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THE PLAY

It's just after the funeral of **Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton** in the Hill District of Pittsburgh in 1948. Floyd was a talented blues guitarist with a hit record who was on the verge of signing a new deal with a record company in Chicago when he died.

A group of his friends—**Vera**, his former girlfriend; **Louise**, Vera's upstairs neighbor; **Hedley**, a street vendor; and **Canewell** and **Red Carter**, members of his band—sit in the yard outside Vera's house remembering Floyd in his final days.

The play then flashes back to Floyd's last week on earth, walking us step by step through the events, interactions, decisions, harsh realities and random circumstances that led to Floyd's untimely death.

MUSIC-FILLED DRAMA

AUGUST WILSON'S SEVEN GUITARS



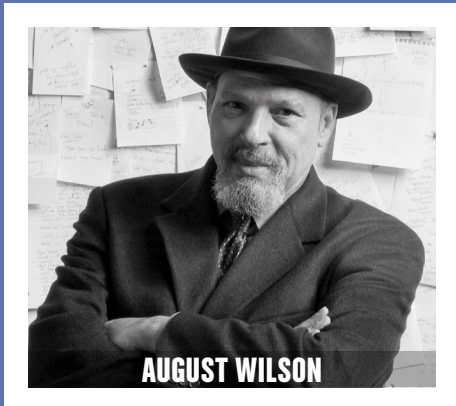
"I don't want to live my life without. Everybody I know live without. I don't want to do that. I want to live with. I don't know what you all think of yourself, but I think I'm supposed to have. Whatever it is. Have something. Have anything."

— Floyd Barton, *Seven Guitars*

Prime Sponsorship for *Seven Guitars* is generously provided by **AARP** Real Possibilities and **COMCAST NBCUNIVERSAL**.
Supporting Sponsorship is generously provided by **Judith N. Batty** and **Patricia and David Fisher**.
Arena Stage offers this production in memory of long-time friend and Trustee, **Margot Kelly**.

Arena Stage's community engagement efforts are generously sponsored by **Denie and Frank Weil**; **The Estate of Ms. Toni A. Ritzenberg**; **AT&T**; **Joanne Barker**; **Catherine and Chris Guttman-McCabe**; **Hattie M. Strong Foundation**; **Robert and Natalie Mandel Family Foundation**; **Floyd E. Davis Family Foundation**; **Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation, Inc.**; **Alice Shaver Foundation**; **Theatre Forward**; **Collins Aerospace**; **England Family Foundation**; **Friends of Southwest D.C.**; **GEICO**; **JBG Smith**; **Wayne and Susan Jonas**; **Foley & Lardner LLP**; **Weissberg Foundation**; **Jean Schiro-Zavela and Vance Zavela**; **Actors' Equity Foundation**; and **Youth Activities Task Force (YATF) of the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly, Inc.**

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



“The foundation of my playwriting is poetry.”

— August Wilson

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel to an African-American mother and a German immigrant father in 1945. He was the fourth of six children, and grew up in a small apartment behind a grocery store in the Hill District of Pittsburgh.

Wilson dropped out of school at age 15. Instead, he spent his days reading at the Carnegie Library. In 1962, he enlisted in the U.S. Army for three years, but left after one. He worked odd jobs and bought his first typewriter for \$20.

At 20, Wilson took his mother’s last name because his father had abandoned the family many years earlier. He chose “August” as his new first name because he thought it sounded like the playwright he wanted to become.

He began to write poetry and joined a group of artists who created the Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop. With these same collaborators, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizons Theater with “the idea of using the theater to politicize the community or...to raise the consciousness of the people.”

In 1979, Wilson wrote *Jitney*, which he considered his first real play of the many he would write. He soon met Lloyd Richards, the dean of the Yale School of Drama, who would direct Wilson’s first six plays on Broadway.

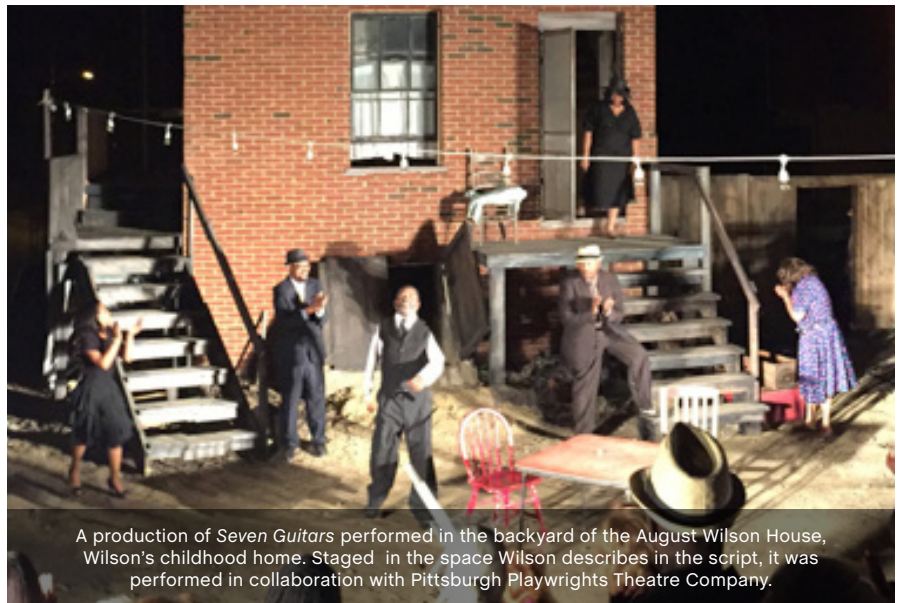
Wilson’s collected works have garnered two Pulitzer Prizes and two Tony Awards. Wilson died of liver cancer on October 2, 2005, but is remembered as a master of playwriting.

WORDS FROM AUGUST WILSON

ON WRITING SEVEN GUITARS

“Despite my interest in history, I have always been more concerned with culture and while my plays have an overall historical feel, their settings are fictions and they are peopled with invented characters 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 asunder. I am not a historian. I happen to think that 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 her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter — are all worthy of art. Hence, *Seven Guitars*.”

— August Wilson from “A Note from the Playwright” for *Seven Guitars*



A production of *Seven Guitars* performed in the backyard of the August Wilson House, Wilson’s childhood home. Staged in the space Wilson describes in the script, it was performed in collaboration with Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company.

ON WRITING BLACK VOICES

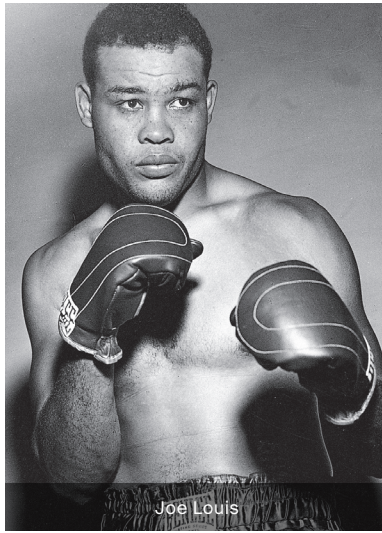
Wilson saw the African-American experience as sacred, unique and under threat within the United States. He aspired to protect and honor the stories of his community onstage — starting with the language spoken by his characters.

“Being an artist, I guess, and being attentive to language, you discover certain things. But it took me a long while before I could value the way Blacks spoke. In my earlier attempts to write plays, I felt that in order to make art out of this, I had to change the language, and so I was trying to force words into the characters’ mouths that simply did not fit because I did not value the way they spoke. But once I stopped and began to listen in my head to the speech rhythms, I uncovered inferences in Black dialogue — a lot of things are done by implication. When you give the language, you are giving the thought patterns as well. There is an impeccable logic in the use of metaphor that I noticed as I was standing around at Pat’s Place [studying my elders]. So I simply was trying to recreate that sense of style or that sense of interior logic within the characters.”

— August Wilson from *Conversations with August Wilson*

ON JOE LOUIS

African-American boxer Joe Louis, “The Brown Bomber,” began boxing at age 17. He hid his boxing gloves in his violin case to keep his mother from knowing this. He was the heavyweight champion of the world from 1937-1949 and is considered one of the sport’s all-time greats.



“Joe Louis was important to Black America. Every time Joe Louis would go out there and fight, what he represented was [a response to] the condition of Black America, all those lynchings, the effects of all the segregation. If only through America’s mind, it was a way of engaging that, and doing battle with that. And Joe Louis emerged victorious, and that gave the people something they needed to get out of bed in the morning.”

— August Wilson from *Conversations with August Wilson*

ON THE BLUES

In *Seven Guitars*, Floyd’s musical talents have been exploited by white producers, who paid him a one-time, flat rate for his record, rather than giving him a percentage of its profits.

“I know that contained in the blues is an entire philosophical system; contained in there is the cultural response of Black America to the world in which they found themselves. This response is the thing that enables your survival. It teaches you certain ideas and attitudes that enable you to still be here in the year 1996 and hopefully in the year 2096, although there are no guarantees. I think it [the blues] is the best literature that Blacks have. It’s certainly at the bedrock of everything I do, because it’s the world and the people. The music comes out of Black life as created by Black people.”

— August Wilson from *Conversations with August Wilson*

THE GREAT MIGRATION

From about 1916-1970 approximately 6 million African Americans moved from the rural South to the North and Midwest, particularly cities like Chicago and Pittsburgh. This was called “The Great Migration.” Industrial jobs in Pittsburgh’s steel mills attracted many workers.

THE BLUES

The roots of the blues go back to Africa. Music has always been a tool of communication in African cultures. In Angola, chants and vocalizations were used to present cases before the king. Work and hunting songs were common. No village was without its musicians who were responsible for teaching history through song.

In the U.S., enslaved Africans retained their musical traditions, singing as they worked in the fields, developing hollers to communicate with neighboring plantations and singing spirituals.

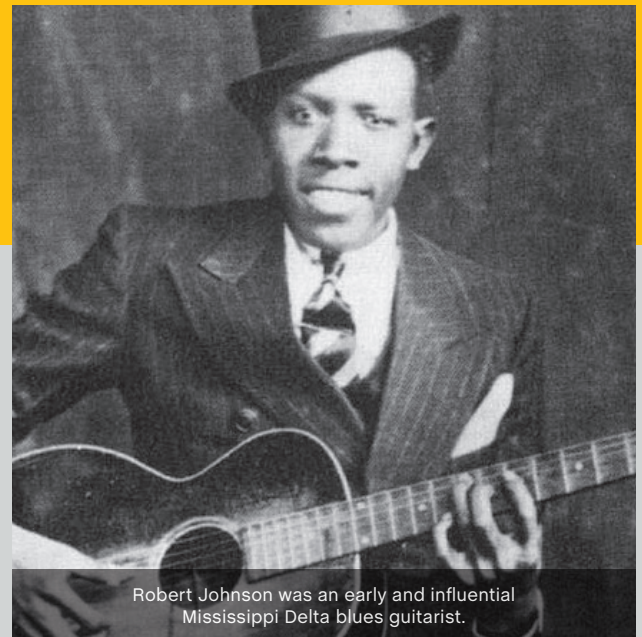
After emancipation, new secular music developed from these traditional African roots, which incorporated the call-and-response patterns of African chants and African-American work songs. This music, in which freed enslaved people expressed their hardships and oppression — conflicts with law, alienation, homelessness, poverty, lost love — came to be known as “the blues.”

The blues existed almost exclusively as rural folk music in the South until the early 1900s. It was sung by Black musicians for Black audiences. The blues became a symbol of Black heritage.

The blues left the rural south during the **Great Migration**. The blues took on a new, raw sound, with Chicago becoming the undisputed center of the urban blues. A commercial market for the blues developed among record companies and clubs. It became an important influence on the pop music of the 1950s and 1960s beginning with Elvis Presley. The development of rock and roll in England was directly influenced by American blues.

Important blues musicians include Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Son House, W.C. Handy, Muddy Waters, Bessie Smith and Blind Lemon Jefferson.

This article created by and included here with permission from the Education Department at the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston, Massachusetts.



Robert Johnson was an early and influential Mississippi Delta blues guitarist.

THE AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

There are seven characters in the play. In *Conversations with August Wilson*, Wilson said, "As it turned out, they are the seven guitars. They each have their individual voices and their individual characters." Listen for other times the word "seven" appears.

FLOYD BARTON is a blues musician with a hit record, "That's All Right." He is trying to get his band together to record another record in Chicago.

VERA is a practical woman who knows her worth. She once dated Floyd and might not want him back.

HEDLEY is a Caribbean immigrant, who makes his living selling chicken sandwiches. He has **tuberculosis** and is losing his grip on reality. He is the political voice of the play.

LOUISE is Vera's friend, who boards in the same house as Vera and Hedley.

RUBY has come to live with her Aunt Louise to escape some "man trouble" in Alabama.

CANEWELL plays the harmonica in Floyd's band and is tired of being in Floyd's shadow.

RED CARTER plays the drums in Floyd's band and understands people and both city and country life.

BUDDY BOLDEN is not a character in the play, but Hedley mentions him frequently. Bolden was a New Orleans trumpet player known as the "King of Jazz." Hedley says his father (another trumpet player) came to him in a dream and said that Bolden would bring Hedley enough money to buy a plantation. Hedley is waiting for Bolden with the fervor of one waiting for a messiah.



Buddy Bolden

Initially August Wilson pictured seven men onstage with guitars. In an interview with the Goodman Theatre, Wilson said the play would be "about the world of bluesmen, and how their world clashed with the white world who saw them as vagrants and as drunkards, and the Black community who saw them as carriers of this tradition, these functional oral historians in this world...then this woman walked on stage and everything changed." By that, Wilson meant the idea for the character of Vera. He said, "She wanted her own story in there."

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

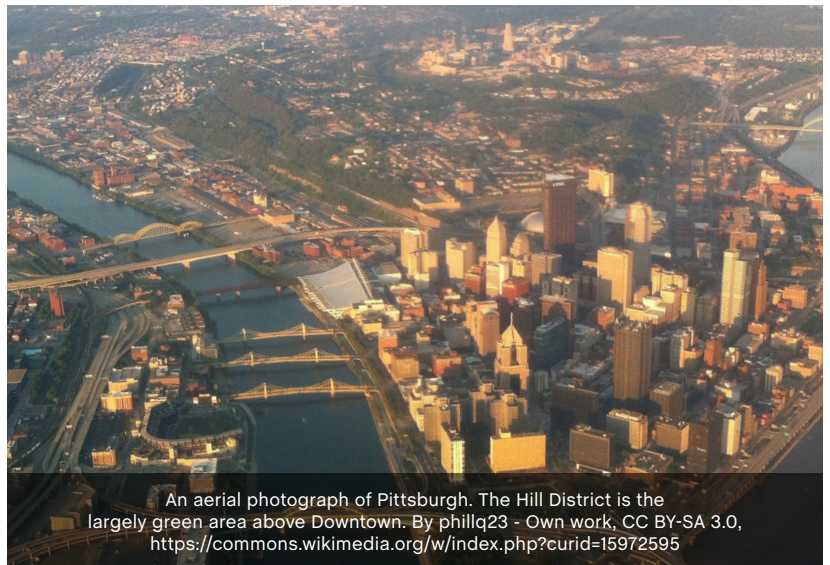
What determines a person's destiny?

2

What is the role of music, especially the blues, in the play?

3

How does racism impact the characters?



WATCH

August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand
A PBS documentary directed by Sam Pollard

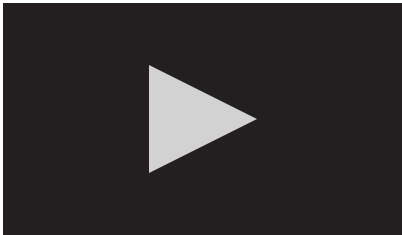
<https://to.pbs.org/20MGVjh>

TUBERCULOSIS

A contagious respiratory disease. One symptom is coughing up blood. It was treated by having people rest in sanitariums, special hospitals to treat chronic illness.

THE AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

August Wilson is best known for writing *The American Century Cycle*. These 10 plays, one for each decade of the 20th century, follow the stories of fictional characters in his real-life neighborhood — Pittsburgh's Hill District. There is only one play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, that takes place outside of this small section of city. Through the lives of everyday Black people, the rhythm of poetic language and even elements of magic, these plays layer generations of Black experience, one upon another. Families of characters grapple with freedom, honor, redemption, love and loss across time. Wilson showcased the stories of Black Americans for the world to see, and his plays are now essential texts in the canon of the American Theater. By the end of this season, Arena Stage will have produced nine of Wilson's ten works.



WATCH

Two of August Wilson's plays, *Fences* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (available on Netflix), were made into major motion pictures. *Giving Voice* is a Netflix documentary about high school students auditioning for the August Wilson Monologue Competition.

READ MORE

Find August Wilson's plays at your local library. Some characters appear in more than one play. For example, Ruby also appears in *King Hedley II*.



GEM OF THE OCEAN

Photo of Linnie Godfrey and Jimonn Cole by Scott Suchman.



JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

Photo of Mel Winkler and L. Scott Caldwell by Joan Marcus.



MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Photo of Tina Fabrique by Scott Suchman.



THE PIANO LESSON

Photo of Jeorge Watson by Scott Suchman.



SEVEN GUITARS

Photo of Roderick Lawrence and Joy Jones by Tony Powell.



FENCES

Photo of Yaphet Kotto and Wally Taylor by Joan Marcus.



TWO TRAINS RUNNING

Photo of Carlton Byrd by Nate Watters.



JITNEY

Photo of John Douglas Thompson and Michael Potts by Joan Marcus.



KING HEDLEY II

Photo of Bowman Wright by C. Stanley Photography.



RADIO GOLF

Photo of Harry Lennix and James A. Williams by Sara Krulwich.

THE HILL DISTRICT OF PITTSBURGH

August Wilson grew up in the Hill District, the setting for all but one of the 10 plays in the Century Cycle. In the early 1800s, the Hill District was a hub for immigrant families who came to work in the steel mills during the Industrial Revolution. After slavery ended, many African Americans moved to the Hill District as part of the Great Migration. By the early 1900s, the Hill had become a diverse and vibrant community, rich in culture. Then its infrastructure began to crumble. Many of the inhabitants of the Hill moved on to other parts of the city, leaving a significant African-American majority.

In the mid-1900s the Hill District became a lively network of African-American-owned shops, restaurants, barbershops and nightclubs.

In 1955, the federal government approved a redevelopment plan which cleared 95 acres of homes and business on the Hill and displaced more than 8,000 residents. Meanwhile, the federal government built federally funded public housing. The Hill District had more public housing than any other neighborhood in Pittsburgh.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Pittsburgh steel industry collapsed, causing rampant unemployment. This was bad news for the Hill District. Gang violence and crime rates rose and buildings deteriorated from lack of upkeep. Random demolition of these buildings left vacant lots. Today, the Hill District is undergoing gentrification.



August Wilson's Childhood Home

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end! If you love the show or a performer, you can give a standing ovation. The actors bow to thank you.



ACTIVITY

Research the history of your neighborhood. Choose a moment in its history that would provide a great setting for a story. Write that play, story, poem, song or rap.

RESOURCES

Conversations with August Wilson

Edited by Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig

"The Great Migration," *Encyclopedia Britannica*

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Migration>

The Paris Review: August Wilson, The Art of Theater

<https://bit.ly/2Rr06AI>

Synopsis adapted with permission from American Conservatory Theater, San Francisco.

Notated articles were created by the Education Department at the Huntington Theatre Company (Boston, MA) as part of their curriculum guide for their 1995 production of *Seven Guitars* and are included in this guide with the Huntington's permission. Inquiries regarding Huntington-created materials should be directed to Meg O'Brien, Director of Education at the Huntington Theatre Company, by emailing mobrien@huntingtontheatre.org



the mead center
for american theater

1101 Sixth Street SW
Washington, DC 20024

Phone: 202-554-9066

Fax: 202-488-4056

August Wilson, Century Cycle and Hill District articles written by Alex Turner and Akhila Khanna

Edited by Rebecca Campana

Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.