black Pittsburghers who met and transcended these problems and are striving to rebuild; that gives many confidence that the Hill district will be revitalized. Crawford Square has returned residential homes to the area with plans for retail developments and the restoring of the New Granada Theatre as a jazz center. One hopes that the Hill district will regain the spark and character it once had.

**“Everything was happening on the hill  
it was jammin’ on the Hill.”**

**-Shirley Anderson, owner of  
the Beauty Mark Salon.**

# A Century of PLAYS, Decade by DECADE

To this point, August Wilson has written eight plays in a “living time-line” that chronicle the Black American’s cultural journey through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Each is an intimate story of complex characters trying to find their way around and through the social issues of the time. Though Wilson doesn’t state the events of each decade, their influences and repercussions reverberate through each character in every play. Themes of struggle with personal and cultural identity, familial relationships, especially that of the father to the son, knowing your place in history and musical threads, “finding the song,” are what the August Wilson theatrical experience is about. He has written about all but the very first and the last decades, leaving his loyal audiences with hope of more to come.

*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, set in 1917, is the story of Harold Loomis who returns to a Pittsburgh boarding house in search of his wife. He is haunted by the memory of bounty hunter Joe Turner, the man who had illegally enslaved him. Loomis is unable to fully embrace or release the past.

*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* deals with a female blues singer in the 1920s, that lives and works under the pressure of a music business that abuses and victimizes its black artists.

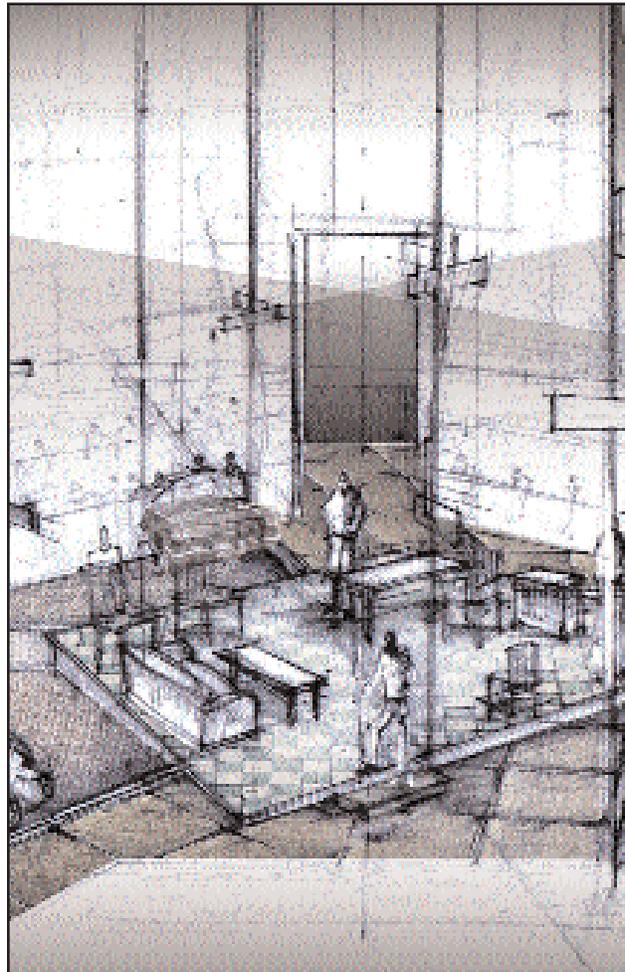
In *The Piano Lesson*, a battle ensues over the possession of a piano, which carries the legacy and opportunities of the characters and determines the choices they must make.

*Seven Guitars* brings a post-war Pittsburgh and us into the world of the 1940s. We sort through the plight of the Black American men who fought and died in World War II, who now return home to find they must confront the same inequities they’d faced before they left.

Troy Maxson is a garbage collector who prides himself on his ability to provide for his family and keep it together. The patriarch and central character in *Fences*, (1950-1965), he continually places barriers between himself and the very people he loves the most. Troy’s rebellion and frustration set the tone for this play as he struggles for a sense of fairness in a society that offers none. He and his son clash over their conflicting views of what it means to be a black man in mid-century America.

*Two Trains Running* examines the possibilities of securing the American dream in a 1960s northern urban ghetto. Memphis Lee, his neighbors and his restaurant’s patrons stand on the precipice of urban renewal. They consider the prospects for surviving this change with their history and cultural identity in tact as the existence of their community is in jeopardy.

The 1970s are the background for *Jitney*. In this story, Pittsburgh’s gypsy cab drivers fight to save their business and retain their livelihood and are pitted again against a world that wants to tear down the inner city for redevelopment. A difficult relationship between father and son again points out how each generation confronts the world in his own way rather than building on the struggles of those who came before him.



*Jitney* set drawing by Michael Brown

# Names *in* the PLAY

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CHARLES “BUDDY” BOLDEN (1877-1931) was founder of New Orleans’ first jazz band and the first “king” in a line of New Orleans cornet players that included Joseph “King” Oliver and Louis Armstrong.

BUFFALO SOLDIERS were regiments of African American soldiers formed in 1866 to put down Native American uprisings. They were named Buffalo soldiers because the tribes thought their dark curly hair resembled the mane of a buffalo.

MELLON refers to the Mellon family of Pittsburgh. Andrew William Mellon (1855-1937) was an American financier, industrialist, philanthropist and Secretary of the Treasury from 1921-1932. His art collection was donated to the public and is housed in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

## ACTIVITIES

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### **I. COMPARE AND CONTRAST: DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF KING HEDLEY II**

Like all literature, August Wilson’s plays work on many different levels.

#### ***KING HEDLEY II AS AN EPIC:***

- How does *King Hedley II* match the criteria of a classic tragedy? How does the character of King Hedley II match the criteria of a tragic hero? What is King Hedley II’s tragic flaw?
- How is Stool Pigeon like a chorus from a classic Greek play?
- *King Hedley II* shares many elements with William Shakespeare’s history plays: the passing of names down from “King” to “King,” the passing of the weapon down from father to son, the emphasis on honor and revenge. In many ways, just as Shakespeare’s “Henry”

plays followed a dynasty, *King Hedley II* follows the story of a “royal” family that started in Wilson’s play *Seven Guitars*. Read *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*. Create a family tree for King Hedley II and the other characters in both plays. Compare the dynasty of King Hedley II and the royal families in *Henry IV* parts *I* and *II*, *Henry V*, *Richard II* and *Richard III* by Shakespeare.

#### ***KING HEDLEY II AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY:***

- August Wilson was inspired by the work of the South African playwright Athol Fugard. Compare *King Hedley II* to such works by Fugard as *Siswe Bansi Is Dead*, “*Master Harold*” and *the Boys*, or *Blood Knot*. How do these works establish compelling characters and events as well as commenting on social and political issues?

# ACTIVITIES

## C O N T I N U E D

### ***KING HEDLEY II* IN THE CANON OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE:**

**Compare *King Hedley II* to such poems, novels and plays as:**

- “I, Too” by Langston Hughes
- “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou
- *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- *Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin
- *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
- *Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry

### **II. THE IMPORTANCE OF NAMES**

• August Wilson said that he began creating *King Hedley II* when Ruby, a character in *Seven Guitars*, said she would name her son King. Wilson later said, “I would always think, ‘Why would you want to put this legacy on a kid?’” What is a “legacy?” Think about the word “king.” Brainstorm ten different descriptive words you immediately think of when you hear the word “king.” Do those words match the character of King Hedley II? How did King Hedley II live up to the legacy of his name?

• The importance of names runs through both *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*. Compare these sections from the two plays.

1. The first is from *Seven Guitars*. Hedley, the man that King Hedley II later believes is his father, describes why he killed a man:

**RUBY:** What you kill him for?...

**HEDLEY:** He would not call me King. He laughed to think a black man could be King. I did not want to lose my name so I told him to call me the name my father gave me and he

laugh. He would not call me King and I beat him hard with a stick...After that I don’t tell nobody my name is King. It is a bad thing.

2. This passage is from *King Hedley II*. King describes his confrontation with Pernell:

**KING:** Pernell called me Champ. I told him my name’s King. He say, “Yeah Champ.” I go on. I don’t say nothing. I told myself “He don’t know.” He don’t know my daddy killed a man for calling him out of his name...He called me Champ and I didn’t say nothing. I put him on probation. Told myself he don’t know but I’m gonna give him a chance to find out. If he find out and come and tell me he’s sorry then I’ll let him live.

• Are our lives determined by our names? If you can, find out why your parents chose your name. Did they just like the sound of the name? Were you named after a relative, or a famous person? Research the origins of your name (you can use this web site: [www.all.at/nameorigins](http://www.all.at/nameorigins)). How does the meaning of your name match you? What is your name’s “legacy?”

### **III. ESSAY QUESTION**

Read the two quotes below. The first is from August Wilson’s play *Seven Guitars*: Canewell is describing why he won’t go to Chicago anymore. The second is from *King Hedley II*, with Hedley describing an argument with a judge. *Seven Guitars* takes place in 1948; *King Hedley II* takes place in 1985. Write a one-page essay comparing these selections, unified with this quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.:

‘The tendency to ignore the Negro’s contribution to American life and to strip him of his personhood is as old as the earliest history books and as contemporary as the morning’s newspaper.’

# ACTIVITIES

## C O N T I N U E D

**1. LOUISE:** What you went to jail for?

**CANEWELL:** Nothing. I ain't done nothing. Ask Floyd. Singing. That's all I did. I was right down there on Maxwell Street waiting on Floyd. I started fiddling with my harmonica. I said if I'm gonna stand here and play I might as well throw my hat down...somebody might put something in it. The police said I was disturbing the peace. Soliciting without a license. Loitering.

Resisting arrest and disrespecting the Law. They rolled all that together and charged me with laziness and give me thirty days. I ain't going back up there.

**2. MISTER:** He got to go back on Monday. See if the judge wanna hold him in contempt of court.

**KING:** Hold me for what? Hold me for what? I ain't done nothing but ask the man a question. The judge sitting up there shuffling papers acting like he don't know why Hop didn't get the contract. So I stood up and asked him "Do you know why Hop didn't get the contract?" He looked at me like I was crazy. Either that or he was too dumb to figure out what I was saying. So I broke it down for him. "Do you...know...why...Mr. Hendricks...didn't...get...the...contract?" He told me I was in contempt of court.

### IV. HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES:

**"They got everything stacked up against you as it is. Every time I try to do something they get in the way. It's been that way my whole life. Every time I try to do something they get in the way. Especially if you try and get some money. They don't want you to have none of that. They keep that away from you. They got fifty eleven way to get money and don't want you to have none. They block you at every turn."** – King Hedley from *King Hedley II*.

*King Hedley II* is the eighth play of Mr. Wilson's "decades cycle," with each play exploring life, especially the African American experience, during a different decade of the 20th century. *King Hedley II* takes place during the 1980s. What were the events, the flash-points that affected the lives of the characters in *King Hedley II*?

### V. "THE OTHER SIDE OF THE VALLEY": KNOWING "WHAT WENT ON"

**MISTER:** Why you have all them newspapers? What you gonna do with them?

**STOOL PIGEON:** See I know what went on. I ain't saying what goes on...what went on. You got to know that. How you gonna get on the other side of the valley if you don't know that? - from *King Hedley II* by August Wilson

In *King Hedley II*, Stool Pigeon collects newspapers, hoping to save the articles as a type of moment-by-moment history book for future generations, so that people in the future will know "what went on." In this way, Stool Pigeon serves as a *griot* in the story.

Think about the phrase: "Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it." How important is it to know "what went on?"

What does Stool Pigeon mean by "the other side of the valley?"

Hoard newspapers (or the addresses of news websites) yourself, for a while. Read local and national newspapers for a week. What is being reported? What is not being reported on enough? Have everyone in your class or group write an article about an event not covered in the press; put your articles together in a newsletter or website for your group called "What Went On." You can include information about August Wilson and your trip to see *King Hedley II*.

# ACTIVITIES

## C O N T I N U E D

*King Hedley II* takes place in 1985, before the amazing growth of the Internet. Imagine the play takes place today. How would Stool Pigeon know “what went on?”

### VI. THEATRE EXERCISES

- Use what you have learned about the characters and their motivations. Improvise short scenes around these moments in *King Hedley II*.

Tonya tells King that she is pregnant.

King tries to get his photos. The clerk can't find them, even though King has the receipt.

Mister tells King he needs his share of the money they have saved; Elmore tells King Hedley the truth about his father.

August Wilson has set each of his plays in a different decade of the 20th century. Choose another 20<sup>th</sup>-century decade. Using the information you have gathered on the history, events, social and political climate of your decade, create a short play, story or poem about people dealing with life during that time.

How do the characters change during the course of *King Hedley II*? How do their transformations affect the outcome of the play?

From what you have learned about August Wilson, Pittsburgh's Hill District and life in America during the 1980s, create a set design and costume designs for *King Hedley II* before you see the play. How do the scenery and costume designs work together in your plan? After seeing *King Hedley II*, see how the set and costume designs are similar, or differ, from your plan.

### VII. BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

In *King Hedley II* (and, indeed, in all his plays) August Wilson brings together literature, history and theatre in a compelling event that is at once timeless and specific. It's essential to talk about the connections between a play and past works by other artists, or how it links to historical events. Equally important is when you see any work of art, how it affects YOU, how it makes you feel about your world and your place in history. Now that you have read about August Wilson and the time in which *King Hedley II* takes place, discuss how the 1980s are different from today. How are they the same? How is the Hill district depicted in *King Hedley II* different from your neighborhood? How is it the same? Do you sometimes feel like any of the characters in *King Hedley II*? Why or why not? By reading and seeing Wilson's work, you have a chance to see your part in the living timeline of history.

**These exercises contribute to Colorado Model Content Standard #4 for Reading and Writing; students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing. Colorado Model Content Standard # 5 for Theatre; students analyze and assess the characteristics, merits, and meanings of traditional and modern forms of dramatic expression. Colorado Model Content Standard #1 for History; students understand the chronological organization of history and know how to organize events and people into major eras to identify and explain historical relationships.**

<p>pg. 2</p> <p style="text-align: center;">N O T E S &amp; S O U R C E S</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lahr, p. 50.</li> <li>2. Lahr, p. 50.</li> <li>3. Lahr, p. 59.</li> <li>4. CBS News, "60 Minutes" interview with Ed Bradley.</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Lahr, John. "Been There and Gone." <i>The New Yorker</i>. August 16, 2001.</li> <li>•<a href="http://www.kinghedley.com/studyguide/printerversion.html">http://www.kinghedley.com/studyguide/printerversion.html</a></li> </ul>	<p>pg. 5</p> <p style="text-align: center;">N O T E S &amp; S O U R C E S</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Wilson, Amos, p. 8.</li> <li>2. McDonough, p. 139.</li> <li>3. Wilson, Amos, p. 35.</li> <li>4. Majors and Billson, pp. 19-20.</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Fine, Michelle and Weis, Lois. <i>Young The Unknown City: Lives of Poor and Working Class Adults</i>. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.</li> <li>•Majors, Richard and Billson, Janet Mancini. <i>Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America</i>. New York: Lexington Books, 1992.</li> <li>•McDonough, Carla J. <i>Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama</i>. London: McFarland and Co., Inc., 1997.</li> <li>•Wilson, Amos N. <i>Understanding Black Adolescent Male Violence</i>. New York: Afrikan World InfoSystems, 1991.</li> <li>•<a href="http://www.kinghedley.com/studyguide/printerversion.html">http://www.kinghedley.com/studyguide/printerversion.html</a></li> </ul>
<p>pg. 3</p> <p style="text-align: center;">N O T E S &amp; S O U R C E S</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hale, p. 19.</li> <li>2. Hale, p. 23.</li> <li>3. Ayazi-hashjin, p. 7.</li> <li>4. Hale, p. 57.</li> <li>5. Lahr, p. 65.</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Ayazi-hashjin, Sherry. <i>Rap and Hip Hop</i>. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 1999.</li> <li>•Hale, Thomas A. <i>Griots and Griottes</i>. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998.</li> <li>•Lahr, John. "Been Here and Gone." <i>The New Yorker</i>. August 16, 2001.</li> <li>•<a href="http://www.kingheadley.com/studyguide/printerversion.html">http://www.kingheadley.com/studyguide/printerversion.html</a></li> </ul>	<p>pg. 6</p> <p style="text-align: center;">N O T E S &amp; S O U R C E S</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ayazi-hashjin, p. 58.</li> <li>2. Ayazi-hashjin, p. 15.</li> <li>3. Ayazi-hashjin, p. 50.</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Ayazi-hashjin, Sherry. <i>Rap and Hip Hop: the Voice of a Generation</i>. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 1999.</li> <li>•Krim, Adam. <i>Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity</i>. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.</li> <li>•Rhodes, Henry A. <i>The Evolution of Rap Music in the United States</i>. <a href="http://www.Yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1993/">http://www.Yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1993/</a></li> <li>•Shaw, Arnold. <i>Black Popular Music in America</i>. New York: Schirmer Books, 1986.</li> </ul>
<p>pg. 4</p> <p style="text-align: center;">N O T E S &amp; S O U R C E S</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Katz, p. 544.</li> <li>2. Katz, p. 545.</li> <li>3. Katz, p. 546.</li> <li>4. Schaller, p. 94.</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Farley, Reynolds. <i>The New American Reality</i>. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996.</li> <li>•Katz, William Loren. <i>Eyewitness: a Living Documentary of the African American Contribution to American History</i>. New York: Touchstone Books, 1995.</li> <li>•Schaller, Michael. <i>Reckoning with Reagan</i>. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.</li> </ul>	<p>pg. 7</p> <p style="text-align: center;">S O U R C E S</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Grun, Bernard. <i>The Timetables of History</i>. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991.</li> <li>•<a href="http://cdcga.org/HTMLs/decades/1980s.htm">http://cdcga.org/HTMLs/decades/1980s.htm</a></li> </ul>
	<p>pg. 8</p> <p style="text-align: center;">N O T E S &amp; S O U R C E S</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Korol, p. 2.</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Korol, Paul S. "A Brief History of the Hill." Pittsburgh Senior News. <a href="http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~njm1/hillhist.htm">http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~njm1/hillhist.htm</a></li> </ul>

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