

1977 IN BLACK AMERICA

Jitney takes place just after the Vietnam War — a period when African Americans were redefining their power in art, culture and politics.

- As the country reflects on the turbulence of the Civil Rights Movement, clashes between the Ku Klux Klan and Black Power Movement continue across the country.
- Black veterans return from Vietnam and struggle to claim the benefits promised to them by the GI Bill. The GI Bill was created to ensure veterans had access to education and low-income housing. However, Black servicemen, like *Youngblood*, face disproportionate obstacles in claiming these benefits.
- Oprah Winfrey hit TV screens across Baltimore city as a co-anchor on the six o'clock news — her first job on television.
- *Roots*, the landmark miniseries recounting the journey of enslaved Africans to the United States and their experiences through the Civil War, is first broadcast by ABC on January 23. Featuring an all-star cast of African-American actors, the series won nine of its 37 Emmy nominations including Best Limited Series.
- President Carter appoints Patricia Robert Harris, the first African-American woman to serve as a Cabinet Secretary. Civil Rights leader Andrew Young is the first African American to be a U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations.

AUGUST WILSON FESTIVAL

Jitney opens a season-long August Wilson Festival here at Arena Stage. We will be celebrating this giant of American Theater with two full productions and community programming throughout the year. For more information on the August Wilson Festival, visit <https://bit.ly/2L6aaNg>.



The cast of *Jitney*. Photo by Joan Marcus

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What qualities or accomplishments make a life to be proud of?

2

How does gentrification impact a neighborhood and those who call it home?

3

What does it mean to serve your community?

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 at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact 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.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- 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 repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

RESOURCES

TO READ

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

ON THE WEB

Theater Talk — *Revitalizing August Wilson's Jitney*
<https://theatertalk.org/6080-2/>

The Paris Review — *August Wilson, The Art of Theater*
<https://bit.ly/2Rr06AI>

Article — *"Before Uber there was jitney"*
<https://bit.ly/2PnVniC>

Article — *"In an Era of Segregation, Owl Cab Mobilized Black Pittsburgh"*
<https://bit.ly/2Pekt77>

Article — *"Pittsburgh jitney service illegal, but thriving"*
<https://bit.ly/2KKRjrX>



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



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ARENA'S PAGE

STUDY GUIDE

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THE PLAY

Becker prides himself on providing his Hill-District neighbors with first-rate transportation and his team of cab drivers with steady work. Driving a jitney (see article) is more than a job — it's a service to their community. It should be an average morning of calls for the team of drivers at the jitney station. **Doub** is a respected elder, a veteran of the Korean War and a long-time jitney driver. **Fielding** is looking for extra cash to buy a bottle of alcohol although he's been warned about drinking on the job. **Turnbo** is gossiping between fares.

He confronts a newer driver, **Youngblood**, because he believes the young man is not respectable enough. Turnbo claims to have seen Youngblood driving around town with women other than **Rena**, Youngblood's girlfriend.

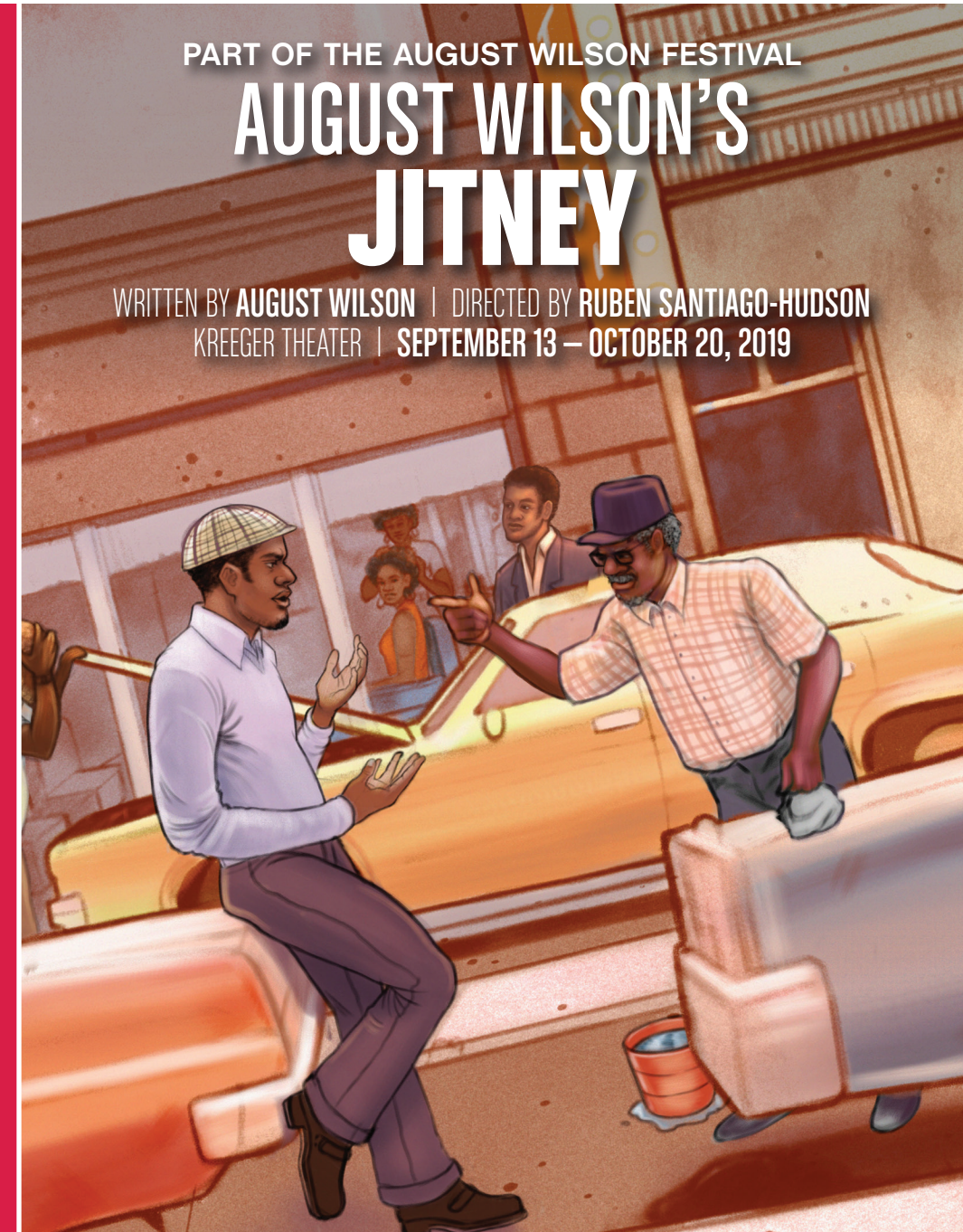
However, Becker has larger issues to face. He has yet to tell his team that the city will demolish the station in two weeks and the service will be closed.

As Becker considers what to do, his son **Booster** is released from a 20-year prison sentence, and arrives at the station for their first reunion since he was sentenced. Can Becker save his neighborhood business and heal his relationship with his son? Or have things broken beyond repair?

PART OF THE AUGUST WILSON FESTIVAL

AUGUST WILSON'S JITNEY

WRITTEN BY **AUGUST WILSON** | DIRECTED BY **RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON**
KREEGER THEATER | **SEPTEMBER 13 — OCTOBER 20, 2019**



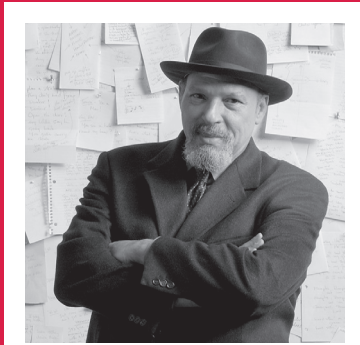
"I say we stay here. We already here. The people know we here. We been here for eighteen years... and I don't see no reason to move. City or no city."

— Becker, *Jitney*

Produced on Broadway by Manhattan Theatre Club in association with Eric Falkenstein, Ron Simons, John Legend/Mike Jackson and Ken Wirth. *Jitney* is generously sponsored by **Dr. Donald Wallace Jones, Dr. Betty Jean Tolbert Jones and Tracey Tolbert Jones.**

The D.C. Ticket Partnership is generously sponsored by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation. Additional support is provided by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, The Bay & Paul Foundations., Collins Aerospace, the Albert and Lillian Small Foundation, AT&T and Exelon.

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



AUGUST WILSON

“The foundation of my playwriting is poetry.”

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 – one of which was earned for this production of *Jitney*, which will tour the U.S. when it closes at Arena Stage.

Wilson died of liver cancer on October 2, 2005, but is remembered as a master of playwriting. A Broadway theater is named in his honor.

WHAT'S A JITNEY

A jitney is an unofficial, unregulated cab. The word comes from a slang term for a nickel – the original cost of a ride. Jitney services were established in U.S. cities during the 1930s as an affordable alternative to discriminatory transportation systems. White cab drivers would refuse service to Black customers and avoid Black neighborhoods due to racial bias and fear of crime. With African-American citizens stranded without public transportation, the Black community made its own inclusive, affordable transportation.

Several jitney drivers would unite to make a jitney cab service, just like the one featured in this play. In some cities like Chicago, these cars would work as bus shuttles on organized routes to fill in the gaps that public transportation left in disenfranchised neighborhoods. Many illegal jitney services eventually gained the footing to turn into fully legal businesses, such as OWL Cab in Pittsburgh – a Black-owned cab service started by a former jitney driver. While jitneys are less common in the age of Uber and Lyft, some services still operate to this day – including those in Pittsburgh's Hill District.



Three men standing in front of Owl Cab cars, including owner Silas Knox in front, parked on residential Belgian block street, c. 1950-1960 Charles “Teenie” Harris American, 1908-1998, black-and-white: Kodak safety film, H: 4 in. x W: 5 in. (10.20 x 12.70 cm), Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh: Heinz Family Fund, 2001.35.19288 © Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles “Teenie” Harris Archive

DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK

RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON

In the preface to the Broadway edition of *Jitney*, the show's director, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, writes about his first encounter with August Wilson's work. He saw *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and it changed his life.

“The lights came up and when the actors began to speak, every fiber in my body began to tingle with the sense memory that I was ‘home.’ I knew these voices, these stories, these people, intimately. I knew how they smelled, the texture of their clothes and hair, the songs they sang on Sunday. I had known them my entire life...As I watched these actors wax poetic I felt moisture on my cheek and realized, ‘Damn, I’m crying.’”



Ruben Santiago-Hudson

TOUR THE HILL DISTRICT

Hop a jitney and explore the streets of Pittsburgh below. As you drive around, stop by the many houses and hangouts that would become home to August Wilson's characters.



Adapted from “August Wilson's Hill District,” The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>1. 1621 Bedford Ave
Last residence of Wilson's mother, Daisy Wilson</p> <p>2. 1727 Bedford Ave
Wilson's childhood home</p> <p>3. Crawford Street Residence
Where Freddy Kittel renamed himself August Wilson</p> | <p>4. Aunt Esther's House
The imagined site of a notable character's home, appearing in multiple Wilson plays</p> <p>5. Carnegie Library
Wilson receives his first library card</p> <p>6. Westbrook Jitney Station
The real-life inspiration and education for <i>Jitney</i></p> | <p>7. Pat's Place
Newsstand and pool hall where Wilson was educated by the conversations of elder men</p> <p>8. Eddie's Restaurant
Wilson's favorite haunt</p> <p>9. Pittsburgh Weil School
Site where the Black Horizon Theater was established</p> |
|--|---|---|



ACTIVITY

The Sound of Your Street

Wilson wanted to share the beauty and insight of his own community's conversations. Write a 5-minute play that provides an accurate example of the voices and events in your neighborhood.

EXPLORE MORE

Want to see the modern Hill District?

Use Google Earth to explore the current neighborhood – starting at the August Wilson House

<https://bit.ly/2Mz14gk>

WRITING BLACK VOICES

August 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

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 10 works.



THE PLAYS (IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER BY SETTING)



1904

GEM OF THE OCEAN

Photo of Linnie Godfrey and Jimonn Cole by Scott Suchman.



1911

JOE TURNER’S COME AND GONE

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



1927

MA RAINEY’S BLACK BOTTOM

Photo of Tina Fabrique by Scott Suchman.



1936

THE PIANO LESSON

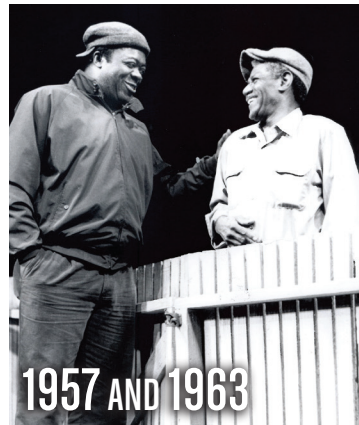
Photo of George Watson by Scott Suchman.



1948

SEVEN GUITARS

Photo of Viola Davis and Keith David by Joan Marcus.



1957 AND 1963

FENCES

Photo of Yaphet Kotto and Wally Taylor by Joan Marcus.



1969

TWO TRAINS RUNNING

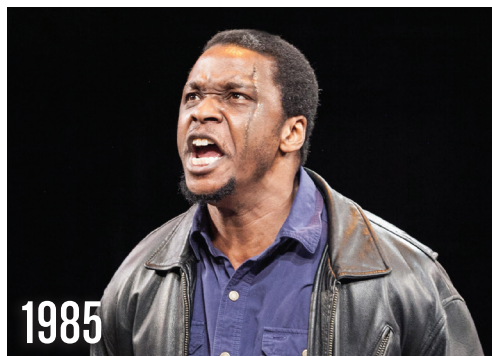
Photo of Carlton Byrd by Nate Watters for Seattle Repertory Theatre.



1977

JITNEY

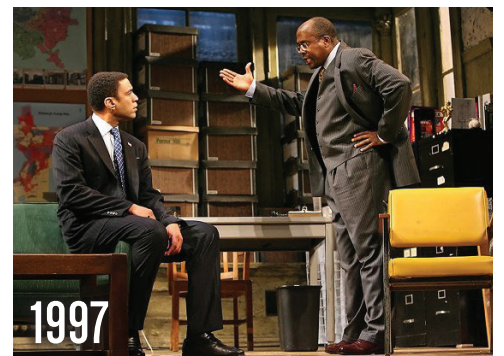
Photo of John Douglas Thompson and Michael Potts by Joan Marcus.



1985

KING HEDLEY II

Photo of Bowman Wright by C. Stanley Photography.



1997

RADIO GOLF

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



WATCH

August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand

A PBS documentary directed by Sam Pollard

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



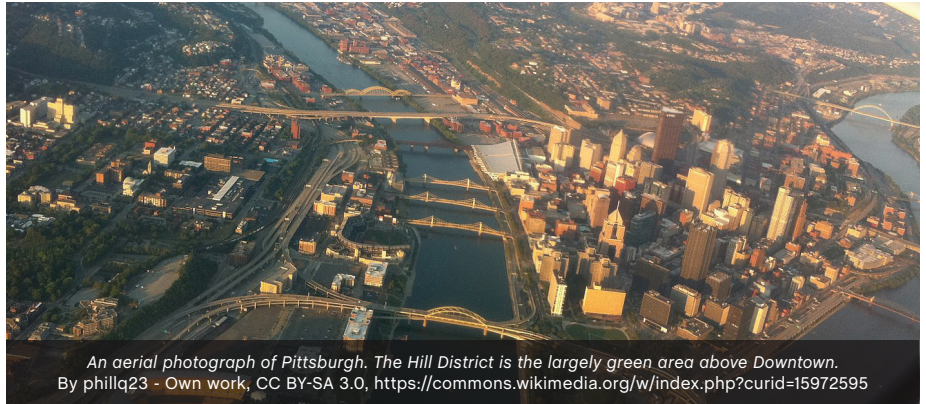
August Wilson's Childhood Home



The New Granada Theater (pictured), once the Hill-District home to jazz-greats such as Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald, now sits in disrepair in 2010. The theater has been spared from redevelopment because of its designation as a National Historic landmark.

THE HILL DISTRICT OF PITTSBURGH

August Wilson grew up in the Hill District, the setting for all but one of the 10 plays in his American 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. 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.



An aerial photograph of Pittsburgh. The Hill District is the largely green area above Downtown.
By phillq23 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15972595>

DEMOLITION AND GENTRIFICATION

In 1955, the federal government approved a redevelopment plan which cleared 95 acres of homes and businesses 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. The crime rates rose and buildings deteriorated from lack of upkeep. Random demolition of these buildings left vacant lots.

In *Jitney*, Doub says, "They been planning to tear these shacks down before you was born." He knows that the city will soon demolish Becker's jitney station. In the play, the city envisions the transformation of the Hill District as an opportunity for revitalization and economic growth. However, the drivers know that a demolished city block rebuilt with luxury buildings will lead to businesses without buildings and people without homes.

This process of renovating and rebranding a neighborhood is often called "gentrification" and can be seen in cities throughout history. These renewal initiatives can uproot and disregard low-income residents. Washington, D.C., is no exception to gentrification. In April 2019, a study by the Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity found that low-income D.C. residents are being pushed out of neighborhoods at some of the highest rates in the country. Where have you noticed a history of gentrification within D.C.? Where do you see signs of its future? What are the pros and cons of this development? What happens to the identity of a neighborhood?