AUGUST WILSON
(1945– )

Karen C. Blansfield

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, on Bedford Avenue in Pittsburgh, the fourth of six children and a child of mixed parentage. His mother, Daisy Wilson, was black, while his father, Frederick Kittel, was a white German immigrant baker who was frequently absent and eventually abandoned the family. His mother subsequently married David Bedford, who proved far more influential in Wilson’s life than his biological father. cramped with his family into a two-room apartment, Wilson grew up in a racially mixed ghetto area known as the Hill District that would figure prominently in his dramatic work, with most of his plays being set in Pittsburgh.

Daisy Wilson, whom August adored and whose surname he later adopted, supported the family with janitorial jobs and welfare checks, working hard to ensure that her children would have a good education and social opportunities. She kept many books in their home, and Wilson learned to read at the age of four. Wilson attended both parochial and public schools, but he was taunted and ostracized, especially when he was the only African American student in the class, and at the age of fifteen, he dropped out permanently when his high school teacher accused him of plagiarizing a term paper about Napoléon. To keep his mother from finding out what he had done, Wilson spent his days at the public library, immersing himself in reading and developing an impressive self-education. Wilson has referred to this time as his “learning years,” noting that he read “everything and anything that I could get

Theatre, whose charges included the point that Wilson’s own plays had achieved success through mainstream white theater as well as that rejecting color-blind casting would have denied prominent roles to many black actors. The following year, Wilson and Brustein held a debate at New York’s Town Hall, moderated by Anna Deavere Smith,* which was billed by some as “the fight of the century.”

Three more plays followed. In 2000, Jitney had its New York premiere and was awarded eight Vivian Robinson AUDELCOb (Audience Development Committee) Awards, and in a 2002 London production, it won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Play. King Hedley II opened in New York in 2001, earning Tony nominations for Best Play and Best Director, though it had an unusually short run of only twelve weeks. Wilson’s latest work, Gem of the Ocean, has been staged at the Goodman Theatre and the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, though as of this writing, the New York premiere has not been scheduled.

Other awards that Wilson has earned on his journey to stardom include a Guggenheim Fellowship, Rockefeller Playwriting Fellowships, a Whiting Foundation Writers Award, a McKnight Fellowship, and a Bush Fellowship, as well as memberships in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Letters; he also has some two dozen honorary degrees. In 1996, the William Inge Festival in Independence, Missouri, devoted its season to Wilson’s work; Fenumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota, did the same for its 2002–2003 season; and New York’s Signature Theatre will devote its 2005–2006 season to Wilson’s oeuvre. Additionally, Wilson moved into yet another career in 2003 when he performed a one- man show at the Seattle Repertory Theatre as part of its Festival of New Works, and he has plans to develop this performance further.

Director Marion Isaac McClinton, in his introduction to Jitney, writes, “August Wilson is the griot, our Homer, our Shakespeare, our grandfather sitting on the front porch telling us the stories that we need to know” (8). As one of the most produced American playwrights and the first African American to be a constant presence in mainstream theater, Wilson has established himself as a major and unique voice in contemporary drama.

MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

August Wilson’s body of work is perhaps the most ambitious undertaking in American theater: a cycle of ten plays (nine of them now completed) that chronicles the cultural history of African Americans in the United States through the course of the twentieth century. Each work is set in a specific decade, featuring characters who are influenced and shaped by the social, cultural, and political environments of the particular era in which they live. (In this sense, Wilson has often been compared to Eugene O’Neill, who also
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