

August Wilson

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August Wilson (April 27, 1945 – October 2, 2005) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning American playwright. His singular achievement and literary legacy is a cycle of ten plays, each set in a different decade, depicting the comedy and tragedy of the African-American experience in the 20th century.



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Biography

Early life

Born **Frederick August Kittel** in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's Hill District, fourth of seven children of Frederick Kittel, an immigrant German baker who seldom spent time with his family, and Daisy Wilson Kittel, an African-American cleaning woman from North Carolina. Earlier, his maternal grandmother walked from North Carolina to Pennsylvania in search of a better life. Wilson's parents divorced when he was five, and his mother raised her children in a Bedford Avenue two-room apartment behind a grocery store. This economically-depressed neighborhood was inhabited by many black Americans and well as others.

During Wilson's teen years in the late 1950s, his mother married David Bedford, and the Bedford family moved from the Hill to a then predominantly white working-class neighborhood, Hazelwood. There, they encountered racial hostility; bricks were thrown through a window at their new home.

Wilson was the only black student at Central Catholic High School in 1959; threats and abuse drove him away, but Connelley Vocational High School proved unchallenging. He dropped out of Gladstone High School in the 10th grade in 1960 when a teacher accused him of plagiarizing a 20-page paper on Napoleon.

Wilson made such extensive use of the Carnegie Library to educate himself that they later awarded him a degree, the only such one they have awarded. Wilson, who had learned to read at age four, began reading black writers there at age 12 and spent the remainder of his teen years educating himself by reading Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and others.

By this time, Wilson knew that he wanted to be a writer, but this created tension with his mother, who wanted him to become a lawyer. She forced him to leave the family home and he enlisted in the United States Army for

a three-year stint in 1962, but left after one year and went back to working odd jobs such as a porter, short-order cook, gardener, and dishwasher.

Adult life

Kittel changed his name to honor his mother when his father died in 1965. That same year he discovered the blues as sung by Bessie Smith and bought a typewriter for twenty dollars and started writing poetry.

In 1968, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizon Theater in the Hill District of Pittsburgh along with fellow resident Rob Penny, who went on to become associate professor of Africana studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Wilson served as a scriptwriter and director for the next ten years; desperate for space, they staged many of their plays in elementary school auditoriums. Among his early efforts there was *Jitney* which he revised more than two decades later as part of his 10-play cycle on twentieth century Pittsburgh.

Wilson's first marriage was to Brenda Burton in 1969. That same year, his stepfather David Bedford died. His oldest daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson, was born January 22, 1970. The marriage ended in 1972.

In 1976 Dr. Vernell Lillie, who had founded the Kuntu Repertory Theatre two years earlier, directed Wilson's *The Homecoming*. That same year Wilson saw *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* at the Pittsburgh Public Theater, his first professional play. Wilson and Penny also started the Kuntu Writers Workshop to bring writers together in a meaningful discussion and to assist writers with getting published and/or produced. Both organizations are still active to this day.

In 1978 Wilson moved to Saint Paul, Minnesota at the suggestion of his friend director Claude Purdy, who helped him secure a job writing educational scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota. In 1980 he received a fellowship for the Minneapolis Playwrights Center.

In 1981 he was married (for the second of three times) to Judy Oliver, a social worker. They divorced in 1990. That same year Wilson moved to Seattle.

Death

On August 26, 2005, he told his hometown newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, that he had been diagnosed with liver cancer in June of 2005 and given 3 to 5 months to live. He died on October 2, 2005 at Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, Washington. He was buried in Greenwood Cemetery on October 8, 2005. He was survived by his third wife, costume designer Constanza Romero, and his two daughters, Sakina Ansari and Azula Carmen (daughter of Constanza).

On October 16, 2005, only 14 days after Wilson's untimely death, the Virginia Theatre in New York's Broadway theatre district was renamed the August Wilson Theatre. This is the first Broadway theatre to bear the name of an African-American.

Quotes

- "Everybody has to find his own song. Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is. Forget how he's supposed to mark down life...See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song, he goes off in search of it...till he find out he's got it with him all the time." *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- "Don't you worry 'bout whether someone like you; worry 'bout whether they're doin' right by you." *Fences*
- "Money can't buy what that piano costs. You can't sell your soul for money. It wont go to the buyer. It'll shrivel and shrink to know that you ain't taken on to it. but won't go with the buyer. *The piano lesson*
- "Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner." *Fences*

Literary works

Wilson's most famous plays are *Fences* (1985) (which won a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award), *The Piano Lesson* (1990) (a Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

The Pittsburgh Cycle

In 2005, August Wilson completed a ten-play cycle, nine of which are set in Pittsburgh, chronicling the African-American experience in the 20th century. These are:

- 1900s - *Gem of the Ocean* (2003)
- 1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984)
- 1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982) - set in Chicago
- 1930s - *The Piano Lesson* (1986) - Pulitzer Prize
- 1940s - *Seven Guitars* (1995)
- 1950s - *Fences* (1985) - Pulitzer Prize
- 1960s - *Two Trains Running* (1990)
- 1970s - *Jitney* (1982)
- 1980s - *King Hedley II* (2001)
- 1990s - *Radio Golf* (2005)

Awards and tributes

- 1985: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- 1985: Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- 1987: Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, *Fences*
- 1987: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Fences*
- 1987: Pulitzer Prize for Drama, *Fences*
- 1987: Tony Award for Best Play, *Fences*
- 1988: Literary Lion Award from the New York Public Library
- 1988: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- 1988: Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- 1990: Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, *The Piano Lesson*
- 1990: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *The Piano Lesson*
- 1990: Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *The Piano Lesson*
- 1990: Pulitzer Prize for Drama, *The Piano Lesson*
- 1992: American Theatre Critics' Association Award, *Two Trains Running*
- 1992: New York Drama Critics Circle Citation for Best American Play, *Two Trains Running*
- 1992: Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *Two Trains Running*
- 1996: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Seven Guitars*
- 1996: Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *Seven Guitars*
- 1999: National Humanities Medal
- 2000: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Jitney*
- 2000: Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Play, *Jitney*
- 2001: Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *King Hedley II*
- 2004: The Freedom of Speech Award at the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival.
- 2005: Make_Shift Award at the U.S. Confederation of Play Writers.

External links

- Comprehensive August Wilson Website (<http://www.augustwilson.net>)
- August Wilson (<http://www.ibdb.com/person.asp?ID=4362>) at the Internet Broadway Database
- Pittsburgh Post-Gazette obituary (<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/05276/581786.stm>)
- Story of August Wilson's funeral (<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/05282/585349.stm>)
- Post-Gazette special index on August Wilson (<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/03001/497623.stm>)
- NPR Intersections: August Wilson, Writing to the Blues

- (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1700922>) audio interview
- Theater Is to Be Renamed for a Dying Playwright (<http://nytimes.com/2005/09/02/nyregion/02theater.html>)
- Kuntu Repertory Theatre (<http://www.kuntu.org/history.htm>)
- Kuntu Writers Workshop (<http://www.pitt.edu/~bjgrier/program.htm#KWW>)
- A detailed biography at AfricanAmericans.com (<http://www.africanamericans.com/AugustWilson.htm>)
- *The Paris Review* Interview with August Wilson (<http://www.parisreview.org/viewinterview.php/prmMID/839>)

Further reading

- *August Wilson: A Casebook (Casebooks on Modern Dramatists, Volume 15)*, edited by Marilyn Elkins, Garland Publishing (November 1, 1999), ISBN 0-8153-3634-9
- *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* by Sandra Shannon, Howard University Press (1995)
- *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics* by Sandra Shannon, Palgrave MacMillan (2004)
- *August Wilson's Fences: A Reference Guide* by Sandra Shannon, Greenwood Publishing (2003)
- "Playwright August Wilson dies at 60". CNN (<http://www.cnn.com/2005/SHOWBIZ/10/02/wilson.obit.ap/index.html>) . Retrieved Oct. 3, 2005.

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Categories: 1945 births | 2005 deaths | African American writers | American autodidacts | German-Americans | Members of The American Academy of Arts and Letters | People from Pittsburgh | People from Saint Paul, Minnesota | American dramatists and playwrights

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