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THE PLAY

It is 1969. Big construction projects have started in Pittsburgh's Hill District, tearing down the mostly African-American neighborhood. Job opportunities are at an all-time low. In **Memphis Lee's** diner everyone is fighting to claim what is due to them.

Lee refuses to sell his property to the city for anything less than \$25,000. **Wolf** believes that gambling is the best way to make money. **Hambone** repeats his demands for ham that he was promised many years ago. **Sterling**, recently released from prison, is looking for a stable job. He is attracted to **Risa**, the diner's waitress, who has scarred legs.

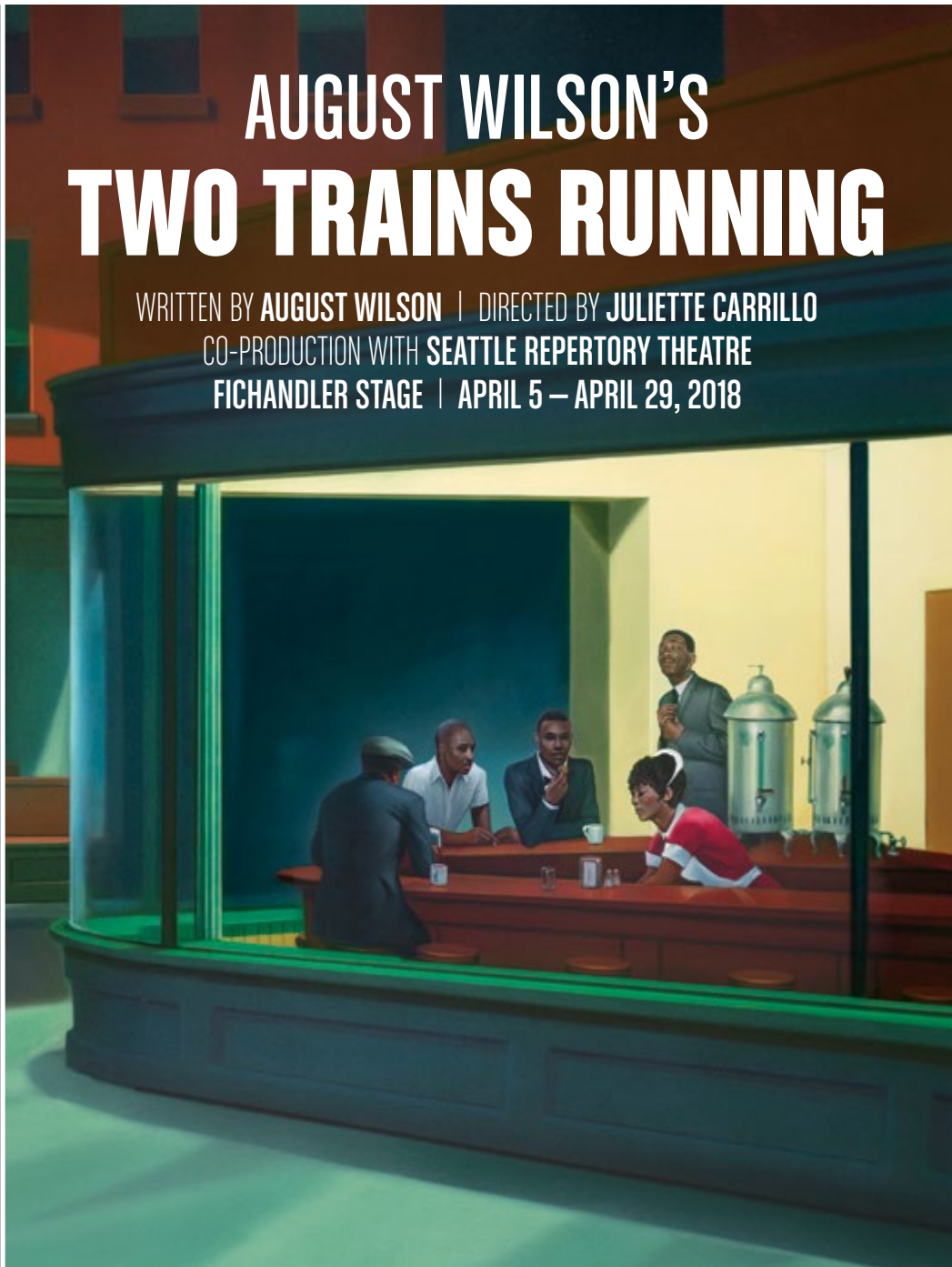
In a country where racism and oppression fight them every step of the way, where should they put their faith?

Holloway believes in visiting a mysterious wise-woman, **Aunt Ester**, who magically cures problems. Others are lining up on the streets for the funeral of **Prophet Samuel**, a local leader believed to be sent by God to deliver justice to African Americans. A rally to celebrate the would-be 40th birthday of Malcolm X is also underway.

Can Memphis and his customers overcome a broken society and build the American Dream?

AUGUST WILSON'S TWO TRAINS RUNNING

WRITTEN BY **AUGUST WILSON** | DIRECTED BY **JULIETTE CARRILLO**
CO-PRODUCTION WITH **SEATTLE REPERTORY THEATRE**
FICHANDLER STAGE | APRIL 5 — APRIL 29, 2018



**“If you around here looking for justice, you got a long wait. Ain’t no justice.
That’s why they got that statue of her and got her blindfolded.”**

— Memphis, *Two Trains Running*

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



AUGUST WILSON

“There are always and only two trains running. There is life and there is death. Each of us rides them both. To live life with dignity, to celebrate and accept responsibility for your presence in the world is all that can be asked of anyone.”

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel to an African-American mother and a German immigrant father in 1945. At 20, Wilson took his mother's last name because his father had abandoned the family many years earlier. Wilson's mother raised her six children 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 Pittsburgh.

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. He began to write poetry and joined a group of artists who created the Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop.

In 1979, Wilson wrote *Jitney*, which he considered his first real play. In 1982, at the National Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill Theatre Center, he met Lloyd Richards, the dean of the Yale School of Drama, who was also African American. Richards directed Wilson's first six plays on Broadway.

Wilson won Pulitzer Prizes for two of his plays: *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. Both plays are part of his 10-play Pittsburgh Cycle, also known as the Century Cycle. He died of liver cancer on October 2, 2005. On October 16, 2005 the Virginia Theatre on Broadway was renamed the August Wilson Theatre in his honor.

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK

WHY *TWO TRAINS RUNNING*?

“Given the current climate of our country, this play could be even more relevant today than when it was written. The characters challenge themselves and each other in examining how and when to step forward, own their cultural pride and claim what's due. We are at a moment in history where we can no longer afford to step over messes and hide in corners when it comes to looking at racial inequities in the US. This play is quiet and subtle in its tone, but in the end, it calls out for action. Take what you deserve.”



Juliette Carrillo

THE EPIC IN AUGUST WILSON

“Aunt Ester give you more than money.
She make you right with yourself”

– Holloway, *Two Trains Running*



Lynnie Godfrey as Aunt Ester in Arena Stage's production of *Gem of the Ocean* in 2007.

August Wilson uses mythical elements and spiritual characters who rise from the pages of our classics and religious tomes. He elevates what may appear to be average people living out their mundane lives and shows us that they are epic and important. He is considered a Shakespeare of contemporary American literature.

Aunt Ester is an ancient wise-woman who has appeared in several Wilson plays that are part of his Pittsburgh Cycle. Symbolically she is the motherly figure whose legacy captures the several-century long history of African Americans. She was born in 1620, just one year after slaves came to America. In *Two Trains Running*, she is 322 years old, as old as figures in the Bible. Many characters like Holloway and Sterling believe in her magical powers. She lives behind a red door and helps anyone who comes knocking.



ACTIVITY

As you read or watch the play, what other allusions or classical motifs do you notice? How do they contribute to the epic nature of the play?

LEADING THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT



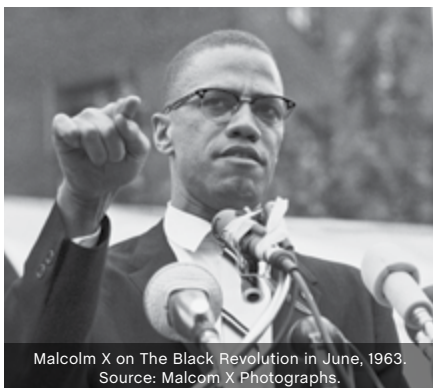
The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 28, 1963. Source: Digital Public Library of America. Courtesy of University of Illinois Urbana Campaign.

The period from 1955 to 1968 is known as the Civil Rights Movement. Though the 13th Amendment officially abolished slavery, it didn't end discrimination against African Americans or their rights being denied on a day-to-day basis. Different ideas of how to achieve equality and end racial prejudice emerged. At the forefront of the movement were two charismatic leaders — Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking before crowd of 25,000 Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights marchers, on March 25, 1965 in Montgomery, Alabama. Source: Stephen F. Somerstein/Getty Images.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed in civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance. King was convinced that enduring insults, physical violence, and imprisonment would eventually gain national attention. When he was assassinated in 1968, the nonviolent action thrust of the Civil Rights Movement continued, but with less frequency and publicity.



Malcolm X on The Black Revolution in June, 1963. Source: Malcolm X Photographs.

Malcolm X, on the other hand, believed in self-defense and in a radical, anti-white position. He preached a message of Black Pride, self-help and separatism. The foremost proponent of Black Power and Black Nationalist philosophies, Malcolm X appealed to the African-American middle class, especially the young. He was a mesmerizing speaker, and his analysis of white racism

and hypocrisy also energized poor urban dwellers, ex-convicts, and street people, who had experienced the contempt of white society first hand. He was a member of the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims).

Courtesy the Seattle Repertory Theatre and the Denver Center Theatre Company.

THE RISE OF BLACK POWER



The raised fist was used as a salute to express unity, strength, defiance or resistance amongst Black Panther Party members.

“Freedom is heavy. You got to put your shoulder to freedom. Put your shoulder to it and hope your back hold up.”

— Memphis, *Two Trains Running*

In *Two Trains Running*, Sterling mentions a rally for Black Power that is taking place to celebrate Malcolm X's 40th birthday. When he puts up a flyer for the rally at the diner, Memphis gets angry. Memphis has been living and working in the white man's world for many years to survive. How can a rally restore his freedom? To understand this conflict between Sterling and Memphis one needs to understand the history of the Black Power Movement.

Following the assassinations of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., many young radicals like Sterling became disillusioned about the effectiveness of nonviolent civil disobedience. The federal government was slow to act, and African Americans were being oppressed, beaten and killed while waiting and fighting for their rights. Many African Americans were dissatisfied, even angry, with the pace of change.

The Black Power Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s emerged as a political and social movement whose advocates believed in racial pride, self-sufficiency and equality for all people of black and African descent. The slogan “Black Power” signaled that some activists were shifting from seeking civil rights to demanding national liberation. Many Black Power activists argued that desegregation was insufficient. Only through the deconstruction of white power structures could a space be made for a Black political voice.

The Black Power Movement also sought to celebrate Blackness and restore positive images of Black people from the negative stereotyping in the larger society. Soon, African-American students began to celebrate Black culture openly. Black women who once straightened their hair to conform to white beauty standards were now sporting afros to demonstrate their pride in African heritage. Phrases like “Black is beautiful” and “Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud” also emerged.

THE PITTSBURGH CYCLE

August Wilson is best known for his Pittsburgh Cycle: 10 plays that chronicle the African-American experience through the 20th century, one play for each decade. All but one (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*) are set in the Hill District. Some characters, like Aunt Ester, appear in multiple plays.

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.

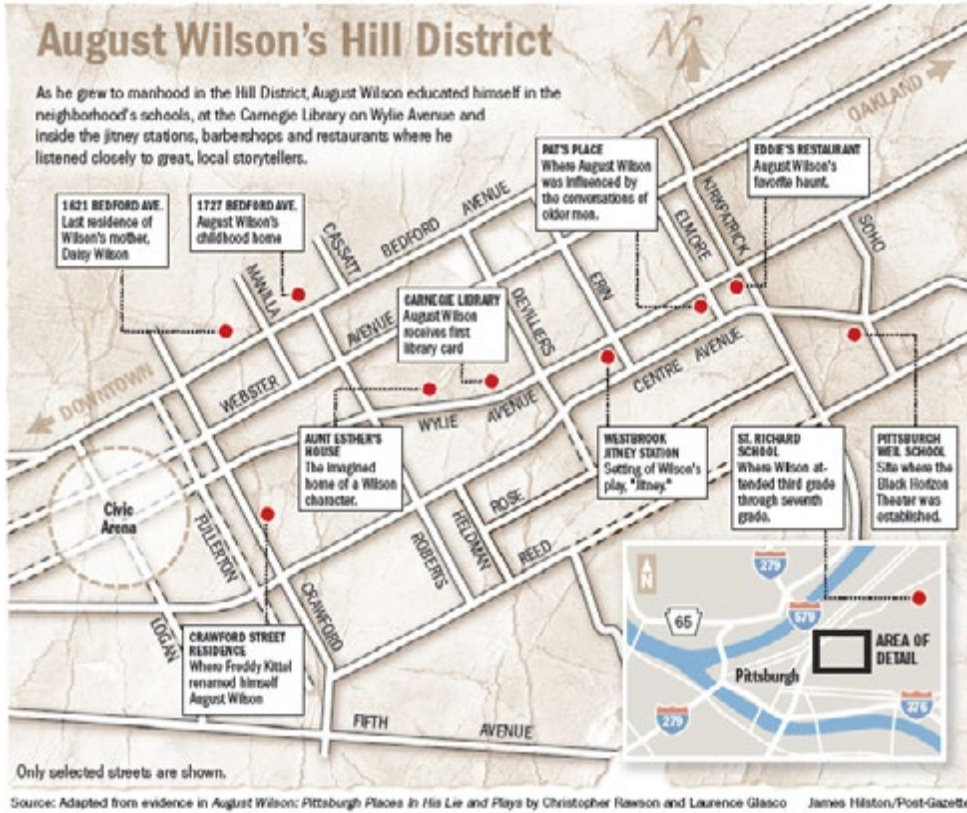


1997

RADIO GOLF

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

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 Pittsburgh 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.

In 1955, the federal government approved a redevelopment plan which cleared out 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. The crime rates rose and buildings deteriorated from lack of upkeep. Random demolition of these buildings left vacant lots. The demolitions in the 1950s and the demise of the steel industry left a poor and crime-ridden neighborhood, isolated from the rest of the city.



WATCH

August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand

A PBS documentary directed by Sam Pollard
<https://goo.gl/dVTv1m>

DID YOU KNOW?

The setting of *Two Trains Running* may have been based on Eddie's Restaurant, where Wilson began his writing career. He loved to write in restaurants.



Photo taken by Dick Bernard in April 1998.



ACTIVITY

Scroll through your social media. Identify movements that students are actively involved in. What are they and why are youth involved? What are issues that you feel passionate about, and how are you advocating for them?

WHAT IS THE NUMBERS GAME?

Luck and faith are central topics of conversation amongst the characters. In *Two Trains Running*, characters put their faith in playing “the numbers game.”

The numbers game is a form of illegal gambling or lottery played mostly in poor and working-class neighborhoods. To play, a bettor tries to pick three numbers to match those that will be randomly drawn the following day. A numbers runner keeps records of the betting slips, collects money from the bettors and disperses money to the winners. The runner reports back to the numbers bank, or headquarters, of the lottery. If a person guesses correctly, they are said to “hit the numbers” and are entitled to a split of the total money in the pool.



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

August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle: Critical Perspectives on the Plays
By Sandra G. Shannon

ON THE WEB

NPR—A *Philosopher Behind the Black Power Movement*
<https://goo.gl/9EbesS>

History Now—*The Civil Rights Movement: Major Events and Legacies*
<https://goo.gl/muTmC2>

Next City—*These 5 Neighborhoods Show Roots of Gentrification*
<https://goo.gl/BtwB1H>



LISTEN

In an interview August Wilson said that the title of *Two Trains Running* originates as a lyric in a blues song “Two trains running, neither one going my way. One running by night, one run by day.” Listen to the song here: <https://goo.gl/WS72ZD>

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What is the American Dream today?

2

How can America achieve equality?

3

What does it mean to have power over your own destiny?



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