

# Two Trains Running

January 11 - February 17, 1996

By August Wilson

Directed by Israel Hicks

Sponsored by Colorado National Bank



## Study Guide

prepared by the Education Department of the Denver Center Theatre Company  
and contributing writer Sally R. Gass



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In order to find more information about August Wilson, the Civil Rights Movement or the 1960s, take a trip to your school or local library. There is a wealth of material on these subjects for both adults and children. Ask your librarian for help in finding the books, videos, records, tapes and magazines you need. Become familiar with your library and you will find that a world of information will be at your fingertips. Most libraries are not restricted by their own collections but can borrow from other libraries to satisfy your informational needs. Become a skillful library consumer. Never hesitate to ask questions. Planning is important, however, and the farther you plan ahead, the more time you give your librarian and yourself to find the best resources.



Each show the Denver Center Theatre Company produces has its own unique informational needs. We here at the theatre, use the resources of our own and other libraries continually. Without access to information, it would not be possible to do what we do whether it is searching for the costumes of a particular period, defining the language of a specific time, discovering the customs and culture of when and where the play takes place, or finding technical information to produce the special effects on stage. Our people have to be well informed. We also think it's important that we share some of the resources we have discovered with you. In fact, this study guide has taken many hours of research, writing and editing in order to help you enjoy the production you are about to see and enrich your theatrical experience at the DCTC.

—Linda Eller  
*Librarian, National Theatre Conservatory  
A department of the Denver Center Theatre Company  
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The Denver Center for the Performing Arts has used its share to fund *Free For All* performances to Denver Center Theatre Company shows, scholarships to the National Theatre Conservatory and the Denver Center Theatre Academy for artists of color, additional Student Matinees at the DCTC, and much more.

The SCFD has been recognized as a national model for the enhancement of community quality of life through the arts: cities from California to Pennsylvania have sought to replicate this special funding District. The residents of the Denver Metropolitan area benefit every day from its programs.

*“His (August Wilson’s) plays have centered themselves in a decade and have illuminated the life of an oppressed people during that time. He has not approached the plays as historical chronologies of the events of the time, or even as dialogues on the problems of the time. He has approached every thing through characters, characters who any of us may have encountered or avoided encountering on the street. He has put them in a position where we can get to know them through their attempts to deal with the issues of their time as they affect their everyday lives. And in their struggle to live, to survive, to thrive, to respect themselves, one begins to perceive these people in their time; you see history flowing to the time and flowing from it as it affects the lives and the decisions of those characters.”*

—Lloyd Richards

## SYNOPSIS OF TWO TRAINS RUNNING

“There are always and only two trains running. There is life and there is death. Each of us rides them both.”<sup>1</sup>

August Wilson’s chronicling of 20th century black history reaches the 60’s in *Two Trains Running*. It is set in Memphis Lee’s eatery in one of Pittsburgh’s poor, mostly black sections. The city wants to tear down an entire block, including Memphis’ building, but Memphis wants \$25,000 for his property, and won’t take a penny less. West, a wealthy undertaker from across the street, offers Lee \$20,000, but it’s no deal. West, for all his prosperity, has troubles of his own. At the lunch counter for his regular coffee, he reveals that Prophet Samuels is laid out in his funeral parlor, and the prophet’s enthusiastic but unruly followers, are creating difficulties. Meanwhile, Risa, a follower of the Prophet, is the lone and lonely waitress at the cafe. Tired of pawing, abusive men, she has slashed her legs repeatedly to keep men away. But that is no deterrent to Sterling, the young bank robber just released from the penitentiary. He plans to go straight, get a job, and marry Risa, despite the fact that she thinks he’s crazy. But there are no jobs, so Sterling gambles by playing the numbers and gets himself a gun.

Among the other regulars at Lee’s restaurant is Wolf, the numbers runner, who uses the pay phones there to conduct his business, which infuriates Memphis. Memphis shows no compassion, either, to Hambone, the deranged character who painted a fence for Lutz, the white butcher, nine and a half years ago. Lutz promised him a ham, but dissatisfied with the job, gave Hambone a chicken instead. Hambone can only stand outside the butcher shop and rage: “I want my ham,” and “He gonna give me my ham.”

The only seemingly contented regular at Lee’s is Holloway, a retired house painter. He has found peace by consulting the unseen Aunt Ester, a “322”-year-old sage who gives mystically unorthodox but sound advice. Holloway becomes a philosopher, dispensing observations about whites, blacks, and the world at large that get “dissed” and discussed by the others present.

*Two Trains Running* reflects the complex social tapestry surrounding blacks at the end of the 60’s. Despite the tumultuous times of Civil Rights unrest and the Vietnam War, the spirit of survival among Wilson’s characters remains undiminished as they scramble, argue, and hope. In their story-telling, they chronicle African-American history and make a connection to their past, which makes their present more precious and meaningful. The characters “live life with dignity—they celebrate and accept responsibility for their presence in the world which is all that can be asked of anyone.”<sup>2</sup>

### THE HAMMER SONG

*(Written by Pete Seeger and Lee Hays)*

If I had a hammer, I’d hammer in the morning,  
I’d hammer in the evening — all over this land;  
I’d hammer at danger, — I’d hammer out warning,  
I’d hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters  
All—o-ver this land.

*“Two Trains Running*, is a metaphor for conflicting options for African-Americans to confront racism in American society in 1969. One train is pulled by Malcolm X; the other by Martin Luther King.” —Israel Hicks, Director

# TWO TRAINS AND TWO CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERS

The period from 1955 to 1968 is regarded as the modern phase of the social movement known as the Civil Rights struggle. It began when Rosa Parks, a black seamstress, refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white male passenger; this action precipitated the 1955-1956 bus boycott by the black citizens of Montgomery, Alabama. In the next 13 years, passive resistance and violent protest kept the movement alive. It was in the philosophies of its two leaders, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., that the struggle played out, flourished and eventually passed from national focus.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. concentrated upon a concept of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance. The aim of his approach was to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent so that in the end there would be redemption and reconciliation. Non-violence involves the willingness to love others, attack

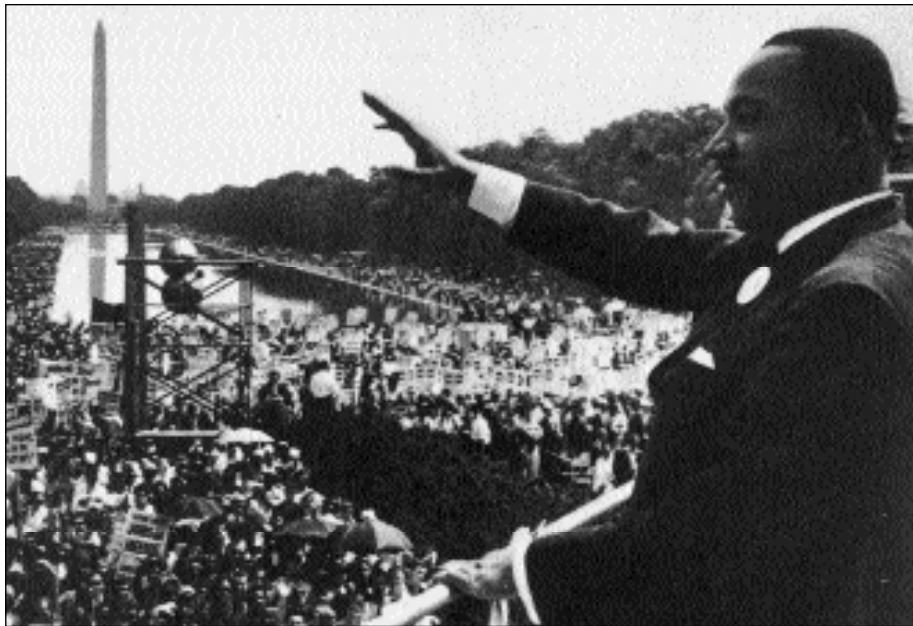
forces of evil rather than individuals, and forgive. Suffering is to be accepted with insults, beatings, and jailings. King's theory was tested during the Montgomery boycott, and proved to be successful. Though he was arrested and jailed several times, King would emerge with a dignity and strength that earned him increased support. However, when the Watts rebellion occurred in 1965, King found himself ineffective in trying to cool the rebellion. When he was assassinated in 1968, the nonviolent action thrust of the black freedom movement continued, but with less frequency and publicity.

The Northern and urban roots of the Civil Rights struggle had its spokesman and leader in Malcolm X. Malcolm believed in self-defense and in a radical, anti-white position. A member of the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims), he preached a message of black pride, self-help, and separatism. The foremost proponent of black power and black nationalist philosophies, Malcolm made sense to the black middle class, especially the young. He was a mesmerizing speaker, and his analysis of white racism and hypocrisy also struck responsive chords in poor black urban dwellers, ex-convicts, and street people, who had experienced the contempt of white society first hand. Why, asked Malcolm, would black people want to integrate into such a corrupt white society? The deteriorating economic conditions of blacks in the cities and the rise of

young black leaders like Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, and Huey Newton justified erupting black rage and riots. These did not end with the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965.

How do the characters reflect these leaders' philosophies? It is not always clear. The characters are fully realized creations that are full of human contradictions. Wolf is passive; he is content to be in his phone booth running his numbers game, beholden to the white men even when they cut the purse. He lacks the courage to make a

move on Risa, who is stuck; she is nurturing and caring, but afraid of life and society, both black and white. Holloway rages against both black and white people, but takes no action except to consult with Aunt Ester and seek refuge in mystical African roots and rituals. West, the undertaker, might be the best exponent of black



enterprise—except that he makes his money from black death and grief. Sterling is definitely Malcolm's man—"Malcolm lives," he cries, as he hustles for jobs, money, respect, and love. It is his final action of the play that gives Hambone his restitution for what he rightfully deserves. And Hambone? He seems mired in rage, but perhaps he is the smartest of all, observes Holloway. He hollers about his ham, but he refuses the chicken. "He ain't willing to accept whatever the white man throw at him. It be easier. But he say he don't mind getting out of bed in the morning to go at what's right." <sup>3</sup> It is a lesson in self-esteem. Or is it that Hambone symbolizes the old complacent negro who passively waits for the white man to give him his due, while Sterling represents the new self-empowered black man who actively goes out and gets what's his.

As for Memphis, he seems to epitomize both black leaders' philosophies. He has learned to live his life and play the white man's game; he will be as patient as Dr. King and wait for the \$25,000 the city owes him for his property. But in the final scene, and with his money, he will reclaim the land he was cheated out of as a youth. It is an action that Malcolm would approve.

## KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE PRIZE

(adaptation of traditional song by Alice Wine)



Freedom's name is mighty sweet,  
soon one day were gonna meet.  
Keep your eyes on the prize,  
*Chorus: hold on, hold on.*

We've met jail and violence too,  
but God's love has seen us through.  
Keep your eyes on the prize,  
*Chorus: hold on, hold on.*

Haven't been to heaven but I've been told,  
Streets up there are paved with gold.  
Keep your eyes on the prize,  
*Chorus: hold on, hold on.*

*Chorus: Hold on, hold on. Keep your eyes on the prize,  
hold on, hold on.*

**“The blacks are all organized. So are the Mexicans, even the Indians. But who, the hell, speaks for me?” (statement of a white factory hand in Texas.) (Newsweek, 10/6/69, p. 31.)**

## BLACK POWER

In his 1968 essay, “An Advocate of Black Power Defines It,” Charles B. Hamilton writes that Black Power has many definitions and connotations. To some people, it was synonymous with premeditated acts of violence; to others it was a plan to rid the Civil Rights movement of whites. To Hamilton, Black Power was concerned with organizing the rage of black people to constructive purposes. These included:

1. Dealing with the growing alienation of black people and their destruction of society's institutions.
2. Working to create new values and building a new sense of community and belonging among African-Americans.
3. Working to establish legitimate new institutions that make participants, not recipients, out of a group of people who have been excluded from societal and legal processes of this country.
4. Developing a sense of pride and self respect in the black persona. The black must change the demeaning concept of himself. He cannot deny his heritage, but must have a sense of his history and himself as a whole human being, so he can become psychologically and mentally healthy as he deals with “integration.”
5. Implementing new forms of decision-making in the black community to overcome alienation and distrust.
6. Building a new sense of community among black people. Black power will try to forge a bond between those who have “made it” and those “on the bottom.” Hopefully, this will end the backbiting and bickering that exists in the Black community and, ultimately, produce unity. Black Power was a developmental process that would involve persistent, hard tedious day-to-day work. “To the extent that



black Americans can organize, and to the extent that White Americans can keep from panicking and begin to respond rationally to the demands of that organization—to that extent we can get on with the business of creating not just law and order, but a free and open society.”<sup>4</sup>

“Middleclass people,” says University of Michigan philosopher Abraham Kaplan, “look around and say, ‘We’ve entered paradise and it looks like the place we just left.’” (*Newsweek*, 10/6/69, p 31.)

### WE SHALL OVERCOME

(words and music arranged by Ziphia Horton, Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan and Pete Seeger {Modern adaptation of Negro Church song I’ll Overcome Someday.})

We shall o-ver-come, we shall over come,  
We shall o-ver-come some-day  
Oh, —deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall o-ver-come some-day.

Verses:

2. We are not afraid...
  3. We are not alone...
  4. The truth will make us free...
  5. We’ll walk hand in hand...
  6. The Lord will see us through...
- The last two lines are the same in every verse.



## “LOUD TALKING”

In his essay, *American History as “Loud Talking” in Two Trains Running*. Mark William Rocha proposes that “the play offers its audience the opportunity to do American history by including them as participants in a ritual through which they can become self-conscious about their odd disconnectedness to the black experience.”<sup>5</sup>

“Loud talking” in the black vernacular requires a triadic relationship. One successfully “loud talks” by speaking remarks to a second person which are meant for a third person, at a level just audible to the third person. If the practice is successful, the third party will usually say, “What?”, to which the speaker replies “I wasn’t talking to you.” Of course, the speaker was, at the same time he wasn’t.<sup>6</sup> The “loud talking” of Wilson’s play tricks the audience into demonstrating their ignorance of the African nature that produced the play and shaped the basic assumptions of black culture. The playwright uses this technique to give the audience “an opportunity to become self-conscious about one’s historical relationship to Wilson’s black community — which is to say, an opportunity to find one’s self in America’s past.”<sup>7</sup>

Wilson incorporates two kinds of “loud talking.” The first is “Allegorical” which Wilson uses to school his audience. Holloway’s “stacking niggers” speech in Act 2, scene 3, depends upon a field of reference that includes the date Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin (1793) and the way this invention served to institutionalize slavery, as well as how the

use of chain gangs was used to build the nation’s infrastructure. Wilson wants the audience to get the point through talk and tales that they have disconnected themselves from America’s past by not knowing this information. The second kind of “loud talking” is “In Your Face.” This is carried on by Hambone whose “I want my ham” is directed at Lutz in order to shame him in front of the community. Wilson also uses “In Your Face” to the audience through Memphis’ story about the boy, Begaboo, who was killed by the police. Because black protests failed, Wilson is “facing” the audience to admit its failure of social responsibility in similar situations.

Other kinds of black vernacular used are “sounding” (getting on someone’s case, as Wolf does when he asks Memphis about his wife); “rapping” (using the vernacular with great dexterity); “sweet talking” (as Sterling does with Risa) and “marking” (mimicking the words of others, as Holloway and others do when they exchange stories.)

Talk is the whole point of the play and the soul of the African culture that has a rich oral tradition. The stories that are told create and preserve the people, including the characters of the play. Wilson’s “loud talking” is an attempt to welcome or pressure the audience into becoming part of the black community and to supply the American theater with something it never had: an American history that is the product of an African rather than a European sensibility.

# THE USE OF METAPHOR IN *TWO TRAINS RUNNING*

1969 was an anxious time in the lives and fortunes of African-Americans. The assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, and the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 with the subsequent riots and conflagrations left in their wake an uneasy social climate. At the beginning of the play, the characters await the funeral of "Prophet Samuel." His funeral arrangements are constantly referred to throughout the play, and these may be seen, on one level, as an extended metaphor for impermanence and the symbolic death of the Civil Rights movement. The struggle to survive appears to weaken, momentarily, as the characters contemplate, not only the death of the "Prophet," but also the city council's renovation project that threatens to tear down the whole neighborhood. The pause in the struggle is made even more significant by the breakdown of the jukebox in the diner—silencing the music of the blues that for centuries has given voice to the black soul and so helped them through their darkest periods. Aunt Ester, the cultural storehouse of memory and experience which is the fragile link to the African past, is ill throughout much of the play and can't entertain visitors. Thus, the music and the magic, cultural conduits to the past, are temporarily inaccessible.

Near the end of the play, however, the jukebox is fixed and Aunt Ester feels better, so the journey toward self-authentication and the struggle for living can continue along new and different paths in the post-Civil Rights era.



## THE TRICKSTER IN *TWO TRAINS RUNNING*

**A**frican mythology is replete with ancestor worship, magic and superstition. One of these superstitions concerns Esu or Eshu, the "divine Trickster" who cons individuals through stories and riddles. This Yoruba trickster god consistently opposes the other gods and thwarts their intentions. Eshu is looked upon as a protective, benevolent spirit as well as a spirit with an evil power that may be directed toward one's enemies. (See more about Esu, Eshu in the Activity package.)

Wilson uses this device compellingly in his play. Sterling embodies the personality of a trickster. He says he was born with luck because his Mama swallowed 7 cents, and he came out "with a nickel in one hand and two pennies in the other."<sup>8</sup> He plans to stand in line to see the dead Prophet Samuel and rub his head for luck. He tries to teach Hambone how to say something more than "I want my ham;" he attempts to hoodwink West into letting him drive his Cadillac; and he "kissing cousins" Risa into a passionate embrace.

Esu can also be seen in the role of Aunt Ester, the 322-year-old conjurer woman who heals by getting her visitors to tell their life stories. Like an oracle, she provides her visitors not with answers, but with riddles and parables that they themselves must interpret. She is the healing maternal presence

who offers them the choice of remaining passive or taking some action—even if they have to walk on nails to reach some solution. She represents African-American memory, and the choice to ignore it or retrieve it.

Perhaps it is August Wilson himself who is the trickster. In a play that looks at first like a conventional dramatization of a slice of black life is actually a clever device by Wilson to confront his audience with their ignorance of black American history. Though he seems to heap vehement blame on white America for prejudice and harassment, he cunningly assaults his own kind. Memphis says: "These niggers talking about freedom, justice, and equality don't know what it mean. You born free. It's up to you to maintain it. You born with dignity and everything else."<sup>9</sup>

But perhaps the biggest trick of all is to make a man who says only two phrases the heart and soul of this play. For nearly 10 years, Hambone has refused to accept a chicken instead of the ham Lutz promised him. When Hambone dies, the community identifies with his quest and canonizes him as the primal creation myth of a new black identity. As Wilson states it: "Hambone is the new black man created in the 60's who would not accept a chicken."<sup>10</sup>

“There’s racial problems, money problems, more crime... .  
Everything has gone to pieces,’ a Kalamazoo, Michigan housewife.” (Newsweek, 10/6/69, p 33.)

## CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR EVENTS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT 1954-1968

**1953:** A successful ten-day boycott of buses takes place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in June. Led by **Rev. T. J. Jemison**, a former NAACP president, black citizens gain modifications in the segregation rules.

**1954:** On May 17, the U.S. Supreme Court (in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*) declares segregation in the public schools to be inherently unequal, and mandates desegregation.

**1955:** The *Brown II* decision of the Supreme Court implements the 1954 ruling by requiring desegregation “with all deliberate speed.”

- On December 1, **Mrs. Rosa Parks** is arrested for violating the bus segregation ordinance in Montgomery, Alabama.

- The Montgomery bus boycott begins on December 5; the **Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.**, is elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association.

**1956:** The Supreme Court upholds a favorable district court decision declaring Montgomery’s bus segregation to be illegal. On December 21, Montgomery’s buses are integrated, and the bus boycott is called off after 381 days.

**1957:** The Southern Christian Leadership Conference is founded in January and Martin Luther King, Jr. is chosen president.

- **Governor Orval Faubus** of Arkansas calls out the National Guard to prevent nine black students from entering all-white Central High School in Little Rock; a court order requires Faubus to withdraw them. After threats of mob violence, **President Eisenhower** orders paratroopers to Little Rock to enforce integration and places ten thousand National Guardsmen on federal service. The troops remain the rest of the year to protect the students. **Daisy Bates**, president of the state NAACP, is the students’ main adviser.

- The first Civil Rights Act in eighty-two years is passed by Congress. Though weak, it has investigative and advisory functions and power of subpoena. The Civil Rights Commission is established.

**1958:** A successful voter registration drive in Fayette and Haywood counties, Tennessee, leads to severe economic reprisals. Many black sharecroppers are evicted. In 1960, “Tent City” is set up and a national appeal for aid made.

**1960:** Four black students—**Ezell Blair, Jr.**, **Joseph McNeil**, **David Richmond**, and **Franklin McClain**—sit in at the Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1. The action is repeated by college students throughout the Deep South. Sympathetic picketing and boycotts occur in the North. Within a year and half, demonstrations have been held in over a hundred cities and towns in every southern and border state.

- Dr. King is jailed in Atlanta. Democratic presidential nominee **John F. Kennedy** telephones **Mrs. King** to express concern. This act is credited with gaining him the election.

**1961:** On May 4, Freedom Riders, led by **James Farmer** of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), leave Washington, D.C., by bus in order to expose illegal segregation practices in terminal accommodations. On May 14, a white mob burns a Freedom Riders’ bus near Anniston, Alabama. Klansmen in Birmingham beat riders aboard a second bus. The Freedom Rides continue. In September, segregation in all interstate transportation facilities is declared illegal by the Interstate Commerce Commission.

**1962:** On October 1, **James Meredith** becomes the first black person to attend class at the University of Mississippi after a weekend of riots during which the National Guard has been called in.

**1963:** On April 3, major demonstrations are launched in Birmingham to protest segregation. These continued throughout May. Schoolchildren are recruited for marches and demonstrations. Police Commissioner **Eugene (“Bull”) Connor** responds with police dogs, fire hoses, and mass arrests.

- On June 11, Alabama Governor **George Wallace** tries to block integration at the University of Alabama by “standing in the door.” the first student is admitted.

- The March on Washington, sponsored by a coalition of Civil Rights groups, churches, and some unions, attracts hundreds of thousands of peaceful demonstrators to the nation’s capitol on August 28.

- An assassin kills President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, on November 22.

**1964:** Hundreds of volunteers arrive to work in Freedom Summer, the Mississippi voter registration project organized by the combined Civil Rights organizations. Three Civil Rights workers, **James Chaney**, **Mickey Schwerner**, and **Andrew Goodman**, are abducted on June 21, while investigating an incident of violence. Their bodies are found buried near Philadelphia, Mississippi, on August 4.

- The 1964 Civil Rights Act is passed by Congress on July 2 and is signed by President Lyndon Johnson.

- Martin Luther King, Jr. receives the Nobel Peace Prize.

**1965:** Lyndon Johnson outlines the Great Society Program to attack poverty.

- Malcolm X is shot to death at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City on February 21.

In August, the Voting Rights Bill is signed into law by **Lyndon Johnson**.

- In the same month, the first major urban conflagration occurs in Watts, California, as black ghetto dwellers burn and loot, following a police arrest of a black youth.

**1966:** In June, **Stokely Carmichael** popularizes the slogan, “black power,” on a march retracing the steps of James Meredith who was gunned down earlier in Mississippi earlier in the month.

- The formation of the Black Panther party by **Huey Newton** and **Bobby Seale** takes place in Oakland, California, in October.

- Martin Luther King, Jr., SNCC and CORE take positions opposing the war in Vietnam.

**1967:** The President appoints a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to inquire into the causes of the urban rebellions. The report is published in 1968.

**1968:** Martin Luther King, Jr., is assassinated on April 4, while assisting striking garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee. Massive riots take place throughout the nation.

-**Robert Kennedy**, a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, is assassinated on June 4, as he is leaving a rally.

- **Richard Nixon** is elected president.

# A WILSON CHRONOLOGY

**1945:** August Wilson was born Frederick Kittel on “The Hill,” a racially-mixed area of Pittsburgh, the fourth of six children. His mother and father separate and eventually divorce. Daisy Wilson becomes the dominant influence in the home.

**1957:** Daisy Wilson marries David Bedford, a black man.

**1959:** The family relocates to a white suburb where Wilson encounters racism.

**1961:** After being falsely accused of plagiarism, Wilson drops out of Gladstone High school.

**1965:** He writes a term paper for his sister comparing Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg, earning \$20 with which he buys his first typewriter. This makes him determined that he'll earn his living as a writer. That Fall, he moves into a rooming house, supporting himself through a series of menial jobs. He hears the music of Bessie Smith for the first time and discovers the Blues. He helps form the Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop.

**1968:** With Rob Penny, Wilson founds Black Horizons Theatre Company on The Hill.

**1969:** He marries Brenda Burton. Stepfather David Bedford dies unexpectedly after suffering a stroke.

**1970:** Daughter, Sakira Ansari, is born.

**1972:** His marriage is dissolved.

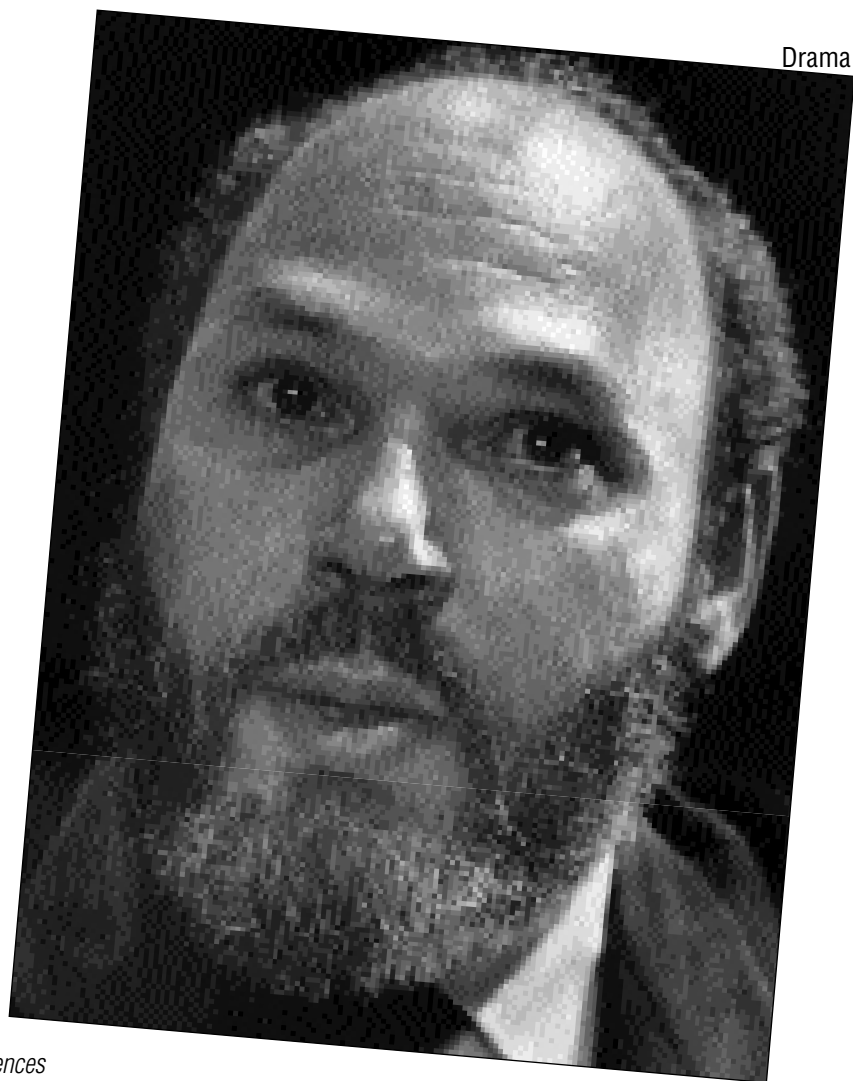
**1978:** He moves to St. Paul to write plays for director Claude Purdy.

**1980:** He joins the Minneapolis Playwrights Center and begins submitting plays to the National Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill Theatre Center. *Jitney*, *Black Bart* and *the Sacred Hills* and *Fullerton Street* are all rejected.

**1981:** Marries Judy Oliver, a social worker. *Black Bart*, a musical satire, is produced in St. Paul.

**1982:** *Jitney* is produced at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is accepted at the O'Neill. Wilson meets director Lloyd Richards for the first time in New York City.

**1983:** Daisy Wilson dies of lung cancer.



## *Fences*

is accepted at the O'Neill.

**1984:** *Ma Rainey* opens at Yale Repertory Theatre April 6 and at the Cort theatre on Broadway October 11. Wilson attends opening night in a borrowed tuxedo. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is accepted at the O'Neill.

**1985:** *Ma Rainey* wins the New York Drama Critics' Circle award and a Tony nomination. *Fences* opens at the Yale Rep. April 30.

**1986:** *Joe Turner* opens April 29 at the Yale Rep.

**1987:** *Fences* opens at Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore on March 26. It wins the New York Drama Critics' Circle award and is nominated for a Tony.

**1990:** *Two Trains Running* opens at the Yale Rep March 27. *The Piano Lesson* opens at the Walter Kerr April 6. Among other things, it wins the New York

Critics' Circle award, a Tony nomination, and the Pulitzer—the second for Wilson. Wilson moves to Seattle. His second marriage ends.

**1991:** He marries costume designer Costanza Romero.

**1991:** Wilson is elected to the Academy of Arts and Sciences.

**1992:** *Two Trains Running* opens at the Walter Kerr on April 13. It wins the New York Drama Critics' Circle award, a Tony nomination and the American Theatre Critics Association Outstanding Play award.

**1995:** *Seven Guitars* opens in at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, Boston's Huntington Theatre Company and San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre. It is scheduled to open on Broadway in the spring of 1996.

# ACTIVITY PACKAGE

## Tricksters in African Mythology

The best-known type of African folktale is the animal-trickster tale. In Bantu Africa (East, Central, and southern Africa) and the western Sudan, the trickster is the hare; in West Africa, the spider (Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone), or the tortoise (Benin, Nigeria). The Yoruba consciously poke fun at their own faults when they tell stories of the tortoise-trickster. Sometimes the tortoise's cunning defeats itself, as, for example, in the tale in which the tortoise steals from the gods a calabash that contains all the wisdom in the world. He hangs it around his neck and is so eager to get home with it that, when he comes to a tree trunk lying across the road, he is unable to cross it because the calabash gets in his way. In his anxiety, he fails to think of putting it on his back. Frustrated, the tortoise smashes the calabash, and so, ever since that day, wisdom has been scattered all over the world in tiny pieces. Anansi (the spider-trickster, of whom stories are told among the Akan and, as Anancy, in Jamaica) often appears as a mythological figure, the fiendish opponent of the sky god, who steals the sky god's stories or tricks him into allowing disease to enter the world.

Eshu - a god of chance, accident and unpredictability. Because he is Olorun's linguist and the master of languages Eshu is responsible for carrying messages and sacrifices from humans to the Sky God. Eshu is said to lurk at gateways, on the highways and at the crossroads, where he introduces chance and accident into the lives of humans. Known by a variety of names, including Elegbara.

## The Lesser God Eshu

Yoruba's mediator was a spirit known as Eshu. He was a very angry God as everyone alive knew. This Eshu is most powerful of all the lesser Gods. And only he, the God supreme, could ride on him slip-shod.

And this he often had to do to keep this God in check. For he was never satisfied unless a life he'd wreck.

Confusion was his great delight on that he really thrived. Sharp discord he would introduce, wherever he arrived.

One time he saw a peaceful home, in which there were two wives. He instantly sought to destroy the peace that filled their lives.

He gave a lovely headdress to one of the man's two wives. The other fumed with jealousy, as Eshu had devised.

He would not cease 'til turmoil reigned, for strife was his first love. He fed the warring falcon, but starved the peaceful dove. <sup>11</sup>

## Martin Luther King and Malcolm X

A. In August 1963, some 200,000 persons marched on Washington to demonstrate for Civil Rights, the climax was this moving plea by Martin Luther King.

"I have a dream that some day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice... will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Excerpt of speech, / *Have a Dream.* <sup>12</sup>

B. Malcolm X, one of the earliest to urge his people to be proud of being Black.

"The day of nonviolent resistance is over. The next thing you'll see here in America—and please don't blame it on me when you see it—you will see the same things that have taken place among other people on this earth whose condition was parallel to the 22 million Afro-Americans in this country.' May 1964." <sup>13</sup>  
"If they make the Ku Klux Klan nonviolent, I'll be nonviolent. If they make the White Citizens Council nonviolent, I'll be nonviolent. But as long as you've got somebody else not being nonviolent, I don't want anybody coming to me talking any nonviolent talk.' December 1964." <sup>14</sup>

*Look up these two men and compare their tactics, their objectives and their prose. How were they alike? How were they different? What qualities made them leaders?*

## CREATE A SCENE, INVENT A CHARACTER.

1. August Wilson's plays revolve around a decade in the twentieth century. If you were writing a play in the nineties what thematic elements would you include in the play, what types of characters, what issue(s) would you address, what is the mythology or history that influences these characters? You might want to have this play address the '90s by dealing with not only racial issues but cultural, gender, and age related issues.

2. Another way to do this exercise would be to ask each student to invent a character, complete with personality, issues, and beliefs. The teacher may then create a scenario in which these characters exist together in a situation or facilitate the class in the creation of a theatrical framework for the characters.

## CHANGING TIMES, CHANGING VALUES.

**"The values that we held so dear are being shot to hell," says George Culberson of the government's Community Relations Service. "Everything is being attacked—what you believe in, what you learned in school, in church, from your parents. So the middle class is sort of losing heart. They had their eye on where they were going and suddenly it's all shifting sands." (Newsweek 10/6/69, p. 28)**

The Sixties were a period of increased consciousness for young people. The youth of the country were supporting universal human dignity through protest in the Civil Rights movement. They were protesting against the immorality of the Vietnam Conflict. Their support of the Peace Corps reflected a commitment to others and their embracing of the Hippie culture was a rejection of a materialistic society. Some dropped out of conventional society to find love and peace and more meaningful ways of living with nature and one another in communities called communes. This vanguard of Hippies was one tangible symbol of a new philoso-

phy that cut to the very core of American life. For the first time in the nation's history, its basic Protestant ethic of hard work, respectability and competition for material success had been called massively to account.

The lapel button was one way of stating one's beliefs. Here are some examples:

### Reflecting Black Emergence:

Black is Beautiful!  
Burn, Baby, Burn!  
We Shall Overcome.  
Sit-ins, sleep-ins, wade-ins, read-ins.

### Reflecting the Hippie Culture:

Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out.  
Don't Trust Anyone Over 30.  
Flower Power.  
Love Children.

### Reflecting the Vietnam War:

Make Love Not War!  
Suppose They Gave a War and Nobody Came!  
Moratorium!  
I am a Human Being: Do not Fold Spindle or Mutilate!

### Reflecting the Peace Corps:

Give a Damn.  
Make a Difference.

1. Create a button or bumper sticker of your own for the nineties to further a cause or issue. How are these different from advertising or what the mass media create. Discuss and explore how cultural groups and society-at-large are and can be manipulated.

## Notes

1. Wilson, p. 42.
2. Wilson, p. 42.
3. Wilson, p. 30.
4. Hamilton, p. 138.
5. Rocha, p. 116.
6. Rocha, p. 117.
7. Rocha, p. 118.
8. Wilson, p. 21.
9. Wilson, p. 42.
10. Rocha, p. 129.
11. Ollivier, pp.180-182
12. *This Fabulous Century*, p.144.
13. *This Fabulous Century*, p.154.
14. *This Fabulous Century*, p.154

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