

A NOISE WITHIN'S 2019-2020 REPERTORY THEATRE SEASON

STUDY GUIDE

Pulitzer Prize Winner

August Wilson's

**GEM** of the  
**OCEAN**

Directed by Gregg T. Daniel



Photo by Daniel Reichert. Veralyn Jones.



# STUDY GUIDES FROM **A NOISE WITHIN**

*A rich resource for teachers of English, reading, arts, and drama education.*

Dear Reader,

We're delighted you're interested in our study guides, designed to provide a full range of information on our plays to teachers of all grade levels.

A Noise Within's study guides include:

- General information about the play (characters, synopsis, timeline, and more)
- Playwright biography and literary analysis
- Historical content of the play
- Scholarly articles
- Production information (costumes, lights, direction, etc.)
- Suggested classroom activities
- Related resources (videos, books, etc.)
- Discussion themes
- Background on verse and prose (for Shakespeare's plays)

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More information? It would be our pleasure. We're here to make your students' learning experience as rewarding and memorable as it can be!

*All the best,*

Alicia Green  
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION



Pictured: Trisha Miller, *Argonautika* 2019, PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

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## CHARACTER MAP

**Aunt Ester Tyler**

A 285-year-old spiritual advisor for the Hill District community.

**Eli**

Aunt Ester's gatekeeper, and the peace keeper at 1839 Wylie Avenue. He and Solly have been friends since they both were conductors on the Underground Railroad.

**Solly Two Kings**

A former conductor on the Underground Railroad. He is a friend and suitor of Aunt Ester.

**Black Mary**

Aunt Ester's protégé and the housekeeper for 1839 Wylie Avenue.

**Caesar Wilks**

Black Mary's brother. He is a landlord and the local constable and holds the law in the highest esteem.

**Rutherford Selig**

A travelling peddler of household items. He is a frequent visitor at 1839 Wylie Avenue.

**Citizen Barlow**

A young man who travelled north to Pittsburgh from Alabama. He is in deep spiritual turmoil and seeks Aunt Ester's help.

## SYNOPSIS

**It is late at night on a Friday** in 1904 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Citizen Barlow has come to the house at 1839 Wylie Avenue to seek help from Aunt Ester, an old woman with a reputation for washing and cleansing souls in turmoil. However, when Citizen knocks on the door, he learns that he must wait until Tuesday to see Aunt Ester. He decides to stand across the street and wait near the house until Tuesday.

The next morning, Rutherford Selig stops by the house and mentions that when he passed through town, he noticed that the mill upriver was shut down. Eli shares that all of the mill workers are attending the funeral of Garret Brown, a former mill worker who, a few days prior, drowned when he jumped into the river after Caesar Wilks, the local constable, accused him of stealing a bucket of nails from the mill. Brown maintained his innocence until he died. Solly, a longtime friend of Aunt Ester, arrives at the house with a letter from his sister in Alabama. He has Black Mary read the letter in which his sister describes the brutal ways in which people of color are being treated in Alabama and pleads for him to help her move north. Solly begins to devise a plan to rescue his sister as he and Eli leave to attend Garret Brown's funeral.

When Eli and Solly are gone, Citizen crawls into the house from an upstairs window. Aunt Ester catches Citizen as he is devouring a piece of bread in the kitchen. Citizen tells Aunt Ester that he is not a thief, and Aunt Ester believes him. She can tell that he has good intentions, regardless of what has brought him to have his soul cleansed, and she invites him to stay.

After the funeral, Eli and Black Mary are skeptical about how Citizen got into the house. Solly arrives with news of riots at the mill in the wake of Garret Brown's death. Caesar Wilks, Black Mary's brother, enters the house, furious about the strike—as constable, he believes in law, order, and punishment. He thinks Black Mary has more to offer than working as a housekeeper for Aunt Ester and asks her to return to work for him at a bakery he runs. Black Mary refuses.

Later, Aunt Ester asks Black Mary to bring Citizen down. Citizen arrives and confesses what has been plaguing his soul: he was the one who stole the bucket of nails at the mill, the same bucket of nails that Garret Brown was accused of stealing. Citizen feels enormous guilt for his role in Garret Brown's death. Aunt Ester decides she is going to take Citizen to the City of Bones in order to cleanse his soul. Suddenly, Eli bursts into the house with news that the mill is on fire.

The mill is still burning the next day as Aunt Ester prepares Citizen for his journey to the City of Bones. As she describes the city, Aunt Ester folds the bill of sale that was issued to the person who bought her when she was sold as a slave into a boat. Solly stops by the house to announce that he is leaving to rescue his sister from Alabama. However, before he goes, Aunt Ester asks him to stay to help take Citizen to the City of Bones. Aunt Ester hands Citizen the paper boat and tells him that the boat is called the *Gem of the Ocean*. And so, the journey to the City of Bones begins.

As Aunt Ester describes the boat and its journey on the water, Citizen feels a wave as if he is on the boat. Citizen's experience on the boat becomes increasingly real to him—he hears people singing, he sees them chained to the boat, he feels himself chained to the boat. Finally, he arrives at the gate to the City of Bones. There, he confronts the gatekeeper, Garret Brown, and confesses that he stole the bucket of nails. Upon this confession, Citizen is transported back to Aunt Ester's house, his soul cleansed.

As soon as Citizen returns from his journey, Caesar barges into the house and accuses Solly of setting fire to the mill. Before Caesar can arrest Solly, Solly whacks Caesar's knee with a walking stick and runs out of the house. Caesar vows that he will catch Solly and get justice.

At Aunt Ester's request, Rutherford Selig agrees to help smuggle Solly out of town on his boat. Before Solly leaves with Selig, Solly reveals that he did burn down the mill. Moments after Solly leaves with Selig, Caesar returns to the house, this time with a warrant for Aunt Ester's arrest for aiding and abetting Solly. Aunt Ester goes with Caesar to jail.

Eli posts bail for Aunt Ester, and as she returns to 1839 Wylie Avenue, so do Citizen, Selig, and a fatally injured Solly. Caesar shot Solly. Despite the group's efforts to save him, Solly dies. Eli begins to perform a eulogy. The group continues to mourn the loss of their friend, and as the play ends, Citizen begins to adopt Solly's role—he dons Solly's coat, takes Solly's walking stick, and discovers the letter from Solly's sister in Alabama. ♦

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: AUGUST WILSON

**August Wilson** was born on April 27, 1945, in the Hill District community of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as Frederick August Kittel, Jr. to Daisy Wilson, a cleaning lady, and Frederick August Kittle, a German immigrant and baker. Wilson's father was absent for most of his life, leaving Daisy Wilson to raise August and his six siblings in a two-room apartment.

In 1958, Daisy Wilson married David Bedford. Growing up, Wilson had a complex experience with race. His mother, Daisy, was black, his father, Frederick Kittle, was white, and David Bedford, his stepfather, was black. The complexity of Wilson's experience with race is expressed in many of his plays.

While Wilson was a bright and creative student, he found school life difficult. In 1959, Wilson attended three different schools. He began high school at Central Catholic High School, a predominantly white, private school. There, he was the victim of race-based bullying so extreme that he transferred to Connelly Trade school. However, Wilson quickly grew bored at Connelly Trade school and transferred once more to Gladstone High School. There, he was accused of plagiarizing a paper he had written, and secretly dropped out of school all together at the age of 15.

After leaving school, Wilson continued to educate himself—he would go to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh during school hours to study while his mother thought he was at school. During his self-education, he read the works of Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, and he learned to love the blues and Bessie Smith's voice. During this time, he began to spend time in restaurants and barbershops around the Hill District simply to listen to the residents' voices and stories. Wilson would later draw on these voices and stories as inspiration for his writing.

In 1962, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Army, however, he only served for one year. After leaving the Army, he began to work a variety of odd jobs while he wrote poetry. By the late 1960s, Wilson had officially adopted the named August Wilson in honor of his mother, and he became involved in the Black Arts Movement. During this time, he collaborated with poets, artists, and educators and became the co-founder of the Black Horizon Theater in Pittsburgh. Wilson served as the resident director of the theater company until the mid-1970s, when Black Horizon Theater dissolved. Before the company dissolved, Wilson met Brenda Burton, his first wife. In 1970, they married, and Wilson's first daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson, was born.

In 1978, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota. There, Wilson began to focus on playwriting. In 1981, he



August Wilson, 2003. Photo from The Estate of August Wilson

married Judy Oliver, his second wife. One year later, he was accepted to the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut in 1982. During this conference, Wilson met Lloyd Richards, the dean of the Yale University School of Drama and the artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre. Lloyd Richards was a legend in the theatrical world, especially in black theater. Richards became a mentor for Wilson and eventually directed Wilson's first six Broadway productions. The same year, Wilson's play, *Jitney*, premiered at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh as the first play in his American Century Cycle, a 10-play cycle depicting the African American experience throughout each decade in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1984, Wilson's play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the second play in Wilson's American Century Cycle, premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre to great critical acclaim. The production moved to Broadway and earned Wilson his first New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Throughout the 1980s to the early 2000s, Wilson continued to write plays for his American Century Cycle. During this time, he won two Pulitzer Prizes for his writing: one for *Fences* in 1987, and one for *The Piano Lesson* in 1990.

In 1990, Wilson's marriage to Judy Oliver ended, and Wilson moved to Seattle, Washington. There, he met Constanza Romero, a costume designer, and the two married in 1994. Three years later, Wilson's second daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, was born.

In June 2005, Wilson was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer, and he died a few months later on October 2 in Seattle. His funeral service was held in Pittsburgh, and he is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, not far from his mother, Daisy. ♦

Edited from:

"August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 29 Feb. 2016, [www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/).

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "August Wilson." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 23 Apr. 2019, [www.britannica.com/biography/August-Wilson](http://www.britannica.com/biography/August-Wilson).



## TIMELINE OF **AUGUST WILSON'S** LIFE

- 1945** August Wilson is born on April 27<sup>th</sup> in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His given name is Frederick August Kittel, Jr. after his father, Frederick August Kittel, Sr. He is the fourth of seven children in his family, and the oldest son. Frederick August Kittel, Sr. is absent for most of Wilson's life.
- 1959** Wilson begins his first year of high school at a predominantly white private school. After enduring race-based bullying, he transfers schools twice and ultimately ends up at Gladstone High School.
- 1960** At Gladstone High School, Wilson is accused of plagiarizing a paper on Napoleon Bonaparte, and he decides to secretly drop out of school. He begins to spend his days at the Carnegie Library reading and teaching himself.
- 1963 - 1964** Wilson works a number of odd jobs while he begins to write poetry. He buys his first typewriter.
- 1965** Frederick August Kittel, Sr. dies, and Frederick August Kittel, Jr. changes his name to August Wilson in honor of his mother.
- 1968** Wilson co-founds the Black Horizon Theater with colleagues. He becomes the company's self-taught resident director.
- 1969** Wilson marries Brenda Burton, his first wife—the two divorce in 1972.
- 1976** Wilson's first play, *The Homecoming*, is produced at Kuntu Repertory Theater in Pittsburgh.
- 1981** Wilson marries Judy Oliver, a social worker.
- 1982** *Jitney*, the first play written in August Wilson's American Century Cycle, premieres at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh. The same year, Wilson is accepted into the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. There, he meets Richard Lloyd and the two forge a lasting friendship.
- 1983** Wilson's mother, Daisy Wilson, dies.
- 1984** *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* premieres at the Yale Repertory Theatre and transfers to Broadway. Wilson wins his first New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the play.
- 1987** *Fences* opens on Broadway. With this production, Wilson wins a New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his first Pulitzer Prize.
- 1990** *The Piano Lesson* opens on Broadway. This production earns Wilson a New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize. Wilson is named the 1990 Pittsburgher of the Year by *Pittsburgh Magazine*. Wilson and Judy Oliver divorce, and Wilson moves to Seattle, Washington.
- 1994** Wilson marries Costanza Romero, a costume designer.
- 1996** Wilson writes the controversial essay, "The Ground on Which I Stand," about black cultural separatism.
- 1997** Wilson's second daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, is born.
- 1999** The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh awards Wilson with a high school diploma, the only diploma the institution has ever given.
- 2002** *Gem of the Ocean* premieres in Chicago.
- 2003** *Gem of the Ocean* opens on Broadway.
- 2005** *Radio Golf* premieres at Yale Repertory Theatre—it is the last play in Wilson's American Century Cycle. In June, Wilson is diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. He dies on October 2 in Seattle, Washington.

Edited from:

"August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 29 Feb. 2016, [www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/).

# AUGUST WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

## THE HISTORY OF CYCLE PLAYS

**After the Roman Empire fell** in the 600s CE, theatre all but disappeared. What was once a celebrated and communal artform in ancient Greek and Roman societies, theatrical storytelling largely fell out of practice. However, around the year 1000 CE, theatre started to make a comeback. However, the artform had changed. No longer was theatre a tool for social commentary and satire or for exploring great tragedy as it had been in ancient Greece and Rome. Instead, theatre became a tool to express stories based in Christianity.

During this time, churches began to produce liturgical dramas, short dramatic performances of biblical stories. The number of these short dramas grew until eventually, they were organized into what is known as a cycle, covering all biblical stories from creation to the Last Judgment. These cycles were known as Mystery Cycles and were made up of up to 50 short plays which were typically performed over two-or-three-day periods.

### AUGUST WILSON'S CYCLE

Over the course of his playwriting career, August Wilson wrote his own cycle of ten plays collectively called the "American Century Cycle." In his cycle, Wilson sets each of his ten plays in a different 20<sup>th</sup> Century decade. The result is a chronicle of the complexities of the changing social and historical landscape of the African American experience over the course of 100 years. The plays in Wilson's cycle, except *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, are set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—the area of Pittsburgh where Wilson grew up.

When he began writing his plays, Wilson did not have a large-scale cycle in mind. In fact, he wrote the plays out of order—Wilson's first play, *Jitney*, is set in the 1970s, his second is set in the 1920s, and his third in the 1950s. Eventually, Wilson realized that he could create a cycle out of his plays. While the ten plays in his cycle all serve a greater narrative spanning 100 years, there is no single thread that runs through all ten of the plays.

Instead, the cycle tells the story of a neighborhood through time—the changes in the community that inhabits the neighborhood, and the challenges the individuals in that community face. In his cycle, Wilson highlights characters who typically go unnoticed in society—an elderly woman in *Gem of the Ocean*, a garbage man in *Fences*—giving voice to otherwise invisible groups. The plays in his cycle also tend to feature spiritual and supernatural elements of African and African American cultures set against the gritty realism of a city plagued by inequality. In an essay published in *The New York Times* in 2000, Wilson wrote this about

his work: "I wanted to place this culture on stage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us all in areas of human life and endeavor and through profound movements of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves."

### WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE INCLUDES:

- *Gem of the Ocean* (written in 2003) set in 1904
- *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (written in 1986) set in 1911
- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (written in 1984) set in 1927
- *The Piano Lesson* (written in 1989) set in 1937
- *Seven Guitars* (written in 1995) set in 1948
- *Fences* (written in 1985) set in 1957
- *Two Trains Running* (written in 1990) set in 1969
- *Jitney* (written in 1982) set in 1977
- *King Hedley II* (written in 2001) set in 1985
- *Radio Golf* (written in 2005) set in 1997

Edited from: "10 Plays, 100 Years - Playwright August Wilson Reveals the History of a Community (From the Playbill)." *Marin Theatre Company*, [www.marintheatre.org/productions/fences/fences-august-wilsons-century-cycle](http://www.marintheatre.org/productions/fences/fences-august-wilsons-century-cycle).

### THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The Black Arts Movement is often seen as the artistic and cultural sister movement of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and early 1970s. As Civil Rights activists advocated for social justice and racial equality in the United States, artists responded to the social injustices they saw on a daily basis through painting, poetry, literature, film, and theatre. Artists and academics organized to create works that challenged the unequal social and racial structures in the United States and addressed issues of black identity and black liberation.

The movement was originally spurred by the assassination of Malcolm X, a prolific Civil Rights activist and staunch supporter of Black Nationalism. As a Black Nationalist, Malcolm X promoted the celebration of black identity and ancestry as separate from a larger American identity. He fought against the assimilation of black identity into American society. His death deeply affected those who were proponents of Black Nationalism.



# AUGUST WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

## THE HISTORY OF CYCLE PLAYS CONTINUED...

Malcolm X's assassination prompted the writer LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) to create the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem New York. The establishment of this theatre company is considered the beginning of the Black Arts Movement.

The concept of community is at the core of Black Arts Movement works. Art that emerged as part of the Black Arts Movement directly addressed the needs and aspirations of black America. In addressing these needs, the Black Arts Movement art radically reorganized the symbols, myths, and icons that were popular in mainstream American culture by creating and expressing a separate set of symbols, myths, and icons. In creating its own, separate artistic symbolism and narratives, Black Arts Movement artists explored and expressed a cultural identity distinct from the larger American cultural identity—one that celebrated ideals and beauty centered on Black culture and experiences. The aesthetic created through these new symbols, myths, and narratives became concerned with the ethical implications of the relationship between an oppressor and those oppressed. In examining the oppressor-oppressed relationship, the Black Arts Movement art and artists began to pose the following questions:

Whose vision of the world is more meaningful?

What is truth?

Who is able to express that truth?

Who should express that truth?

In exploring and answering these questions, the Black Arts Movement sought to fulfill what civil rights activist and sociologist W.E.B. Dubois called for: creating art that is "about us," "by us," "for us," and "near us."

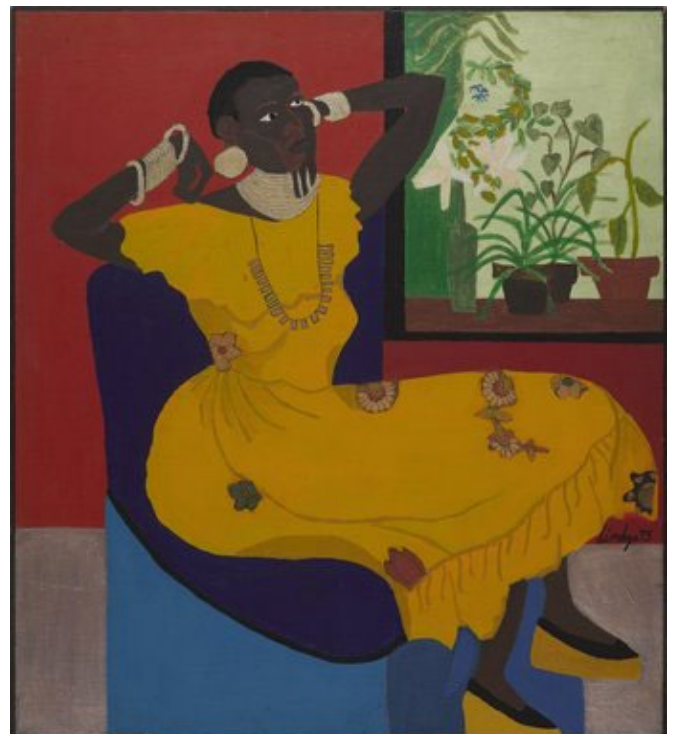
### AUGUST WILSON AND THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The Black Arts Movement reached its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s when it produced some of the most radical music, art, drama, and poetry. It was in this creative and social environment that August Wilson began to develop his distinct voice as a poet, writer, and theater practitioner.

Wilson describes his greatest sources of inspiration as the



"Revolutionary (Angela Davis)" by Wadsworth A. Jarrell, 1971



"Empress Akweke" by Dindga McCannon, 1975

# AUGUST WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

## THE HISTORY OF CYCLE PLAYS CONTINUED...

"Four Bs":

1. Jorge Luis Borges, a poet and key literary figure in the genre of magical realism.
2. Blues music.
3. Romare Bearden, an African American artist who created works depicting daily African American life through oil paint, printed images, and collage.
4. Amiri Baraka, a playwright, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, who created the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem, and who is credited with sparking the start of the Black Arts movement.

With these four sources of inspiration in mind, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizon Theater with fellow playwright Rob Penny. Wilson describes the work he did with the Black Horizon Theatre as work based on the "idea of using the theater to politicize the community or, as we said in those days, to raise the consciousness of the people"—an idea that has its roots in the community-centric and political core of the Black Arts Movement.

Beyond his work with Black Horizon Theater, Wilson became a prominent public proponent of African American self-determination. He made his views about colorblind casting clear in a televised debate about colorblind casting during which he delivered an address titled "The Ground on Which I Stand." In his address, Wilson calls for black artists to define themselves through their own art rather than to participate in a work of art originally created by and for another group: "I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth. As there is no idea that cannot be contained by black life, these men and women found themselves to be sufficient and secure in their art and their instruction." ♦

Edited from:

Butler, Isaac. "Breaking 'Ground': How the Speech Came to Be and What It Set in Motion." *AMERICAN THEATRE*, 6 Jan. 2017, [www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/breaking-ground-how-the-speech-came-to-be-and-what-it-set-in-motion/](http://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/breaking-ground-how-the-speech-came-to-be-and-what-it-set-in-motion/).

Frederick, Candice. "On Black Aesthetics: The Black Arts Movement." *The New York Public Library*, The New York Public Library, 21 Sept. 2016, [www.nypl.org/blog/2016/07/15/black-aesthetics-bam](http://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/07/15/black-aesthetics-bam).

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review: Summer* 1968, vol. 12, no. 4, 1968, p. 28., doi:10.2307/1144377..



"Victory in the Valley of Eshu" by Jeff Donaldson, 1971



## PITTSBURGH, 1904:

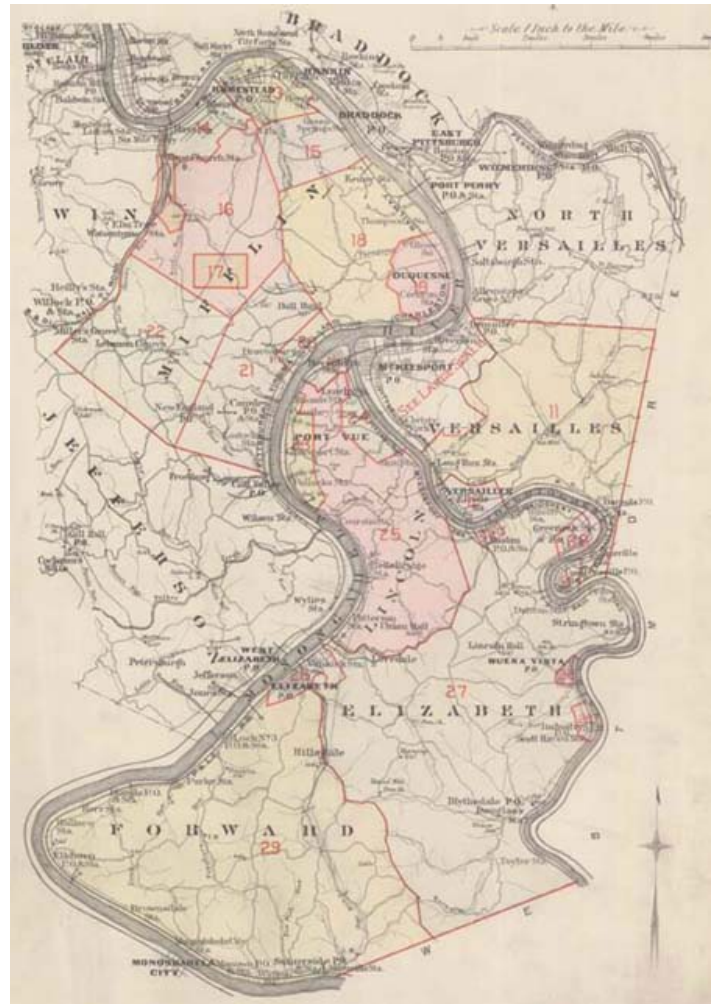
### THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *GEM OF THE OCEAN*

**Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania** holds an important role in transportation and industrialization in American history. Situated at the point where the Ohio, Allegheny, and Monongahela rivers intersect, Pittsburgh became known as the “Gateway to the West” as it became the departure point for any travelers heading to the new frontier. Beyond its proximity to easily navigable rivers, Pittsburgh is situated on land rich with natural resources—coal, timber, natural gas, and limestone. The abundance of natural resources combined with the accessibility of waterways helped make Pittsburgh into an industrial hub.

As fundamental political and economic ideologies ran a rift between the northern and the southern United States in the late 1850s and early 1860s, the country entered into the Civil War. As an industrial powerhouse, Pittsburgh became a key city during this time as it produced ammunition, weapons, and other materials for the Union Army. The city’s position at the intersection of three rivers made for the efficient and speedy transportation of these materials across the country. What is more, because of the city’s advantageous location at the intersection of three rivers, Pittsburgh became an important site in the Underground Railroad.

As runaway slaves made their way to northern states, Pittsburgh’s landscape provided important hiding spots. As an industrial town, there were plenty of caves and empty buildings in which runaways could take shelter. The rivers that run through the city made it all the more accessible for those seeking refuge from slavery. Beyond the topographical advantages of the city, Pittsburgh was home to many abolitionist groups. In fact, the antislavery Republican Party has its roots in the city, and the city had many safehouses for those on the Underground Railroad. Additionally, because of the relatively tolerant ideological climate of the city, many runaway slaves were able to settle in Pittsburgh—mostly in the Hill District—and find jobs in the city’s numerous industrial factories and mills.

While *Gem of the Ocean* is set in 1904, thirty-nine years after the end of the Civil War, the events of the war play an important role in the play. Solly, Eli, and Aunt Ester all lived through the war—Aunt Ester, at 285 years old lived through much more. It was on the Underground Railroad that Solly and Eli first met, as the two worked together to guide other runaway slaves to freedom.



"1900, Index Map 2 - Real estate plat-book of the south-eastern vicinity of Pittsburgh" by G.M. Hopkins & Co.

#### JIM CROW ERA

On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued an Emancipation Proclamation to free all enslaved people in both the Union and the Confederacy. However, as the Confederacy did not recognize Abraham Lincoln as their president, they did not adhere to his proclamation. It was not until the Civil War ended in 1865 that former Confederate states rejoined the United States and recognized the Emancipation Proclamation as legitimate. It was then that slavery officially ended in the United States.

However, once slavery ended and the country entered a period of reconstruction following the war, new, extremely restrictive and racially biased laws began to emerge throughout the United States. These laws, known as Jim Crow Laws, targeted the rights of African Americans. Even the name "Jim Crow" has roots in



## PITTSBURGH, 1904: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *GEM OF THE OCEAN* CONTINUED...

racism as “Jim Crow” was the name of a minstrel show which featured a character in blackface.

These laws began as strict statutes detailing when, where, and how freed slaves could work and how much they could be compensated. These laws also controlled how black citizens could own property and travel. These laws essentially became a legal way in which southern states could force black citizens into indentured servitude.

Over time, these laws evolved, and in 1896 in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the United States Supreme Court confirmed that racial segregation was constitutional under the “separate but equal” doctrine. This ruling ensured the survival and prevalence of Jim Crow laws throughout the next half-century and beyond.

After this ruling in the South, lawmakers began to draw physical lines through public spaces indicating where people of color could and could not go. Signs reading “Whites Only” hung over stores and restaurants.

Northern states, on the surface, were seen as more tolerant and accepting of communities of color. However, they were not immune to these racist laws. While there were no physical lines drawn through public spaces, restrictive housing laws perpetuated segregation by limiting where black families could live. Northern states also began to enforce laws against loitering and disorderly conduct disproportionately in communities of color. What is more, many northern states began to alter what was considered to be public space. Wealthy and white individuals began to buy what were once public parks and beaches and began to limit who could access these spaces.

This is the social and legal backdrop of *Gem of the Ocean*. Solly’s sister, who lives in Alabama, describes the intensity of the racially discriminatory laws of the town where she lives and begs for Solly to rescue her. Even in the Hill District in Pittsburgh, it is clear that small crimes committed by people of color are met with radical and severe punishment. ♦

Edited from:

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An African American man drinking at a water cooler for “colored” people at a streetcar terminal in Oklahoma City in 1939.  
Russell Lee/Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (image no. LC-DIG-fsa-8a26761)

## 1839 WYLIE AVENUE: WHERE REALITY MEETS FANTASY

### MAGIC REALISM

Magic Realism is a literary genre that has its roots in Latin American literature. This genre examines where the ordinary and the sublime—familiarity and fantasy—intersect. This type of writing emerged in the 1940s when postcolonial Latin American writers worked to make sense of two separate realities. One of the genre's first key figures and advocates was Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentinian writer who weaved magical elements throughout his short stories and poems which were otherwise rooted in settings that mirrored the world in which he lived—early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Argentina.

August Wilson notably listed Jorge Luis Borges and his body of work as one of his top sources of artistic inspiration. Borges' influence on Wilson's work is evident through Wilson's incorporation of mystical, fantastical, and supernatural elements in his American Century Cycle—a cycle dedicated to telling the history of the Hill District of Pittsburgh over one hundred years.

In his preface to *Seven Guitars*, Wilson describes how history and myth function in his writing:

"Despite my interest in history, I have always been more concerned with culture, and while my plays have an overall historical feel, their stings are fictions, and they are peopled with invented characters whose personal histories fit within the historical context in which they live.

I have tried to extract some measure of truth from their lives as they struggle to remain whole in the face of so many things that threaten to pull them under. I am not a historian. I happen to think of the content of my mother's life—her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter—are all worthy of art."

### FANTASTICAL REALITY: THE WORLD OF *GEM OF THE OCEAN*

The world of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* is one that is deeply rooted in the realities of the social, political, and economic climate of Pittsburgh in 1904. Characters experience racial discrimination and express frustration with the systemic and cyclical oppressions they face daily. As the play progresses, Wilson's setting becomes so grim that social and physical structures in the world of the play begin to collapse—the death of Garret Brown at the nearby mill leads to increasing levels of tension and chaos in the community until the mill is



Jorge Luis Borges, 1981, Bettmann/Corbis



"Large two-story home or duplex with child on steps" by Charles "Teenie" Harris, c.1940-1945

burned to the ground. This gritty world of the play is one that has its roots in historical fact. Jim Crow era laws as well as discriminatory social structures and norms restricted the rights of people of color throughout the United States.

In the midst of this discriminatory and chaotic reality sits the house at 1839 Wylie Avenue. Described by Black Mary as a "sanctuary," the house is an extraordinary place. It is in this sanctuary that elements of fantasy emerge against the stark and hopeless events of the outside world.

The first detail that suggests that 1839 Wylie Avenue is home to elements of fantasy is Aunt Ester's age. At 285 years old, Aunt Ester has a wealth of life experience. Over the course of her life she survived a brutal and involuntary Trans-Atlantic voyage, was sold as property, and escaped slavery. While her age contributes to her sagacity, it highlights the idea that not all of the typical laws of our universe are at work in the world of the play—at least not at 1839 Wylie Avenue.

What is more, Aunt Ester appears to possess supernatural powers to cleanse others' souls and absolve them of guilt. We see these supernatural powers in action when Aunt Ester, with the help of Black Mary, Eli, and Solly, brings Citizen to the City of Bones. During Citizen's voyage to the City of Bones, 1839 Wylie Avenue becomes a liminal and magical space. As he travels to the City of Bones, Citizen feels the floor of the house move like waves in the ocean. He hears and sees slaves in the cargo hold of a ship on the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. He arrives at the City of Bones and speaks to the late Garrett Brown.

Citizen's journey to the City of Bones does not live in the realm of realism. Rather, it calls upon myth and mysticism. However, because the characters involved in facilitating the journey full-heartedly believe in the reality of the journey, the magical elements of the trip become integrated into the reality of the world of the play. ♦

# JOURNEY TO THE CITY OF BONES:

## THE ROLE OF RITE OF PASSAGE IN *GEM OF THE OCEAN*

### RITE OF PASSAGE

Simply defined, a rite of passage is an event or ceremony that takes place at a pivotal point in a person's life. Nearly all cultures throughout time have developed specific rites of passage that are performed at birth, marriage, and death, although some cultures have developed many more.

While there is a great diversity in the rituals and rules of different rites of passage practiced around the world, all rites of passage serve the same overall purpose: to separate the individual from their former group, prepare them for their new phase of life, and to guide them in their re-entry into society at a new social level or position. This overall purpose translates into three distinct phases that are present in every rite of passage: separation, liminality, and incorporation.

#### Stage One: Separation

In this stage, the participant in the rite of passage is stripped of their identity as they are physically or emotionally separated from a former way of life. In this phase, the participant may be asked to make external changes such as changing clothes or hair. The participant may also be asked to alienate friends, change names, or embark on a journey.

#### Stage Two: Liminality

Once a participant is separated from a former life or set of norms, they enter into liminality. This stage is characterized by disorientation and ambiguity. In liminality, the participant is in between identities. It is a time of limbo in which social norms are inverted or reversed. This is an educational stage that ultimately results in the development of new skills, new knowledge, a religious revelation, or the discovery of a universal truth.

#### Stage Three: Incorporation

After the participant has made the necessary discovery or developed necessary skills, they are incorporated back into the society with a new identity. This phase is often characterized by a celebration. In incorporation, the participant may receive new articles of clothing, accessories, or other items that physically represent their new identity and new role in society.

### CITIZEN'S JOURNEY TO THE CITY OF BONES

In order to cleanse Citizen's soul and to absolve himself of the guilt he feels for the role he played in the death of Garret Brown, Aunt Ester takes Citizen to the City of Bones. The journey to the City of Bones is a rite of passage, and Citizen emerges from the rite of passage with a new identity than that with which he started.



Dutch Boats in a Gale ('The Bridgewater Sea Piece') by Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1801

Citizen's journey can be broken down as follows:

#### Stage One: Separation

While Aunt Ester enlists the help of Black Mary, Eli, and Solly in guiding Citizen on his journey to the City of Bones, Citizen is ultimately alone in the trip. This separation can be seen physically, as Citizen stands by himself as he holds the *Gem of the Ocean* while the others stand together some distance away, occasionally chanting or singing in unison.

#### Stage Two: Liminality

Once on his journey, Citizen begins to see, hear, and feel sensations that are other worldly. He describes feeling as though he is on a ship, and his experience on the ship mirrors the experience of sailing to America in a ship that is part of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. In this phase of his journey, Citizen is neither completely present as himself in the house at 1839 Wylie Avenue, nor has he been absolved of the guilt he feels. It becomes evident that the rules of this liminal world are not those of the real world. When Citizen arrives at the City of Bones, he sees Garret Brown, and has a revelation that absolves him of his guilt.

#### Stage Three: Incorporation

When Citizen returns to 1839 Wylie Avenue, he is no longer plagued by constant guilt. What is more, his identity and his role within society has changed. We see this first when he actively volunteers to help smuggle Solly out of the city when Caesar puts out a warrant for Solly's arrest. This change in identity and role becomes clear after Solly dies and Citizen dons Solly's coat and picks up Solly's walking stick. In adopting Solly's clothing and walking stick, Citizen also takes on Solly's former role and identity. ♦



## THEMES

“They never made Emancipation what they say it was [...] If you gonna do it...do it right! They wave the law on one end and hit you with a billy club with the other.”

—Solly, Act 2 Scene 2

### FREEDOM AND OPPRESSION

The desire for freedom in an oppressive world drives the action in *Gem of the Ocean*. Each character strives to find freedom in a world filled with oppressive social structures.

When Eli, Solly, and Aunt Ester escaped from slavery, they did not step into a completely free world. In fact, the world they stepped into was so steeped in racial bias and discrimination that the freedom they gained was not absolute, and the social and legal structures of the free world were nearly as constricting as slavery. We see just how constricting these structures are when we hear the letter Solly's sister, Eliza, has written to him describing the brutal ways in which she and other African American citizens are treated in Alabama:

“Dear Solomon, I am writing to let you know the times are terrible here the most anybody remember since bondage. The people are having a hard time with freedom.”

Eliza goes on to describe how people of color in her town are unable to buy train tickets to leave—they are trapped. Eliza's description of her experience of life in a free world highlights the harsh reality that legal and ideological freedom does not necessarily equate freedom in totality. Solly and Citizen explore this point further:

**Solly:** The people think they in freedom. That's all my daddy talked about. He died and never did have it. You say I got it but what is it? I'm still trying to find out. It ain't never been nothing but trouble.

**Citizen:** Freedom is what you make it.

**Solly:** That's what I'm saying. You got to fight to make it.

Throughout the play, characters have different relationships with freedom. To Citizen, freedom means being able to be forgiven for the part he played in Garret Brown's death. In order to feel free, Citizen needs to shed the weight of the guilt he feels for stealing the bucket of nails, the theft for which Garret Brown died. Citizen's desire for absolution, for freedom from guilt, propels him to initially seek out Aunt Ester.

To Caesar, freedom means power. Caesar has spent his life using the hand he was dealt at birth and manipulating others to gain power, status, and freedom. In this sense, Caesar hosts his oppressors and his oppression—that is, he adopts many of the attitudes about people of color that the white oppressors hold. While hosting the oppressor gives Caesar an immediate sense of empowerment and freedom, he is ultimately still trapped by the same oppressive forces that trap those he feels are inferior to him.

### IDENTITY

In *Gem of the Ocean*, we see characters struggle to claim and reclaim their identities in a society that is fast to buy into rumors and lies. The desire to maintain a sense of identity integrity in a world where labels have serious implications is so powerful that Garret Brown is willing to die if it means that he will not live out the rest of his life labeled as a thief and a liar.

Early in the play, Selig shares a story that parallels that of Garret Brown in which the accused thief takes a near polar opposite approach when his integrity is called into question:

“They had a man down in Kentucky was accused of stealing a horse. He said he didn't do it. Turned him into an outlaw. Made him the biggest horse thief in Kentucky. He lived to steal horses. He must have stole 500 horses. And every one he sent back word: I stole that one but I didn't steal the first one. I stole that one but I didn't steal the first one. They never did catch him. He died and the horse thieving stopped.” —Selig

Rather than letting his accusers define his identity and label him as a horse thief, the man in the story reclaims his identity on his own terms as he decides to steal horses and actively act how one would expect a horse thief to act. He takes the label his accusers incorrectly prescribed to him into his own hands and crafts an identity on his own terms.

## THEMES CONTINUED...

As with the case of Garret Brown and the horse thief, throughout the play, we see the important role in which language and labels play in how society identifies a person and how that person identifies themselves. Take Citizen Barlow. His name carries with it a great significance, especially in a time in which African Americans were not easily able to exercise the entirety of their rights as American citizens. Citizen and Solly discuss the weight that Citizen's name carries:

**Citizen:** My mama named me Citizen after freedom came. She wouldn't like it if I changed my name.

**Solly:** Your mama's trying to tell you something. She put a heavy load on you. It's hard to be a Citizen. You gonna have to fight to get that. And time you get it you be surprised how heavy it is.

"Citizen" is Citizen Barlow's verbal identifier—the way in which the rest of world refers to him. Because the word "Citizen" carries additional social and political significance, Citizen Barlow also carries that significance and the identity of the word with him wherever he goes.

Solly Two Kings is no stranger to the significance of a name to one's identity. When he was a slave, Solly was known as Uncle Alfred. However, at a certain point, Solly sought out a change to his identity, and he started with a change in his name. Instead of being referred to as Uncle Alfred, Solly decided that he wanted to be known to the world as Two Kings—taking his name after the kings David and Solomon. When Solly initially explained who the Two Kings in his name referenced to a man he met, the man mistook Solly's name to simply be Solomon and began to refer to him as Solly, for short. In naming himself after two monarchs, Solly adopts the identity of a leader, a fitting identity considering the number of slaves he helped lead to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

## MEMORY AND THE PAST

"I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. People say you crazy to remember. But I ain't afraid to remember. I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. I feed them. I got to feed them otherwise they'd eat me up. I got memories go way back. I'm carrying them for a lot of folk. All the old-timey folks. I'm carrying their memories and I'm carrying my own."—Aunt Ester

Throughout *Gem of the Ocean*, the past is a constant presence. By the time the play takes place, the Civil War and slavery have been over for nearly 40 years, and yet, the events of war and the horrors of slavery still loom large in the cultural, social, and political atmosphere of the play. In 1904, the country was still in the midst of recovering from the devastation of slavery, secession, and war, so it is no surprise that the memories of that time are still fresh and heavy with pain. While some, like Citizen, who is constantly plagued by guilt from an event gone by, might rather forget the past, others, like Aunt Ester, carry the weight of the past in the hope of seeing progress and change in the future.

At the age of 285, Aunt Ester was born roughly in 1619, right as the Trans-Atlantic slave trade began to emerge. Through her years, she has lived through major events in the United States, not all of which are proud events in the country's history. What is more, Aunt Ester is inextricably linked to the past through her name. It is not a coincidence that her name sounds similar to the word "ancestor." She continues to hold on to her experiences as well as the experiences of others through her memory, because for an event to be forgotten, it would be as if it did not happen at all. Knowing that her time might be drawing to an end, Aunt Ester has chosen Black Mary as her successor and keeper of her memories, so that the past continues to remain alive and relevant.

The past holds a physical presence as well. Both Solly and Aunt Ester hold on to items they originally acquired when they were still slaves: Solly carries chain link that was originally part of a shackle used on him, and Aunt Ester holds onto the Bill of Sale issued when she was bought as a slave. While these physical items serve as reminders of the past, the Bill of Sale folded into a paper boat called *Gem of the Ocean* is also what is used to help Citizen overcome his guilt and step into the future. ♦

## THE INJUSTICE SYSTEM: THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF *GEM OF THE OCEAN*

**August Wilson's** *Gem of the Ocean* takes place over a hundred years ago, in an era in which Jim Crow laws blatantly restricted the rights of African American citizens across the country. We hear about the effects of these laws in Wilson's play. On the most extreme end of the spectrum, we hear about a town in Alabama in which the wealthy white population has made it impossible for African American citizens to buy train tickets to leave the city. On a more subtle but equally harmful end of the spectrum, we hear about the ways in which factory and mill owners set up their businesses so that their predominantly black employees are constantly financially indebted to them. What is more, we see Caesar dole out disproportionately severe punishments to black citizens in response to the crimes committed under his watch as constable.

In 1896, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that it is Constitutional to enforce and maintain racially segregated, "separate but equal" spaces, it inherently legally justified racially discriminatory behavior and policy. The discriminatory behavior that the Supreme Court's 1896 decision validated became alarmingly normal and widespread throughout the country and went legally unquestioned for the next half-century.

While considerable progress has since been made in American society in regard to reforming longstanding and deeply rooted racially discriminatory laws and behavior, racial inequality is still widespread in contemporary society. Outright acts of discrimination are no longer justifiable by written law and are considerably less tolerated; however, racial discrimination remains prevalent on a systemic level. The system that plays perhaps the largest role in the perpetuation of racial inequality in the country is the justice system.

The United States criminal justice system is the largest in the world. In 2015, 2.2 million individuals were incarcerated in federal, state, or local prisons and jails, accounting for nearly 22% of all prisoners in the world. Within the United States' massive correctional and criminal justice system, there is significant racial disparity. For example, African Americans are more likely than white Americans to be arrested. Once arrested they are more likely to be convicted. Once convicted, they are more likely to receive lengthy prison sentences. In fact, African American adults are nearly six times as likely to be incarcerated than white American adults.

This disparity has its roots, in part, in how the criminal justice system is structured to favor those with great financial means over people of lower socio-economic status. In his book, *No Equal Justice*, former Georgetown Law Professor David Cole states:

"These double standards are not, of course, explicit; on the face of it, the criminal law is color-blind and class-blind. But in a sense, this only makes the problem worse. The rhetoric of the criminal justice system sends the message that our society carefully protects everyone's constitutional rights, but in practice the rules assure that law enforcement prerogatives will generally prevail over the rights of minorities and the poor. By affording criminal suspects substantial constitutional rights in theory, the Supreme Court validates the results of the criminal justice system as fair. That formal fairness obscures the systemic concerns that ought to be raised by the fact that the prison population is overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately black."

Viewing the justice system through this critical lens, it becomes clear that our current justice system is steeped in practices and policies that mirror those of the Jim Crow era—practices and policies that inherently target and limit black citizens' rights. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, articulates the archaic roots of the contemporary U.S. legal system's practice of incarceration of black Americans on a mass scale:

"As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it." ♦

Edited from:

"Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System." *The Sentencing Project*, [www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/](http://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/).



## INTERVIEW WITH JOYCE GUY: CHOREOGRAPHY

### **What attracted you to *Gem of the Ocean*? What is most intriguing to you about this story?**

What attracted me to *Gem of the Ocean* is to be working again with director and frequent collaborator Gregg Daniel. I've worked on a number of productions with Gregg throughout the years both as an actor and choreographer—recently, the production of *Raisin in the Sun* at A Noise Within as choreographer. What also attracted me to “Gem” is that I believe this is one of the most well written plays of August Wilson’s American Century Cycle. The depth in which he deals with the theme of legacy resonates with me since I’ve studied traditional African dance for over 30 years.

The story delves into the themes of truth, destiny, redemption and legacy. I’m intrigued by the character “Garrett Brown” who because of his inherent truth, knowing he didn’t commit a crime, makes the decision to put his fate and destiny in his own hands by letting the water take him. This is the same fate a number of enslaved people took during the middle passage; to put truth to power.

### **What is the choreographer’s job? How did you begin your process for this show?**

The choreographer’s job is to bring elements of gesture, movement, body language, expression, stillness and dance to further enhance and move the story forward. Whether these elements augment music, the written word, subtext, or silence, the choreographer’s job is to explore those relationships within story.

After reading the play and speaking with Gregg, I had a clear idea where I wanted the process to begin based on the character’s history being not far removed from the slave trade. The characters would have some sense of ancestral memory of rituals and ceremony. This is where my knowledge of traditional African dance comes to play.

### **How did you first become interested in choreography?**

I come from a family where street dance was very prominent in our household on a day-to-day basis, at family outings, reunions and parties. This is where my love of dance began. My interest in choreography began by watching dance shows on television like the *Carol Burnett Show*.

### **What piece of the show are you most excited to see come to life?**

I am most excited to see the “City of Bones” scene come to expression. I perceive this scene with all its elements of fantasy, music, chants, and tradition as the denouement of the story. There are so many layers of ritual, movement, and dance that are exciting, mysterious, and a little bit scary to explore with the actors and director. ♦

## INTERVIEW WITH GREGG T. DANIEL: DIRECTION

### What attracted you to *Gem of the Ocean*?

August Wilson is one of the great playwrights of the 20th century. His ambitious goal to write a play chronicling the lives of African Americans decade by decade is remarkable. I'd be drawn to direct any work of this playwright. The delicious thing about *Gem* is I get to start with the very first play of the ten play cycle.

Everything starts and in some ways ends with *Gem*. Within *Gem*, Wilson plants the seeds of what is to unfold for the next 90 years. Additionally, the use of myth, mysticism & folklore built into the DNA of the play makes it one of my favorites. There is a skillful use of the tradition of African storytelling in *Gem*. Selfishly, I'm hoping the next nine plays might be somewhere in my directing future.

### What is the Director's job? How did you begin your process for directing this show?

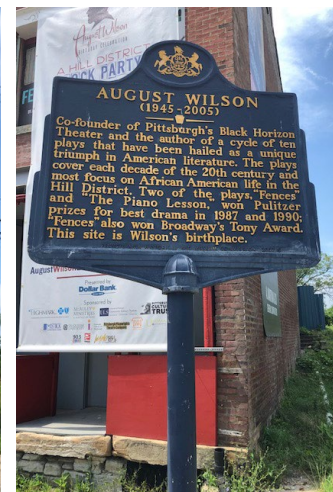
My job is to ask the right questions, the kind of questions which activate & stimulate the skill, craft and imagination of our actors and design team. Any play which has a 285 year old woman as a central character asks you to bring a bold imagination and fearless vision to it. One of the ways I prepare is, if the play has previously been mounted, I collect all the reviews, books & commentaries I can locate. Sometimes there's a phrase used to access the work which triggers an idea and helps to shape my vision of the play.

Additionally, I enjoy delving into period plays as they shed light on a specific timeframe in history. Doing the necessary research to understand the world of the play is illuminating.

Oft times, I begin by asking myself what is the playwright wanting to say with this work and secondly, what do I want to say by directing it? The first week of rehearsals is actually one of my favorite times. We do what I call a, "stop and go" which means anyone at the table can stop at any time during our reading and ask a question about any aspect of the play. The question may be related to their character or not. I always find these discussions stimulating as I have all these talented & creative minds around me pondering some aspect of the play. The practice always ends up feeding the ensemble creatively.



Childhood home of August Wilson.



Gregg Daniel at the childhood home of August Wilson.

### How did you first become interested in directing?

Initially, I trained as an actor in a highly regarded conservatory program. Upon graduation, I left my native New York to do at least twelve years of regional theatre around the country. It was the best transition/exposure I could have had from the University system into the professional world.

## INTERVIEW WITH GREGG T. DANIEL: DIRECTION CONTINUED...

Somewhere in those years, I began asking questions during rehearsals which were way beyond the scope of acting. It became clear to those generous and patient Directors I was working with (and I thank them) that I was being drawn toward the craft of Directing. Eventually, I began to assist professional Directors as well as direct smaller projects on my own (when time allowed, as I was still a professional actor). Having a hand in shaping the overall interpretation of a play became intoxicating to me.

### **What piece of the show are you most excited to see come to life?**

The “City of Bones” journey (which Aunt Ester guides Citizen Barlow through in Act II) anchors the play. The Journey is a highly theatricalized segment which I’m hoping will transport our audience. It is a spiritual, physical and psychological journey which should visually and viscerally stun our audience. It will take the stagecraft of all our departments, lights, sets, costumes, props and sound to make it work. And of course, this mythical journey will challenge our actors to occupy a space somewhere between reality and fantasy. Every character involved in the, “City Of Bones” is changed when it ends, I’d like our audience to experience that change as well. ♦



## PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **RESEARCH**

### Purpose:

These research prompts will help students develop an understanding of the social and historical contexts of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*.

### Prepare:

To prepare for seeing *Gem of the Ocean*, have students break into small groups to research the following topics either in their groups or individually. When they are ready, have students present their findings to the class.

#### Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade:

- Start and end dates
- Causes
- The Middle Passage
- Ship conditions
- Slavery conditions

#### Civil War:

- Causes of the war
- Key dates
- Key political figures and leaders
- Popular literature
- The Underground Railroad
- The Emancipation Proclamation
- The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments

#### Jim Crow Era:

- Key dates
- Origin of the name "Jim Crow"
- *Plessy v. Ferguson*
- Examples of Jim Crow laws
- School segregation
- W.E.B. Dubois

#### Pittsburgh:

- The city's geography
- Industries in the city
- Demographics of the city in 1904 and now
- Cultural and artistic movements that started in the city

#### The Black Arts Movement:

- Key artists
- Key writers
- Origin of the movement
- Black Arts Repertory Theatre
- Black Nationalism
- Marcus Garvey
- Malcolm X

#### Magical Realism:

- Origin of the genre
- Jorge Luis Borges
- Key writers
- Examples of works that employ magical realism

#### August Wilson:

- His childhood
- His education
- His hometown
- His artistic influences
- Black Horizon Theatre
- His "The Ground On Which I Stand" address
- The American Century Cycle

## PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **ACTIVITIES**

### Purpose:

These activities will prompt students to think critically about the themes and ideas in *Gem of the Ocean* and engage with the narrative.

**THE MUSIC OF CHARACTER:** In this activity, students will have the opportunity to explore how the language and sounds a character uses to express ideas can reveal information about that character.

**Background:** August Wilson was fascinated with the way people speak. When he was young, he would spend time at barbershops and restaurants in the Hill District of Pittsburgh listening to peoples' voices—their vocal intonation, their words, their rhythm of speech. As he grew older, Wilson became increasingly interested and artistically influenced by music, particularly Blues music. As he began to write for the theatre, Wilson used the voices he heard in the Hill District as well as the Blues as inspiration for developing the ways in which his characters speak.

- Have each student conduct a brief, 5-minute interview with a family member or friend on a subject of the student's choosing.
- Instruct students to either record the audio of the interview or to take down the interviewee's responses in writing.
- After they have completed their interviews, divide students into pairs, and instruct the students to give each other the audio or written recordings of the interview they conducted.
- Have students listen to or read the new interview and develop a profile for a fictional character based on the interview. This profile should include details about the following:
  - The character's upbringing
  - Where the character currently lives
  - What the character does for a living
  - What the character does for fun
  - The character's greatest fears
  - The character's greatest hopes
- Encourage students to focus on the interviewee's language usage, rhythm of speech, and vocal intonation as well as any details the interviewee may reveal about themselves when creating this profile.
- Allow students to share their character profiles as well as the recording used as inspiration for the profile.
- Facilitate a class-wide discussion about the ways in which speech and language reveal character traits by asking questions such as: how was this activity? What words or speech patterns did you notice when listening to or reading the interview? How did you draw conclusions about a character from the interview?

**A LANDMARK'S LIFE:** In this activity, students will have the opportunity to research and explore how a particular landmark or location in their hometown has evolved over time.

**Background:** August Wilson is best known for his American Century Cycle—a cycle of ten plays that each take place in a different decade during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All but one of these plays takes place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Altogether, the ten plays tell the story of how a community has changed over time.

- Have students pick a place, perhaps in their hometown, with which they are very familiar. This place could be a restaurant, park, store, school, house, or another geographical structure.
- Instruct students to research the history of their chosen location for the past 100 years. If the site they have chosen has been built or developed within the past 100 years, instruct students to research what was in the location before. Encourage students to also pay attention to the groups of people who frequented the location through time.
- After students have completed their research, direct students to create a timeline of their

## PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **ACTIVITIES** CONTINUED...

- location's history. This timeline could include images, drawings, newspaper clippings, or print-outs.
- Allow students to share their timelines with the class.
- Facilitate a class-wide discussion about the discoveries made during this activity. What did you learn about your location? Who has visited or used your location over time? Has your location changed drastically in the last 100 years? If so, how? Were there any surprises?

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**TABLEAUS OF POWER AND OPPRESSION:** In this activity, students will have the opportunity to explore the relationship between power and oppression physically.

**Background:** Every character in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* faces systemic oppression to some degree. Whether the oppressions they face is based on the color of their skin or based on their low financial status or both, each character struggles against socially oppressive forces throughout the play.

- Place three chairs at the front of the room.
- Ask for a volunteer from the class to arrange the chairs so that one chair clearly has more power than the other chairs.
- After the volunteer has arranged the chairs, ask for another volunteer to arrange the chairs into a different formation such that one chair still clearly has more power than the other two chairs.
- Have a number of students come up, one-by-one to place the chairs in different arrangements so that one chair clearly has more power than the other two.
- Next, have a volunteer come up to arrange the chairs in such a way that one chair is clearly oppressing the other two chairs.
- Have a number of students create new arrangements in which one chair is oppressing the other chairs.
- Add another chair to the mix and ask students to continue to arrange chairs in different formations in which one chair is clearly the oppressor, however, at this point, encourage students to devise arrangements in which there may be more than one oppressor, or in ways such that one chair that is clearly oppressed is also the oppressor of another chair.
- Add another chair into the mix and continue to ask students to come up with arrangements.
- Facilitate a class-wide discussion about the activity. Ask students to consider the following:
  - What was this activity like?
  - What did you discover about the difference between power and oppression?
  - Which arrangements stuck out to you?
  - Which arrangements presented the most evident picture of oppression? Why?
  - Which arrangements clearly featured an oppressor who was also oppressed? How?



## ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. In a conversation with Black Mary, Caesar says the following:  

"I got to play the hand that was dealt to me. You look around and see you black. You look at the calendar. Slavery's over. I'm a free man. I can get up whatever time I want to in the morning. I can move all over and pick any woman I want. I can walk down the street to the store and buy anything my money will buy. There ain't nothing I can't have."

In a thesis-driven essay, compare and contrast Caesar's attitude towards freedom and Solly's attitude towards freedom. Be sure to use evidence from the text to support your claim.
2. To what extent does guilt drive the action in *Gem of the Ocean*? Support your argument with evidence from the text.
3. Black Mary describes the house at 1839 Wylie Avenue as "a house of sanctuary." In a thesis-driven essay, characterize how 1839 Wylie Avenue functions in the play. Use examples from the text to support your claim.

4. Read the following passage:

"I been across the water. I seen both sides of it. I know about the water. The water has its secrets the way the land has its secrets. Some know about the land. Some know about the water. But there is some that know about the land and the water. They got both sides of it. Then you got fire. That's a special one. It's got lots of secrets. Fire will heal and kill. It's tricky like that. I can talk about the land and I can talk about the fire. But I don't talk about the water." –Aunt Ester

In a thesis-driven essay, analyze the role water plays in *Gem of the Ocean*. Support your thesis with evidence from the text.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### BOOKS:

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2012.

Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. PLUTO Press, 2019.

Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, a Division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Routledge, 2017.

Wilson, August. *Gem of the Ocean*. Samuel French, 2015.

### ARTICLES:

Cherry, James M. "August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle." *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre (JADT)*, 5 June 2017, [jadtjournal.org/2016/12/23/august-wilsons-pittsburgh-cycle/](http://jadtjournal.org/2016/12/23/august-wilsons-pittsburgh-cycle/).

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review: Summer 1968*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1968, p. 28., doi:10.2307/1144377.

Robinson, Phoebe. "Pittsburgh's Underground Railroad, Preserved and Not." *The New York Times*, 24 Feb. 2017.

Shafer, Yvonne. "An Interview With August Wilson." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 1989.

### FILMS:

*American Masters—August Wilson: The Ground On Which I Stand* (PBS, 2015)

### ONLINE RESOURCES:

August Wilson and the Black Arts Movement (PBS Learning Media):

<https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/aug15.ela.lit.blackarts/wilsons-bs-baraka-black-arts-movement/>

"The Ground on Which I Stand" Address Text: <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>

### VIDEO CLIPS:

Playwright August Wilson on Writing About Black America (1988 interview): <https://billmoyers.com/story/august-wilson-on-writing-about-black-america/>

August Wilson on Beginning with Dialogue: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-on-beginning-with-dialogue/3726/>

August Wilson's Youth: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilsons-youth/3707/>

## ABOUT THEATRE ARTS: KEY THEATRICAL TERMS

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of amusement: going to the theatre. But attending a live theatrical performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of entertainment.

In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like *A Noise Within*, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd.

Although playhouses in the past could sometimes be rowdy, participating in the performance by giving respect and attention to the actors is the most appropriate behavior at a theatrical performance today. Shouting out (or even whispering) can be heard throughout the auditorium, as can rustling paper or ringing phones.

After this *A Noise Within* performance, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

**blocking:** The instructions a director gives actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

**character:** The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

**conflict:** The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

**dramatic irony:** A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

**genre:** Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce or social drama.

**motivation:** The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

**props:** Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop.

**proscenium stage:** There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

**set:** The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

**setting:** The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

**stage areas:** The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

**theme:** The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

**thrust stage:** A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. *A Noise Within* features a thrust stage.



## ABOUT **A NOISE WITHIN**

**A NOISE WITHIN** A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists performing in rotating repertory immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue. Our plays will be performed in rotating repertory, sometimes simultaneously in multiple spaces, and buttressed by meaningful supporting programs to create a symphonic theatrical experience for artists and audience.

In its 27 year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at a Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its arts education program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.

### Study Guides

A Noise Within creates study guides in alignment with core reading, listening, speaking, and performing arts standards to help educators prepare their students for their visit to our theatre. Study guides are available at no extra cost to download through our website: [www.anoisewithin.org](http://www.anoisewithin.org). The information and activities outlined in these guides are designed to work in compliance with the California VAPA standards, The Common Core, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills.

Study guides include background information on the plays and playwrights, historical context, textual analysis, in-depth discussion of A Noise Within's artistic interpretation of the work, statements from directors and designers, as well as discussion points and suggested classroom activities. Guides from past seasons are also available to download from the website.

### Study Guide Credits

Alicia Green .....	<i>Education Director and Editor</i>
Rebecca Wilson.....	<i>Education Manager and Editor</i>
Rachael McNamara.....	<i>Author</i>
Craig Schwartz .....	<i>Production Photography</i>
Teresa English .....	<i>Graphic Design</i>



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