

***Jitney***  
**By August Wilson**

**Directed by Lou Bellamy**

**A Penumbra Theatre Company production**

**October 13, 2016 – November 6, 2016**

Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide

## **Educational Tools**

### Welcome and How to Use this Tool

Greetings! Thank you for visiting Penumbra Theatre Company's **Study Guide Library**. We are so pleased that you seek to extend and engage your understanding of the drama we produce and the thematic issues it brings to the fore.

**Penumbra Theatre Company** occupies a very unique place within American society, and by extension of that, the world. Penumbra was borne out of the Black Arts Movement, a time charged by civic protest and community action. An artist making art by, for and about the black community was charged with merging aesthetic (artistic) principles with ethical (moral) ones. Subsequently, in this historical and political context, art had an agenda to strive toward social change. African American artists were part of, and greatly influenced, the social currents that carried people from their homes, schools and places of worship to the streets.

Bonding artistic interpretation with civic responsibility engenders an important kind of creative dissonance, a harmony of balance. It creates something neither art nor civic action could do alone. This is mission driven art, informed by a black ethos and aesthetic, which can adequately illuminate our experience. **Ensemble Theatre** in that context is the creation of a community of people committed to the telling of a story that acknowledges the experience of everyone involved. This kind of art demands that each audience member recognize his or her place in relation to the art. When that happens, we begin to think about ourselves as interactive forces in a greater social context. Our own agency becomes clearer to us; our choices and reactions start to make sense within a broader, more nuanced environment. We begin to see that others have lived with similar issues, and that their perspectives have great potential to enrich our experience and help us problem-solve. This kind of art creates and sustains community. It encourages coalition.

The function of an **Education and Outreach Program** inside an institution such as Penumbra Theatre Company is to use informed discussion and interdisciplinary tools to unpack the issues stimulated by the drama. Just as an actor must learn lines and blocking before interpreting a character, we offer our audiences the practical tools so that they may respond to the art both critically and creatively. It is our job to push conversation, critical analysis, and commentary beyond emotion toward solution.

The **Study Guides** are meant to stimulate discussion, not to present a definitive voice or the "right answer." Theatre is *fluid*, active, interactive and reactive; we must engage it intellectually that way too.

We hope to create space for the themes inspired by the drama to take root and blossom. Penumbra invites audiences to participate in the art and social action, by using our Education and Outreach tools to locate their contribution, their voice, within the larger human story we tell over and over again. We love. We fail. We begin anew. Over and over, told by countless tongues, embodied by some of the finest actors and carried in the hearts of some of the most committed audience members; we speak our human lessons through the prism of the African American experience.

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## The Artistic Process

An exploratory essay by Sarah Bellamy

### The Social Symbolic: Individuals in Society

Art is a complicated process that we rarely fully engage. It stimulates emotional, intellectual, even physical responses in audiences. Art is so powerful because it is one example of a deep and necessary connection between an individual and the collective world. To better understand the process of art, it helps to consider this connection and how it works.

The connection between an individual and society is made through complex systems of meaning and metaphor; groups of symbols created by humans that represent how we feel, think, see and understand the world in which we live. These systems represent the tie that binds us all to one another in relationships that constitute identity, and help us comprehend our human experience. Art is one such system and there are others too.

Individuals can only access these systems through the collective, social world. In order for a human child, for example, to learn to use language (really just a system of symbols, meaning and metaphor), that child must come into contact with other human beings who already grasp and make use of the faculty of language. Once the child is inducted into this social system, the symbols, meaning and metaphor common to all members of the community will eventually dominate the life-experience of that child and his or her ability to reflect upon or process that experience. In fact, these systems are so powerful, that the child will also only come to understand him or herself in relation to other community members, and only through the system of meaning and metaphor common to that group. This process is called socialization. A community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism forms its culture. Socialization does two things: it sustains culture and forms an individual's identity.

### Social Commentary and the Nature of Art

Art works by tapping into a community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism to represent the experience, knowledge or reality specific to that culture. Art is ultimately the expression of an idea, emotion or experience through the creation of a symbolic structure. The artistic product does not have to have *physical structure* to be considered art. Music, story-telling, and dance are all artistic modes that are active and not permanent. Instead art is defined by its ability to recreate human experience through the point of view of the artist and affect a response within an audience. This might seem fairly simple, or even obvious. A deeper examination, however, will illuminate the special quality of art and explain why it is so important to a healthy society.

Human beings have the unique ability to critically observe ourselves. We can, in other words, reflect upon our actions, emotions and experiences. The fact that the word "reflect" can mean "to think" and "to mirror, or reverse an original image back to its source," is quite telling about the nature of art. In the most basic terms, an artist creates a piece of art as a reflection of culture.

Culture is made up of individuals, their experiences and the integration of all of these things to become more than the sum of its individual parts.

Artists use many different structures, or “mediums,” to communicate meaning. The artist’s effort to communicate his or her intent is both informed by, and limited to, his or her cultural perspective; no individual exists completely outside of some cultural context. Within that cultural context, the artist embodies different symbols that have meaning within the culture. His or her navigation of the cultural landscape will be informed by these symbols and will also inform the art too. This is what we mean when we talk about an artist’s “voice.” Even though the artistic product may not have sound (like a painting or a piece of sculpture) it was created by a particular person with a particular experience in a particular social context. The artistic product reflects those particularities (the artist’s perspective or point of view) and the meaning it conveys is determined by them.

Moreover, any form of communication (like language or art) requires the use of the symbolic tools of the culture. This means that in order to reflect the culture through artistic representation, the artist has to be able to stand both outside and inside a culture simultaneously (but never be totally in either place). Only from that vantage point can the artist use the symbolic tools of a culture to communicate what he or she observes about the culture itself. This is what is known as “artistic commentary.” It conveys the artist’s intent, or impetus for creating something.

### **The Role of the Audience and the Alienation of the Artist**

The process does not end with the creation of an artistic product. Art needs an audience other than the artist who created it. In solitude, the artist may marvel at his or her creation—might even be enlightened or surprised by it—but the artist will remain unfulfilled without the participation of an audience. The artist was moved to respond to cultural stimuli, the response now requires an audience to receive it, absorb it and refract it back to the artist. This is the contribution of the artistic product to the cultural landscape that inspired it. This way the artist can observe the change engendered by his or her commentary. To comment on something is to change it.

If the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret and then comment in order to change, the nature of the audience is also to observe and interpret. Because each human being has been exposed to an infinite number of symbols in widely divergent patterns and trajectories, and at different points in our lives, each spectator will “read” (or make sense of, interpret the symbols) the artistic product differently. An entire audience might have similar emotional or intellectual responses to a piece of art, but each spectator will have a slightly different experience than his or her neighbor. When the members of an audience have an opportunity to discuss their experience, the entire group is enlightened or engaged, bound by the same artistic element. This is how art creates community. A kind of spontaneous culture is fashioned by virtue of a shared experience. The culture is singular to itself because of the unique qualities of each audience member and any variance within the art.

The audience has one last critical role to play in the artistic process, and it is both enlightening and violent. The audience is invited to observe a translation of a common experience through the perspective of an artist. The audience is then momentarily able to achieve a similar distance from

the culture as the artist did before creating the artistic product, but this time the audience starts at the end and works in retrospect back to the state of things to which the artist originally responded. They are afforded the benefit of the impetus for the art and the art itself simultaneously. This event illustrates the extent of, or limit to, the intent of the artist.

In order to comprehend the art, in order to feel it, the spectator must contextualize it within his or her own unique experience. Of course this experience is largely determined by the spectator's cultural context. Even as the spectator experiences the art he or she changes it, manipulates it so that it will fit within the frame of reference particular to him or her. Art encourages all who use the system of symbolism, meaning and metaphor to consider it differently. This is where the integrity of the artist's original intent starts to break down, and it is the moment in which the artist **loses** the ability to control his or her artistic product. The artist can no longer speak for the art; the art now speaks for itself and for the artist. By virtue of its nature, an audience changes the artistic product fundamentally from the scope of what is intended by the artist to the full breadth of the potential audience experience. To claim the art is to fulfill it, it is also to sever it forever from its original intent—it is no longer defined by a striving to effect change through artistic translation and commentary, it is the reception of the comment and the realization of change. The artistic product has traveled a very great distance between the artist and the audience. It is now absorbed back into the cultural system of metaphor and symbolism and becomes another tool for communicating meaning. The artist is impotent to reclaim or control the artistic product. So to reiterate, the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret, comment and in so doing effect change. The nature of the audience is to observe, interpret, and claim.

### **Perpetual Motion: The Circle of Art and Culture**

The manipulation, possible misunderstanding and absorption of the artistic product by the culture, is both a fulfillment and a violation of the artist. The only way for the artist to regain agency or engage his or her artistic product from this point on is to produce more art in response to the culture. This is how art is perpetual and how culture and art continually constitute one another. It stimulates growth in both arenas and so keeps a society from stagnating.

### **Summary**

To review, an artist responds to cultural stimuli through the manipulation of symbols that the culture uses to communicate meaning. The artistic product is a blend of the system of meaning specific to a culture and the artist's interpretation of that system. The art produced is the artist's commentary. The audience functions as an agent of translation as it claims the artistic product for itself and alters it in order to access it. The culture absorbs the art and the artist no longer can change or access his or her artistic product now that it has entered the social realm of the symbolic. The artist can only create more art, using the tools of the cultural symbolic, a system that has already been altered by its absorption of the original artistic product. Thus art and culture are constitutive of one another.

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## History of African American Theatre

An overview of the African American contribution to American theatre by Sarah Bellamy

### A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

Aspects of the dramatic performing arts can be found in cultures around the world. Globally speaking, American Theater is a relatively new tradition. As theater has evolved from the African roots of Greek tragedy to Shakespearean epics, American stages have produced a wide range of plays, largely influenced by the diverse peoples inhabiting this nation. In its early years, American Theater reflected the lives of its proponents, namely white, property-owning, Christian men. Ironically, even as America established itself as a sovereign nation, the drama of the day came largely from Europe, which boasted a unique canon of work. Still, as early as 1821 black American artists were creating, staging and performing for mixed audiences, showcasing both existing and original work.

One of the first theater companies to approach the dramatic performing arts from an African American perspective was The African Grove Theater in New York City. It was founded by William Henry Brown and James Hewlett, both who had traveled by ship throughout the Caribbean, where story-telling, performance, dance and music were essential to the culture and survival of the slaves working on sugar cane and tobacco plantations, salt flats and mines. The company performed tragedies and comedies from Shakespeare to American playwrights. Eventually, the need for work that came from within the African American experience proved itself. Two years after it opened, the first play written and produced by an African American was presented at the African Grove in 1823. The play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, by Brown, played to mixed (though predominately black) audiences that year. However, many whites were adamantly opposed to the existence of such a theater and frequent police raids, harassment and threats forced Brown and Hewlett to relocate the theater several times throughout the lower East side of Manhattan. Eventually, the white opposition won out over the tenacity of the black actors, directors and producers of The African Grove Theater Company and it closed its doors permanently.<sup>1</sup>

As Americans established a canon of their own, dominant political and social trends were addressed by the work. One of the nation's most successful and fraught enterprises was racialized slavery in the American South. Depicted on white stages, black characters often fit into stereotypical characters which would haunt American stages for decades to come. Some of the most prevalent of those were the Sambo, the Uncle, the Mammy and the Jezebel. These racist depictions would be reflected over and over again in the theater, usually performed by white actors in blackface. African-American artists struggled against these stereotypical images as soon as they entered the public sphere. In 1857, William Wells Brown, (no relation to William Henry Brown) juxtaposed a stereotypical black male character named Cato with an exemplary black male

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see Bernard L. Peterson Jr.'s "Introduction: The Origin and Development of the Black American Playwright from the Antebellum Period to World War II," *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalog of Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 1-21.

character named Glen in his play *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom*. This play highlighted the difference between an image created by black people for black audiences and an image created by white people for white audiences. It was an important statement.

Still the popularity of comical representations of black Americans continued. Minstrelsy was very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This performance tradition was created as whites made light of and fantasized about slave life and plantation culture in the antebellum South. White entertainers in blackface would do comedic impressions of, or parody, the stories, songs and dance, jokes and music of blacks for white audiences. Minstrelsy was a very lucrative and beloved form of theater for white audiences for many years. White theatre-goers filled houses to laugh at representations of blacks as happy, contented and dim-witted. The tradition would continue long into the mid-1900s. Responsible for the creation of one familiar American character, Jim Crow, this theatre tradition was hardly benign. Its impact had a life that extended far beyond the stage in American social, political and civil rights policy.

For many years, (largely due to the audience expectations created by these white performers) the only work black performers could find was to perform in minstrel shows, *in blackface*. This absurd situation reinforces the notion that the depictions of blackness and black people on white stages was not real. Even black actors had to “perform” white ideas of blackness by darkening their skin, wearing silly costumes and miming the white actors’ racist depictions of black people.

In Hollywood, some of America’s most revered epic films depict the early stereotypes created in the theater and in the 1920s and 30s. Black artists, writers and musicians began responding to the racist depictions and creating their own artistic representations of black life and philosophy. This period of burgeoning talent and new work is known as The Harlem Renaissance. In 1923, the first serious play written by a black playwright produced on Broadway. It was called *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* by Willis Richardson.<sup>2</sup> Still, the prevalent trend was for white artists and producers to pull from black narrative, song and dance and parody it for audiences. Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer were particularly concerned with white representations of blackness in the theater. Read below, Langston Hughes’ famous poem “Notes on Commercial Theater”:

You've taken my blues and gone --  
 You sing 'em on Broadway  
 And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,  
 And you mixed 'em up with symphonies  
 And you fixed 'em  
 So they don't sound like me.  
 Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.  
 You also took my spirituals and gone  
 You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones  
 All kinds of Swing Mikados  
 And in everything but what's about me --

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 165.

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But someday somebody'll  
Stand up and talk about me --  
Black and beautiful --  
And sing about me,  
And put on plays about me!  
I reckon it'll be  
Me myself!  
Yes, it'll be me.<sup>3</sup>

This poem echoes one of the founding tenets of another critical moment in black theater history, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. It was during this period that some of the most celebrated black writers responded vociferously to the racism American citizens were struggling against in the Civil Rights Movement. Self-representation became a major focus of the movement—art was created by, for, and about black people. Artists such as LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Nikki Giovanni, Harold Cruse, Ray Durem, Adrienne Kennedy, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez all produced seminal work during this period of time. In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry's famous play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in New York City. It was the first time a play written by a black playwright, directed by a black director (Lloyd Richards) and written about black people was presented at this level. The next twenty years saw an eruption of African American theater companies springing up around the country, one of which was Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director Lou Bellamy, Penumbra addressed issues of racial tension and misrepresentation between what were visibly separate black and white Americas. Over the last 30 years, Penumbra has provided a consistently clear message that the African American experience is rich, dynamic and critical to the American theater canon. While visiting the Twin Cities, playwright August Wilson said of Penumbra:

It was with the indomitable spirit associated with pioneers and visionaries that Lou Bellamy took a handful of actors over [sic] twenty years ago and challenged them not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief. When I walked through the doors of Penumbra Theatre [sic], I did not know that I would find life-long friends and supporters that would encourage and enable my art. I did not know I would have my first professional production, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theatre in the world. And that their production of *The Piano Lesson* would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style an eloquence that would inspire my future work. I only knew that I was excited to be in a black theater that had real lights, assigned seats and a set that was not a hodgepodge of found and borrowed props as had been my experience with all the black theater I had known. We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of PTC enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York: Vintage, 1995) 215.



of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Through artistically excellent theater, Penumbra has sought to plumb the depths of the human experience by presenting culturally specific and historically accurate depictions of African Americans. Sadly, many of the black theater companies founded during the BAM have closed over the years, largely due to lack of funding, managerial problems and poor attendance. Penumbra's survival is a testament to all the people who believe in its power for social change. Our artists, administration, audiences and community have consistently buoyed us up and kept this important institution afloat on the occasionally stormy seas of non-profit arts administration. Today, because of our growth and the changing world, Penumbra is widely regarded as a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue. Lou Bellamy explains that black people not only "have to be at the table" to engage in cross-cultural conversations, but host such debates as well. Our template of finding the universal through the specificity of human experience has become a model for teaching, arts application and criticism. We are nationally and internationally recognized as a preeminent African American theater company.

In an America that increasingly more often accepts oversimplified answers, we seek out nuance and enjoy disturbing the veneer. At Penumbra, we provide the table at which artists and audiences alike may sit down and rigorously engage one another with complicated questions. We are proud to have these artists in our midst and excited to produce work that circumvents a hackneyed black / white binary.

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<sup>4</sup> August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997.

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## About the Study Guide Writers



**Sarah Bellamy** is Co-Artistic Director for Penumbra Theatre Company. She has designed several programs that engage patrons in critical thinking, dialogue, and action around issues of race and social justice. Select programs include Penumbra's RACE Workshop and the Summer Institute, a leadership development program for teens to practice art for social change. A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, Ms. Bellamy also holds an M.A. in the Humanities from The University of Chicago. She teaches at Macalester College, The University of Minnesota and is currently the Visiting Professor of Theatre and Culture at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. She serves as a Vice Chair of the Board of Directors for Theatre

Communications Group and is Chair of the TCG Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Committee. She is a 2015 Bush Fellow.



**Harrison David Rivers'** plays have been performed and developed at The Public Theater, New York Theatre Workshop, Lincoln Center, LABYrinth Theatre Company, The Drama League, The Movement Theatre Company, Diversionary (San Diego), About Face (Chicago), TheatreLAB (Richmond), Theatre Latte Da (Minneapolis) and The American Airlines Theatre on Broadway. Awards include the McKnight Fellowship for Playwrights, the Many Voices Jerome Fellowship, New Dramatists' Van Lier Fellowship, New York Theatre Workshop's Emerging Artist of Color Fellowship, Aurora Theatre's Global Age Project Prize, New York Stage and Film's Founders Award and a GLAAD Media Award for best Off-Off Broadway play. Harrison is an alum of the Public Theater's Emerging Writers' Group, Interstate 73, NAMT, The Lincoln Center Directors' Lab and he was the 2016 Playwright-in-Residence at the

Williamstown Theatre Festival. He is currently a Core Writer, and a member of the Board, at the Playwrights' Center. BA: Kenyon College; MFA: Columbia School of the Arts.

## **Characters in the Play**

(as described by the playwright)

**YOUNGBLOOD:** jitney driver and Vietnam veteran—mid-to late 20s

**TURNBO:** jitney driver who is always interested in the business of others

**FIELDING:** jitney driver and former tailor, with a dependency on alcohol

**DOUB:** long-time jitney driver and Korean War veteran

**SHEALY:** numbers taker who often uses the jitney station as his base

**PHILMORE:** local hotel doorman, recurring jitney passenger

**BECKER:** well-respected man who runs the jitney station—in his 60s

**BOOSTER:** Becker's son, recently released from prison—in his early 40s

**RENA:** Youngblood's girlfriend and mother of their young son

**SYNOPSIS** It is 1977, and in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, city officials threaten to level a makeshift taxi dispatch office where neighbors have gathered for years. At a time when safe and comfortable transit was not guaranteed for black customers, Becker's car service provided mobility and a modicum of respect for the community. Now his building has been identified as prime real estate for redevelopment, and he might be forced out of business. Meanwhile, his estranged son has been released from prison and wants to come home. As pressure mounts, Becker is forced to reckon with powers beyond his control. *Jitney* is an "explosive" and "gripping" portrait of African American life from the pen of one of America's greatest writers.

**SETTING (as written by the playwright)** The time is early fall, 1977. The setting is a gypsy cab station in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The paint is peeling off the walls, and the floor is covered with linoleum that is worn through in several areas. In the middle of the wall stage left sits an old-fashioned pot-bellied stove that dominates the room. Upstage of it is a blackboard on which is written the rates to different parts of the city, and the daily, marginally illegal policy numbers. Next to the blackboard a sign reads: "Becker's Rules: 1. No overcharging; 2. Keep car clean; 3. No drinking; 4. Be courteous; 5. Replace and clean tools." Downstage on the wall is a pay telephone. The entire right wall is made up of the entrance down right and a huge picture window. Along the upstage wall is a sofa, with several chairs of various styles and ages scattered about to complete the setting.

## **JITNEY: WILSON BECOMING WILSON**

an essay by Harrison David Rivers

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### **1.**

“So I write from the center, the core, of myself.”  
-August Wilson<sup>5</sup>

Written in 1979 and revised in 1996, *Jitney*, by August Wilson, is chronologically the eighth play in the playwright’s ten-play “Century Cycle,” though it was the first to be written.

Set in 1977, *Jitney* explores the effects of “urban renewal” on a makeshift taxi dispatch in the Hill District, a predominately black neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When city officials threaten to level the building (and, in fact, the entire block) that houses the station, Becker, the proprietor, and his fellow cab drivers, are forced to decide whether to take a stand against the order or to find other means of subsistence. The play, by virtue of its setting, also speaks to the primacy of another harsh reality of life in the Hill—the transit gap in black communities.

Wilson said that he “wrote *Jitney* simply to show how the station worked, how these guys created jobs for themselves and how it was organized.” He noted that, “all my life that’s how you got around in the black community in Pittsburgh. Jitney’s were a natural fact of life.”<sup>6</sup>

Born out of necessity, jitney cab companies emerged in the wake of the post-World War I recession. So named after the slang term for a nickel [the standard streetcar fare in 1914] the jitney system, offering flexibility, convenience, and speed began in California and quickly spread across the country. Within months, “Seattle’s 518 jitneys were carrying almost 50,000 passengers a day... In a two-week period, Kansas City went from zero jitneys to more than 200. In Los Angeles,

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<sup>5</sup> Powers, Kim. “An Interview with August Wilson.” *Theatre*. Volume 16, Number 4 (Fall-Winter 1984) p 55.

<sup>6</sup> Shannon, Sandra G. “August Wilson Explains His Dramatic Vision.” *Conversations with August Wilson*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, The University Press of Mississippi, 2006, 126.

over 150,000 residents were using jitneys every day.”<sup>7</sup> By 1915, jitneys operated in most major cities and reportedly numbered 62,000 nationally.<sup>8</sup>

The jitneys were loosely organized and highly spontaneous. Most jitney drivers were independent, some between jobs or working part-time to supplement their income. Many were simply working people who picked up fares on the way to their regular job... Jitneys adapted flexibly as demand changed with the weather, time of day, day of the week, special events, and so on. Despite the decentralized nature of jitney transport, customes, voluntary associations, and company fleets began to emerge. The associations helped drivers obtain insurance and share maintenance services and protected the drivers from hostile lawmaking; sometimes the group members coordinated routes and schedules.<sup>9</sup>

The presence of jitneys was most significant in urban neighborhoods occupied by poor African Americans.

In Pittsburgh, yellow cabs, which were largely white owned and operated, regularly refused to send cars to predominately black neighborhoods, a clear sign of the prevalent segregation and deeply embedded racist attitudes of the day. Yellow Cab also refused to hire “colored drivers.”<sup>10</sup>

Though illegal, jitney cabs were essential to daily life in the Hill. As Philip D. Beidler states in his article “King August,” “jitneys form an invisible, unofficial transit system that uses a secret, underground economy, networking through the white man’s telephones, his streets, his cars, without his approval, his franchise, his certification. It unwrites all the Public Utility Regulations of cultural visibility.”<sup>11</sup>

As Becker intones in Wilson’s play, jitneys sprang up “out of a need for service”:

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt, Sophie. “Uber before Uber.” *Medium*, 22 Dec. 2015, <https://medium.com/uber-under-the-hood/uber-before-uber-35730f2bfcc9#.53r38ps2u>. Accessed 30 Aug. 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Tabarrok, Alexander, ed. *Entrepreneurial Economics: Bright Ideas from the Dismal Science*. Oxford University Press, 2002, 276.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 276-277.

<sup>10</sup> Barnett, Charlene. “In An Era of Segregation, Owl Cab Mobilizes Pittsburgh.” Carnegie Teenie Harris Archive (blog), Museum of Art, 24 June, 2015, <http://blog.cmoa.org/2015/06/in-an-era-of-segregation-owl-cab-mobilized-black-pittsburgh>.

<sup>11</sup> Beidler, Philip D. “King August: August Wilson in His Time.” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Volume 45, Issue 4 (Fall 2006), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0045.401;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1;g=mqrq>. Accessed 18 July 2016.

BECKER: We ain't just giving rides to people. We providing a service. That's why you answer the phone "Car service." You don't say Becker's Cabs or Joe's Jitneys.<sup>12</sup>

Jitney cab stations were owned and operated *by* neighborhood residents *for* neighborhood residents—as a matter of self-care, solidarity and pride. All of this in the face of segregation, racism, gentrification and red-lining.

In *Jitney*, Wilson wrote what he knew best. He wrote the neighborhood of his youth. He wrote his people: about "the men," as Dinah Livingston writes in her 1987 interview "Cool August: Mr. Wilson's Red-Hot Blues," "he admired most when he was growing up in a Pittsburgh slum—the black 'warriors' against white society who ended up in the penitentiary—and about the women who supported them."<sup>13</sup> He gave voice to their experiences, their hopes and dreams, frustrations and concerns. The play is both a collage of memories—of the Civil Rights era, of the Vietnam War, of mistakes made, setbacks suffered, loves lost and won—and, in the end, a call to action. As befitting an early play, it is raw and rambly and deeply personal. It is the confluence of history and biography, with the unmistakable heart of the Blues.

## 2.

"[The jitney station] was the perfect place for a play because you had a set and a community of players who work together and have created something out of nothing."

-August Wilson<sup>14</sup>

The Hill District, the neighborhood of Wilson's birth and the setting for all but one of his "Century Cycle" plays, features prominently in *Jitney*. Its historical trajectory—from its founding as a desirable neighborhood for wealthy white families to, by the mid-1950s, a largely economically-

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<sup>12</sup> Wilson, August. *Jitney*. The Overlook Press, 2003, 86.

<sup>13</sup> Livingston, Dinah. "Cool August: Mr. Wilson's Red-Hot Blues." *Minnesota Monthly*. Volume 10 (1987), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Boyd, Herb. "Interview with August Wilson." *Conversations with August Wilson*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, University Press of Mississippi, 2006, 236.

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depressed, predominately African-American enclave—is deeply embedded into Wilson’s narrative.

The Hill was, from its beginning, a neighborhood in flux. Initially home to wealthy white families who literally wanted to rise above the grit and grime of Pittsburgh’s urban center—to live on “the Hill”—the neighborhood’s ethnic topography shifted toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of Jewish immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Italians, Lebanese, Greeks, Syrians, Armenians and Slovaks; by the early 1900s, an influx of African-Americans from the South, lured by the hope of jobs in the nearby steel mills and on the railroad, once again altered the Hill’s already varied cultural landscape.

By the 1920s and 1930s, the neighborhood was a cultural hotbed, christened by poet Claude McKay the “Crossroads of the World.” With its bustling shops, nightclubs and restaurants, The Hill was *the* place to stop between New York and Chicago. It was home to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the most prominent newspapers in America. It had the Pittsburgh Crawfords, a premiere Negro League baseball team, which boasted both Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson on its roster. And it had jazz. All the greats played the clubs and dance halls in The Hill—Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn and Dizzy Gillespie headlined at the Crawford Grill. Music legends Lena Horne and Billy Eckstein lived in the neighborhood.

The streets of The Hill were the stage for public life, and adults and children were outside often, talking with neighbors and friends, playing in the alleys, walking to see and be seen. Wilson recalled, “There were Syrians, Jews, and blacks... The street I lived on... was a community of people, and I remember coming home from school, and all of the parents would be sitting on the stoops, talking and exchanging recipes, talking about what they were cooking for dinner, talking about their kids.” The closeness of the houses created a strong sense of community and shared

public life, and the inhabitants of a particular block knew each other well and watched out for each other. “That was a nice neighborhood in the sense that anyone in the neighborhood was your social parent,” Wilson said. “Any one of the adults could tell you to do anything, and you did it quicker than if your mother told you to do it—because if Miss Pearl or Bella or Julie or Sadie said to do something and you didn’t do it, and they told your mother, it was twice as difficult.”<sup>15</sup>

And while the sense of community lingered, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, the wear and tear of time began to show. The district, one of Pittsburgh’s first, was over one hundred years old. Its buildings had fallen into disrepair. Many residences still did not have indoor plumbing and they were overcrowded. The rates of disease, crime, juvenile delinquency and murder were all disproportionately higher in the Hill than in other parts of the city. The declining conditions of the Hill, as well as its racial make-up [the lower and upper Hill and Homewood-Brushton neighborhoods were home to 68.8% of Pittsburgh’s black population by 1860], made the neighborhood a perfect target for “urban renewal.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1943 civic leaders in Pittsburgh organized the Allegheny Conference on Community Development as a means to develop a postwar revitalization plan. Edward K. Miller writes in his essay “Renaissance and Renewal” that, “One hundred and fifty community leaders constituted the [Allegheny] Conference... but Richard K. Mellon, heir to the powerful Mellon family financial interests, dominated the organization.” Under Mellon, the Allegheny Conference engaged able planning consultants, established an agenda for the renewal of the city, and lined up private sector consensus behind it.

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<sup>15</sup> Livingston, *ibid.*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Cardelli, Renee Marie. “Segregation by Manipulation: The Move of African-Americans into Pittsburgh Public Housing 1950-1970.” *The Sloping Halls Review*. Volume 4 (1997), 3.



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The city's planners and civic leaders had participated in national discussions on solving urban problems, which had taken place for years before and during the war. Generally, proposals for Pittsburgh reflected the accepted wisdom of the day, similar to those under discussion for many other cities. What set Pittsburgh apart, however, was its ability to get the renewal process underway before the federal acts of 1949 and 1954 jump-started urban renewal in most cities. State legislation passed between 1945 and 1947 allowed Allegheny County and Pittsburgh to undertake redevelopment and set up authorities that could raise revenue, operate beyond the jurisdiction of a single municipality, and avoid local political embroilments.<sup>17</sup>

When The American Housing Act was passed in 1949 as part of President Harry Truman's Fair Deal, providing federal funds to cities to cover the cost of acquiring areas perceived to be "slums," Pittsburgh, at Mellon's insistence, was the first major U.S. city to take advantage of the program's incentives.<sup>18</sup>

In May of 1950, ninety-five acres of the lower Hill District classified by the Urban Redevelopment Association [URA] as "blighted" were slated for redevelopment. As outlined by a 1952 report from the Institute of Housing, blight existed in urban areas if there were "unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions of the dwellings; inadequate planning, excessive land coverage or lack of light, air and open space; and defective design and arrangement of buildings, faulty street or lot pattern or undesirable land usage."<sup>19</sup>

George H. Evans, a member of the Pittsburgh City Council, wrote that,

The Hill District of Pittsburgh is probably one of the most outstanding examples... of neighborhood deterioration... There are 7,000 separate property owners; more than 10,000 dwelling units and in all more than 10,000 buildings. Approximately 90 percent of the buildings in the area are sub-standard and have long outlived their usefulness, and so there would be no social loss if they were all destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Muller, Edward. "Downtown Pittsburgh: Renaissance and Renewal," *A Geographic Perspective of Pittsburgh and the Alleghenies*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006, 8.

<sup>18</sup> These were an ambitious set of proposals put forward by United States President, Harry S. Truman, to Congress in his January 1949 State of the Union Address, outlining a series of proposed actions in the fields of economic development and social welfare.

<sup>19</sup> Cardelli, *ibid.*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Evans, George E. "Here Is a Postwar Job for Pittsburgh... Transforming The Hill District." *Greater Pittsburgh*. July-August 1943.

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Though the neighborhood was a lively one, bursting with shops, nightclubs and restaurants, there was little opposition to its demolition.

From 1955 to 1963, hundreds of small businesses and more than 8,000 people were cleared to make room for a “planned cultural district,” which included a new Civic Arena with a retractable roof. Approximately 1,218 families were relocated to standard-rated housing in the nearby Third, Fourth and Fifth wards; 80 families had to settle for housing deemed “substandard” by Pittsburgh Housing Authority.<sup>21</sup> The federal government did not provide displaced homeowners with relocation money, and homeowners had no contact with the city until acquisitions had been made. Homeowners received only a notice in the mail.<sup>22</sup> As with most urban renewal projects in the United States, the affected families were disproportionately African American, prompting James Baldwin to declare live on Boston public television that urban renewal meant Negro removal.<sup>23</sup>

The city promised new housing stock, but the long delay between demolition and rebuilding forced many residents to move from the integrated Hill District to neighborhoods that reflected their own race, thus worsening the city's segregation problem. By 1960, Pittsburgh was one of the most segregated big cities in America.<sup>24</sup>

Reflecting on the process, Bob Pease, the Director of the Urban Redevelopment Authority in the late 1950s and 1960s said that demolishing buildings and relocating people "are hard things to do. These are things that when you do them, really serious and good people question you. You have doubts, but you do the best you can to achieve the results you want to achieve. Things are

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<sup>21</sup> Fitzpatrick, Daniel. “The story of urban renewal.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 21 May 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> “James Baldwin on “The Negro and American Promise.” *American Experience*.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/bonus-video/mlk-james-baldwin>. Accessed 4 Sept. 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzpatrick, *ibid*.

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never perfect." "It was chaos," confessed URA official Irving Rubinstein, "Absolute chaos. We didn't know what to do." David Craig, who was a city solicitor in the 1960s offered that, "It seemed like a perfect plan. It just didn't work the way we planned. I feel, in a measure, guilty."<sup>25</sup>

Hopes that the presence of the arena and accompanying "cultural district" would spark further cultural development in the area did not materialize. "Instead parking lots and the long-planned Crosstown Expressway isolated the Civic Arena from downtown. With the exception of two apartment buildings and a hotel, little additional development took place on the site for several decades."<sup>26</sup> Not only did development stall, these efforts also damaged the neighborhood that remained. The Hill District lost its commercial core, much of its population, and its connection to downtown. It was left isolated, disconnected from job opportunities, and starved for capital investment.

The Hill took on further damage in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Racial tensions had been building in Pittsburgh for years when the assassination occurred, and King's senseless murder ignited the long-simmering powder keg. The National Guard was called in to enforce a curfew on an angry community, and the riots, which began April 5, 1968, raged until April 12. The week of violence saw 505 fires, over six hundred thousand dollars in property damage, one death and 926 arrests.<sup>27</sup>

With the shift in the global economy in the 1970s The Hill descended deeper into crime and poverty. A combination of high labor costs, lack of willingness to invest in new state of the art technology, cheap competition from foreign producers, costly environmental protection measures,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Muller, *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Fox, Randy. "Pittsburgh's Hill District: The Death of a Dream." *The Huffington Post*, 16 July 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/randy-fox/pittsburghs-hill-district-dream\\_b\\_1669867.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/randy-fox/pittsburghs-hill-district-dream_b_1669867.html). Accessed 30 August 2016.

and general long-range changes in the nation's economy made heavy manufacturing—of all products, not just steel—unprofitable by the end of the decade. Pittsburgh, a steel city, was hard hit. Neighborhoods like the Hill, still comprised largely of African Americans, were hit harder still.

This is the Hill District of Wilson's later "Century" plays—*Two Trains Running* set in 1969, *King Hedley II* set in 1985, *Radio Golf* set in 1997, and 1977 set, *Jitney*. All four feature characters wrestling with the economic fallout of urban renewal.

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The National Urban League, founded in 1910 by Mrs. Ruth Standish Baldwin and Dr. George Edmund Hayes [with the mission] to "enable African Americans to secure economic self-reliance, parity, power and civil rights," released its first State of Black America Report in 1976. The League's findings were dismal.<sup>28</sup>

Black median family income fell back in 1974 to only 58 per cent of white family income... More than onequarter of the black work force was unemployed throughout 1975... The number of black families with two breadwinners—the principal factor supporting many of the hopeful analyses of black advances made earlier in this decade—has declined significantly during the current recession...

The article continued, "The list is longer, but the message is clear. In aspects of life that can be measured statistically, the gains made in the sixties by America's largest minority group have been decimated. And in intangible terms—those relating to the demands for equality urged on the nation's conscience by its leaders—all gears have been thrown into reverse." The League concluded that no recent year "has been more destructive to the progress of blacks than 1975."<sup>29</sup>

This is the world inhabited by the gypsy cab drivers in Wilson's *Jitney*.

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<sup>28</sup> "Mission and History." *National Urban League*, <http://nul.iamempowered.com/who-we-are/mission-and-history>. Accessed 30 August 2016.

<sup>29</sup> "Distress Signal." *The New York Times*, 2 Feb. 1976, 21.

From the outset, Wilson makes it clear that Becker’s Car Service has seen better days. He begins with a description of the station: “The paint is peeling off the walls, and the floor is covered with linoleum that is worn through in several areas... Along the upstage wall is a sofa, with several chairs of various styles and ages scattered about.” The room has only two other defining features. The first, a sign on the wall, reads “Becker’s Rules: No overcharging; Keep car clean; No drinking; Be courteous; And replace and clean tools.”<sup>30</sup> The second is the pay phone that will ring continuously throughout the play and that each of the drivers—Becker, Fielding, Turnbo, Doub and Youngblood—will answer with the company line, “car service.”

The drivers—largely middle-aged, working class, living from paycheck to paycheck, black men—come and go, transporting people to East Liberty, Wooster Street, Homewood or wherever else they need to go. The phone rings and conversations are abandoned part way through to be resumed whenever those initially involved have reconvened. While they wait for calls the drivers occupy themselves with games (checkers) and magazines of the off-color variety, they grab cups of light and sweet coffee and fish sandwiches from Clifford’s Restaurant next door. They joke and they tease. They haggle over money—four dollars here, thirty cents there. They debate about who’s prettier, Lena Horne or Sarah Vaughn, but unequivocally agree that any woman—pretty or not—can be dangerous.

FIELDING: It’s them pretty women like Lena Horne get a man killed.

TURNBO: You ain’t got to be pretty to get a man killed. Any woman will get a man killed if he ain’t careful.

DOUB: You right. That’s why I don’t talk about women. I don’t talk about money either. Them is the two things you never hear me talk about too much. Them is the two things that get most people killed.

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<sup>30</sup> Wilson, *ibid.*, 11.

FIELDING: Women and money will get a preacher killed.<sup>31</sup>

When Shealy, the neighborhood numbers runner drops by to use Becker's phone, the men pump him for information about who hit it big the week before.

DOUB: I see your boy down the street got a brand new car.

YOUNGBLOOD: Who? Who got a new car?

DOUB: Pope who own that restaurant down on Centre.

YOUNGBLOOD: What'd he get?

DOUB: He got a brand new shiny Buick Riviera. How much did he hit for, Shealy?<sup>32</sup>

But Shealy refuses to divulge the specifics. "You know me, Doub," he says. "I don't be putting nobody's business in the street."<sup>33</sup> But it doesn't matter if Shealy tells or not because somehow everybody in the station already seems to know. The Hill, as painted by Wilson, is a tight-knit community—the kind of community where everybody knows everybody or at least where everybody knows somebody who knows somebody else.

Which is why no one is shocked when Youngblood announces that Cigar Annie, the neighborhood eccentric, is standing in the middle of Robert Street with her dress up over her head.

DOUB: Oh, yeah. Who she mad at now?

YOUNGBLOOD: She started with God and went on down the list. She cussing out the mayor, Doc Goldblum, Mr. Eli, her landlord, the light man, gas man, telephone man, and anybody else she can think of. They got her furniture and everything sitting out on the sidewalk.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

TURNBO: I knew it was gonna come to that. Everybody else done moved out of that place two months ago. The building been condemned for two years.<sup>34</sup>

Cigar Annie's story is a prime example of the negative effects of the city's renewal efforts in The Hill. In the wake of the destruction of the once vibrant neighborhood, residents scramble to cobble together a living with the limited resources that remain available to them. Some are forced to do things they wouldn't otherwise do in order to survive.

DOUB: Ain't nothing wrong with her [Cigar Annie]. They had her down in Mayview two or three times. They figure anybody cuss out God and don't care who's listening go to be crazy. They found out she got more sense than they do. That's why they let her go. She raising up her dress cause that's all anybody ever wanted from her since she was twelve years old. She say if that's all you want... here it is.

Annie would be a cautionary tale if she were the only resident unable to adjust to the changing conditions of the neighborhood. Sadly, her experience is not singular. Turnbo interprets her actions as protest. "She [Cigar Annie's] sending out an S.O.S," he says. "That's what she's doing."<sup>35</sup> Sending up an S.O.S for The Hill.

Wilson continually clarifies the economics of the world through conversation. "I don't know what this world's coming to,"<sup>36</sup> Turnbo laments in the opening scene. He has just returned from a trip and is in a bit of a shock.

TURBO: The boy come by here... and asked me to carry him on a trip to the Northside. Then he say he got to make a stop up on Whiteside Road. I carried him up there and he go into one of them houses and come on out carrying a television. He ain't said nothing about no television now. I told him it was gonna cost him two dollars more for me to be hauling around a

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 20.

television. Had me carry him over on the Northside to the pawnshop.<sup>37</sup>

Turnbo is unfazed by the fact that the boy had clearly stolen the television. He remarks to Shealy, "I ain't said nothing. I just want my money." He is, however, unsettled by the fact that not thirty minutes after he drops the boy off at the pawnshop, he hears that the television belonged to the boy's grandmother. "Name is Bolger," he tells Shealy, "Miss Sarah Bolger. That's old lady McNeil's mother. I used to carry her to church before she got too old to go. Steal his own grandmother's television!"

Shealy's unsentimental reply, "That ain't nothing, Turnbo. I seen worse than that,"<sup>38</sup> perfectly captures the sense of "wear" that permeates the jitney station and speaks to the depressed state of the surrounding neighborhood and its inhabitants.

None of Beckers' drivers are more downtrodden than Fielding, who has driven for Becker for eight years and who was once in the employ of Billy Ekstine. "I used to make all his clothes," he tells Becker's son, Booster, who has just been released from prison. "He wouldn't let nobody else make them."

FIELDING:                   Count Basie found out I was Billy Ekstine's tailor... come through here and wouldn't leave till I had made him a suit. Fucked up his whole tour. Had to cancel Cleveland and Cincinnati while he waited them ten days for that suit. Cost him twenty thousand dollars in lost revenue but he say he didn't care. He tried to steal me away from Billy, but Billy was from Pittsburgh and that made us have more of a bond. Even though I must say I liked Basie cause he paid well.<sup>39</sup>

Fielding's career suffered as his dependence on alcohol grew. "The only thing that could tear me and Billy apart was this here bottle," he says referencing the gin in his hand. Drunk with regret,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 81.



Fielding cautions Booster: “It don’t always turn out like you think it is. You don’t always have the kind of life that you dream about.”<sup>40</sup> Having spent twenty years in the Western State Pen, Booster, of all the men who enter the jitney station over the course of Wilson’s play, probably best understands Fielding’s words.

BOOSTER: I thought I was gonna be the heavyweight champion of the world. Be the next Albert Einstein. But I forgot you can’t live in your dreams. I found that out when I was seven. I dreamt I had a bicycle. I went all over on the bicycle... I rode it everywhere. I rode it to the store. I rode it to school. I went all over on the bicycle. Red bicycle. Had a coonskin tail hanging from the handlebars. Had a little bell on the handlebars. Anybody get in your way you just ring that. Had real nice reflectors... That was one of the nicest bicycles anybody ever wanna see. I woke up and went looking for it. I had to go to school. Where the bike? Why don’t I just hop on that? I looked all over for it. I looked in the back yard. The neighbor’s yard. Where the bicycle?

That’s when I decided right then that dreams didn’t mean anything in this world. You could be the president or a bishop or something like that. You can dream you got more money than Rockefeller. See what happen when you wake up.<sup>41</sup>

Fielding offers Booster a pull from his bottle—a gesture of solidarity. “You can dream lucky,” he says, “and wake up cold in hand. That’s what my daddy used to say.”<sup>42</sup> In *Jitney*, aspiration does not guarantee a favorable outcome. Nor does hard work or good behavior.

Doub, the most senior of the drivers, and Youngblood, the youngest, share a similar “real-talk” moment at the top of Act 2. The junior driver has just heard the news that the station is closing [Youngblood is always the last to know everything] and he immediately places blame on white people. “White folks ain’t got no sense of timing. They wait till I get in the position to buy me

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 82.

a house and then they pull the rug out from under me!" Doub intervenes, asserting that "that white man ain't paying you no mind."

DOUB: They been planning to tear these shacks down before you was born. You keep thinking everybody's against you and you ain't never gonna get nothing. I seen a hundred niggers too lazy to get up out the bed in the morning, talking about the white man is against them. That's just an excuse. You want to make something of your life, then the opportunity is there. You just have to shake off that "White folks is against me" attitude. Hell, they don't even know you alive.<sup>43</sup>

Youngblood's resentful reply, "they knew I was alive when they drafted me and sent me over to Vietnam to be shot at,"<sup>44</sup> prompts a story from Doub:

DOUB: I wasn't in the army but four months and they had me in Korea... It was a detail company. I think at that time the only dead body I had seen was my grandmama when Foster buried her. That's all I knew about a dead body. But I was meant to find out quick. The third day they put us on some trucks and drove out to the front lines... Got there and everything was quiet. The sergeant told us to get down off the trucks. We got down and started walking. Got near about two hundred yards when we saw our first body. Then another one. Then three more. The sergeants say "All right boys, we gonna clean up. I want you to stack the bodies six high." Not five. Not seven. Six high. And that's what I did for the next nine months. Clean up the battlefield. It took me six months before I got to where I could keep my supper down. After that it didn't bother me no more. Never did learn how to do nothing else. They was supposed to teach me but they never did. They just never paid me no mind. There was a whole bunch of us they never paid no mind.<sup>45</sup>

Doub urges Youngblood to take advantage of his experience. "You too young to be depending on driving jitneys... Make something of your life," he says. "Be a pilot or an engineer or something... The world's opened up to you. When I was your age, the only thing you could get a job

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

doing was busing dishes, running elevators and cleaning out toilets.” Doub returned from Korea—having bravely served his country—and nothing had changed. His life options were still limited by racism. Doub encourages Youngblood to take advantage of the changes: “You can be anything you want.”<sup>46</sup>

But Youngblood’s only concern is [quick] cash. “How I’m gonna get me some furniture and pay that three hundred dollar a month mortgage?” The young man has been working two jobs (and is looking for a third) in order to make a down-payment on a house for his girlfriend, Rena, and their son. Doub suggests that the youth talk to Becker, “See if he can get you on down at the mill.” But that idea doesn’t appeal to Youngblood.

YOUNGBLOOD: I don’t want to work in no mill. I done seen what the mills do to people and I swore I’d never work in no mill. The mills suck all the life out of you. That’s not for me. I don’t want that. I’ll do anything but I don’t want that.

DOUB: It ain’t all the time what you want. Sometime it’s what you need. Black folks always get the two confused.<sup>47</sup>

Fielding, Turnbo, Doub and Youngblood need the jitney station both financially and in terms of morale. The station functions not only as a place of business, but a gathering place—a social hub. It is a place where Becker’s men can be their unfiltered selves. A place where they can talk freely about their pasts, their ex-wives and girlfriends, mamas and grandmamas, their hopes for the future. The station is a place where everyone not only knows your name, but your situation as well. There may be tension. There may be conflict. But the men continue to show up. Fielding says, “You got to have somebody you can count on.”<sup>48</sup> In this moment he is speaking of his ex-wife,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 52.

but the statement applies to the drivers as well. They count on each other. They have to. Their partnership is key to their individual and collective survival.

That is why when Doub, who has driven with Becker for twelve years, finds out that Becker isn't going to fight the city's decision the confrontation is deeply personal.

DOUB:                    Why the hell didn't you tell somebody!

BECKER:                I'm telling you now.

DOUB:                    Fine time to tell me, two weeks later. It ain't like that's a small piece of news. I got rent to pay. Doctor bills. Every man in here depending on this station for their livelihood. The city's gonna board it up.... You've known for two weeks... and you ain't bothered to get around to telling nobody. That ain't like you Becker. What we gonna do now? In the two weeks we got.<sup>49</sup>

But Becker doesn't have a plan.

BECKER:                I used to question God about everything. Why he hardened Pharaoh's heart? Why he let Jacob steal his brother's birthright? After Coreen died I told myself I wasn't gonna ask no more questions. Cause the answers didn't matter. They didn't matter right then. I thought that would change but it never did. It still don't matter after all these years. It don't look like it's never gonna matter. I'm tired of waiting for God to decide whether he want to hold my hand.<sup>50</sup>

Becker confesses that after eighteen years of working hard and playing by the rules and trying to keep everybody happy, he's tired. Tired of struggling. Tired of waiting. Tired of hoping that things will get better. Becker tells Doub "I think I'm just tired of driving."<sup>51</sup> The city's notice seems like a sign, a sign that it may be time to quit.

Doub blasts his friend, complaining that, "It's like you just a shadow of yourself. The station done gone downhill. Some people overcharge. Some people don't haul... I just watch you and you

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

don't do nothing."<sup>52</sup> Becker insists that he's doing the best (that) he can. Doub replies, "Sometime your best ain't enough."<sup>53</sup>

As the drivers scramble to make alternate work arrangements, Becker is dealt another blow. At the end of Act One, Scene Two, Lucille, Becker's second wife, calls to let him know that his son Booster, who has been in prison for twenty years, is to be released the following day. It is unclear how Becker feels about this news, until Wilson reveals the story behind his incarceration in a scene with Youngblood and Turnbo.

TURNBO:                    See, Becker's boy... he liked that Science. You know the science fair that they have over at the Buhel Planetarium every year...? Booster won first place three years in a row. He the only one ever did that... They let him in to the University of Pittsburgh... Gave him a scholarship and everything. Becker was just as proud as he could be.<sup>54</sup>

Turnbo proceeds to tell Youngblood how in his first year of school Booster started to date a white girl from a wealthy family. One night, the woman's father, who, Turnbo explains, "was up here in the neighborhood looking for one of them whores," recognized his daughter's car, and went over and looked inside. The sight of his little girl with a black man was more than he could bear. He "went crazy," yanking open the car door and "screaming his head off." Not realizing that the man was his girlfriend's father, Booster proceeded to beat him "half to death." When the police arrived on the scene, the girl told them that Booster had jumped into her car and raped her. Booster was arrested, but was let out on bail soon after. "The first day he was out... the first day!" Turnbo says, "he went over to that gal's house and shot her dead right on the front porch."<sup>55</sup> Turnbo asserts that Booster's prison sentence killed his mama.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 41.

When Becker's son arrives at the station the next morning, a showdown between the two men is inevitable. Wilson begins their reunion cordially enough. "How you doing, Pop?" Booster asks. "Fine. Fine. How you doing?" Becker replies. "You look good." But Becker cannot hold back his anger for long. "So what you gonna do with the rest of your life now that you done ruined it," he asks his son. "You just took your life and threw it away like it wasn't worth nothing."<sup>56</sup>

The men do verbal battle, riffing on injustice, violence and family. Booster attempts to justify his [murderous] actions: "I wanted to do something that said I wasn't just another nigger... that I was Clarence Becker. I wanted to make them remember my name... I thought you would understand. I thought you would be proud of me... For being a warrior. For dealing with the world in ways that you didn't or couldn't or wouldn't."<sup>57</sup>

Becker refuses to condone Booster's actions, lamenting the life his son could have led, the life that Becker had sacrificed everything [he had] to ensure: "I swallowed my pride and let them mess over me, all the time saying, 'You bastards got it coming. Look out! Becker's boy's coming to straighten this shit out! You're not gonna fuck over him! He's gonna grow big and strong! Watch out for Becker's boy! Becker's taking this ass whipping so his boy can stride through this shit like Daniel in the lion's den! Watch out for Becker's boy!'"<sup>58</sup>

In the scene's climactic moment, Becker blames Booster for the death of his girlfriend and his mother—"You killed her! You know that? You a double murderer"—and the death of Becker's dreams for his son. In the final moments of the Act, Becker disowns his son. "You are my son. I

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

helped bring you into this world. But from this moment on... I'm calling the deal off. You ain't nothing to me, boy. You just another nigger on the street."<sup>59</sup>

By Act Two, Scene Two, Becker has found a bit of his old fire. He has called a station meeting and all of the drivers are in attendance. "All right... you all know why we're here... Since they boarding up the place we got to figure out what we gonna do..." Becker lays out the options. They could rent a new space or could try to join with another station and have to play by that station's rules or they could stay put. "We already here. The people know we here. We been here for eighteen years... and I don't see no reason to move."<sup>60</sup>

Becker's decision to fight, and to lead, is a result of his confrontation with Booster. He has adopted some of his son's defiance.

BECKER:                   When I first came along I tried to do everything right. I figured that was the best thing to do. Even when it didn't look like they was playing fair I told myself they would come around. Time it look like you got a little something going for you, they would change the rules. Now you got to do something else. I told myself that's alright, my boy's coming. He's gonna straighten it out. I put it on somebody else. I took it off of me and put it on somebody else. I told myself as long as I could do that then I could just keep going along and making excuses for everybody. But I'm through making excuses for anybody... including myself.<sup>61</sup>

At the end of the scene Becker asks Doub, "...my boy been around here? You seen him?" to signal his hope for a reconciliation with Booster.

It is clear in *Jitney* that the threat of demolition is not new, that The Hill has been in danger of being levelled for years and that the drivers are well aware. "They're tearing everything down around here," Turnbo comments at one point. "All along Wylie there. You see they done tore

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

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everything down.”<sup>62</sup> And then again at the top of Act 2, Doub notes: “It’s about time they done something around here. They been talking for years about how they was gonna fix it up.”<sup>63</sup> But it’s one thing to talk about “the end,” especially when you’ve been waiting so long for it to arrive that it seems as though it never actually will. It’s quite another for the wrecking balls to show up on your street and start knocking things down.

### 3.

“I can’t write plays, man.”<sup>64</sup>  
-August Wilson

August Wilson was born April 27, 1945, to Frederick August Kittel, Sr., a German immigrant, and Daisy Wilson, an African-American woman from North Carolina. Kittel was an infrequent and sporadic presence in the household. He would come “for a few days” and then vanish “for many, many more.”<sup>65</sup> A baker by trade, his visits were notable in that he usually brought a bag of fresh rolls.

Daisy raised Wilson and his five brothers and sisters in a two-room, cold-water flat in the Hill. She supported her family on income she earned from cleaning jobs and welfare subsidies. She was resourceful, stretching eggs with flour to make breakfast go seven ways, waiting until Christmas Eve for the \$1 tree she could afford, and purchasing second-hand Nancy Drew mysteries and other books for the daily reading she required of her children.<sup>66</sup> Though she had only a sixth grade education she was a very good reader and taught all of her children to read.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>64</sup> Watlington, Dennis. “Hurdling Fences.” *Vanity Fair*, 52 (April 1989), 106.

<sup>65</sup> Freedman, Samuel J. “A Voice From the Streets.” *The New York Times Magazine*, 15 March 1987, 40.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Livingston, *ibid.*



“She stressed the idea that if you can read, you can do anything—you could become a lawyer, you could be a doctor, you could be anything you wanted to be if you knew how to unlock the information.” Daisy took Wilson to get his first library card when he was five.

Daisy instilled in her children a strong sense of pride and a limited tolerance for injustice. She once turned down a washing machine she had won in a contest when the company sponsoring the event tried to fob off a secondhand item on her. Wilson recalled:

...Morton Salt had a contest on the radio. Apparently they had just come out with the slogan “When it rains, it pours”—and if you could name the product, you got a brand-new Speed Queen washing machine. And my mother heard this on the radio. We didn’t have a telephone, so she had to write the number down for my sister, give her a dime, tell her to run to the store, and call this number, and say “Morton Salt.” So my sister ran out of the house, down the steps, went to the store, and said “Morton Salt.” My mother’s home listening to the radio, and “Hey, we got a winner!” When they found out that she was black, they wanted to give her a certificate to the Salvation Army, where she could go down and get a used washing machine. And she told them exactly what they could do with their certificate.<sup>68</sup>

It was at his mother’s knees that Wilson learned black culture:

"Growing up in my mother’s house at 1727 Bedford Avenue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I learned the language, the eating habits, the religious beliefs, the notions of common sense, attitudes toward sex, concepts of beauty and justice, and the responses to pleasure and pain that my mother had learned from her mother, and which you could trace back to the first African who set foot on the continent."<sup>69</sup>

He was inspired by Daisy’s “myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter” to make art.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Livingston, *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Wilson, August. “The Ground on Which I Stand, a Speech on Black Theatre and Performance.” *AAS21*, <http://aas.princeton.edu/publication/thegroundonwhichistand>. Accessed 1 Sept. 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*. McFarland & Company, 2004, 6.

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When Wilson was twelve years old, he made a major discovery in the library: the Negro section. “There were thirty or forty books,” Wilson has estimated, all of which he read – Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison. “I can remember reading *Invisible Man*... and Dunbar—I don’t think I ever took that Dunbar book back to the library.”<sup>71</sup> Wilson remembers [especially] a sociology text that spoke of ‘the Negro’s power of hard work.’ The young man was emboldened by the notion that a Negro could have any kind of power in America. “The whole world was there [in the library],” Wilson has said. “Those books were a comfort. Just the idea that black people would write books. I wanted my book up there, too.”<sup>72</sup>

Wilson recalls a poem he wrote at Central Catholic High School in Hazelwood, a blue-collar steelworkers’ neighborhood where his mother moved the family after divorcing Wilson’s father in 1957. It was an assignment from his favorite teacher, Brother Dominic. “He would always tell me I could be an author, and I needed to hear that.” Wilson remembers writing:

The black man walks in the dark  
Unseen by human eyes  
Dark are the night shadows around him

“This was 1959, and I didn’t say the Negro man, I said the black man,” Wilson has said. “I remember Brother Dominic called me in, and the gist of what he said was that I should write about something other than blacks. He was well-meaning, but he was all wrong. He suggested that I should write about more universal stuff, but that was suggesting that the black experience was outside of the universal experience. I started writing nature poems, but I got over that.”

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<sup>71</sup> Moyers, *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Shafer, Yvonne. *The Changing American Theatre: Mainstream and Marginal, Past and Present.* University of Valencia Press, 2002, 126.

No doubt the encounter with Brother Dominic deeply influenced Wilson's thoughts on the integrity of the African American experience. In his 1996 speech "The Ground on Which I Stand" he declared, "As there is no idea that cannot be contained by black life, these men and women found themselves to be sufficient and secure in their art and their instruction." He went on to say:

I believe that race matters—that is the largest, most identifiable and the most important part of our personality. It is the largest category of identification because it is the one that most influences your perception of yourself, and it is the one to which others in the world of men must respond... There are some people who will say that black Americans do not have a culture—that cultures are reserved for other people, most notably Europeans of various ethnic groupings, and that black Americans made up a sub-group of American culture that is derived from the Europeans origins of its majority population. But black Americans are Africans, and there are many histories and many cultures on the African continent. Those who would deny black Americans their culture would also deny them their history and the inherent values that are a part of all human life.<sup>73</sup>

The only black student in his class, "Wilson gained an awareness of the grinding ugliness of racism that would inform his work."<sup>74</sup>

I would come to school and there would be a note on my desk that said 'Go home, nigger.' And every morning, like clockwork, I just would pick it up and throw it away... I got into a lot of fights. One particular day there was, like, forty-some kids waiting outside after school for me, the principal had to send me home in a cab.<sup>75</sup>

Wilson transferred to Connelly Trade School, a vocational high school that proved far too easy for him, and then to Gladstone Public High, where his History teacher, Mr. B, accused him of cheating on his term paper. "And he said, 'Wellllll—you have some older sisters, don't you?' I said, 'Yeah, I have three of them.' 'Wellllll—is it possible that they could have written this paper?' I said, 'To be honest, I write their papers.'" Mr. B was not amused. Nor did he believe that Wilson had

<sup>73</sup> Wilson, August. "The Ground on Which I Stand, a Speech on Black Theatre and Performance." *AAS21*, <http://aas.princeton.edu/publication/thegroundonwhichistand>. Accessed 1 Sept. 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Isherwood, Charles. "August Wilson, Theater's Poet of Black America, Is Dead at 60." *The New York Times*, 3 Oct. 2005, Section A, Column 2.

<sup>75</sup> Feingold, Michael. "August Wilson's Bottomless Blackness." *The Village Voice*. Volume 39 (27 November 1984), 117-118.

done the work himself. “He leaned back in his chair and took his pen and drew a circle around the “E” [for fail] and handed me back the paper. And I took the paper, tore it up, threw it in the trash bucket and walked out.”<sup>76</sup>

Wilson never returned. For the next several years, he educated himself at the main branch of the Carnegie Library, voraciously reading everything from theology to biographies to books about furniture making.

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In 1965, when Wilson was twenty-years old, two very important events occurred in his life—events that would dramatically shape his writing. Both, coincidentally, were purchases.

The first was a typewriter. “When I was twenty, I wrote a term paper for my sister, who was going to Fordham University. And she gave me \$20. I went down to McFarren’s typewriter store, and they had this old Royal typewriter in the window that I had my eye on, and it was \$20.” Wilson has remarked that twenty dollars was a lot of money in 1965, but that he was resolved. “When I bought the typewriter, I made the decision that I was going to be a writer. Not a bus driver or a lawyer or anything else.” His ambition was further solidified when he bought his first ream of paper. “I thought... I’m really a writer now. That’s five hundred sheets of paper, five hundred poems.” It was really a big deal.<sup>77</sup>

The second purchase was a record player that only played one speed—78. “I used to go to this place that had stacks and stacks of records. I’d buy them ten at a time [indiscriminately]—give

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<sup>76</sup> Livingston, *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

the man fifty cents and I'm gone. One day there was this typewritten yellow label and it said, 'Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine'—Bessie Smith."<sup>78</sup>

Wilson had never heard of Bessie Smith. But he put the 78 on the turntable. He put the needle to the record. The tinny piano began to play. And then Ms. Smith began to sing in her strong contralto:

In a bakery shop today  
I heard Miss Mandy Jenkins say  
She had the best cake, you see  
And they were fresh as fresh could be  
And as the people would pass by  
You would hear Miss Mandy cry  
Nobody in town can bake a sweet jelly roll like mine, like mine...

With that, August Wilson's life was changed.

I listened to it twenty-two times," he has said. "And I became aware that this stuff was my own. Patti Page, Frank Sinatra—they weren't me. This was me. The music became the wellspring of my work."<sup>79</sup>

Armed with the Blues and a typewriter, Wilson took to the streets of "the Hill" in search of inspiration. He cites Pat's Place, a cigar shop and pool hall, which stood on the southwest corner of Wylie and Elmore Streets, as particularly influential in the development of his voice. "It was where the railroad porters would congregate and tell stories... I was twenty-one at the time and had no idea I was going to write about it. I wasn't keeping notes. But I loved listening to them." Their particular brand of philosophy and history—their running commentary on the news, the politics of the city, the outcome of the latest baseball game—soon began to sound less like chatter and more like poetry to the budding writer. "They would argue about how far away the moon was.

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<sup>78</sup> In an interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson identified the record store as the St Vincent de Paul store.

<sup>79</sup> Watlington, *ibid.*

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They'd say, "Man, the moon a million miles away." They called me Youngblood. They'd say, "Hey, Youngblood, how far the moon?" And I'd say, "150,000 miles," and they'd say, "That boy don't know nothing! The moon's a *million* miles."

Wilson bequeathed his nickname, Youngblood, to Darnell, the youngest of the taxi drivers at Becker's Car Service.

Wilson found similar inspiration elsewhere in the Hill: conversations overheard in the barbershop, on the street corner, or at any of his myriad odd jobs—he worked at various points as a porter, a dishwasher and a short-order cook—became fodder for his poetry. He frequented Eddie's Diner and often composed poems in the back booth. He took note of how [for good luck] "Miss Sarah sprinkled salt and lined up pennies across her threshold." He eavesdropped on the guys at the jitney stand next to the Pan Fried Fish restaurant on Wylie, who would crack each other up with stories of their conquests with women or their skill at sports. "Invariably," Wilson said, "they would talk about themselves and their lives when they were young men. And so a lot of what I know of the history of blacks in a very personal sense I picked up standing there in Pat's Place."<sup>80</sup>

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"In '68 [Wilson's friend] Rob Penny wrote a play; he said, 'Hey look what I did!' I said, 'Let's do it.' We both looked at each other and said, 'How?' 'I don't know; let's do it. Let's start a theater.'" That conversation became Black Horizon Theater, which the two co-founded with the idea of using the theater to politicize the community or, as Wilson has noted, "as we said it in those days, to raise the consciousness of black people."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Sheppard, Vera. "August Wilson: An Interview." *National Forum: The Phi Kappa Phi Journal*. Volume 70 (Summer 1990), 7-11.

<sup>81</sup> Saddik, Annette J. *Contemporary American Drama*. Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 89.

“I knew nothing about theatre,” Wilson has remarked. “I [had] never seen a play written down before.”<sup>82</sup>

I started directing but I didn’t have any idea how to do this stuff... We started doing Baraka’s plays and virtually everything else out there. I remember *The Drama Review* printed a black issue, somewhere around ’69, and we did every play in the book.<sup>83</sup>

Wilson learned how to direct by reading.

I found one called *The Fundamentals of Play Directing* and checked it out. I didn’t understand anything in it. It was all about form and mass and balance. I flipped through the book and there in Appendix A I discovered what to do on the first day of rehearsal. It said, “Read the play.” So I went to the first rehearsal very confidently and I said, “Okay, this is what we’re going to do. We’re going to read the play.” We did that. Now what? I hadn’t got to Appendix B. So I said, “Let’s read the play again.” That night I went back to the book and sort of figured out what to do from that point on.

It was during his affiliation with Black Horizon that Wilson first attempted to write a play.

“It was disastrous,” he has said of his effort. “I couldn’t write dialogue.”<sup>84</sup> “I had one character say to the other guy, ‘Hey, man, what’s happening.’ And the other guy said, ‘Nothing.’ I sat there for twenty minutes and neither of my guys would talk. So I said to myself, ‘Well, that’s all right. After all, I’m a poet. I don’t have to be a playwright. To hell with writing plays. Let other people write plays.’” He didn’t try to write a[nother] play for a number of years after that first experience.<sup>85</sup>

But try again he did. Inspired by a production of Athol Fugard’s [play] *Sizwe Bansi in Dead* at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre, Wilson once again picked up his pen, an effort which resulted in

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<sup>82</sup> I-Chin Tu, Janet. “A Story To Tell -- Playwright August Wilson, Now Settled In Seattle's Misty Nest, Writes About The Black Experience Like No Other Storyteller.” *The Seattle Times*, 18 January 1998.

<sup>83</sup> Savran, David. “August Wilson.” *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*. Theatre Communications Group, 1988, 290.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Lyons, Bonnie & George Plimpton. “August Wilson, The Art of Theater, No. 14.” *The Paris Review*, Winter 1999, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/839/the-art-of-theater-no-14-august-wilson>. Accessed 30 June 2016.

several one-act plays, among them: *Recycle* (1973), *The Homecoming* and *The Coldest Day of the Year* (both in 1976).

“I had a scene in a very early play, *The Coldest Day of the Year*, between an old man and an old woman sitting on a park bench. The old man walks up and he says, “Our lives are frozen in the deepest heat and spiritual turbulence.” She looks at him. He goes on, “Terror hangs over the night like a hawk.” Then he says, “The wind bites at your tits.” He gives her his coat. “Allow me, Madam, my coat. It is made of the wool of a sacrificial lamb.” “What’s that you say?” she says, “It sounded bitter.” He says, “But not as bitter as you are lovely . . . as a jay bird on a spring day.”<sup>86</sup>

“My early attempts at writing plays... did not use the language that I work in now.” Wilson has commented that he didn’t respect how black people talked. “I thought that in order to make art out of their dialogue I had to change it, make it into something different. I didn’t realize [at the time] the poetry in the everyday language of black people.”<sup>87</sup>

In 1977, Wilson wrote a series of poems about a character, Black Bart, a former cattle rustler turned alchemist. His good friend and stage director, Claude Purdy, suggested that he turn the poems into a play. At first Wilson blanched at the idea, but Purdy insisted and so between that Sunday and the next Sunday Wilson wrote a play, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, a 137 page single-spaced musical satire. The play was produced in 1981 by Lou Bellamy at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota, where Wilson had relocated in 1978. It was Wilson’s first professional production.

Around the same time Wilson was awarded a twenty-five hundred dollar Jerome Fellowship by the Playwrights’ Center in Minneapolis. This proved to be a life-changing moment:

“I found myself sitting in a room with sixteen playwrights. I remember looking around and thinking that since I was sitting there, I must be a playwright too. It was then that I began to think of myself as a playwright, which is absolutely crucial to the work. It is important to claim it. I had worked so hard to earn the title “poet” that it

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.



was hard for me to give it up. All I ever wanted was “August Wilson, poet.” So the idea of being a playwright took some adjusting to. I still write poetry and think it is the highest form of literature. But I don’t call myself a poet-playwright. I think one of them is enough weight to carry around.”<sup>88</sup>

Wilson submitted *Jitney* to the O’Neill Theatre Center’s National Playwrights’ Conference. Wilson said, “they sent it back.” So he sent it to them again. “I thought, ‘You guys didn’t read this play.’” And they sent it back a second time. “I was forced to look at it again and I thought, ‘Maybe it’s not as good as I think it is. I have to write a better play but how the hell do you do that?’ I felt I was writing the best I could.”<sup>89</sup>

Wilson’s next play, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, which the O’Neill accepted, established Wilson as a major new voice in the American Theater.

#### 4.

“The language is defined by those who speak it.”<sup>90</sup>  
-August Wilson

Wilson said, “all the characters in my plays, their ideas and their attitudes, the stance that they adopt in the world, are all ideas and attitudes that are expressed in the blues... All you need is the blues... To me it’s the book, it’s the bible, it’s everything... I think the blues is the best literature that we as black Americans have.”<sup>91</sup>

Michael Eric Dyson eloquently described August Wilson’s relationship to the blues: “If the blues is the wash of black suffering hung up to dry in the sun of pitiless self-reflection, then August Wilson was our greatest lyrical washerman... He bathed the soil of bigotry in the rhetoric of black

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Savran, *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Lyons and Plimpton, *ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Lewis, Miles Marshall. “August Wilson Interview.” *The Believer*. November 2004, [http://www.believmag.com/issues/200411/?read=interview\\_wilson](http://www.believmag.com/issues/200411/?read=interview_wilson). Accessed 29 Aug. 2016.

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spirituality. And he made raucous black vernacular an agitator to stir hope into motion.” Wilson’s narratives give “lyrical shape to the hurts and affections that stymie and transform black life. [They] tap comedy to temper tragedy—and to tame the absurd.”<sup>92</sup>

Wilson’s blues aesthetic manifests itself as an amalgamation of the playwrights’ keen understanding of Pittsburgh’s socio-political history, his own childhood experiences and artistic development in The Hill, and his sensitivity to the particular rhythms and cadences of black speech. His men are direct descendants of the elders at Pat’s Place and the regulars at Eddie’s Diner. They are “angry, thwarted, hurtful, [and] hurt-filled. They act at once cornered and disdainful, fearful of the young, the hip, the outlaw.” “Wilson constructs the individual cab drivers and their particular histories and idiosyncrasies.” The interplay of the five drivers in Becker’s employ is the hallmark of the play. Each of the men has his own sound, his own particular rhythm, tempo and style. Each plays backup; and each has his solo moment to shine. As written by Wilson, all are virtuosic performers.<sup>93</sup> They are prophets and oracles. And sometimes they are crazy. The young ones are hot headed. They tend to think they know it all, and so they do not listen. They do not heed warnings. Nearly all of the men have served in the military or been in jail. All of them, regardless of their age, have stories to tell.<sup>94</sup>

Wilson lets them talk—in rangey, rambling, bittersweet passages—about the way things used to be. About the good old days. Back when they were young and capable and passionate and desired. Back when the neighborhood seemed full of possibility. Before death. And divorce. And the threat of demolition.

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<sup>92</sup> Dyson, Michael Eric. August Wilson’s Blues Poetry.” *Humanities*. Volume 36, Number 2, March-April 2015.

<sup>93</sup> Elam, Harry Justin. *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*. University of Michigan Press, 2006, 39.

<sup>94</sup> Beidler, *ibid*.

But *Jitney* is not merely retrospective. The impending wrecking ball forces the men, who have become a bit complacent, to take a stand, not only on behalf of the business, but [of/for] the neighborhood itself. Addressing his drivers, Becker speaks to the inter-connectedness of the Hill, remarking on how if one neighborhood stalwart closes its door, then another will close theirs, and another and so on. The financial viability of the “whole” is reliant upon the resilience of the “one.” “[I]f we don’t do something they’ll put Clifford out of business. Put Hester out of business. Put us out of business... we gonna run jitneys out of here till the day before the bulldozer come! Ain’t gonna be no boarding up around here!”<sup>95</sup> The men are more like Cigar Annie than they realized.

After Becker’s funeral in Act Two, Scene Four, Booster expresses appreciation for his father: “I can’t say nothing wrong by him. He took care of me when I was young. He ain’t run the streets and fuss and fight with my mama. The only thing I ever knew him to do was work hard... He deserved better than what life gave him... I’m proud of my old man. I’m proud of him. And I’m proud to be Becker’s boy.”<sup>96</sup>

The phone begins to ring. None of the drivers move [to answer it], presumably out of respect for Becker. Booster, who is almost out the door, chooses to honor his father in another way. He crosses to the phone and picks up the receiver and answers, “car service.”<sup>97</sup> And with that simple gesture, it is clear that Booster will finish the campaign his father began. He will step into the “bigness” of Becker’s shoes and fight to keep the station open.

Wilson’s life experience, the history of the The Hill and his love for the musicality of his people, converge in *Jitney*, resulting in an intimate and powerful story of a community at a crossroads. Wilson said:

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<sup>95</sup> Wilson, *ibid.*, 85.

<sup>96</sup> Wilson, *ibid.*, 96.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

I don't write particularly to effect social change. I believe writing can do that, but that's not why I write. I work as an artist. All art is political in the sense that it serves someone's politics. Here in America whites have a particular view of blacks. I think my plays offer them a different way to look at black Americans.<sup>98</sup>

Wilson went on to say that his plays could allow white people to see that the very things that influence their lives—"love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty"—are no less present in the lives of black people; "[r]ecognizing that these things are as much part of his life as theirs can affect how they think about and deal with black people in their lives."<sup>99</sup> *Jitney*, though an earlier writing effort, aspires to the same objective: To present black life in all of its richness and complexity, its ugliness and its beauty, its tragedies and its triumphs, with a keen awareness of its past, an unflinching portrayal of its present and with tremendous hope for its future.

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<sup>98</sup> Lyons and Plimpton, *ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

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