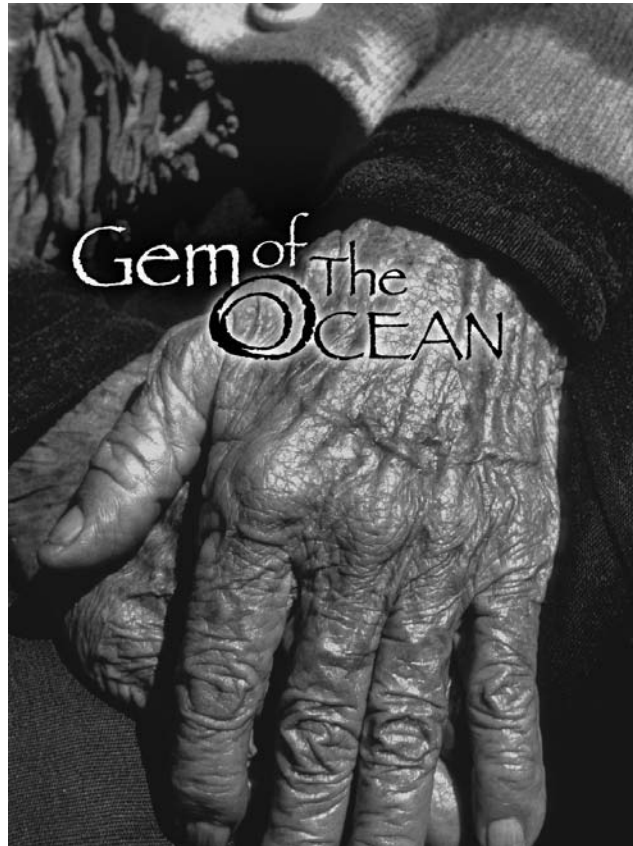


P.L.A.Y.

(Performance = Literature + Art + You)

Student Matinee Series



By August Wilson
Directed by Timothy Douglas

A Co-Production with
Syracuse Stage and
Indiana Repertory Theatre

Student Matinee
2006-2007



Sponsored by

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SEASON

Dear Educators,

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It seems that most of us – and I'm including myself alongside my students here – subtly separate the history of our own lifetime from that of someone else's. It's an arbitrary if natural division. Can you scan a timeline of events and not insert your birth year at the appropriate point? Doesn't everything that came after that point seem just a little bit more real, a little bit less history?



This is just one reason I've always marveled at August Wilson's unfolding saga of the twentieth century. He wrote one play for each decade; unlike a century, the passage of a decade is a comprehensible span within our own and our students' lives. In creating his sustained history of African-American lives, rooted in the Pittsburgh community where he was born, Wilson wove a pattern of continued experience in which the legacy of the past is not remote but immediate, relevant and astonishingly tangible. From decade to decade and generation to generation, each of the stories and their challenges are still within living memory for the characters we meet next.

Geva has committed to exploring this complete chronicle, and *Gem of the Ocean* marks the first play in a five-year project to celebrate August Wilson's American Century. In late April of this year we present readings of the second play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. (See page 5 for the reading schedule.) During the 2007-08 season Geva will present a reading of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and a production of *The Piano Lesson*. Each year a production partnered with a reading will continue to unfold the ten-play cycle in chronological sequence. Wilson's gift to the theatre audience was that these stories can become our own living memories as well. *Gem of the Ocean* is just the first leg of our journey, and we hope you'll continue the voyage with us.

Sincerely,

Kathryn Moroney
Associate Director of Education

August Wilson's American Century

Gem of the Ocean
(set in 1904)

Joe Turner's Come and Gone
(set in 1911)

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom
(set in 1927)

The Piano Lesson
(set in 1936)

Seven Guitars
(set in 1948)

Fences
(set in 1957)

Two Trains Running
(set in 1968)

Jitney
(set in 1977)

King Hedley II
(set in 1985)

Radio Golf
(set in 1997)

"The people might get mad but freedom got a high price."

Solly Two Kings

Synopsis

Young Citizen Barlow steals a can of nails while working at the mill. Another man is accused but chooses suicide rather than facing arrest for a crime he did not commit. Citizen hopes to unburden himself of his guilt and seeks out Aunt Ester, whose healing powers are legendary. She instructs Citizen to collect some items he will need for his journey to the City of Bones. Together with others from the community, Aunt Ester guides Citizen through a ritual “soul washing.” In the hold of the historic ship, *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen experiences the slaves’ journey across the Atlantic. The City of Bones’ gatekeeper is the man who was accused of stealing, and after acknowledging his guilt, Citizen is welcomed into the city. The assembled community celebrates but Caesar interrupts to accuse Solly Two Kings of starting the fire that burned down the mill. Solly attempts to flee, but Caesar catches and kills him. Caesar’s sister disowns him and Citizen moves on, taking Solly’s walking stick and coat with him.

Significance of Names

Citizen Barlow was given his name “after freedom came.” After abolition most slaves who had previously borne their masters’ surnames chose new names for themselves and for their children. They often took these names from the Bible, from their own family history, or from famous people they admired. Names such as Liberty or Citizen were chosen to celebrate their new freedom.

Eli, Aunt Ester’s companion, bears the name of an Old Testament priest and mentor to young Samuel. The biblical Eli was steady, reliable, and maintained peace and security.

Aunt Ester’s name sounds like the word “ancestor.” Her name suggests both Easter, the most holy day of the Christian calendar, and the biblical Ester, a Jewish woman who became Queen and hero of her people.

Black Mary serves Aunt Ester and washes her feet in a ritual reminiscent of the self-abasement of Mary at Bethany during the last days of Christ.

Rutherford Selig’s last name means “blessed” in German. As a white man, he is an outsider in this community, but suggests the possibility of a peaceful alliance in an integrated world.

Solly Two Kings was once named Uncle Alfred. After slavery he changed his name to David and Solomon, two biblical kings. David means “friend” or “beloved,” but he was also known as a warrior when he defeated the giant Goliath. Solomon was the son of David; his name means “peaceful.” Known for his wisdom and wealth, Solomon expanded the kingdom of David and there was peace on all borders.

Caesar’s name means dictator or autocrat and originated from the original Roman dictator Julius Caesar. In the Bible Caesar represents worldly power, wealth and government.



costume rendering
for Caesar by
Junghyun Georgia Lee



costume rendering
for Aunt Ester by
Junghyun Georgia Lee

“I don’t know which one God gonna call me. If he call me Uncle Alfred then we got a big fight”

Solly Two Kings

About the playwright



August Wilson was born in 1945 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which later became the setting for most of his plays. His father was a white German immigrant; his mother was black. Wilson stated that the “nurturing, the learning” of his life were “all black ideas about the world that I learned from my mother. My mother’s a very strong woman. My female characters come in large part from my mother.”

In the late 1950s, August’s family moved to a predominantly white suburb of Pittsburgh, and he attended school there until age fifteen. “I was bored,” he explained. “I was confused, I was disappointed in myself, and I didn’t do any work until my history teacher assigned us to write a paper on a historical personage.”

Wilson chose Napoleon because he had always been fascinated with the “self-made emperor.” It was a twenty-page paper, and Wilson’s sister typed it up on a rented typewriter. Since Wilson had previously done no work in class, his instructor found it hard to believe that it was his own work. He wrote both an A+ and then an F on the paper. If Wilson couldn’t prove the paper was his own, he would receive the failing grade. “Unless you call everybody in here and have all the people prove they wrote them, even the ones that went and copied out of the encyclopedia word for word, I don’t feel I should have to prove anything,” replied Wilson. He took the failing grade, tore the paper up, threw it in his teacher’s wastebasket, and walked out of school. He did not go back.

“The next morning,” Wilson remembered, “I got up and played basketball right underneath the principal’s window. As I look back on it, I see I wanted him to come out and say, ‘Why aren’t you in school?’ so I could tell someone. And he never came out.” Rather than tell his mother he had dropped out, Wilson spent every school day at the public library, reading some 300 books over the next four years. His reading eventually led him to pursue a career as a writer.

Wilson channeled his early literary efforts into poetry, saving his nickels for a twenty dollar used typewriter when he was nineteen. He began writing one-act plays during the height of the Black Power movement as a way “to politicize the community and raise consciousness.” He maintained that the “one thing that has best served me as a playwright is my background in poetry.” Wilson did not think of himself as a playwright, however, until he received his first writing grant in the late 1970’s. “I walked in,” he remembers of his first encounter at the Playwrights’ Center, “and there were sixteen playwrights. It was the first time I had dinner with other playwrights. It was the first time I began to think of myself as one.”

Do you think Wilson should have taken credit for his work on his history paper? What choice would you have made in his place?

What are the traits and values held by the female characters in *Gem of the Ocean*? How does the older generation (Aunt Ester) guide the next?

Compare Wilson’s story with *Gem of the Ocean*’s Garret Brown, an innocent man who is accused of stealing. What choice would you have made in that situation? What influences your decision making? Is it a guiding principal? Is it the consequences?

“It must have meant an awful lot for him to say that. He was willing to die to say that.”

Aunt Ester

Identify an issue that challenges your community now, at the start of the twenty-first century. Next, interview older relatives, neighbors or teachers to identify an issue from the year you were born. What was an important issue when your parents were your age? What was a challenge when your grandparents were your age? What was an issue for the same community at the start of the twentieth century? Do you see patterns? Do you see progress?

Neighborhood revitalization efforts are occurring all around the United States. Find a “success story.” How is “success” evaluated? What issues were considered in the renewal planning? What are the positive and negative outcomes of the redevelopment?

It was this grant that allowed Wilson to rework a one-act about a blues recording session into what became the full-length *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. When *Ma Rainey* ran for ten months in 1984, it was the first successful Broadway play by a Black writer since Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959.

Around this time, Wilson conceived of a truly grand-scale project: he would write ten plays, one for each decade of the twentieth century, each focusing on a particular issue that challenged the African American community at that time. Along the way he won two Pulitzer Prizes, for *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson finished his cycle by writing the beginning of the century – *Gem of the Ocean* – and the end of the century – *Radio Golf*.

Wilson was diagnosed with liver cancer in August of 2005 and died in October. Two weeks later Broadway’s Virginia Theatre in New York City was renamed the August Wilson Theatre, becoming the first Broadway theatre to be named for an African American. Today August Wilson is considered not only one of the greatest African American playwrights, but also one of the greatest American playwrights of our time.

(Richard J. Roberts, Dramaturg, Indiana Repertory Theatre)

Pittsburgh’s Hill District

Set in 1904, *Gem of the Ocean* features an emergent African American community and new arrivals from the south. African Americans began arriving in Pittsburgh’s Hill district between 1880 and 1910, urged north by industry recruiters who promised relief from the segregation laws of the south. The new arrivals joined an already diverse community of central and eastern European immigrants. Hill district residents supplied the labor for mines, mills, business and government, and created a flourishing commercial, artistic and social community which remained vibrant even through the Depression. From the 1930s to the 1950s the Hill district became one of the most energetic and powerful African American neighborhoods in the country. However, by August Wilson’s lifetime the Hill’s neighborhood infrastructure had deteriorated. In 1955 the federal government approved a redevelopment plan which demolished buildings on 95 acres and displaced more than 8000 residents: 1239 black families, 312 white. The evolving struggles of the Hill community provide the canvas for Wilson’s century-long cycle of plays.

*“I got memories go way back.
I’m carrying them for a lot of folk.”*

Aunt Ester

SPECIAL EVENT

During the production of *Gem of the Ocean*, Geva will present a reading of the next play in August Wilson’s cycle, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. The play is set in 1911 in a Pittsburgh boarding house. Herald Loomis is falsely jailed on a trumped-up charge and forced to work in a chain gain; upon his release he must find inspiration to re-enter the world, reclaim his identity, and raise his daughter.

The play will be read twice during the month of April:

**Geva Theatre Center
April 23, 7:30p.m.
Tickets are \$10, \$7 for students and can be reserved through the Geva Box Office.
(585-232-GEVA)**

**St. Luke Tabernacle Community Church
1261 Dewey Avenue
April 30, 7:30p.m.
Tickets are free of charge.**

Civil Disobedience

An act of civil disobedience is, by its very nature, a criminal act. It is the simple refusal to obey a law considered unjust. The United States of America is a country of laws, the network of rules and regulations in which we collectively place our faith in the running of the country. A willful disregard for these laws is often considered a statement about their worth or validity. The act will, it's assumed, bring attention to a perceived injustice and set about correcting it. This correction is often tied to the preservation of a person or group's sense of dignity and worth within the larger community – it may have to do with voting



regulations, forms of expression or financial inequalities. However, an act of civil disobedience may also result in legal repercussions such as imprisonment or fines, the alienation of supporters who believe in adhering to strictly legal means of protest and backlash from both within and outside of the community. The act is born of the overriding desire for change, regardless of the weight of the punishment at hand.

Civil disobedience is often communal, designed to achieve a sense of critical mass and bring enough attention to a cause so as to make it impossible to ignore. It frequently gathers importance from the anonymity of the person committing the act – the average person taking the time to deviate from his or her everyday routine in order to draw attention to an action can seem particularly powerful when multiplied several times over. Acts of civil disobedience often build from a long-running sense of frustration or grievance, drawing from a history of discontent that often validates the subsequent actions. This historical perspective may serve as a blueprint of sorts for the newer actions, as well as provide a sense of hope that change, however gradual and incremental, will eventually come.

How many different “laws” govern our lives (e.g. political, moral, religious)? Think of a situation that puts two sets of laws in conflict. How do we decide what law to follow?

Some acts of civil disobedience are committed by a group while others are committed by an individual. Discuss the merits of each. Could one be more effective than the other in a particular situation?

“You see Mr. Caesar, you can put the law on the paper but that don’t make it right.”

Aunt Ester

Consider the situation of the “conductors” of the Underground Railroad. What challenges did they face? Why would they decide to participate in the Underground Railroad?

The sense of community, anonymity and history are all present in *Gem of the Ocean*. The link of chain from his days of slavery that Solly Two Kings keeps with him – what he refers to as his “good luck piece” – is symbolic of the way that he gained his freedom in Canada (or Freedom-land, as it was sometimes called by former slaves). The metal link that Solly gives to Citizen Barlow is in and of itself a simple piece of forged iron. Once connected to a number of other similar pieces, however, it becomes a chain, capable of use for any number of things. The Underground Railroad that ushered Solly to freedom worked by a similar principal as slaves would be guided from one “station” to the next by a series of “conductors”. These stations and conductors were illegal, essential pieces in the theft and relocation of the slave owners’ “property.” Legal or otherwise, many former slaves and Northern whites regarded slavery as immoral, not in any way one of the “beautiful splendors” that Aunt Ester relays to Citizen during his voyage to the City of Bones.



Is there ever a proper time to refuse to obey a law? What might motivate you to consider such an action? What would prevent you? Are things like community or anonymity a factor?

What other examples of civil disobedience have you encountered or studied?

It is in the City of Bones where Citizen begins to comprehend the actions of those who have come before him – the conductors of the Underground Railroad, the dead whose bones sustain the underwater city, the man who died in the river near the mill because of a bucket of stolen nails and a lie. Aunt Ester tells Citizen as he looks out over the City of Bones that he has a duty to life. Implicit in this it seems is the notion that everyone has a similar duty, part of which is the building from the actions of the past and forwarding them on to those yet to come. It’s a lesson understood by Citizen who, with his soul freshly washed by the waters of his voyage, retrieves the hat, coat and walking stick of the recently-departed Solly and sets out to help Solly’s sister Eliza make her way up North.

*“The law’s got certain rights.
That’s what keeps the peace.”*

Caesar

From the Composer



Creating a magical ritual at the heart of a play should not resemble staging a magic show. *Gem of the Ocean*'s composer Michael Keck explains that August Wilson's play requires the cast and audience to participate in a true journey. The City of Bones is conjured from history, collective knowledge, and visceral experience, not from clouds of smoke and trap doors. With that goal in mind, he created sound to transport the audience by sharing information or by evoking new ideas or emotion, never attempting to "sound like magic."

Keck composed the music that the performers sing as required by the script, and the director suggested the addition of vocals to be sung in

the transitions between scenes. Continuity would help to ground the coming magic as something the characters themselves created and owned. Keck took time to acquaint himself with each actor's natural singing voice, and intended that the quality of their singing during daily activities such as chopping vegetables would not seem different from the voice they would contribute to the ritual later in the piece.

Keck began as a historian, investigating music from the turn of the twentieth century and the sounds that August Wilson references in his writing: slave songs and spirituals, old blues and folk tunes. He collected lyrics so that appropriate phrases of text could be selected for each of the transitions, which he then set to music. Secret meanings were often hidden in the slave songs; lyrics about "crossing the wilderness," or finding "Jesus," "heaven," or the "promised land" were often coded references about escaping to the north. Embedded significances recur in much of Wilson's writing, and Keck took this as his cue in choosing significant lyrics for the transitional pieces.

The soundscape for Citizen's journey to the City of Bones was designed to "put the audience in Citizen's head, to help them experience the ritual as he does." Here history merged with contemporary composition, since Keck wanted to create a timeless sound that both Citizen and today's audience could share. Keck composes using a surprising variety of layers: humming, group harmonies, solos, shouts, moans, and spoken text; his score includes both recorded vocals and those provided live by the actors in each performance. Several ancient West African percussion instruments, such as the *bougarabou*, are featured. Textures from other sounds are woven into the musical journey: the creaking of the ship, flapping of the sails, the rattle of chains and the crack of whips. Keck also composed ambient sound, sounds which are "felt, not heard." When Citizen confesses his guilt to the gatekeeper ("It was me. I done it.") Keck says the "molecules change, even if we don't realize we heard anything."

"I feel like I got a hole inside me."

Citizen

Sometimes the composer and the director use the transitional music to linger on the mood or idea of the previous scene, so that the audience might continue to consider the action just passed. In other cases the sound is used as a bridge to push forward, either in time or in mood, toward a new scene. Listen to the character of the transitional music throughout the play. When is it haunting? Rousing? Where does the music want our attention to travel?

Discuss the uses of musical scores, soundscape, and diegetic (actual) sound in storytelling. Look for examples in this play and other performances or films you have viewed. Chose a passage from literature you are reading and decide how you think it could be scored for performance.

The Middle Passage

The middle passage was the second leg of the slave trade route, known as the triangular trade. The first leg brought goods such as iron, gunpowder, and brandy from Europe to Africa. The Middle Passage brought Africans to the Americas, where they were exchanged for tobacco, sugar, and other goods. The final leg of the voyage carried those products back to Europe. During the peak years of the slave trade, between 1740 and 1810, Africa supplied 60,000 captives a year – outnumbering Europeans migrating to the New World. The ships carrying slaves were hideously overcrowded, with 300 to 400



people stripped naked, chained together, and packed tightly into small compartments with little ventilation. Historians believe that between ten and twenty percent of Africans transported died during the voyage, from disease or suicide, and far more were severely weakened or maimed. Hundreds of thousands of bodies – the dead and the near dead – were hoisted overboard, bodies left to rot in the sea without proper burial.

Aunt Ester's birth date coincides with the shipment of the first slaves to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, making her 285 years old. Discuss the significance of Wilson's choice to link her to the Africans' arrival.

There are numerous locations around greater Rochester that were used as safe-houses to shelter fugitive slaves; the most common route used the "lines" that led from Henrietta through Monroe County and into Rochester. Research and discuss the history of the Underground Railroad in our area.

The Underground Railroad

A system to assist runaway slaves escape to the North and Canada seems to have begun toward the end of the 18th century. This vast, loosely organized network was composed predominantly of free blacks and local groups of white abolitionists, often Quakers. In 1831 it was dubbed "The Underground Railroad," after the then-emerging steam railroads. The homes and businesses where fugitives would rest and eat were called "stations" and "depots" and were run by "stationmasters;" those who contributed money or goods were "stockholders" and the "conductor" was responsible for moving fugitives from one station to the next. The fugitives would move at night, generally traveling between 10 and 20 miles to the next station. Fugitives would also travel by train or boat – conveyances that sometimes required payment. Funds were also needed to improve the appearance of the runaways so they would not attract suspicion. In addition to soliciting money, vigilance committees in the larger towns of the North provided food, lodging and helped the fugitives settle into a community by helping them find jobs and providing letters of recommendation. According to one estimate, the South lost 100,000 slaves to the Underground Railroad between 1810 and 1850.

*"I been to the City of Bones.
It's something like you ain't ever seen"*

Solly Two Kings

Emancipation and Migration

With the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, and the Civil Rights Act of 1866, blacks were freed from slavery and given the rights of citizenship. However, the white governance of the South prioritized control of the former slaves; a series of laws known as the Black Codes reflected racism and fear. African Americans were limited to specific areas to rent or buy property. They were forced to work for white employers at low wages whether they wanted to or not; non-working African Americans were arrested for vagrancy. Those who wanted to leave were often prevented from taking available transportation. Fines were imposed for offenses such as insulting speech or gesture, violation of curfew and possession of fire arms.

As white Southerners realized that their control was to be weakened by Reconstruction, secret societies such as the Knights of the White Camellia, The White Brotherhood, the Pale Faces and the Ku Klux Klan promoted white supremacy through illegal and terrorist tactics. They used intimidation, force, murder and lynching to deprive blacks of political equality. Believing that conditions for freedom were better in the Northern states, more than 400,000 blacks left the South between the Civil War and World War I. However, many Northern whites viewed the rising black population with alarm, and white mobs entering black communities destroyed property, beat, injured or killed inhabitants, and forced many to flee. Difficult tasks of social reform and integration had only just begun.

The Mill System

From 1875-1945 Pittsburgh was a manufacturing metropolis with steel as its primary product. To produce cheap, high-volume steel, mill owners needed a steady supply of unskilled laborers. After an 1875 strike crippled the iron industry in Pittsburgh, southern African Americans were recruited to work in western Pennsylvania's mills. Since African American workers didn't trust unions and weren't accepted by the white union organizers, they provided steel mill owners a potential weapon to end strikes. Most were working to carve out a life for themselves by whatever means possible, and employment at the mills promised a respite from farm labor, better pay and a chance to be treated as real U.S. citizens. The reality was not ideal. Mill workers worked twelve-hour days for low wages and lived in cramped tenements owned by the mills. Renting housing to the workers was an effective way of keeping employees, since a worker would be less likely to quit his job if it also meant he would lose his home. Work conditions were often dangerous, and there was no compensation in the case of death or injury.



By the Emancipation Proclamation 3,063,392 slaves were set free. The remainder were emancipated by the Thirteenth Amendment, making the total freed slaves 3,895,172. How could your class represent those numbers of people? If one slave were freed every second, how long from today would it take to free them all? Or if each slave were represented by an object, how far would the line of objects reach? Devise a project to commemorate those lives. Alternatively, compare these numbers with the number of lives impacted by other historical events you have studied.

“They don’t understand the mill is what hold everything together.”

Caesar

Resources

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John Quinlivan
Managing Director

Nan Hildebrandt
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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/>

The National Geographic site dedicated to the Underground Railroad features an interactive journey for students and extensive resources for teachers.

<http://www.freedomcenter.org/learn/>

Find current news, recent historical research, video clips, links and other resources on this site maintained by the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia>

Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery: the companion site to the PBS documentary explores the odyssey of African slaves in America, from the arrival of Europeans in Africa to the American Civil War.

<http://www.clpgh.org/exhibit/neighborhoods/hill>

The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's website features portraits and photographs from the Hill district (although most are from later in the century than the play's setting) and an extensive reading list about the neighborhood.

History and Context

Slaves in the Family by Edward Ball

The Underground Railroad: First-person Narratives of Escapes to Freedom in the North by Charles L. Blockson

The Middle Passage by Tom Feelings (a collection of artwork)

The African-American Century: How Black Americans Have Shaped Our Country by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West.

Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troubling Word by Randall Kennedy

Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery by Charles Johnson and Patricia Smith (The book is the companion to the PBS series, which is available on VHS and DVD.)

His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker, Former Slave and Conductor on The Underground Railroad edited by Stuart Seely Sprague.

The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters by William Still

About August Wilson

August Wilson edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom.

August Wilson: A Casebook edited by Marilyn Elkins.

August Wilson and Black Aesthetics edited by Dana A. Williams and Sandra G. Shannon.

The Ground On Which I Stand by August Wilson (Observations from Wilson's address to a national theatre conference in 1996)

All titles are available through the Monroe County Library System

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"Told them the hand of justice was at the gate but the people still had to open it."

Solly Two Kings

Tickets Available for Public Performances

Gem of The OCEAN

April 3rd thru April 29th
Recommended for ages 13+

Tickets available by calling (585) 232-Geva (4382)
or online at www.gevatheatre.org



Geva
Theatre
Center

75 Woodbury Boulevard
Rochester, New York 14607
Box Office: (585) 232-Geva (4382)
Education Department: (585) 232-1366, ext. 3058
www.gevatheatre.org