How to Write A Play Like August Wilson

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MARCH 10, 1991

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*This article is adapted from a talk by August Wilson at the Poetry Center of the 92d Street Y in Manhattan earlier this year, during which the playwright answered questions about how he works. Mr. Wilson, who is 45 years old and was born in Pittsburgh, has had nine plays produced. His work has won a Tony Award and two Pulitzer Prizes.*

When I discovered the word breakfast, and I discovered that it was two words, I think then I decided I wanted to be a writer. I’ve been writing since April 1, 1965, the day I bought my first typewriter, for $20. That’s, I don’t know, 26 years now. And so, behind each one of the plays are all those thousands of poems and stories and things I wrote many, many years ago. I had begun writing then as a 20-year-old poet. And I don’t care what anybody says, as a 20-year-old poet you cannot sit at home and write poetry, because you don’t know anything about life. So you have to go out and engage the world.

My friends at the time were painters. I was not envious of them, because they were always trying to get money for paint and get money for canvas. I felt that my tools were very simple. I could borrow a pencil and write on a napkin or get a piece of paper from anyone. So I began to write out in bars and restaurants little snatches of things.

I still do it that way. I start -- generally I have an idea of something I want to say -- but I start with a line of dialogue. I have no idea half the time who’s speaking or what they’re saying. I’ll start with the line, and the more dialogue I write, the better I get to know the characters. For instance, in writing the play “The Piano Lesson,” one of the characters, Berniece, says something to Boy Willie, her brother, and he talks about how “Sutter fell in the well.” Well this is a surprise to me . I didn’t know that.

Then I say, “Well, who is Sutter?” You see, if you have a character in a play, the character who knows everything, then you won’t have any problem. Whenever you get stuck you ask them a question. I have learned that if you trust them and simply do not even think about what they’re saying, it doesn’t matter. They say things like, “Sutter fell in the well.” You just write it down and make it all make sense later. So I use those characters a lot. Anything you want to know you ask the characters.

Part of my process is that I assemble all these things and later try to make sense out of them and sort of plug them in to what is my larger artistic agenda. That agenda is answering James Baldwin when he called for “a profound articulation of the black tradition,” which he defined as “that field of manners and ritual of intercourse that will sustain a man once he’s left his father’s house.”

So I say, O.K., that field of manners and ritual of intercourse is what I’m trying to put on stage. And I best learn about that through the blues. I discovered everything there. So I have an agenda. Someone asked the painter Romare Bearden about his work and he said, “I try to explore, in terms of the life I know best, those things which are common to all cultures.”

So I say, O.K., culture and the commonalities of culture.

Using those two things and having the larger agenda, I take all this material, no matter what it is, and later, I sit down and assemble it. And I discovered -- and I admire Romare Bearden a lot; he’s a collagist, he pieces things together -- I discovered that that’s part of my process, what I do. I piece it all together, and, hopefully, have it make sense, the way a collage would.

As for the characters, they are all invented. At the same time they are all made up out of myself. So they’re all me, different aspects of my personality, I guess. But I don’t say, “Oh, I know a guy like this. I’m going to write Joe.” Some people do that. I can’t do that. So I write different parts of myself and I try to invent or discover some other parts.

I approach poetry and plays differently. For me, if there is such a thing as public art and private art, then the poems are private. They are a record, a private journey, if you will. I count them as moments of privilege. I count them as gifts.

In terms of influence on my work, I have what I call my four B’s: Romare Bearden; Imamu Amiri Baraka, the writer; Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine short-story writer; and the biggest B of all: the blues. I don’t play an instrument. I don’t know any musical terms. And I don’t know anything about music. But I have a very good ear and I’m a good listener. And I listen mostly to the blues. I have been variously influenced by them and also by the 2,000 or some poets I have read. I have not been, per se, influenced by playwrights or any writers other than that. Some of the black writers I read. For instance, I read Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man” when I was 14. I guess I’ve been influenced by him. I’ve certainly been inspired by examples like that.

In my own work, what I hope to do is to “place” the tradition of black American culture, to demonstrate its ability to sustain us. We have a ground that is specific, that is peculiarly ours, that we can stand on, which gives us a world view, to look at the world and to comment on it. I’m just trying to place the world of that culture on stage and to demonstrate its existence and maybe also indicate some directions toward which we as a people might possibly move.

For instance, in the play “Two Trains Running,” there are so many references to death. The undertaker in the black community is the richest man. It’s still true today. In the midst of all that, though, in the midst of all this death, you have that which doesn’t die -- the character of Aunt Esther, which is the tradition. And when the people, the characters in the play, go to see Aunt Esther, the main thing she tells them, each in a different way, is that if you drop the ball you have to go back and pick it up. If you continue running, if you reach the end zone, it’s not going to be a touchdown. You have to have the ball.

And I think that we as black Americans need to go back and make the connection that we allowed to be severed when we moved from the South to the North, the great migration starting in 1915. For the most part, the culture that was growing and developing in the Southern part of the United States for 200 and some years, we more or less abandoned. And we have a situation where in 1991 kids do not know who they are because they cannot make the connection with their grandparents -- and therefore the connection with their political history in America.

In “The Piano Lesson,” where you have a brother and sister arguing over a piano that is a family heirloom, and each with different ideas of ways to use it, the ending was a very difficult thing because I didn’t want to choose sides.

We had about five different endings to the play. But it was always the same ending: I wanted Boy Willie to demonstrate a willingness to battle with Sutter’s ghost, the ghost of the white man -- that lingering idea of him as the master of slaves -- which is still in black Americans’ lives and needs to be exorcised. I wasn’t so much concerned with who ended up with the piano, as with Boy Willie’s willingness to do battle.

In staging it, there were also the ghosts of the guys in the play who had burned up in the boxcar. Ideally, I had wanted Boy Willie to fight it out himself. But then we thought, well, maybe we’ll have those ghosts come in and they’ll help him with this battle with Sutter. At the same time, Berniece must break her taboo about playing the piano and call up the ghost of her mother and her grandmother and all of her ancestors, whom she has been rejecting. And she does that, and it’s a very powerful force. And Sutter’s ghost leaves the house. And that’s as clear as I can put it.

A version of this article appears in print on March 10, 1991 of the National edition with the headline: How to Write A Play Like August Wilson.