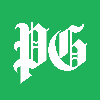
August Wilson’s mythic character Aunt Ester explored in theater festival

Christopher Rawson / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / Nov 9, 2009

Aunt Ester is back where she began. A mythic inhabitant of 1839 Wylie Ave. in the Hill, she moves Downtown this week as the new August Wilson Center for African American Culture embarks on its most ambitious creative project, The Aunt Ester Cycle.

Ester came to August Wilson only midway through his Pittsburgh Cycle, the rich 10-play epic of love, honor, duty and betrayal that tells the painful and triumphant story of black America throughout the 20th century.

We first hear of Ester Tyler in Wilson’s sixth play, “Two Trains Running,” set in the 1960s, where she is a vivid 349-year-old spiritual healer who has a crucial but offstage impact on three lives. In his eighth play, “King Hedley II,” set in the 1980s, she is still offstage, but her influence is fading, and her reported death at age 366 is a tragedy fitting that decade of drive-by shootings and societal dysfunction.

Then in 2000, in his preface to “King Hedley II,” Wilson wrote that “Aunt Ester has emerged for me as the most significant persona of the cycle. The characters, after all, are her children.” It is her wisdom and the legacy she embodies that define the centuries-long story he had to tell.

So in the ninth play, he tracked her back to 1904 and put her on stage at last as the lead character in “Gem of the Ocean,” complete with all her cantankerous wisdom and luminous eccentricity. And in the 10th and final play, “Radio Golf,” set in 1997 and completed only as Wilson was dying in 2005, he invokes her posthumous legacy and hints at her possible rebirth.

In order to track this potent modern myth, to celebrate its namesake and to flex the AWC’s muscles, the Aunt Ester Cycle will offer full productions by visiting theater companies on its 486-seat mainstage of three plays (two performances each), an experimental rehearsal/symposium of the fourth, a symposium on the mystery of Ester and something new -- “The Women of the Hill,” a stage piece by the noted Ping Chong & Company that stages real-life stories that embody the legacy of the strong women at the heart of African America.

Aunt Ester is not literally three centuries old but a succession of folk priestesses, reaching back to 1619, the year the first shipment of black Africans was brought to Virginia to become slaves in the future home of the free. She embodies a weighty history of tragedy and triumph, as suggested in Vanessa German’s 2006 sculpture, “1832 Wylie Avenue.”

Although Wilson conceived of her late in the Pittsburgh Cycle, she must have been with him for years, in his bones, in his family background, and in the experiences he soaked up in the three decades he lived on the streets of the Hill. He wrote his plays after he moved to St. Paul and Seattle because there, freed of the daily pressures of the Hill, he found its characters spoke to him clearly, using the voices he had heard in its diners, jitney stations, numbers parlors and barber shops.

Now Pittsburgh gets a chance to witness how these plays and a new performance piece all speak to each other, with the onstage/offstage story of Aunt Ester a unifying theme.

# The Cycle is born

The idea of the Aunt Ester Cycle began with departed AWC head Neil Barclay, but it has been pursued with tenacity and flair by its curator, playwright/director Talvin Wilks.

Wilks emphasizes the crucial role to be played by the audience, not just for the six performances of three plays, but for the symposia, one on the legend of Aunt Ester, the other an experimental open rehearsal of “King Hedley,” with dual directors, commenting scholars and audience dialogue. And the audience is especially crucial to “The Women of the Hill,” for which Wilks is co-writer/director.

The three participating theater companies are bringing productions they have already staged. St. Louis Black Rep, St. Paul’s Penumbra Theatre and Pittsburgh Playwrights will perform on a unit set that Wilks calls “a frame or a totem,” suggesting Aunt Ester’s home. Sharing is necessary because the turn-around between shows will be just 12 hours, in a theater that is itself still new.

“I call it the great experiment, pushing beyond the capacity of the center,” Wilks says. He praises the local effort, led by Mark Clayton Southers, founder and artistic director of Pittsburgh Playwrights, which opened its workshop and props collection and is building the set.

The Aunt Ester Cycle is a prototype of performance events the AWC hopes to curate. It dovetails with the AWC’s Black Theater Initiative, which Wilks coordinates, seeking to unite black theaters and presenters nationally to encourage new work and share productions. To pursue this, the AWC will host a simultaneous weekend gathering of two dozen national producers, directors, presenters and playwrights.

If companies elsewhere begin to build the AWC into their plans, it can be “catalytic in supporting a national network,” Wilks says, “a bridge and a model for other venues. Even with three partners for one project, you start balancing the costs.”

The goal is to serve audiences and artists, giving further life to the work, because new plays often die on the vine. Wilks believes the AWC can be mission-driven, not just a showplace for touring shows. “It has to be curated, not just booked,” he says.

He anticipates a similar program next year, focusing on plays by African-American women. In the future, music and dance could get the same kind of mini-festival treatment.

He describes this year’s prototype as “a celebration of the work and the artistry of these companies all in one week, along with a meditation or conversation on the legend of Aunt Ester,” as follows:

• St. Louis Black Repertory, **“Gem of the Ocean,”** directed by Andrea Frye; tomorrow 8 p.m. and Wednesday 1 p.m.

• **“The Legend of Aunt Ester: A Symposium,”** with the director and actors from “Gem,” plus Penumbra’s Lou Bellamy and actress Michelle Shay, who has played Aunt Ester several times, moderated by Post-Gazette senior theater critic Chris Rawson; Wednesday 7 p.m.

• Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre, **“Two Trains Running,”** the same production directed by Mark Clayton Southers that played here last year, starring Broadway’s Anthony Chisholm and Eugene Lee; Thursday 8 p.m. and Friday 1 p.m.

• **“Reconstructing ‘King Hedley II’: A Symposium,”** directed by Paul Carter Harrison and Eileen Morris, with Wilson scholars and critics on hand; Friday 7 p.m.

• Penumbra Theatre, **“Radio Golf,”** directed by Lou Bellamy; Saturday 8 p.m. and Sunday 3 p.m.

• Ping Chong & Company, **“The Women of the Hill,”** starring six Hill residents; 8 p.m. Nov. 20-21 and 3 p.m. Nov. 22.

All these programs are supported by grants from 10 foundations and arts agencies. Tickets: $18-$28 per play, discounts for seniors and AWC members; symposia $10; Festival Pass $85.50; 412-456-6666 or [www.pgharts.org](http://www.pgharts.org).