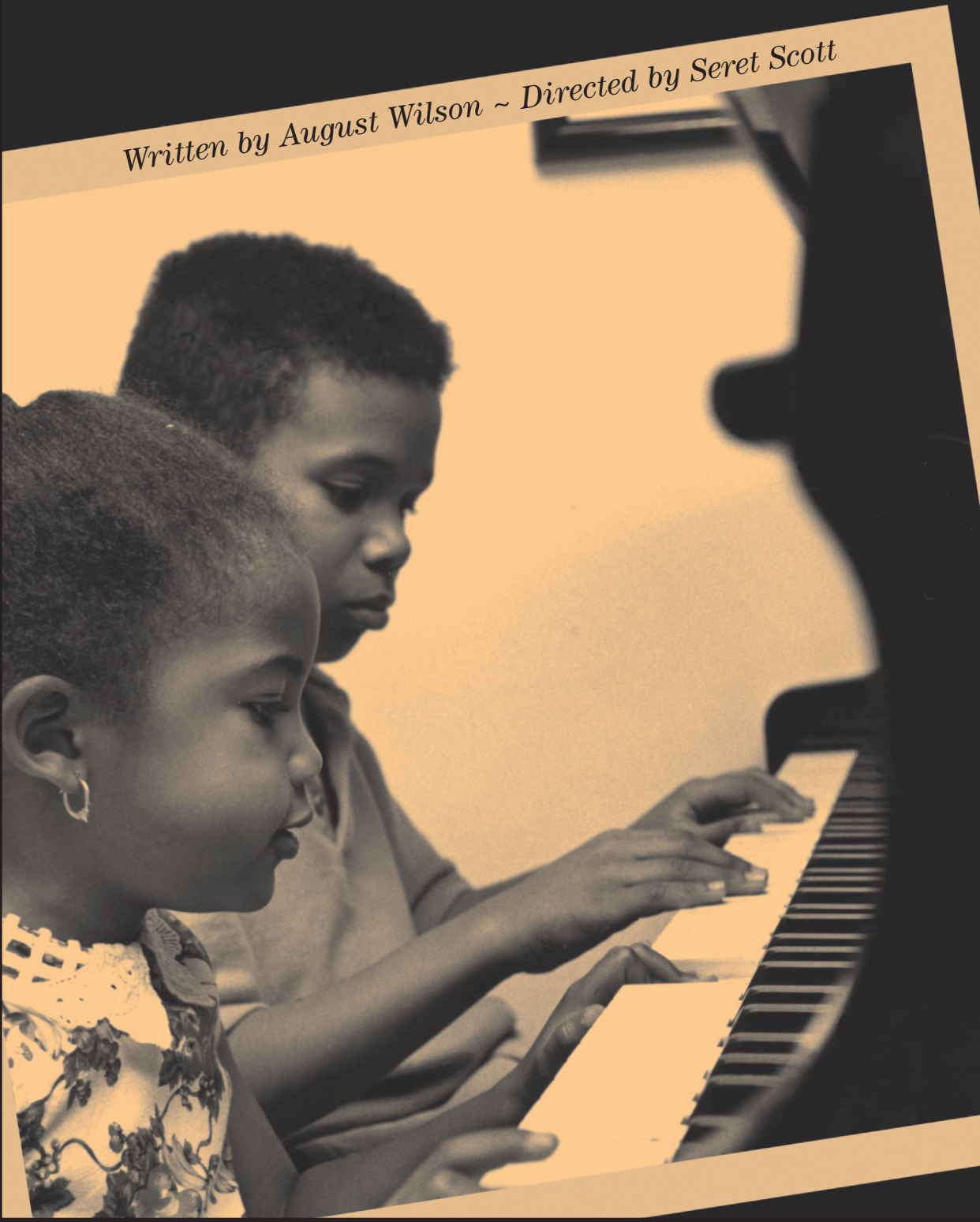


THE PIANO LESSON

Written by August Wilson ~ Directed by Seret Scott



P.L.A.Y.

(Performance

= Literature

+ Art + You)

Student

Matinee

Series

2007-2008

Season

thirty
35
years



Geva
Theatre
Center

Great Theatre Lives Here

Dear Educators,

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Theatre depends on the first-person narrative. We're forever trying to get inside each character's perspective, or to understand big ideas in terms of individual lives. August Wilson's plays, collectively spanning the entire twentieth century, are perfect examples; *The Piano Lesson* expresses generations of history in an immediate and pragmatic debate between siblings.

Wilson's own words about his work are documented in many interviews, and you'll find plenty of excerpts throughout these pages. Indeed, we've been pretty liberal with quotations in this guide, inviting you and your students into the first-person perspective of, not only the playwright, but the director and designers as well. Our artistic collaborators must always make personal connections to a text, and we hope our student audiences will join us in that same process. We look forward to initiating that personal interaction during the preparatory workshops coming to most of your classrooms in April.

This guide also features one other set of voices. Last year, we received a collection of wonderfully candid and individual responses to our production of *Gem of the Ocean* from students at John Marshall High School. Since then, three passionate English teachers from that school (the wonderful Eileen Coughlin, Sharron Dow, and Cassandra Walsh) have committed to sharing the rest of our August Wilson productions with their successive classes over the next four years, and to helping the students express and document their responses to each play. Some of their students' initial responses and questions surrounding *The Piano Lesson* appear in this guide, and we think you'll find that their thoughts both mirror the artists' ideas and reflect some of the curiosity alive in other classrooms. We're always listening for your students' voices; let us know what they have to say.

Sincerely,



Kathryn Moroney
Associate Director of Education

Cast of Characters

Doaker

Boy Willie

Berniece

Maretha

Lymon

Wining Boy

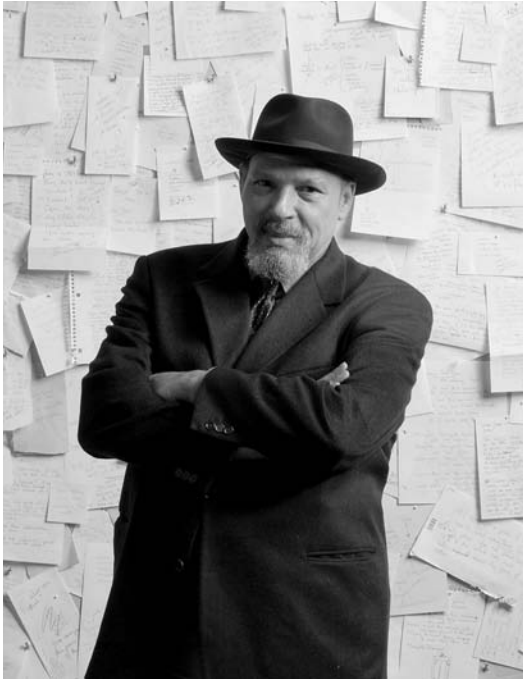
Avery

Grace

Participation in this production and supplemental activities suggested in this guide supports the following NYS Learning Standards:
A: 2, 3, 4
ELA: 1, 2, 3
SS: 1

"Everybody got stones in their passway. You got to step over them or walk around them. You picking them up and carrying with you." - Avery

Why a century of plays?



August Wilson

August Wilson has said, “If you had a connection to your grandparents and understood their struggle to survive, you wouldn’t be out there in the street killing someone over fifteen dollars worth of narcotics. You have to know your history. Then you’ll have a purposeful presence in the world.” Do you agree or disagree with his conclusion?

August Wilson (1945-2005) is considered one of America’s greatest playwrights. Self-taught, Wilson described his writing process as letting characters speak to him, listening to the voices and stories collected throughout his life. Those voices, many from the Hill District of Pittsburgh where he was born, populate ten plays, including Pulitzer Prize winners *The Piano Lesson* and *Fences*. Wilson explained:

“Somewhere along the way it dawned on me that I was writing one play for each decade. Once I became conscious of that, I realized I was trying to focus on what I felt were the most important issues confronting black Americans for that decade, so ultimately they could stand as a record of black experience over the past hundred years presented in the form of dramatic literature. What you end up with is a kind of review, or re-examination, of history. Collectively they can read, certainly not as a total history, but as some historical moments.”

In a 1989 interview Wilson recalled, “I was talking with my daughter, who’s eighteen.... They were having a black forum, and the things they were talking about reminded me of some of the things

we used to talk about in the sixties – Timbuktu and all the great African civilizations. There’s nothing wrong with that, but you should start by making connections to your parents and your grandparents and working backwards. We’re not in Africa anymore, and we’re not going back to Africa. You have to understand your grandparents. I like to say I’m standing in my grandfather’s shoes.”

Of the Hill District itself, once known as “Little Harlem,” Wilson said, “Most of it is no longer there. At one time it was a very thriving community, albeit a depressed community....I went out into the world, into that community, to learn what it meant to be a man, to learn whatever it is that the community had to teach me. And it was there I met lifelong friends who taught me and raised me, so to speak. I still have family there. So I go back as often as I can. I go and I stand on a corner, and say, “Yeah, this is me.” Wilson referred to the cycle as his own personal history. “It’s my story....I claim the right to tell it in any way I choose because it’s, in essence, my autobiography; only it’s my autobiography of myself and my ancestors.”

While each play stands as an independent piece, many issues and themes run through the cycle, just as those issues run through the twentieth century. To help track the progression of history and ideas, our guide for *Gem of the Ocean* may offer additional connections; find it online at http://www.gevatheatrecenter.org/education/study_guide_archive.php

Geva will present a reading of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, which precedes *The Piano Lesson* in the cycle, on May 5 at 7:30 pm. Tickets for this event are free but must be reserved in advance through the Box Office: (585) 232-Geva. All students and teachers are warmly encouraged to join us.

August Wilson 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)

“To understand about that piano ... you got to go back to slavery time.” - Doaker

What inspired this Lesson?

Looking for a full synopsis? Visit “Geva for Teachers” on our website: www.gevatheatrecenter.org

Wilson credited “4 Bs” for inspiring his work: the Blues, (Romare Bearden, (Jorge Luis) Borges and (Amiri) Baraka. Research Wilson’s thoughts about any or all of these. Can you find their influence in his writing? (Also note the discussion of the Blues on page 8 of this guide.)

About Bearden’s collages Wilson said, “My response was visceral. I was looking at myself in ways I hadn’t thought of before and have never ceased to think of since.” Visit a wonderful website dedicated to students’ exploration of Bearden’s work at: <http://www.nga.gov/education/classroom/bearden/>



The Piano Lesson, Romare Bearden

“I generally start with an idea, something I want to say. In *The Piano Lesson*, the question was, ‘Can one acquire a sense of self-worth by denying one’s past?’ (I think I place myself on one side of the question.) So then, how do you put this question on stage, how do you narrate it? Next I got the title from a Romare Bearden painting called *The Piano Lesson*....

“While writing *The Piano Lesson* I came up with the idea of tracing the history of the piano for a hundred and thirty-five years, with the idea that it had been used to purchase members of this family from slavery. But I didn’t know how that was going to tie in....I discovered it as the characters began to talk: one guy wants to sell the piano, the sister doesn’t want to. I thought, why doesn’t she want to sell it? Finding all those things helped me find the story....**I’m not sure the play’s about the idea I started with. I think the central question ended up being, ‘How do you use your legacy?’”**

Wilson’s questions are both historical and personal. Consider Wilson’s comments in an interview with Bill

Moyers from 1988, the year following the first performances of *The Piano Lesson*:

Wilson: I enjoy the benefit of the historical perspective. You can look back to a character in 1936, for instance, and you can see him going down a particular path that you know did not work out for that character. Part of what I’m trying to do is to see some of the choices that we as blacks in America have made. Maybe we have made some incorrect choices. By writing about that, you can illuminate the choices.

Moyers: Give me an example of a choice that you think may have been the wrong one.

Wilson: I think we should have stayed in the South. We attempted to transplant what in essence was an emerging culture, a culture that had grown out of our experience of two hundred years as slaves in the South. The cities of the urban North have not been hospitable. If we had stayed in the South, we could have strengthened the culture.

Moyers: But wouldn’t it have been asking a great deal of people for them to stay where they were the victims of such discrimination and oppression?

Wilson: I’m not sure, because the situation existed very much like that in the North, too. We came to the North, and we’re still victims of discrimination and oppression in the North. The real reason that the people left was a search for jobs, because the agriculture, cotton agriculture in particular, could no longer support us. But the move to the cities has not been a good move.

“If everybody stay in one place I believe this would be a better world.” - Doaker

What was happening in the 30s?

This cover from a 1938 issue of *The New Yorker* reflects the increased presence of African-Americans in the northern cities; the image of the sleeping African-American under the watchful eye of the white officer suggests the apprehension which white New Yorkers may have felt at the presence of so many blacks in what they considered to be their city.

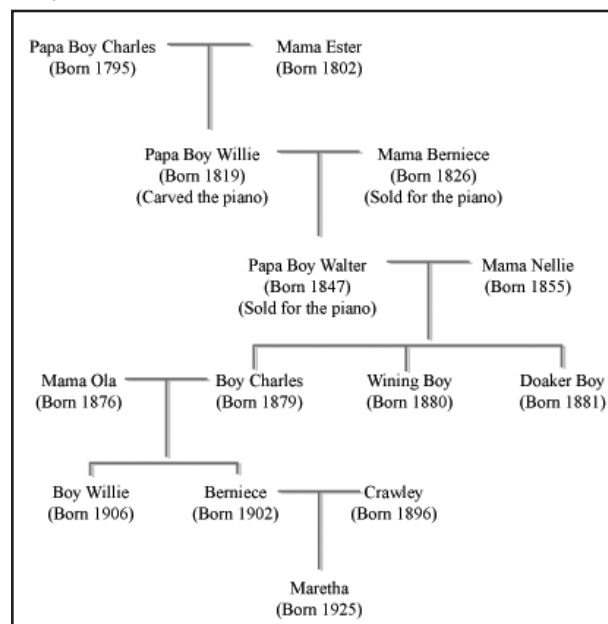


During the first three decades of the 1900s, represented by the first three plays of Wilson's cycle, many African-Americans came to the North to pursue their new destinies. By the mid-thirties, the peak of migration from the South had passed, and African-American communities were firmly established in many northern cities. Their cultural identity was becoming associated with an era of popular swing, big band, and jazz artists. However, "musicians like Duke Ellington performed for all white audiences at such places as the Cotton Club in Harlem, an ironic reminder of slavery when Blacks fiddled while their masters danced."⁽¹⁾ In the wake of the Great Depression the struggle to find jobs and make ends meet was dire for much of the urban population, and the emergent African-American communities were particularly vulnerable. With the passage of difficult

decades in the north, some members of those communities came to question what had been left behind. In *The Piano Lesson* we meet characters who are eager to return to the South; it is the first time that any of Wilson's characters consider the South as a place that might support a positive future.

However, despite the decline of such organizations as the Ku Klux Klan (which had enjoyed renewed support during the 1910's and 1920's) racism was as strong as ever in the southern states. African-Americans also found themselves at the center of political conflict. While the South had been solidly Democratic since the Civil War, the Roosevelt administration actively appealed to African-Americans to join their party, thus alienating many Southerners. The growing divide between Northern and Southern Democrats over the issue of race came to a head in April 1937, when a bitter fight over an anti-lynching bill took place in the House of Representatives. In the wake of a gruesome double lynching in Mississippi (only one of more than a hundred which had taken place since 1930) the House passed the anti-lynching resolution, despite the opposition of all but one Southern member. Declaring that the South had been "deserted by the Democrats of the North," former Roosevelt supporters in the Senate carried out a six-week-long filibuster which resulted in the withdrawal of the bill in February 1938. The bitter political fight was indicative of the racism and regional conflict still firmly entrenched in America in the 1930s.⁽²⁾

Each generation faces evolving challenges. Ask students who have read the play to sketch out a family tree for the named characters in the script; you may wish to share this family tree with students who have not. Compare the lifetimes of these characters with a timeline of African-Americans' history in the U.S.



Charles family tree

Sources: 1 *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey* by Kim Pereira.

2 "Urban and Urbane: *The New Yorker* magazine in the 1930s" a website created by the American Studies Program at the University of Virginia. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG02/NewYorker/newyorkerhome.html>

"You always talking about your daddy but you ain't never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama." - Berniece

How does the stage shape the story?

August Wilson has reflected on how a written script provides the foundation for the theatrical experience that takes place in a specific time and space:

“I think it was the ability of the theatre to communicate ideas and extol virtues that drew me to it. And also I was, and remain, fascinated by the idea of an audience as a community of people who gather willingly to bear witness. A novelist writes a novel and people read it. But reading is a solitary act. While it may elicit a varied and personal response, the communal nature of the audience is like having five hundred people read your novel and respond to it at the same time. I find that thrilling.”

“I think I found the one perfect metaphor – which is the music, the piano. One of the things I started out with was the idea of putting this piano onstage, and the audience has to sit there and look at it. It looks strange. And then you begin to find out more, and more, and more. Every time you look at it, you see something different. You learn it was stolen. You learn this happened, and that happened. And every new piece of information you find out about the piano, the piano changes. Hopefully your attitude toward the piano keeps changing, which makes the piano get bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and it becomes more and more and more important.”

“Symbolism is one of the tools of art, and I think it helps in creating metaphors and taking a very large experience and focusing it down to something more manageable.”



set rendering
by Russell
Metheny

“An earthy yellow pierces or seeps through from the outside world to energize the space. The walls of the set itself are designed to allow light either to glow or to pierce the atmosphere. With the piano as the central iconic object, all the other details, from sink to parlor chaise, become iconic as well, with their own history and character. The staircase and its windows frame the piano, allowing varying atmospheric light of day or night to bathe the room. Above the archway of the staircase, a window, closed, dark, and oddly haunting, gives a poetic mystery to the ‘ghost’ that haunts the family’s lives.”

– Russell Metheny, Scenic Designer

Two symbolic elements, the piano and the window (mentioned below), are placed at the center of this design. Choose another work of literature you have recently read, and identify an important setting. If you were designing the set for that story, what two elements or objects would you wish to make prominent in the space, and why?

The designer explains that the walls of this set were intended to work with the lighting design. Watch for three different “looks” or moods achieved with lighting within the play (not including the scene changes). When did each occur? What was happening in the story at that time?

“I don’t play that piano cause I don’t want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in this house.” - Berniece

Objects and obstacles: How will you use your legacy?

What happens when a family disagrees? Do they have the obligation to come to consensus? Must one perspective always be right and the other wrong?

“The character Boy Willie reminds me of someone that I know. They both are stubborn and don’t listen and always gotta learn things the hard way.”

–Tyree Duggans

“My favorite character is Berniece because she is not scared to do anything. She is a real serious person that doesn’t mind what people really say about her.”

– Sara DeWolf

“The lesson is never let a piano sit in the corner not being played.”

– Aaron Owens

John Marshall High School students

“Have you ever noticed the look on your grandparents’ faces when they pull out a family heirloom?...When things happen in the family it’s kind of like it’s ‘carved’ into the family history forever.”

Kennisha Stewart, John Marshall High School

We asked director Seret Scott, “How do you hope young people may connect with this production? Does it have anything to say to them?” She answered:

“Young people may look at an old quilt, a family holy book, a rocking chair, one of many ancient items that have stayed in their family line for a hundred years and wonder...of what use is this item to me? Perhaps there is no tangible use for the item today but the connection to their personal ancestry is immeasurable. The story I’m telling in *The Piano Lesson* is how one family finally embraces its past and allows it to clarify the present and illuminate the future.

“The Charles family relationship is very compelling. Like so many families, siblings Boy Willie and Berniece are on very different sides of an issue, in this case, what to do with a piano carved with their rich family history. Both of them recognize the importance of the piano to their familial past, both have strong ideas about the role of the piano as the family moves forward.”



Brown family silverware

How often do we take the time to consider where family heirlooms came from and how they ended up in our homes? John Marshall High School student Patrick Brown tells the story of his family’s silverware:

“In the late 1800s my grandmother’s mom was a slave. Her side of the family got the last name Brown through their slave owners. She worked in the house. One day, Anthony Brown, the slave owner, gave his wife Sue Brown some expensive silver and gold utensils. My grandmother and her mom would eat with them all the time when no one was around. Sue Brown and my great grandmother became really close

and Sue wanted to thank her for everything for over the years. So, my great-grandmother told her how much she loved the gold and silver forks, knives and spoons. So she told her to take them. When my great-grandmother died, she gave them to my grandma, and when she passed, they were given to my mom. Every occasion we sit down and eat with them.”

August Wilson himself corrected a frequent misconception about Boy Willie’s attitude toward the piano and his plan to sell it:

“He doesn’t want to sell off part of his history. Quite the contrary. Boy Willie, not his sister, is the one who embraces his history. He’s not afraid of the piano. She can’t bring herself to touch it. He doesn’t need this piece of wood to remind him of who he is, to remind him of who his daddy was, to remind him of his daddy’s heroics – he doesn’t need any of that. But he does need some land. He does need to build a future.”

“That piano ain’t doing nobody no good.” - Boy Willie

Should we believe in ghosts?

“Who are the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog? What does Sutter want Boy Willie for? Did Berniece really see Sutter’s Ghost?”

– ShaToya Morgan

“Was she dreaming about the ghost or did she really see him?”

– Marcelleus D. Frost

“Why doesn’t Boy Willie believe Berniece when she said she saw Sutter’s ghost?”

– Valiencina Thomas

Students from John Marshall High School shared some initial responses and curiosity as they began to read *The Piano Lesson* in class. A supernatural, mystical or magical influence appears in many of August Wilson’s plays, and it challenges us to understand how that presence co-exists with his apparent historical realism. Is a ghost literal as well as symbolic? Are characters emotionally or actually haunted?



Roslyn Ruff as Berniece (photo by Megan McKinney)

“I try to keep all of the elements of the culture alive in the work, and myth is certainly a part of it.” Reflecting on the ghosts that appear in his plays, Wilson observed, “In Africa there’s ancestor worship, among kinds of religious practices. That’s given blacks, especially southern blacks, the idea of ghosts, magic and superstition...relating to the spirit worlds is very much a part of African and Afro-American culture.”

What does the past sound like?

Not every character in *The Piano Lesson* is visible on stage – and yet all of them make their presence felt. We see the actors in their various roles and even the piano itself is a character – residing quite literally at the center the set – and yet the story would not be complete without the sounds heard throughout the production, from the otherworldly groans and shrieks of a fitful ghost to the often joyful and sometimes weary blues that make their home in all of August Wilson’s work.

The story of the Charles family and the piano at the heart of their journey began years earlier on the plantation of the Sutter family. And it is the ghost of one of the recently deceased Sutters who has taken up residence in the Charles household. But how does an unseen ghost become a character? How does a phantom make its presence known? According to Todd Reischman, the sound designer for this production, the ghost of Sutter needed to become “a real character in the story present enough for the other characters to interact with” using only the elements of sound, light and imagination. To accomplish this, Reischman started with a collection of approximately ten minutes worth of various sounds made by an acoustic bass. He then took these sounds and manipulated them with effects such as echo, delay, pitch shifting and reverb to develop the sense of Sutter’s presence, beginning with a series of “unintelligible, almost subliminal whispers” that eventually give way to the “percussive and stabbing [and] ... downright destructive” emanations of the wrathful ghost as his claims to the instrument are repeatedly challenged. With a “low bowed note” issuing from the floorboards of the house, and serving as the base or “bed” of Sutter’s “voice,” the ghosts’ passive warnings gradually give way to a more aggressive and prominent tone.

Wilson: “I would go and listen to the music...and find out what their ideas and attitudes are about the situation and the time in which they live.” Choose a song that has been popular within the last few years that you think reflects current times. What point of view do you think it reflects? Can you do the same for another time in history?

Imagine that you were the sound designer for this production. How would you make Sutter’s ghost sound? Which instruments and technology would you use?

“I wish I would see Sutter’s ghost. Give me a chance to put a whupping on him.” - Boy Willie

Equally invisible but unquestionably present in *The Piano Lesson* are the strains of the blues, particularly its Southern variations. Here, too, the bass is used by Reischman but not in a spectral way, touching, instead, on “solemn and introspective scene[s] ... and ... a clumsy late night romantic encounter.” He created music that purposely did not include piano, choosing “to keep the [instrument] as a unique ... character in the story.” Although *The Piano Lesson* is set in Pittsburgh, the music employed throughout the production is rooted in the Deep South, particularly the Mississippi Delta where the Charles’s story in America begins. To create the music that moves us from one scene to the next, Reischman drew on his own history as a fan of blues music as well as the guidance of the director. He took particular strides to remain “true to the ... sophistication (or lack thereof) of the characters” by using instruments similar in quality

to those that may have been played by the Charles family – a metallic sounding snare drum played with wire brushes, for example, to recall a gritty or raw Southern version of the music rather than the cleaner, more polished sounds of the Northern blues. He also “overlooked some simple timing flaws and even a sour note here and there” - alerting us that, with the exception of Wining Boy, none of the Charles’s are professional musicians, using music as a means of personal expression and mutual communication.



Folk Musicians, Romare Bearden

“The blues” is a wide-ranging term encompassing a number of styles and sub-genres often based on geography and the idiosyncrasies of the performer. The form grew, in part, from music brought over by African slaves and often contained elements of spirituals, field hollers, call-and-response and even European harmonic structures. With their genesis on the plantations, the lyrics of these songs often served dual purposes and were laden with double meanings and coded references to escape routes to the North, mistreatment at the hands of those in power and (sometimes) exaggerated sexual encounters. As at least a partial oral tradition, it was not uncommon for songs to reference legends such as the story of Stagger Lee, a black cab driver and pimp named Lee Shelton convicted of murder. The crime was quickly immortalized in a folk song that has since been re-recorded hundreds of times. Stagger Lee has become an archetypal embodiment of a black man who is streetwise, potentially violent and often defiant of white authority. These story-songs were easily circulated and modified according to the whim of the singer. The lyrics often contained historical references, sometimes obscure, sometimes more general. When Wining Boy sings that he “never knew what misery was till [he] lit on old Arkansas” and worked six months for a “rascal” named Joe Herrin, he may be referring to the fact that on Christmas Day, 1912 the Governor of Arkansas pardoned 360 state prisoners, most of them black. Had Wining Boy been working in Arkansas, a former slave state with a less than stringent penal system, his time most likely would have been difficult at best. Lyrics like these give us, perhaps, a small glimpse into both a private history as well as a public one.

Parchman Farm, the prison farm where Boy Willie, Lymon, Doaker and Wining Boy have all spent time, is mentioned often in older blues songs – Bukka White’s “Parchman Farm Blues” is perhaps the best known. Why would this place attain such status? Are there any modern-day equivalents?

Why would August Wilson choose to use the blues as the main musical style for this play? Consider other predominantly African-American music forms of the 1930s and how their use might affect the telling of the Charles family’s story.

“Sometime it seem like the only thing to do is shoot the piano player cause he the cause of all the trouble I’m having.” - Wining Boy

What does it mean?

Jumping the broom – an African wedding ritual which began on pre-Civil War plantations as an alternative to Christian or civil ceremonies which were prohibited among slaves. The ceremony signified the couple’s entrance into a new life as a family by symbolically “sweeping away” their respective pasts.

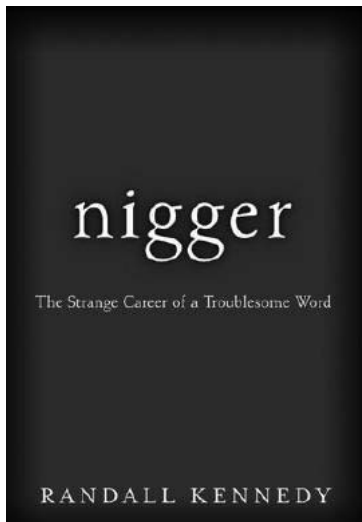
The Yellow Dog – refers to the yellow Yazoo Delta Railroad cars that criss-crossed much of the South as well as the rail lines that lead to the North. Musician and songwriter W.C. Handy said that he heard a man in Tutwiler, Mississippi singing a song about “going where the Southern cross the Dog,” a reference to the Southern Line Rail which crossed the Yellow Dog in Moorhead, Mississippi. Handy wrote a song about this crossing (“The Yellow Dog Rag”) and it is now considered the first use of blues harmonies.

Irene Kaufman Settlement House – is where Maretha takes classes to learn how to play piano. Settlement houses were neighborhood outreach centers that provided recreational and educational programs for the community. The Settlement House Movement began in poor areas of London in the late 1800s and quickly spread to America. They were often the only safe havens in downtrodden or disreputable neighborhoods.

“Don’t show your color” – in a 1993 interview, August Wilson said “It means ‘Don’t act out.’ It really means ‘Don’t be yourself.’ It means ‘Go down there and try to act the best you can, like you see white folks acting.’ It was really used as ‘Be good.’ But you see, if you say showing your color is bad, you’re saying, ‘Don’t go down there and act like a nigger; don’t go down there and act black.’ Why would you tell a black kid that? How else are they supposed to act?”

John D. Rockefeller – entrepreneurial Boy Willie references the American industrialist who revolutionized the petroleum industry and defined the structure of modern philanthropy. He founded the Standard Oil Company and eventually became the world’s first billionaire – he is often considered the richest person in history. After his retirement, he used his fortune to create a systematic approach to philanthropy through the use of foundations which had a major effect on medicine, education and scientific research.

Why that word?



“That’s part of the language. I’ve heard people say that all my life, and I hear people say it now in an attempt to be authentic, to tell it like it is. We’re all sensitive, both black and white, to that word ...” - August Wilson

The word “nigger” makes its appearance in the first scene of *The Piano Lesson* and remains a presence throughout the story. To some, it’s a coarse word, indicative of an ugly nature and carrying a burdensome past, “like a red rag to a bull” according to Langston Hughes; to others, it’s an accepted part of modern life and contemporary language. The writer Helen Jackson Lee referred to it as “a piece-of-clay word that you could shape ... to express your feelings.”

The word, traced back to its Latin root, *niger*, simply means the color black. By the early 1600s, variations could be found in records of shipments of Africans to Virginia. And by the mid-nineteenth century, it had assumed the weight of at least some its present-day meanings.

In 1936, the year of the play’s setting, the word enjoyed a particular acceptance – it could be easily found in literature and song titles (written by both black and white writers) as well as newspaper stories and court transcripts. Today, the word often has a polarizing effect as it is considered extremely offensive by large segments of society yet is still in widespread use throughout American culture. In his 2002 book *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, Randall Kennedy asks “How should nigger be defined?” A question, it seems, with no shortage of answers.

“You trying to tell me a woman can’t be nothing without a man.” - Berniece

Resources

Staff

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Mark Cuddy
Artistic Director

Greg Weber
Managing Director

Nan Hildebrandt
Executive Director

Websites

<http://www.nga.gov/education/classroom/bearden/>

A fabulous teaching site about Romare Bearden's work with information and exercises

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/fshowhome.html>

America from the Great Depression to WWII: A Library of Congress digital photograph archive 1935-1945 - A large photo collection with an emphasis on small town and rural Americans during the Great Depression.

<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/collections/digitized/african-american-women/>

This site features collections of slave letters and documents written by African-American women as well as links to related resources.

<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/african/intro.html>

The Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Black History and Culture - This site features narratives by ex-slaves as well as information about the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance.

Books

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

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansbury debuted on Broadway in 1959. An interesting piece to compare and contrast, it also depicts an African-American family deciding how to use their legacy. It has also been represented on film (1961, 1989, and most recently a made-for-television film which premiered this February).

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)

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

"Worse Than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice by David M. Oshinsky

About August Wilson

Conversations with August Wilson edited by Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig

August Wilson and the African American Odyssey by Kim Pereira
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)

DVD

The Piano Lesson - made-for-TV adaptation with a teleplay by August Wilson, Hallmark Home Entertainment, 2002

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