



Biography of August Wilson



Born Frederick August Kittel, Jr. in Pittsburgh on April 27, 1945, as the fourth of seven children, August Wilson grew up in the ethnically diverse but impoverished Hill District of the city. With his German-immigrant father absent throughout his childhood, Wilson was raised by his African American mother, Daisy Wilson, whose surname he would later adopt. After dropping out of high school following unfounded accusations of plagiarism, Wilson worked odd jobs while continuing his informal education with trips to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, where he read the works of Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison.

Following a short enlistment in the Army in 1962, Wilson worked a series of menial jobs. In 1965, he purchased his first typewriter for \$20 and, inspired by the authors whose works he encountered during his trips to the public library, he started to write poetry. He passed time in coffee shops and cigar stores, observing the lives and voices he encountered in the Hill District, often recording his thoughts on cocktail napkins and later using these notes to create the personalities of the characters in his plays.

Inspired by the Black Power movement of the late 1960s, Wilson joined a group of poets, educators, and artists who formed the Centre Avenue Poets Theater Workshop, through which he met Rob Penny. In 1968, they co-founded the Black Horizons Theater, a community-based theater company in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Wilson served as the director and occasional actor, and Penny was the playwright-in-residence until the mid-1970s when the company dissolved.

When he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota in 1978—at the invitation of his friend Claude Purdy, a co-founder of St. Paul's Penumbra Theater—Wilson further concentrated on playwriting, channeling the voices he remembered from the Hill District. His works penetrated the broad experience—both the triumphs and struggles—of Black Americans, conveying their stories on the popular American stage with gravity and emotional heft. The centerpiece of Wilson's body of work was the *American Century Cycle (TACC)*, a career-spanning project composed of 10 plays, each one set in a different decade of the 20th century, with Pittsburgh, and the Hill District in particular, serving as the setting for all but one of these works.

Wilson's first professional production was *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, staged by St. Paul's Penumbra Theater. Then in 1979, he began writing *Jitney*. Much later the re-written version of *Jitney* went on to win an Olivier Award for Best New Play in 2002. This work is considered the first installment in TACC.

Wilson won significant acclaim and attention for his next play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, his only play in TACC that does not take place in Pittsburgh (it was set in a 1920s Chicago recording studio). First staged in 1982 at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, it had its Broadway debut two years later under the direction of Wilson's frequent collaborator Lloyd Richards. Writing for the *New York Times*, theater critic Frank Rich noted that Wilson "sends the entire history of black America crashing down upon our heads."

Fences was Wilson's next play, making its Broadway debut in 1987 with James Earl Jones as the lead in a role that, in its 2010 revival and 2016 film adaptation, would be reprised by Denzel Washington. The play initially ran for 525 performances, and earned Wilson a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, a Tony Award for Best Play, and a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play. Wilson would later win a second Pulitzer Prize in 1990 for *The Piano Lesson*. His later plays were nominated a record six times for this prestigious award.

In 1991, Wilson moved to Seattle, Washington with his future wife, costume designer Constanza Romero Wilson. While in this city he wrote five more installments in TACC : *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, *Gem of the Ocean*, *King Hedley II*, and *Radio Golf*. In 2003 he also wrote a one man play about his artistic and moral evolution as an artist entitled *How I Learned What I Learned*. *Radio Golf* premiered on Broadway in 2006, just months after his death from liver cancer on October 2, 2005.

Weeks after his passing, the Virginia Theater on Broadway was renamed the August Wilson Theatre. In Pittsburgh the August Wilson African American Cultural Center now houses a permanent exhibit on Wilson's artistic journey entitled, August Wilson: the Writer's Landscape. His childhood home in the Hill District has been transformed into an Arts Center, and most notably, Wilson's entire archive is now available to be seen and studied at the University of Pittsburgh.

No other American playwright has left such a lasting legacy in the History of American Theater than August Wilson. Now Netflix along with executive Producer Denzel Washington are committed to telling the stories contained in TACC and producing them in the media of film for the enjoyment and enlightenment of a larger number of audiences worldwide.

Plays written by August Wilson

Titles in **bold** form Wilson's *American Century Cycle*

Recycle - 1973

Black Bart and the Sacred Hills - 1977

Fullerton Street - 1980

Jitney - 1982

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom - 1984

Fences - 1987

Joe Turner's Come and Gone - 1984

The Homecoming - 1989

The Coldest Day of the Year - 1989

The Piano Lesson - 1990

Two Trains Running - 1991

Seven Guitars - 1995

King Hedley II - 1999

Gem of the Ocean - 2003

How I Learned What I Learned - 2003

Radio Golf – 2005

List of selected actors who have appeared on Broadway in August Wilson's plays

* = Tony Award-winning performance in Wilson's work

Mary Alice – *Fences* (1987-8)*

Angela Bassett – *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988)

Roscoe Lee Browne – *Two Trains Running* (1992)

L. Scott Caldwell – *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988)*

Keith David – *Seven Guitars* (1996)

Viola Davis – *Seven Guitars* (1996), *King Hedley II* (2001)*, *Fences* (2010 revival)*

Charles S. Dutton – *The Piano Lesson* (1990-1)

Laurence Fishburne – *Two Trains Running* (1992)*

LisaGay Hamilton – *The Piano Lesson* (1990-1)

James Earl Jones – *Fences* (1987-8)*

Delroy Lindo – *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988)

S. Epatha Merkerson – *The Piano Lesson* (1990-1)

Brian Stokes Mitchell – *King Hedley II* (2001)

Phylicia Rashad – *Gem of the Ocean* (2004-5)

Ruben Santiago-Hudson – *Seven Guitars* (1996)*; directed *Jitney* (2017 revival)

Courtney B. Vance – *Fences* (1987-8)

Denzel Washington – *Fences* (2010 revival)*

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