BEEN HERE AND GONE

How August Wilson brought a century of black American culture to the stage.

BY JOHN LAHR

If anybody asks you who sang this song
Tell 'em
It was little Jimmy Rushing,
He's been here and gone.

The playwright August Wilson lives in a leafy, genteel part of Seattle intended by the city's founding fathers to be the site of the state capitol, and so named Capitol Hill. He moved here in 1994, with Constanza Romero, a Colombian-born costume designer who is now his third wife, and they share a rambling turn-of-the-century house with Azula, their three-year-old daughter. Azula has her father's ear and number, as well as total control of the living room, which, apart from a jukebox and a piano—props from Wilson's productions—hasn't a stick of adult furniture. Wilson, who doesn't drive, is more interested in the inner terrain than the external one; writing, he says, "is for me like walking down the landscape of the self. . . . You find false trails, roads closed for repairs, impregnable fortresses, scouts, armies of memory, and impossible cartography."

Wilson does most of his pathfinding below the living room, in a low-ceilinged basement, lit by neon bars, where he goes to sneak cigarettes, listen to records, and wait for his characters to arrive. He writes standing up, at a high, cluttered pine accounting desk, where he can prop his legal pad and transfer his jottings to a laptop computer. Pinned on a bulletin board, just beside where he stands to write, are two quotations, as bold as street signs: "TAKE IT TO THEMOON" (Frank Gehry) and "DON'T BE AFRAID. JUST PLAY THE MUSIC" (Charlie Parker). When Wilson looks up from his desk, at the dingy wall with its labyrinth of water pipes, he sees honorary degrees from the University of Pittsburgh, his home town, and from Yale, where his career as a playwright began, in 1982—just two of twenty-three he has accumulated so far, which is not bad for a fifty-five-year-old writer who quit school when he was fifteen.

For years, about two steps behind Wilson's writing table, an Everlast punching bag was suspended from the ceiling. When Wilson was in full flow and the dialogue was popping, he'd stop, pivot, throw a barrage of punches at the bag, then turn back to the work. Recently, however, during a particularly vigorous rewrite of his new play, "King Hedley II," which opens on Broadway this month, Wilson knocked the bag and its ceiling hook down, and it now rests mournfully in the corner. Wilson has a retired boxer's heft—thick neck, square shoulders, wide chest—and a stomach whose amplitude is emphasized by suspenders that bracket his belly like parentheses. Wilson is the product of a mixed marriage, but, he says, "the culture I learned in my mother's household was black." He has a handsome face that is dominated by a wide forehead and a concentrated gaze. He exudes a very specific sense of gravity. He gives away nothing at first, or even second, glance. But when his guard is down, and especially when he's telling a story, you feel what his wife calls "the sizzle."

Wilson, who was originally named Frederick August Kittel, after his German father, says that his model for manhood—"the first male image that I carry"—is not his father but an old family friend, "the brilliant Hall of Fame prizefighter" Charley Burley. Archie Moore called Burley the best fighter he'd ever faced, and Sugar Ray Robinson refused to box him, but after his glory days as a pugilist were over Burley became a garbageman in Pittsburgh and lived across the street from the impressionable young Wilson. In Burley's Friday-night regalia—hundred-dollar Stetson, cashmere coat, yam-colored Florsheim shoes—Wilson saw something iconic. Burley was one of those black men, Wilson writes, who "elevated their presence into an art. They were bad. If only in an abstract of style."

Burley was known as "the uncrowned champion"; Wilson is known as "the heavyweight champion"—a nickname given to him by the director Marion McClinton, who is staging "King Hedley II." McClinton explains, "It's August's language—the rhythm of hurt, the rhythm of pain, the rhythm of ecstasy, the rhythm of family—which sets him apart and is why we call him the heavyweight champion." Between 1959, when Lorraine Hansberry had a hit with "A Raisin in the Sun," and 1984, when Wilson made his sensational breakthrough with "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," a play about black musicians' struggle with their white bosses in the twenties, the number of African-American plays to succeed on Broadway was zero. (There were, of course, many other black playwrights during this time—Amiri Baraka, Ron Milner, Phillip Hayes Dean, Richard Wesley, and Ed Bullins, among them—who won critical praise and a coterie following.) "Ma Rainey" ran for ten months. Almost immediately, Hollywood came calling, mostly with offers for bio-pics of Louis Armstrong, Muhammad Ali, and the like; Wilson wasn't tempted. He asked the Hollywood nabobs why so many black playwrights had written only one play. "I go, 'Where is Lonne Elder? Where is Joseph Walker?' They go, 'They're in Hollywood.' And I go, 'Oh, I see,'" he says. "I wanted to have a career in the theatre."

Wilson's success also triggered what McClinton calls "one of the more major American theatrical revolutions." His audience appeal almost single-handedly broke down the wall for other black artists, many of whom would not otherwise be working in the mainstream. His plays were showcases for an array of first-rate performers, such as Charles S. Dutton, Samuel L. Jackson, Courtney Vance, Angela Bassett, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, and Laurence Fishburne. And the opportunities for African-American playwrights also increased. "What's happened since 1984 has been incredible," McClin-

August Wilson at the Café Edison, February 13,2001: He gives away nothing at first, or even second, glance, but when his guard is down, and especially when he's telling a story, you feel what his wife calls "the sizzle."Photograph by Dana Lixenberg.

ton says. "A lot of black writers had doors opened to them basically because August knocked them open. So then you start seeing Kia Corthron, Suzan-Lori Parks, Keith Glover, Robert Alexander, Lynn Nottage, Sam Kelley, Carlisle Brown, Charles Smith, Michael Henry Brown—I could keep going. American theatre now looks toward African-Americans as viable members."

Wilson followed "Ma Rainey" with six critically acclaimed plays in a row—"Fences" (1987; Pulitzer Prize, Tony Award), "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" (1988), "The Piano Lesson" (1990; Pulitzer Prize), "Two Trains Running" (1992), "Seven Guitars" (1996), and "Jitney" (2000). He actually had drafts of "Fences" and "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" in his trunk before "Ma Rainey" made it to Broadway, and sometime after the success of that play, he has said, it dawned on him that each play he'd written so far was "trying to focus on what I felt were the most important issues confronting black Americans for that decade." Wilson gave himself a mission: to continue to chronicle, decade by decade, the "dazed and dazzling" rapport of African-Americans with the twentieth century. "King Hedley II" is set in the nineteen-eighties, which leaves only the first and last decades of the century to be written. The plays form a kind of fever chart of the trauma of slavery. Their historical trajectory takes African-Americans through their transition from property to personhood ("Joe Turner's Come and Gone"); their struggle for power in urban life ("Ma Rainey");their dilemma over whether to embrace or deny their slave past ("The Piano Lesson"); the broken promise of first-class citizenship after the Second World War ("Seven Guitars"); their fraught adaptation to bourgeois values ("Fences");stagnancy in the midst of Black Power militancy ("Two Trains Running"); and their historical and financial disenfranchisement during the economic boom ("Jitney" and "King Hedley II").

"The average struggling non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America," Zora Neale Hurston wrote in 1950. Wilson has put that man—his songs,his idiom, his superstitions, his folly, and his courage—on the stage. His plays are not talking textbooks;they paint the big picture indirectly, from the little incidents of daily life. "People can be slave-ships in shoes," Hurston said. Wilson's characters are shackled together by something greater than poverty; their bondage is to the caprices of history. "We's the leftovers," Toledo, the piano player and only literate member of Ma Rainey's band, tells the other musicians. "The white man knows you just a leftover. 'Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don't know that we been took and made history out of."

Wilson's work is a conscious answer to James Baldwin's call for "a profound articulation of the Black Tradition." He says he wanted to demonstrate that black American culture "was capable of sustaining you, so that when you left your father's or your mother's house you didn't go into the world naked. You were fully clothed in manners and a way of life." In the past, playwrights such as Dubose Heyward, Paul Green, and Eugene O'Neill made blacks and black culture the subject of drama; Wilson has made them the object. "When you go to the dictionary and you look up 'black,' it gives you these definitions that say, 'Affected by an undesirable condition,'" Wilson says. "You start thinking something's wrong with black. When white people say, 'I don't see color,' what they're saying is 'You're affected by this undesirable condition,but I'll pretend I don't see that.' And I go, 'No, *see* my color. Look at me. I'm not ashamed of who I am and what I am.'"

Wilson's characters often scrabble desperately, sometimes foolishly, for an opportunity that rarely comes.But when opportunity knocked for Wilson he seized it with a vengeance. He has tried to live his writing life by the Buddhist motto "You're entitled to the work but not the reward";nevertheless, he has become a very rich man—in 1990, he was the most produced American playwright—and he is only getting richer. After "Seven Guitars," he and his co-producer, Ben Mordecai,formed a joint venture called Sageworks, which allows Wilson to exercise unusual control over the destiny of his plays—and also to take both a writer's and a producer's share of their profits. A Wilson play has a gestation period like no other in the history of American theatre, and no other major playwright—not Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, or David Mamet—has negotiated the latitude to work so freely. Before a play arrives on Broadway, Wilson refines his story through a series of separate productions. In his rehearsal mufti—black turtleneck and cloth cap—he sits beside the director for almost every hour of every production,and, since "Seven Guitars," he's taken to "writing in the heat of the moment." By the time "King Hed-

"Stanley, we need to talk, so please don't interrupt."

ley II" reaches New York, the play, which shows the fragmented life of a Pittsburgh ghetto during the Reagan years, will have been seen, digested, reconceived, and rewritten after productions in Seattle, Boston, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington. This long reworking, like a brass rubbing, brings the play's parameters and its filigree of detail into bold relief until the drama emerges, as Wilson puts it, "fat with substance."

"When I was writing 'Joe Turner,' " Wilson says, "I realized that someone was gonna stand up onstage and say the words, whatever the hell they were. That's when I realized I had a responsibility to the words. I couldn't have the character say any old thing. There couldn't be any mistakes." To achieve this sort of focus requires the kind of appetite for victory that is epitomized, for Wilson, by a breed of championship racehorses, which in order to win "bite their own necks to get more oxygen." He began his own extraordinary endeavor late, at about forty, and his time is valuable. He does not spend it on the telephone, or watching television, or going to movies (between 1980 and 1991, he saw only two, both directed by Martin Scorsese—"Raging Bull" and "Cape Fear"). His work requires a lot of "doing nothing" to generate "brain space." So Wilson, whom Azula calls "the slippery guy," is usually to be found puttering in the crepuscular gloom of his basement, where he communes with himself and, if he's lucky, taps into what he calls "the blood's memory," that "deepest part of yourself where the ancestors are talking." To do so requires a kind of ritual preparation. "Before I write something, I wash my hands," he says. "I always want to say I approached it with clean hands—you know, a symbolic cleansing."

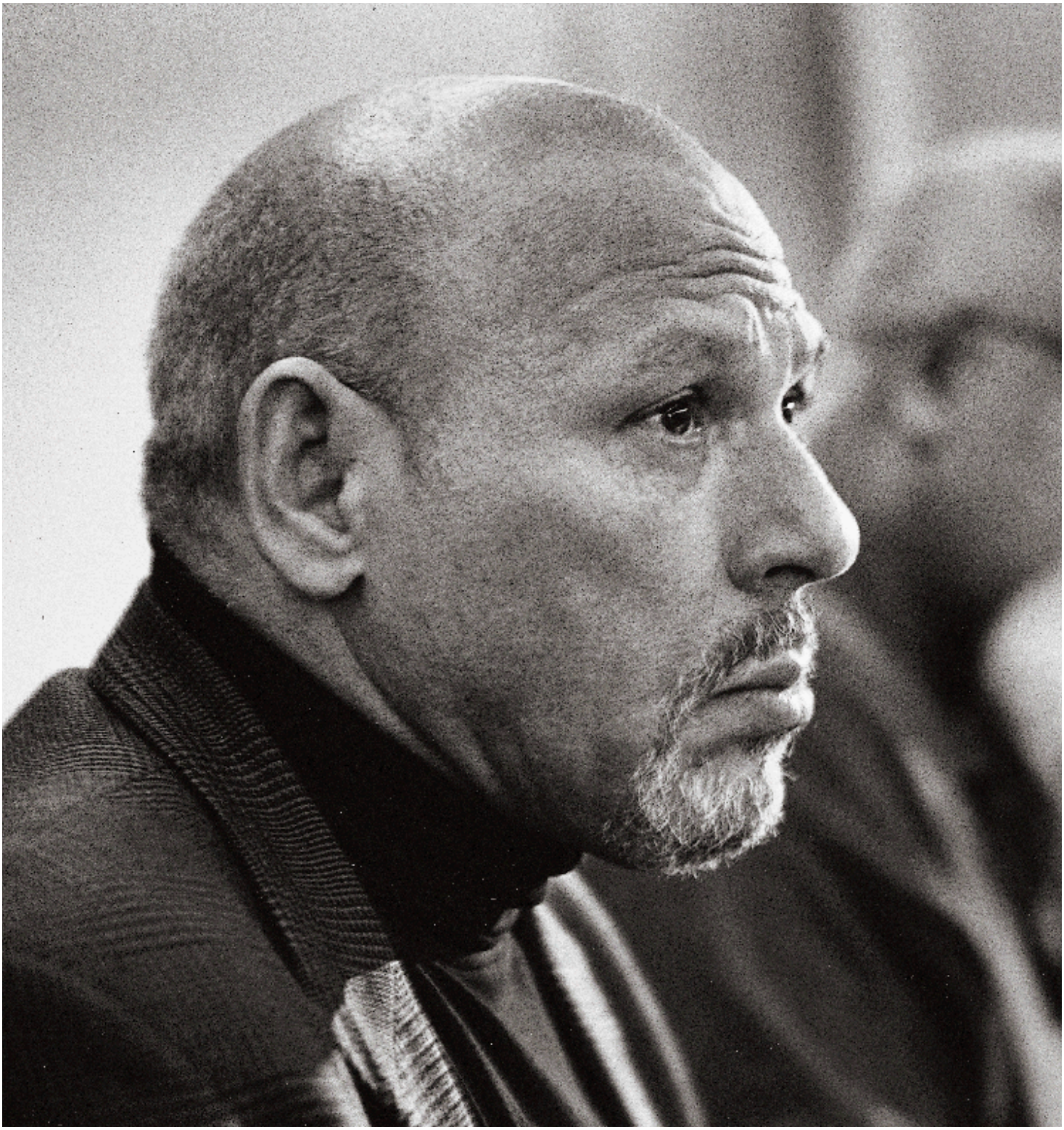
Wilson's plays, filled as they often are with visions and visionaries, have a kind of hoodoo of their own, which can seem strange to white viewers, who are often critical of his use of the supernatural. He is a collagist, making Afro-Christian parables, and his plays are best when the real and the spiritual are wedded ("Joe Turner," "Seven Guitars," "The Piano Lesson"), in order, as he says, "to come up with a third thing, which is neither realism nor allegory." Then, his intensity and his natural eloquence—what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls "an unruly luxuriance of language, an ability to ease between trash talk and near-choral transport"—most effectively highlight another comparatively unsung quality of his writing: the ability to unfetter the heart. Under his focussed gaze, characters take on uncanny, sometimes awesome, life, and, unlike most contemporary male playwrights, he can write memorable roles for women as well as men. Wilson's work is not much influenced by the canon of modern Western plays, almost none of which he has read or seen. "I consider it a blessing that when I started writing plays in earnest, in 1979, I had not read Chekhov. I hadn't read Ibsen. I hadn't read Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, or O'Neill," he says. By then, he had been writing poetry for fifteen years and had read all the major American poets. "It took me eight years to find my own voice as a poet. I didn't want to take eight years to find my voice as a playwright." To this day, as incredible as it seems, with the exception of his own productions and a few of his friends', Wilson has seen only about a dozen plays.

In the age of the sound bite, Wilson is that most endangered of rare birds—a storyteller. A Wilson tale takes about as long as a baseball game, which is to say a good deal longer than the average commercial play. Although audiences will happily watch sports contests into double overtime, the play of ideas and characters is another matter. In this arena, they are accustomed to what Shakespeare called the "two hours' traffic," and Wilson has taken a lot of flak for his capaciousness. According to "The Oxford Companion to American Theatre," his plays "lack a sense of tone and a legitimate, sustained dramatic thrust." This criticism is, to my mind, unjust, but it reflects a distinctive cultural and artistic difference. Virtually all the seminal white postwar plays—"The Glass Menagerie," "Long Day's Journey Into Night," "Death of a Salesman"—revolve around the drama of American individualism; they mark a retreat from exterior into interior life. Wilson, however, dramatizes community. "Community is the most valuable thing that you have in African-American culture," he explains. "The individual good is always subverted to the good of the community." Wilson's plays are distinctive—and longer—because society, not just a psyche, is being mediated. They demonstrate the individual's interaction with the community, not his separation from it.

In Wilson's plays, the white world is a major character that remains almost entirely offstage; nonetheless, its presence is palpable—its rules, its standards, its ownership are always pressing in on the black world and changing the flow of things. "I look around and say, 'Where the barbed wire?' " Hedley says, observing that as a slave he would have been worth twelve hundred dollars, and now he's worth three-fifty an hour. "They got everything else. They got me blocked in every other way. 'Where the barbed wire?' " To which his sidekick replies, "If you had barbed wire you could cut through. You can't cut through having no job." "Blacks know the spiritual truth of white America," Wilson says. "We are living examples of America's hypocrisy. We know white America better than white America knows us." Wilson's plays go some distance toward making up this deficiency. For white members of the audience, the experience of watching a Wilson work is often educational and humanizing. It's the eternal things in Wilson's dramas—the arguments between fathers and sons, the longing for redemption, the dreams of winning, and the fear of losing—that reach across the footlights and link the black world to the white one, from which it is so profoundly separated and by which it is so profoundly defined. To the black world, Wilson's plays are witness; to the white world, they are news. This creates a fascinating racial conundrum, one first raised by Baldwin: "If I am not what I've been told I am, then it means that *you're* not what you thought *you* were *either!*"

II

August Wilson was born in 1945 in Pittsburgh's Hill District. Although it was just four minutes by car from downtown, the Hill—known then as Little Harlem—was a lively, flourishing, self-contained universe, with its own baseball teams, night clubs, businesses, and newspaper, and its own people, some of them legends who had left its one square mile to sing their distinctive songs to the world: Lena Horne, Erroll Garner, Ahmad Jamal, Earl (Fatha) Hines, Billy Eckstine, George Benson. When Wilson was a child, the Hill had a population of fifty-five thousand; since then, as a consequence of the 1968 riots, urban renewal, and competition from



August Wilson may have lost a father in the split with Lloyd Richards, but in Marion McClinton (right) he gained a brother.

white neighborhoods, to which African-Americans now have putative access, the Hill's boundaries and its buoyancy have shrunk. Today, its rows of small, decrepit houses sit on the sloping land like a set of bad teeth—irregular, decaying, with large gaps between them. Beside one such desolate, littered vacant lot, at the rear of 1727 Bedford Avenue, Wilson grew up. You have to bushwhack your way through a tangle of branches that covers the ten steep steps to the boarded front door of the forty-dollar-a-month apartment where Wilson, the fourth of six children, lived with his mother, Daisy Wilson, and his siblings, Freda, Linda Jean, Donna, Richard, and Edwin.

Daisy ran a structured household that was centered on family activities. "Monday at seven, the Rosary came on the radio, so we said the Rosary," Wilson recalls. "Art Linkletter's 'People Are Funny' was Tuesday. We played board games. Then there was the Top Forty.

ograph by Alen MacWeeney.

Everyone got to pick a song. If your song got to No. 1, you got a nickel." The back yard, where Daisy planted flowers and played dodgeball and baseball with her children and, on summer evenings, sat around a card table for games of Tonk, is blocked off now and difficult to see, but in the set for "Seven Guitars" Wilson preserved the ramshackle solace of the place so exactly that when his sister Linda Jean first saw the show she burst into tears. At the core of Wilson's personality is a kind of truculent resolve, which comes, he says, from his mother's example. (Daisy, who planned her own funeral, down to the gown she'd wear, died of lung cancer in 1983; for the past eighteen years, Wilson has returned to Pittsburgh on her birthday to gather with his family and visit her grave.) She was a tall, strong, handsome homebody, who had left school after the seventh grade and lived by the gospel of clear-eyed common sense and competitiveness. For Wilson, the best example of Daisy's brand of bumptious integrity is an incident that took place around 1955. She was listening to a quiz program that was offering a new washing machine to anyone who could answer a question correctly. Daisy knew the answer, and knew that, with six children, a washing machine would be a blessing. But when she won the contest and the promoters found out that she was black, they offered her instead a certificate to the Salvation Army to get a used washing machine. "Mother said she wanted the new machine or she didn't want any," Wilson says. "I remember Julie Burley"—Charley Burley's wife—"saying to her, 'Oh, Daisy, you got all them kids, what difference does it make? Take the washing machine.' And my mother said, 'Something is not always better than nothing.' "

Wilson's sense of his own uniqueness came, at least in part, from his mother's adoring gaze, what Baldwin called "the crucial, the definitive, the all-but-everlasting judgment." Wilson was Daisy's much longed-for first son. "My mother said she would have had eleven girls—she didn't care—she would have kept trying till she had a son," says Wilson's sister Donna, who remembers being told of her father's disappointment at her own birth. " 'Another split-ass,' he said." Freda says, "Mother seemed to have a need for a male in the house to show leadership. She clearly felt that August was the best and smartest of us, so he should be given the duty of going downtown at the age of ten or eleven to pay the bills. It wasn't just about paying the bills. Her underlying reason was to prepare him for the world." "She made me believe that I could do anything," Wilson says. He adds, "I wanted to be the best at whatever I did. I was the best dishwasher in Pittsburgh. I really was. I got a raise the first day I was there. When I sit down and write, I want to write the best play that's ever been written. Sometimes that's a fearsome place to stand, but that's when you call on your courage."

Wilson had a high I.Q.; he also had a gift for language. In kindergarten, he was already entertaining the class with his stories. By the sixth grade, he was turning out love poems for the girls he fancied: "I would I could mend my festering heart / Harpooned by Cupid's flaming dart / But too far the shaft did penetrate / Alas, it is too late." At his Catholic grade school, Wilson's intellectual overreaching drove the nuns crazy. "When they said no one could figure out the Holy Trinity, I was like, 'Why not?' I instantly wanted to prove it could be done," he says. As Wilson grew into adolescence, even his friends acknowledged a certain grandiosity in him; his nickname was Napoleon.

Wilson's hankering to be spectacular was fed not only by his mother's expectations but by his father's abdications. Fritz Kittel considered himself German, although when he had immigrated to America, with his three brothers, in 1915, he was an Austro-Hungarian citizen. The first time he met Daisy, at a neighborhood grocery store, she was shy. At the urging of her grandmother, the next time she saw him she was more flirtatious. They married, but by the time Wilson was born, Linda Jean says, Fritz was staying at the house only on weekends and living in a hotel during the week. Wilson remembers him as "mostly not there," adding, "You stayed out of his way if he was there." Fritz was, Wilson says, "an extremely talented baker," who worked for a while at New York's Waldorf-Astoria. He was also a wine drinker—"Muscatel by the gallon"—and couldn't keep a job.

The only father-son experience Wilson remembers was being taken downtown by Fritz in a blizzard to get a pair of Gene Autry cowboy boots. "He gave me a bunch of change, about seventy-five cents, and told me, 'Jingle it.' To let them know I had money." Otherwise, his memories focus on his father's hectoring abuse. Wilson refers to ferocious arguments, which sometimes ended with Fritz outside heaving bricks at their windows. "We knew to hide," Freda says. "We ran together, we'd fall behind the bed together, then, obviously, someone would sneak up to the

"What's this they say, Billy, about a new, more virulent strain of teen-ager?"

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window and look down." If Wilson closes his eyes to conjure up his father, he sees a tall man singing a German song to himself as he comes home from work with three-foot-high brown bags full of baked goods. "When he got angry, the next thing you know, Dad was just throwing the bags on the floor and stomping and crushing all the doughnuts and things in the bag," Linda Jean recalls. "And we needed those morsels." One Thanksgiving, in a tantrum, Fritz pulled the door off the oven and Daisy had to prop it back up with a stick so the turkey could finish roasting. Fritz's tranquil moments could be as tyrannical as his outbursts. "He believed in reading the papers," Freda says. "We had to sit down. We were not allowed to talk. We were not allowed to play. It was complete silence." Freda saw him as a displaced person, "an off-the-boat-type person." She says, "I don't think he ever fit here in America. I don't think he ever accepted black people. Or the culture. I think for my whole family there's a deep sense of abandonment." By 1957, when Wilson was twelve, Daisy had divorced Kittel and taken up with David Bedford, a black man whom she later married. "I loved the man," Wilson says of Bedford, an avid reader who was a community leader, and who, Wilson learned, after his death in 1969, had spent twenty-three years in prison.

Wilson inherited his father's volatile temperament. "He was a kid with a temper," Freda says. "And a sorry loser, because, in his mind, if he played to win he should win because he should have figured out whatever strategy was needed to win. And not figuring out that strategy was just highly unacceptable to him." In this regard, Wilson hasn't changed much over the years. "My goodness, when he got emotional he was mad scary," says the professor and playwright Rob Penny, who was one of Wilson's closest friends on the Hill. "You'd think he was gonna snap out, attack you, or beat you up or something. He was very intense." When he was about twenty, Wilson cuffed his sister Donna and broke her jaw. I asked Constanza Romero what she had found most surprising about Wilson after she married him, and she said, "His temper—his temper scared me." She referred to an explosion over a misplaced telephone number. "He went crazy, absolutely bonkers," she said. "He starts speaking very strongly, cussing himself out. He really doesn't allow himself any mistakes, any leeway."

"I just always felt that the society was lined up against you," Wilson says. "That in order to do anything in the world you were going to have to battle this thing that was out there. It wasn't gonna give you any quarter." For Wilson, the battle began in earnest when he was a freshman at Central Catholic High School, where he was the only black student in his grade and was placed in the advanced class. "There was a note on my desk every single day. It said, 'Go home nigger,' " Wilson says. The indignities—the shoving, the name-calling, the tripping—were constant; so was Wilson's brawling. The Christian Brothers frequently sent him home by taxi. "They would have to walk me through a gantlet of, like, forty kids. I would always want to say to them, 'But you're not saying anything to these forty guys. You're just escorting me through them as though they have a right to stand here.' " Then, one day when Wilson was in his early teens, a student standing in front of him during the Pledge of Allegiance made mention of the "nigger" behind him. "I said, 'O.K., buddy,' " and, at "liberty and justice for all," Wilson punched him. "We go down to Brother Martin's, and he's ready to send me home. I said, 'Hey, why don't we just do this permanently? I do not want to go to school here anymore.' " Wilson went next to a vocational school, where the academic content was "I swear, like fifth-grade work." When his shop teacher, angry that Wilson had knocked in a thumbtack with a T-square, punched Wilson so hard that he knocked him off his chair, Wilson lunged at the teacher and "bounced him off the blackboard." "Give me a pink slip," he said. "I'm leaving this school."

At fifteen, Wilson ended up at Gladstone High School, taking tenth-grade classes but still officially in the ninth grade. He sulked in class, sat in the back, and refused to participate. Then, in an effort to redeem himself in the eyes of a black teacher, who ran an after-school college club Wilson wanted to join, he decided to take one assignment seriously. It was an essay on a historical figure, and Wilson chose Napoleon. "The fact that he was a self-made man, that he was a lieutenant in the army and became the emperor, I liked that," Wilson says. He researched it; he wrote it; he rented a typewriter with money he'd earned mowing lawns and washing cars; he paid his sister Linda Jean twenty-five cents a page to type it; and then he handed it in.

"The next day, the teacher asked me to stay after class," Wilson says. On the paper the teacher had written two marks—A-plus and E, a failing grade. "I'm gonna give you one of these two grades," he told Wilson. Suspecting that one of Wilson's older sisters had written

the paper, he asked, "Can you prove to me that you wrote this?" Wilson remembers saying, "Hey, unless you call everybody in here and have all the people prove they wrote them, even the ones that went and copied out of the encyclopedia word for word, I don't feel I should have to prove anything." The teacher circled the E and handed the paper back. "I tore it up, threw it in the wastebasket, and walked out of school," Wilson says.

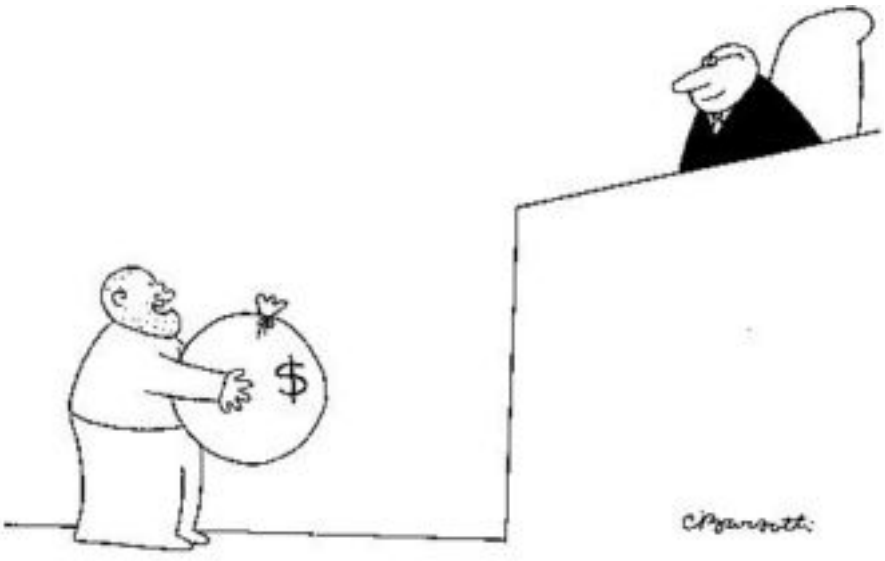
Every morning for the rest of the school year, rather than tell his mother he'd dropped out, Wilson walked three blocks to the local library. Over the next four years, by his own estimation, he read three hundred books, spending as many as five hours a day in the library. He read everything—sociology, anthropology, theology, fiction. "The world opened up," he says. "I could wander through the stacks. I didn't need anyone to teach me. All you had to do was have an interest and a willingness to extract the information from the book." It was about this time that Wilson began to see himself as a kind of warrior, surviving unapologetically on his own terms. The first person with whom he had to do battle was Daisy, whose dashed dreams for her son made her a furious opponent. "She told him he was no good, that he would amount to nothing," Linda Jean says. "It was relentless. It was an agony for him. He suffered many indignities. He was often denied food. She would take the food out of the refrigerator, put it in her bedroom, lock the door, and then go out. He was made to live in the basement for a while. She said he was dirty. She didn't want him in the house upstairs."

By the time Wilson was banished to the basement, he had decided to become a writer. "I was like, 'O.K., I'm gonna sit here, I'm gonna write some stories. I'll show you,' " Wilson says. "I was gonna demonstrate my worth to her. I negotiated cooking privileges. I'd get fifteen cents and go buy me three pounds of potatoes. I was gonna demonstrate that I could feed and take care of myself." He lasted a week. "My mother was very disappointed," Wilson says. "She saw a lot of potential that I'd squandered, as far as she was concerned." To get out of the house, Wilson joined the Army. He took the Officer Candidate School test and came in second in his battalion, just two points behind the leader. Then, as often happens in Wilson's plays and in his life, he came up against the rules: to be an officer, you had to be nineteen; he was seventeen. And, if he couldn't be an officer, he wasn't interested.

Wilson headed across the country to California, where he worked in a pharmacy, until his father's terminal illness brought him back to Pittsburgh. Wilson and Linda Jean visited their father, who told them stories about being in the Army and the battle of the Argonne Forest. "Then he suddenly looked up and said, 'Who are you?' " Wilson says. "He basically chased us out of there, but for a couple of hours we had a great time." On his deathbed, Wilson's father called for his son "Fritz." Afterward, Wilson wrote a muted memorial, "Poem for the Old Man," which begins by evoking his father in his prime ("Old Fritz, when young / could lay a harem") and ends with Wilson himself ("his boxing boy / Is hitting all the new places / Too soon to make a mark").

Wilson took refuge in the African-American community, and it, in turn, nurtured him and contained him and his rage at his father's abandonment. "He's so faithful to the blackness. He's faithful like a father—that represents fidelity to him," says James Earl Jones, who starred in "Fences." Wilson found another father figure in Chawley Williams, a black drug dealer turned poet, who became his protector on the street. "August wasn't really black. He was half-and-half," Williams says. "He was too dark to be white, and he was too white to be dark. He was in no man's land. I knew he was lost. I was lost. Kindred brothers know one another. We were trying to become men. We didn't even know what it meant." In time, Wilson would write himself into the center of modern black American history. But when he hit the streets he had no money, no marketable skills, no proven talent. He was, he says, "searching for something you can claim as yours."

On April 1, 1964, Wilson walked into downtown Pittsburgh to McFerron's typewriter store and put twenty dollars on the counter for a heavy black Royal Standard in the window. He'd earned the money by writing a term paper—"Two Violent Poets: Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg"—for Freda, who was then at Fordham University. He lugged the typewriter up the Hill to the basement apartment he'd rented in a boarding house, placed the machine on the kitchen table, put a piece of loose-leaf paper in it, and typed his name. Actually, he typed every possible combination of his name—Fred A. Kittel, Frederick A. Kittel, Frederick A. Wilson, A. Wilson, August Wilson—and settled finally on the last because it looked best on paper. He then laboriously typed a batch of poems. He'd heard that *Harper's* paid a dollar a line, so he sent the poems there. "They came back three days later," Wilson says. "I said, 'Oh, I see. This is serious. I'm gonna have to learn how to write a poem.' I wasn't deterred by that. I was emboldened." But because he "didn't like the feeling of rejection," Wilson didn't send out another poem for five years. (His first published



"Then I thought, Why should I spend it all on fancy lawyers?"

work was "Muhammad Ali," which appeared in *Black World* in 1969.) "It was sufficient for me to know that I wrote poetry and I was growing as an artist," he says.

Most sightings of Wilson on the Hill were in restaurants—the White Tower, Eddie's Restaurant, the B &W, Moose's—bent over, scribbling on his tablet or on napkins. Decades later, Wilson would walk through the neighborhood and people would stop him and ask, "You still drawin'?" "I found out later people thought I was a bum," Wilson says. "The thing that sustained me was that my idea of myself was different from the idea that society, my mother, and even some of my friends had of me. I saw myself as a grand person." He adds, "I saw the pictures of Richard Wright, Langston Hughes—all of them always had a suit on. I thought, Yeah, that's me. I want to be like that." At a local thrift shop, he bought white shirts for a dime, the broad ties he favored for a nickel, and sports coats for thirty-five cents. In the poetic sphere, he'd come under the influence of Dylan Thomas, and he went through the Black Power movement with a coat and tie and a pipe, intoning poetry in an English accent. "People thought he was crazy in the neighborhood," Chawley Williams says. He adds, "When I met August, I was in the drug world. Here come August. He's sensitive, he's articulate, he has talent, he's trying to write. And the hustlers of the streets is at him. They could get him to do things, 'cause he wanted to belong. He would allow them to come to wherever he stayed at to eat, to get high and shoot their dope, to lie up with different women. They were trying to get him to get high. I put a halt to that."

Fish love water, it is said, and are cooked in it. But although Wilson swam in this predatory world he never felt threatened. If you ask him now to imagine the street back then, a smile crosses his face; he holds out his big right hand and trembles it. "A shimmy," he says. "The avenue shimmered. Hundreds of people on the sidewalks. Life going on." The vibrancy ravished him. Once, riding up Centre Avenue in a friend's convertible, Wilson heard gunshots. "I hopped out of the car and ran down to where the gunshots were," he says. "There's this woman chasing the man around the car, and—*boom!*—she shot him. He was bleeding, and he asked this guy, 'Man, drive me to the hospital.' The guy said, 'You ain't gon' get all that blood in my car!' " Wilson adds, "I remember one time I didn't go to bed for damn near three days because every time I'd go to bed I felt like I was missing something."

Although Little Richard, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, Chuck Berry, and other rock and rollers had spilled over the back-yard fences of Wilson's childhood, it wasn't until this time that he first heard the blues. For a nickel at a St. Vincent de Paul charity shop, he bought a bootleg 78-r.p.m. record on whose tattered yellow label he could make out the words "Bessie Smith: 'Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine.' " Smith's impudent, unabashed sound stunned him. "The universe stuttered and everything fell to a new place," he wrote later. Like James Baldwin, who wrote that hearing Bessie Smith for the first time "helped to reconcile me to being a 'nigger,' " Wilson saw the moment as an epiphany: "a birth, a baptism, and a redemption all rolled up into one." Wilson played the new record twenty-two times straight. "Then I started laughing, you know, 'cause it suddenly dawned on me that there was another record on the other side." He adds, "It made me look at the world differently. It gave the people in the rooming house where I lived, and also my mother, a history I didn't know they had. It was the beginning of my consciousness that I was the carrier of some very valuable antecedents."

Wilson considers the blues "the best literature we have." As a way of preparing the emotional landscape for each play of his cycle, he submerges himself in the blues of the period. For "Hedley," for instance, he's asking himself, "How'd we get from Percy Sledge's 'Warm and Tender Love' to 'You My Bitch'?" Even the structure of his sentences—the frequent reiteration of themes and words—owes much to the music's repetitions, its raucous pitch and improvised irony. From "Two Trains Running":

> A nigger with a gun is bad news. You can't even use the word "nigger" and "gun" in the same sentence. You say the word "gun" in the same sentence with the word "nigger" and you in trouble. The white man panic. Unless you say, "The policeman shot the nigger with his gun."

He particularly likes it when singers speak their names in song. "There's

CHIQUITA GREGORY

Sagaponack swings the Atlantic around its head
Like an athlete in the windup for the hammer throw.
It is a hurricane and the radio
Predicts a tornado will follow.

The air violently
Smells fresh like nowhere else,
And I am just assuming it is
You calling to everyone lunch is ready.

We are heads bowed
At our place cards. Zeus is saying grace
When the chairs begin to shake and lightning outside
Shazams you back to life, tsunami

Light as a feather, the feather of life,
Very long legs,
Very short shorts, a chef's apron in front, so that from
Behind . . . Goddess,

You have returned to earth in a mood and
In a storm, and I have no doubt that
Irreplaceable trees on Sagg Main are davening
Themselves to the ground. They

Rend their clothes and tear their hair out out
Of joy. Chiquita, how can anyone be so
Angry who has died? The whirling light in
The drive is the police, here

To urge the last holdouts in houses near the
Ocean to leave. To help us
Decide, they suavely ask for the name of next of kin.
The ocean bursts into towering flames of foam.

The lobsters in the pot are screaming
Inside the reddening roar.
Your aproned ghost keeps boiling more, keeps boiling more,
And turns to serve the gore.

—Frederick Seidel

something wonderful about that," he says. "They're making a stand. They're saying, 'This is me. This is what I have to say.' " In the context of what Zora Neale Hurston called "the muteness of slavery," the notion of singing solo and making a personal statement is, for African-Americans, a comparatively new and extraordinarily potent thing, which Wilson dramatizes in his plays. In his theatrical vocabulary, "finding a song" is both the expression of spirit and the accomplishment of identity. Some of his characters have a song that they can't broadcast; others have given up singing; some have been brutalized into near-muteness; and others have turned the absence of a destiny into tall talk—the rhetoric of deferred dreams. But Wilson's most brilliant demonstration of "carrying other people's songs and not having one of my own"—as one character puts it—is in "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," where a conjure man called Bynum, who has a song, discourses with Loomis, who has been separated from his. Bynum says:

> 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.

Music, in Wilson's plays, is more than slick Broadway entertainment. A juba dance banged out on a table, a work song beaten out with chairs and glasses, a gut-bucket blues demonstrate the African-American genius for making something out of nothing. They take an empty world, as Ma Rainey says, and "fill it up with something."

Blues people, Ralph Ellison once wrote, are "those who accepted and lived close to their folk experience." On the Hill, the blues cemented in Wilson's mind the notion that he was somehow "the conduit of ancestors." West's Funeral Home—which figures in "Two Trains Running"—was just around the corner from Eddie's Restaurant, and Wilson, for some deep personal reason and not for art's sake, felt compelled routinely to pay his respects to whomever had died. "I didn't have to know them. I felt that this is a life that has gone before me," he explains. From Claude McKay's "Home to Harlem," he learned of a hangout in his own neighborhood called Pat's Place—a cigar store with a pool hall in the back—where a lot of the community elders congregated. Pat's Place became Wilson's Oxford, and its garrulous denizens—"walking history books," Wilson calls them—his tutors. They called him Youngblood. "I was just like, 'Hey, man, how did you get to be so old, 'cause it's hard out here.' I really wanted to know how they survived. How do you get to be seventy years old in America?" Wilson recalls meeting one old man at Pat's Place who said to him, "I been watchin' you. You carryin' around a ten-gallon bucket. You carry that ten-gallon bucket through life, and you gon' always be disappointed. Get you a little cup. And, that way, if somebody put a little bit in it, why, you got sumpin'." Wilson adds, "I managed to cut it down to a gallon bucket, but I never did get that little cup."

"What I discovered is that writing was the only thing society would allow me to do," he said in 1991. "I couldn't have a job or be a lawyer because I didn't do all the things necessary. What I was allowed to do was write. If they saw me over in the corner scribbling on a piece of paper they would say, 'That is just a nigger over in the corner scribbling on a piece of paper.' Nobody said, 'Hey, you can't do that.' So I felt free." On the street, as a defensive maneuver, Wilson says he "learned to keep my mouth shut," but, according to Chawley Williams, "when August stood onstage and read his poetry, there was a difference in him that didn't exist at no other time. He stood tall and proud. He stood with that definiteness." He was supported in this pursuit by his friends in the neighborhood—Williams, Rob Penny, and Nicholas Flournoy, who were all aspiring poets. The group founded the Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop, out of which came the journal *Connection* (Wilson was its poetry editor), then the Halfway Art Gallery, and, from 1968 to 1972, the Black Horizons Theatre, which Wilson co-founded with Penny, who served as house playwright.

During this time, Wilson had a daughter, Sakina Ansari (to whom "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" is dedicated), in a marriage to Brenda Burton, which ended in 1973. "She moved out with the baby," Linda Jean says. "August came home to an empty house. The shock and pain were unbearable to him. In a nutshell, she thought his writing was a waste of time, he wouldn't amount to anything." Although Wilson himself always felt successful, he says, he still hadn't achieved what he calls, quoting the poet Robert Duncan, "surety—the line burned in the hand." He says, "I had been trying to get

to that point. I didn't approach it lightly. I worked concertedly toward growth." Finally, in 1973, in a poem called "Morning Statement," Wilson found his poetic voice:

> It is the middle of winter
> November 21 to be exact
> I got up, buckled my shoes,
> I caught a bus and went riding into town.
> I just thought I'd tell you.

"The poem didn't pretend to be anything else," Wilson says. "It wasn't struggling to say eternal things. It was just claiming the ground as its own thing. For me, it was so liberating." But his liberation as a playwright didn't begin until March 5, 1978, when he moved away from the Hill, to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he married Judy Oliver, a white social worker. In doing so, he went from a neighborhood that had fifty-five thousand blacks to a state that had the same number. "There weren't many black folks around," he says. "In that silence, I could hear the language for the first time." Until then, Wilson says, he hadn't "valued or respected the way that black folks talked. I'd always thought that in order to create art out of it you had to change that." Now he missed the street talk and wanted to preserve it. "I got lonely and missed those guys and sort of created them," he says. "I could hear the music."

III

By the time Wilson reached St. Paul, he'd directed a handful of amateur productions, and his friend the director Claude Purdy had staged a musical satire based on a series of Wilson's poems. But despite a paying gig at the Science Museum of Minnesota, where Wilson wrote children's plays on science-related subjects, he was, by anyone's standard, a theatrical tyro. As early as 1976, he'd begun work on a piece about Ma Rainey, but then, he says, "it never occurred to me to make the musicians characters in the play. I couldn't have written the characters." His dialogue had a kind of florid artiness. In one of his early dramatic experiments, which involved a conversation between an old man and a woman on a park bench, the woman said, "Terror hangs over the night like a hawk." Wilson had at least one play, "The Coldest Day of the Year," produced in this stilted style. "It wasn't black American lan-

SKETCHBOOK BY BENOÎT VAN INNIS *The beginning of the professional baseball season*

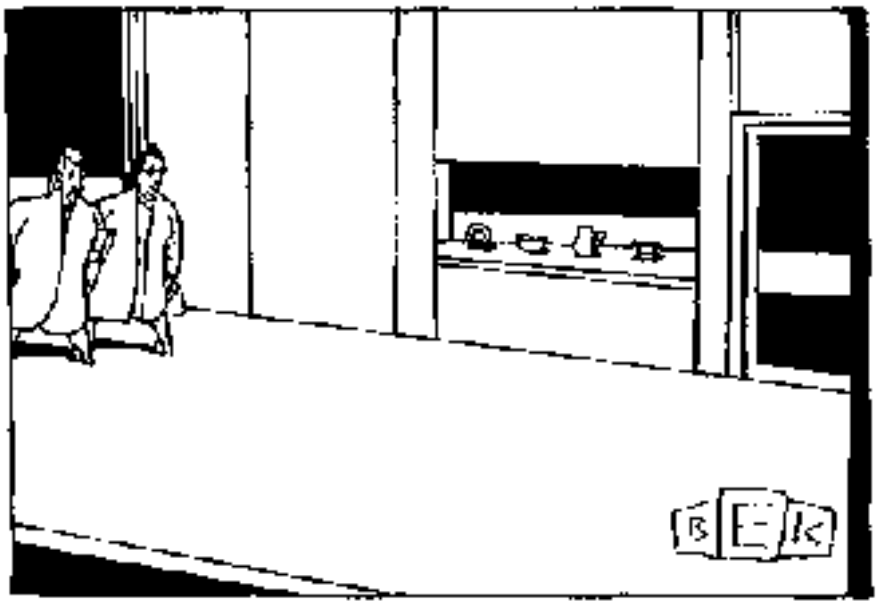
'naugurates the annual father-son ritual of playing catch in the back yard, the park, or any other available space.

guage," he says. It wasn't theatre, either.

In the fall of 1977, Wilson came across the work of the painter Romare Bearden. As he thumbed through Bearden's series of collages "The Prevalence of Ritual," he discovered his "artistic mentor." Bearden's paintings made simple what Wilson's writing had so far only groped to formulate: "Black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence." He adds, "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." In later years, Wilson would stand outside Bearden's house on Canal Street, in New York, "in silent homage, daring myself to knock." He didn't knock, but, he has written, if Bearden "had answered . . . and if I were wearing a hat, I would have taken it off in tribute." (In the end, Wilson's true homage was his plays, two of which—"Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket," which became "Joe Turner," and "The Piano Lesson"—took their titles from Bearden paintings.)

Years before, Wilson, who then "couldn't write dialogue," had asked Rob Penny, "How do you make characters talk?" Penny answered, "You don't. You listen to them." Now, in 1979, when Wilson sat down to write "Jitney," a play set at the taxi stand that had been one of Wilson's hangouts on the Hill, the penny, as it were, dropped. For the first time, he was able to listen to his characters and let them speak. "I found that exhilarating," he says. "It felt like this was what I'd been looking for, something that was mine, that would enable me to say anything." For Wilson, the revelation was that "language describes the idea of the one who speaks; so if I'm speaking the oppressor's language I'm in essence speaking his ideas, too. This is why I think blacks speak their own language, because they have to find another way." While writing "Jitney," he proved to himself that he didn't have to reconstitute black life; he just had to capture it.

Wilson sat at Arthur Treacher's Fish & Chips, a restaurant up the street from his apartment in St. Paul, for ten days in a row until the play was finished. At Penny's suggestion, he submitted it to the O'Neill Playwrights Conference, a sprawling estate in Waterford, Connecticut, where each summer about a dozen playwrights are provided with a dramaturge, a director, and a cast to let them explore their flawed but promising plays. The O'Neill rejected "Jitney"; its incredulous author, assuming that no one had read it, submitted the play again. The O'Neill rejected it again. Wilson took serious stock of his newfound calling; his inner dialogue, he says, was " 'Maybe it's not as good as you think. You have to write a better play.' 'I've already written the best play I can write.' 'Why don't you write above your talent?' 'Oh, man, how can you do that?' 'Well, you can write beneath it, can't you?' 'Oh, yeah.' " Wilson turned back to the play on Ma Rainey and began to imagine it differently. "I opened up the door to the band room," he says. "Slow Drag and Cutler was talking about how Slow Drag got his name. Then this guy walked in—he had glasses, carrying the books—he became Toledo. I had discovered them and got them talking."



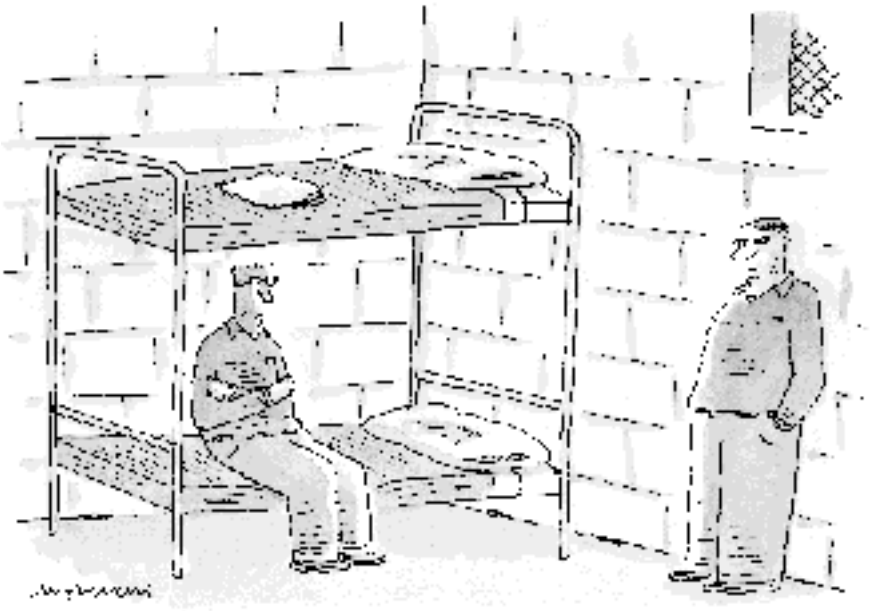
"I just don't want to turn into one of those women who never shut up about the Duchess of Windsor."

On August 1, 1982, the producer Ben Mordecai, who had recently become the managing director of the Yale Repertory Theatre, drove up to Waterford to see his boss, Lloyd Richards. Richards, who is of Jamaican descent, was the head of the Yale Drama School and, for more than thirty years, worked during the summer as the artistic director of the O'Neill. He is a man of few words, most of them carefully chosen. "Is there anyone here I should meet?" Mordecai asked Richards. "Meet him," Richards said, nodding toward the porch of the main building, where Wilson was sitting. When "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" was accepted at the O'Neill, Wilson stumbled onto the right person at the right place at the right time. Other African-Americans, such as Ed Bullins, whose "Twentieth-Century Cycle" did for South Philadelphia in the sixties and seventies what Wilson would do for Pittsburgh, were not as lucky. With access to theatres and to grant-giving agencies, Richards, who had directed "A Raisin in the Sun" on Broadway, was well positioned to usher Wilson's talent directly into the mainstream. Richards became, Wilson wrote, "my guide, my mentor, and my provocateur," and all of Wilson's subsequent plays until "Seven Guitars" would follow the same golden path—from the O'Neill to Yale to Broadway.

When "Ma Rainey" went to Yale, in 1984, Richards took over. "We go into the room with the actors, we read the play," Wilson says, describing the first day of rehearsal. "An actor had a question about a character. I started to speak, and Lloyd answered the question. There was another question, and Lloyd answered it again. I remember there was a moment when I thought, The old fox knows what's going on. This is gonna be O.K." "We had a pattern of work," Richards says of their partnership, which in time

would become as influential as that of Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan. "I would work on it, check it with him, so I included him, but I was the director." He adds, "August was very receptive in the early days. He had a lot to learn and knew it. He was a big sponge, absorbing everything." Richards sent him to the sound booth, to the paint shop, to the lighting designer. "As he learned structure—playwriting, really—he was also learning everything else," Richards says.

Richards is not a gregarious man, and his natural reticence complements his collaborative, indirect way of working: "I try to provoke the artist to find the answer *I* want him to find." When Wilson sent Richards a version of "The Piano Lesson," he says, "Lloyd calls me up and says, 'I think you have one too many scenes there.' 'O.K., Lloyd, I'll look at that.' End of conversation. I go to the play. I see this scene that looks like it's expendable. I pull it out. Talking to Lloyd about something else a couple of days later, I say, 'Oh, Lloyd, by the way, I took the scene out.' Lloyd says, 'Good.' To this day, I don't know if we were talking about the same scene." Richards says, "He cut the scene that needed to be cut." He adds, "August writes wonderful scenes. He must think they're wonderful,' cause they go on and on and on. To the point where they advance the play much further than it needs to be advanced at that moment." Wilson's "Fences," which was the second-most-produced play on American professional stages in 1989, was transformed by Richards, over several productions, from a four-and-a-half-hour first appearance at the O'Neill to its commercial length of less than three hours not just by cutting but by reorganizing. This began Wilson's practice of refining his plays in the regionals. "The Piano Lesson"—which involves a contest for ownership of a prized family piano between a sister, who wants to keep it as a symbol of her African-American heritage, and her brother, who wants to sell it to buy land on the plantation where their ancestors were slaves—had still not found a satisfactory ending after a year of touring. It finally got one when Richards suggested to Wilson that the battle between the brother and sister was missing a third party: the spirit of the white family who also had claims on the piano. "August wrote a wonderful speech describing how the piano came into the family and how they had stolen it from this white family," Richards says. "That brought the piece together."



"It started out as a food fight, but then it got totally out of hand."

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When "The Piano Lesson" was made into a TV movie, in 1995, Wilson served as a producer, a shift in power that also augured a change in his relationship with Richards. At one meeting, a production designer, Patricia Van Ryker, who hadn't read the original play—which states that the piano's legs are "carved in the manner of African sculpture," to represent the characters' African heritage—laid out her plans to decorate the piano with images of plantation life that fit within the time frame of the play. Wilson exploded. "He was screaming," Van Ryker recalls. " 'How dare you do this! You're insulting my relatives! My race!' It was like I'd thrown kerosene on him." Richards recalls the moment as "terrible," and says, "I don't function dictatorially. I don't give directives. I saw August in a position of power. I knew I couldn't work *for* him."

As Wilson grew in confidence, craft, and stature, it became increasingly difficult for him to play the protégé in the partnership. "The two of them artistically began drifting apart, which was, I think, a natural thing," Mordecai says. "The collaboration wasn't happening at the level it had in earlier years." As Wilson saw it, "Lloyd slowed down," but it's just as true to say that Wilson grew up. When a rewritten version of "Jitney" was up for production at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre, in 1996, Wilson chose as his director Marion McClinton, who had done inventive second productions of many of his earlier plays. Wilson may have lost a kind of father in the split with Richards, but in McClinton he gained a brother. Where Richards's productions were stately, McClinton's are fluid; where Richards's process was formal, McClinton's is relaxed. "The first conversation we had, August said to me, 'My style is I don't talk to the actors,' " McClinton recalls. "I said, 'I don't care if you talk to the actors. Whatever gets the information to them the clearest and cleanest, that's what I'm for.' "

"August is a soldier," McClinton says, and he's referring to more than Wilson's theatrical battles. Wilson, who cites the Black Power movement as "the kiln in which I was fired," describes himself as a "race man." And his very specific anthropological understanding of American history has led him to some hard, politically incorrect opinions. For instance, he believes that it was a mistake for African-Americans to leave the South. "The blood and bones of two hundred and fifty years of our ancestors are buried in the South, and we came North," he says. "I think if we'd stayed South and continued to empower our-

selves, in terms of acquiring land—we already had acres of farmland that we owned—we'd have had ten black senators in the United States. We'd be represented. We'd be a more culturally secure and culturally self-sufficient people."

Wilson's insistence on preserving and sustaining an African-American identity led to a well-publicized argument with Robert Brustein, the artistic director of Boston's American Repertory Theatre, that culminated in a formal debate at New York's Town Hall, in 1997. Among many contrarian points, Wilson argued against the current fashion for "color-blind casting"—a bias shared by McClinton, who refers to the practice as "Cyclops casting." "It's color-blind in one eye," he says. "You're quite aware of the fact that we're black—that's why we're not asked to present that in our performance, where the white actors can bring whatever history and interior self-knowledge they have into a rehearsal process and into the making of character." In Wilson's view, to mount an all-black production of, say, "Death of a Salesman" is to deny us "the need to make our own investigations from the cultural ground on which we stand as black Americans." In his exchange with Brustein, Wilson pointed out the transparent inequity of having sixty-six regional theatres and only one that can be considered black. (He subsequently conceived and supported the African Grove Institute for the Arts, an organization that promotes African-American theatre.) In America, "the subscription audience holds the seats of our theatres hostage to the mediocrity of its tastes, and serves to impede the further development of an audience for the work that we do," he said. "Intentional or not, it serves to keep blacks out of the theatre, where they suffer no illusion of welcome anyway." This call for an African-American theatre was immediately seized upon by the press as separatist, despite the fact that Wilson himself disputed the label. "We are not separatists, as Mr. Brustein asserts," he said. "We are Americans trying to fulfill our talents. We are not the servants at the party. We are not apprentices in the kitchens. . . . We are Africans. We are Americans." The aftermath of the debate—something of a tempest in a teapot—still lingers (and is still misconstrued). "He took that hit for a lot of other people," McClinton says. "That's what a champion does—a champion fights." When Wilson gave me a book of his first three plays, he inscribed it, "The struggle continues."

My first sighting of McClinton and Wilson at work was last November, in the rehearsal room of Chicago's new Goodman Theatre, where "King Hedley II" was the inaugural production. They sat shoulder to shoulder at the rehearsal table. McClinton, a heavy man, wore a baggy white T-shirt and a black fedora; he chugged at an economy-sized Dr Pepper. Wilson, in his trademark cap, sat bent slightly forward and absolutely still. His eyes were trained on the figure of Hedley, a former killer trying to make a go of it on the Hill, as he knelt in front of a flower patch demarked in rehearsal by a few stones on the concrete floor. His mother, Ruby, stood nearby, watching him. "You need some good dirt," she told him. "Them seeds ain't gonna grow in that dirt." Hedley responded, "This the only dirt I got. This is me right here." The words—the opening of the play—linked Wilson's newest protagonist to all the other desperate heroes of his cycle, and to himself: men attempting, in one way or another, to claim their inheritance. Wilson leaned across to whisper something to McClinton, who, keeping his eyes on the actors, nodded, took another hit of soda, and stopped the rehearsal to adjust the blocking. "King don't listen well," the actor playing Hedley said. "He's a king," McClinton replied. "Kings don't listen."

At the break, Wilson headed off to the theatre's loading bay for a cigarette. There he brooded about Aunt Esther, the three-hundred-and-sixty-six-year-old character whose death the play announces. "See, Aunt Esther is the tradition," he said. "If you don't value that, then you lose it. So, in 1985, these kids are out there killing one another. Aunt Esther dies of grief. People quit going up to her house. The weeds are all grown over. You can't even find the door no more. So she dies." He added, "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."

As he readied "Hedley" for New York, Wilson had been trying to make a start on his nineteen-hundreds play, in which Aunt Esther is a central character. Like Romare Bearden, Wilson opens himself up to his subjects and communes with them until he finds a pattern: "I just invite some of the people I know to come into the room and give it an ambience." "Fences" began with the ending; Wilson says that he saw his hero, Troy Maxson, "standing out on this brilliant starry night with this baby in his arms, talking to this

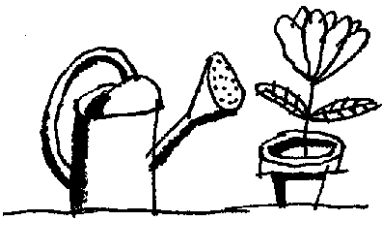
woman. I didn't know who the woman was." "Two Trains Running" began in a New Haven restaurant, where Wilson picked up a napkin and wrote, "When I left out of Jackson I said I was gonna buy me a big Ford. Was gonna drive by Mr. Henry Ford's house and honk the horn. If anybody come to the window, I was gonna wave. Then I was going out, and buy me a 30.06, come on back to Jackson and drive up to Mr. Stovall's house. Only this time I wasn't waving."

By contrast, Aunt Esther had been balky about making her presence known. "I said, 'O.K., Aunt Esther, talk to me.' And she says, 'There's a lot of things I don't talk about.' And that threw me, because I didn't have anything to write then," Wilson says. A month later, he tried again. This time, he asked Aunt Esther, "O.K., what *don't* you talk about?" "I don't talk about the trees. The trees didn't have spirits," she told Wilson. "What does that mean? What that means is that none of your world is present here. You're looking at this landscape that's totally foreign to you. So I started writing that," Wilson says. "Then she started talking about the water, and I find she's talking about the Atlantic Ocean. And she starts talking about a city, a half mile by a half mile, down in there. She has a map to the city," he adds. "I think the map is important, so I have to pick the right time to approach that idea about the map. If I do it this afternoon, I get something entirely different than if I do it next week. It's intuition. You have to keep your eyes and ears open for clues. There's no compass."

In "King Hedley II," Hedley's sacrifice keeps a dying black tradition alive; in life, Wilson has also made a sacrifice to renew a connection to the past. He seems to know that the price he's paid for his enormous accomplishment is other people; and he has recently begun to take stock of his life and resolve "to do something different." He is making noises about retiring. Not long ago, when he returned to Seattle, Wilson, who had been away, by his own admission, "for the past two years," was dismayed to discover that Azula didn't know he lived there. "You live in all the places," she told him. "Boston, New York, Pittsburgh." "No, I live here," he said. He took Azula upstairs and showed her his clothes in the closet.

Wilson, who is an insomniac, shares a bed with both Azula and Constanza. At lights-out, Azula will say, "Don't let the bedbugs bite." Wilson will reply, "If they do, take a few," which leaves his daughter the final word: " 'Cause I got them from you." When they wake up, Wilson says, "Good morning, Sunshine." Azula replies, "Good morning, Big Old Dad." But these moments of connection are only one side of the story. Wilson, who has created a universe of fully imagined characters, whose histories he knows in minute detail, is not as curious about the history of those close to him. "I've been married before," Constanza says. "He's never asked me a single question about that. I mean a lot to him, but what is it I mean to him if I'm not a complete person with history, with wants, with needs?" Constanza met Wilson at Yale fourteen years ago, when she designed costumes for "The Piano Lesson," and she has a kind of clear-eyed fatalism about her life with this ambitious storyteller. "It's been hard," she says. "I don't get the love from him that all of me would like. I don't have a partner through the little things in life. He just doesn't reach that intimate part of everyday life." She continues, "In his mind, he's a great father, a great man, a great husband. One time, I was saying to Azula, when she was going to sleep, 'I'm going to teach you how to choose a really good husband for yourself.' And then August said, 'Just like your daddy.' And I was thinking to myself, No!"

"Be where you are"—a maxim Lloyd Richards drilled into Wilson—is a habit that Wilson is "still working at." When he is at home, Wilson is pretty much wrapped in his own solitude, "brewing," as his sister Freda calls it. "I call him the deepest pool I have ever seen in my life," Constanza says. "You can throw a rock inside this man and you'll never see it hit bottom. He's a mystery to me in many ways. He's reachable only in concise sentences." Wilson's plays are brilliantly furnished with characters and incident, but he hasn't yet managed to furnish his own home. "It's gone beyond eccentricity," Constanza says. "It's an outward symbol of our marriage being so out of the ordinary. We can't even furnish our own house. I mean, that's sad." Wilson's critical eye and Constanza's conviction that he would disapprove if she took the decoration into her own hands keeps them at a stalemate. "He's extremely critical," Constanza says. "The closer you are to him, the more critical he is. That's a pattern that his mother passed on to him."



Ordinarily, according to his wife, Wilson "has a hard time laughing at himself." But in the presence of his daughter the sombre, self-absorbed Wilson drops away. "I've seen a different August with Azula," McClinton agrees. "She brings out such a playful side of him. He came to the first day of rehearsal in Seattle for 'King Hedley II' wearing a bunny mask with the ears sticking up." Wilson has taught Azula some of the nonsense songs that he learned at the age of five from an uncle: together, they sing, "Jo and Mo had a candy store / Tellin' fortunes behind the door / The police ran in / Joe ran out / Hollerin' 'Run, Mo! / Policeman holdin' my hand!' " Recently, he wrote a story just for her that involved what he calls "telescoping"—a fusion of the spiritual and the diurnal "that I'm trying to do in the plays." The tale starts off in Seattle with a little girl who won't go to bed. "My aunt in Africa will grant you a wish if you will go to bed at the proper time," her babysitter says. "O.K.," the little girl says. "My wish is that it be daylight all the time so I never have to go to bed." The story then moves from reality into a fantastical world of sun gods and kings of darkness and chess games where the pieces come alive. "I think it's close to what would be an African-American world view—tree spirits and all those kinds of things," Wilson says. "In this world, you can have a three-hundred-and-sixty-six-year-old woman and you also gotta pay your bills. They exist side by side. They infuse life with a something that lifts it up, almost into another realm. Closer to God." Even Azula understands that her father's undertaking is somehow special and heroic and big in the world. At the Goodman Theatre, catching sight of him as he walked toward her in the lobby, she threw open her arms and said, "August Wilson!" Around that time, she also asked him, "Daddy, why you a writer?" "To tell the story," Wilson said. ♦