

AUGUST WILSON'S JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

DIRECTED BY
PHYLCIA RASHAD



Welcome to Center Theatre Group and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* by August Wilson,

part of his acclaimed Century Cycle of plays
chronicling the African American experience in
America over 100 years.

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August Wilson said that *Joe Turner's Come and
Gone* was his favorite of all his plays, explaining
that the play is about "people searching, emerging
from the 300-year experience of slavery dazed and
stunned, just trying to get your bearings, finding
out who you are and what happened to you."

The play starts in 1911 at Seth and Bertha Holly's
Pittsburgh boardinghouse. We meet travelers,
people migrating to the industrial North in search
of work, a new life and somewhere to belong.
For each character we meet, the boardinghouse
provides food, conversation, song and a sense of
community before they continue on their journey.

Take a moment and think about the ideas of
journey and community. How does having a
community of people help us on our individual
journeys to discover who we are and make sense of
where we have been? Can our community help us
discover our unique gifts and skills—what August
Wilson called our "song"? Does understanding our
shared history as a community of Americans help
move us forward into a better future?

Turn the page to discover more about August
Wilson and the artists who inspired him. Read the
interview with director Phylcia Rashad and her
thoughts about truth in theatre. Learn about the
power of names, both personally and historically.
Reflect on the connection between discovering
your song and freedom.

Theatre raises questions and challenges audience
members to discover their own answers. See what
questions this information raises for you and what
questions and answers the performance provides.
Thank you so much for joining us for *Joe Turner's
Come and Gone*. We look forward to seeing you
at the theatre!

"It ain't nothing to
find no starting place
in the world.
You just start
from where you
find
yourself."

—*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

“A fellow that’s gonna show you the Secret of Life ain’t to be taken lightly.” —Bynum

1911, the Hill District of Pittsburgh. The Great Migration has just begun and thousands of former slaves are pouring into the North searching for a better life.

A typical day in Seth and Bertha Holly’s boardinghouse. Bertha is preparing breakfast. Longtime lodger Bynum Walker is in the backyard performing his morning ritual with pigeons, roots, and ancient symbols scratched in the ground. Seth is at the window watching and criticizing. He also takes issue with a younger lodger, Jeremy Furlow, who spent the night in jail. Bynum reminds Seth that, like so many others migrating from the deep South, “He ain’t been up here but two weeks. It’s gonna take a while before he can work that country out of him.” Seth scoffs at the “rude awakening” Jeremy and the others can expect in the North.

Despite Seth’s cynicism, the boardinghouse is quickly filled to capacity with travelers. Each knock on the front door reveals a person in the middle of a journey: Mattie Campbell is following a man who left her; Molly Cunningham seeks the good life; Herald Loomis, with young daughter Zonia, has spent the last three years searching for his wife. Each in their own way is coping with great loss, their communities and lives torn apart by the legacy of slavery.

The boardinghouse is an oasis on their journey. It’s a place to sit and rest, get a warm meal and some companionship. It’s a place where the ancient and modern, the spiritual and the routine live side-by-side. Here, magic and the supernatural are as common as biscuits and gravy. And it’s a place where they can find and strengthen their “song”—their individuality, sense of self, and the knowledge that their song is worth singing.

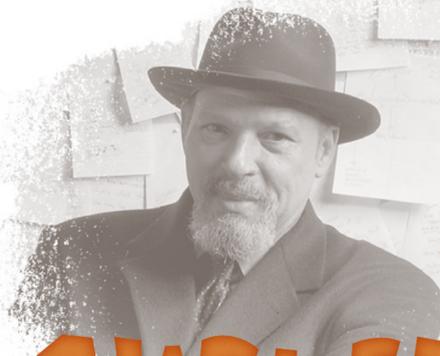
The boardinghouse lodgers came North with expectations and the North isn’t meeting them. Seth and Bertha’s home is a refuge from the hardships of the outside world. Eventually, some will return to the road, but as long as they’re staying at the boardinghouse, they have somewhere to go that feels like a home.

BOARDINGHOUSES

Today, they are a thing of the past. But in the late 19th and early 20th century, boardinghouses provided either shelter or income for as many as half of all urban Americans. For those with few resources, these lodgings provided a safe place to sleep and a hot meal at prices they could afford. Wilson spent his early writing years in a boardinghouse. At 20 he had decided it was time to move out on his own, but had very little money, much of which he spent on a used typewriter. The boardinghouse he ended up in lodged other aspiring artists, and Wilson’s career as a writer began.

Like Wilson, boarders were mostly single men and women. Each had a room, access to an outhouse, use of the kitchen and parlor and, for a small fee, home-cooked meals daily. For most landlords and lodgers, though, the benefits of living in a boardinghouse went beyond the practical. It was not unusual for boarders to eat together at the family table and participate in communal activities. For the homesick, separated from their families and friends, unsure of where their journey would end, the intimacy of the boardinghouse served as a surrogate family home.

“This has always been a respectable house” —Seth



“Before I am anything, a man or a playwright, I am an African American.” —August Wilson

AUGUST WILSON

August Wilson is widely regarded as one of America’s greatest playwrights. His popularity among audiences of all races has paved the way for black artists who might otherwise have been relegated to “black” theatres. But his journey was not easy, and it did not happen overnight.

Wilson was born on April 27, 1945 and named after his father, Frederick August Kittel—a German immigrant who was largely absent from his family’s life. His mother, Daisy Wilson Kittel, was left to raise six children on her own in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. His parents divorced and Daisy married David Bedford, a black man who quickly filled the hole his father had left. Wilson was biracial, but his cultural identity was firmly African American.

Daisy eventually moved her family to Hazelwood, a white working-class neighborhood. Between 1959 and 1960, Wilson attended three different high schools, all of which confirmed that traditional learning environments were not for him. At the first school, he was the only black student and subjected to persistent and aggressive racism. The second, a trade school, was far too easy for him academically. The final straw came at the neighborhood high school: his history teacher, a black man he admired, accused him of plagiarizing an essay and gave him a failing grade. Fed up, Wilson dropped out and spent the next four years educating himself at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

1965 was a significant year. He turned 20. His father passed away and Wilson dropped the first and last name he’d been given in favor of his mother’s maiden name. He discovered the blues, moved out of the family home into a boardinghouse, bought a used typewriter, and began his writing career as a poet in earnest. Working various odd jobs to make ends meet, Wilson could be found writing poems on tablets or napkins in diners, pool halls, and cigar stores all over town. He explains, “I found out later people thought I was a bum. The thing that sustained me was that my idea of myself was different from the idea that society, my mother, and even some of my friends had of me.”

His transition from poet to playwright came in 1978 when a good friend encouraged him to come to St. Paul, Minnesota and rewrite a series of his poems into a play, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. In doing so, he found his voice and his calling. Committed now to playwrighting, he began to submit his work to theatres for production. At first, all of his submissions were rejected. Wilson didn’t give up and his persistence paid off. In 1982, the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center’s National Playwrights Conference, which had rejected his plays multiple times, accepted *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

Continuously, in every year after that until his passing in 2005, August Wilson had a play either in development or in production at the most prestigious theatres in the country.

August Wilson. PHOTO BY DAVID COOPER.

CENTURY CYCLE



By completing the Century Cycle, August Wilson achieved something no playwright had ever done, or has done since. In 10 plays—each set in a different decade of the 20th century—he captured the daily lives and challenges of African Americans one decade at a time.

He didn’t set out to do it. After writing *Jitney*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and *Fences*, he noticed a pattern that surprised him: each play took place in a separate decade. Bringing the entire century to life on stage was an exciting challenge.

The project would also give Wilson the opportunity to express one of his deepest convictions. He felt strongly that our connection to history—our ancestors, their experiences and rituals—was essential to knowing who we really are, to knowing our “song.” He wasn’t interested in being a historian. Of course, the events of each decade impact his characters. In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* the ripple effects of slavery, Jim Crow, the Great Migration and racism throughout the United States influence the residents of the Holly’s boardinghouse. But it was their individual lives that Wilson wanted to spotlight.

What stories would you tell if you were creating your own Century Cycle? How would you tell them? Why do they need to be told?

“The importance of history to me is simply to find out who you are and where you’ve been. It becomes doubly important if someone else has been writing your history.”

—August Wilson

THE BLUES AND BEARDEN

“If it doesn’t work, tear it up and start on something else. Writing is free; it doesn’t cost you anything. There is nowhere where it says that 500 words cost \$.25 or a dollar. They are free.” —August Wilson

The Blues

In 1965 Wilson first heard the blues. Bessie Smith’s recording of “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine” resonated deeply. He said it “spoke to something in myself. It said, this is yours.” The blues showed him that he, too, had a song worth singing, that his life and his community “were worthy of the highest celebration and occasion of art.” Wilson also recognized the blues as something bigger: a continuation of the oral traditions of the past and a way of passing information within communities and from generation to generation.

Romare Bearden

Late in 1977 a friend showed Wilson the work of visual artist Romare Bearden. Bearden portrayed African American life in a way Wilson had never seen before. Describing his first reaction to Bearden’s work he stated, “What I saw was black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness.... I was looking at myself in ways I hadn’t thought of before and have never ceased to think of since.”

Is there an artist whose work inspires you, whose art opens your eyes and helps you better understand yourself, your culture, or your history?

Writing *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* The inspiration for *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* came from a blues song and a Bearden collage.

The song “Joe Turner’s Blues” describes an all-too-common experience in the South: black men granted their freedom by the Emancipation Proclamation, kidnapped off the street and forced into unpaid, backbreaking labor.

Bearden’s collage, *Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket* (1978), shows four figures in a kitchen: a man wearing a trench coat and hat, hunched in a chair; around him, another man, a woman, and a child. The hunched man intrigued Wilson: “I looked at that, and I said, ‘Everyone is going to leave. The man is going to work, and the woman is going shopping, and the kid is going to drink the milk and go out, and this man is going to be left in there in this posture. And what he needs most is human contact.’”

Curious to learn more about the hunched man, Wilson decided to “make the boardinghouse come alive and give these characters names and find out who this guy is and what is his story.” From there, the play flowed on its own: “The characters actually do what they want to do. It’s their story. I’m like Bynum... walking down a road in this strange landscape.”

inside

- Joe Turner’s Come and Gone 2
- August Wilson 2
- Journey 4
- Your Song 6
- Interview with Phylicia Rashad 7
- Credits 8



L.A.’s Theatre Company
A non-profit arts organization

Ahmanson Theatre
Mark Taper Forum
Kirk Douglas Theatre

601 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Education and Community Partnerships
CenterTheatreGroup.org/
Education

Audience Services
213.628.2772
CenterTheatreGroup.org

Theatre Locations
Mark Taper Forum
Ahmanson Theatre
at the Music Center
135 North Grand Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Kirk Douglas Theatre
in downtown Culver City
9820 Washington Blvd.
Culver City, CA 90232

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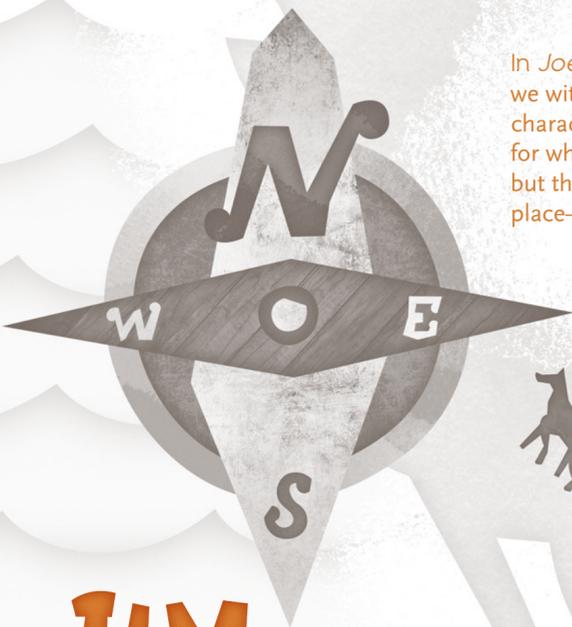
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STARTING PLACE AND JOURNEY

In Joe Turner's *Come and Gone* we witness personal journeys. Each character has a different expectation for where their journey will take them, but they share the same starting place—their history.



JIM CROW

The Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862 and later the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution, freed the slaves. It was a step toward an America for all its citizens, no matter their race. Efforts toward racial equality were made in the South, but in 1877 federal troops—meant to protect this progress—were withdrawn. Unmonitored, Southern state and local governments disregarded the Emancipation Proclamation, passing laws that effectively restored white supremacy in the South.

These laws came to be known as “Jim Crow”: a system of oppression that mandated segregation in all public and private facilities, legalized discrimination in employment practices, and limited housing options. Between 1877 and 1965 blacks were denied the right to vote, to organize, or to run for political office. And in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896), the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the “separate but equal” principle—the backbone of Jim Crow.

Acts of violence against black Southerners were common practices under Jim Crow. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) had been officially dissolved in 1869, but it continued underground. Many wealthy and working-class whites saw kidnapping, lynching, and public executions as legitimate tools for maintaining their dominance. Between 1882 and 1903 over 2,000 African Americans were lynched.

Jim Crow segregation with its ever-present potential for extreme violence, as well as the lack of job opportunities, drove African Americans to take their families elsewhere. The North held great promise. Because manufacturing and industry were growing quickly in the Northern states, it was reasonable to assume that there would be good jobs and lots of them. Plus, people imagined life in the North—the heart of the abolitionist movement—would be open to all Americans, and certainly better than in the Jim Crow South. With high expectations, the Great Migration began.

MIDDLE PASSAGE

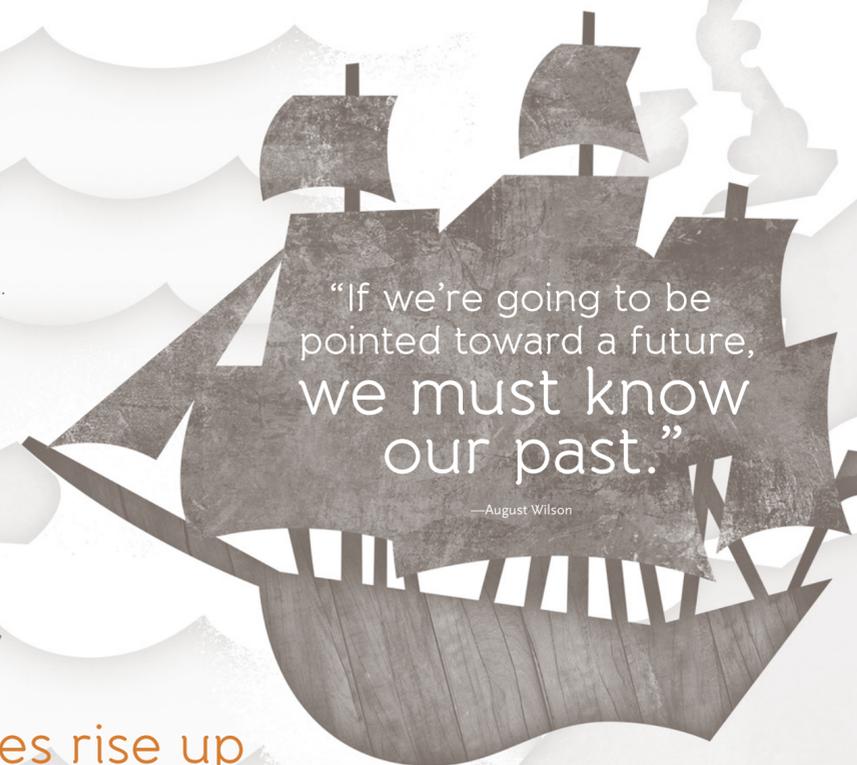
Herald Loomis has a powerful and shocking vision. In the living room of the Holly boardinghouse, he sees the resurrection of countless Africans lost at sea during the Middle Passage. The realization that those skeletons are just like him, are in fact part of him, is essential for his mental and emotional recovery. Facing and accepting his history is the only way to become complete again.

That history starts when Europeans began trading in human lives. In 1441 a Portuguese vessel returned home from the Gold Coast of Africa with more than their usual cargo—in addition to gold, they brought back ten African slaves. For the next 300 years, over 54,000 trips transported 10-12 million Africans. Importing slaves became technically illegal in the United States in 1808, but the trade continued up until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.

“Middle Passage” refers to the part of the trade route from West Africa, across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas and the Caribbean. The trip could take as long as four months.

For Africans taken from their homes to be deposited into a life more barbarous than they could imagine, every leg of the trip was traumatizing. But the Middle Passage held unique horrors. They were chained wrist-to-wrist or ankle-to-ankle, stuffed between decks too low for standing. The heat was intense and the air almost unbreathable. Often forced to lie down with their heads between each other's legs, they dealt constantly with human waste and blood. Crew members were extremely cruel, using iron muzzles, whippings, and torture to prevent any possible rebellions.

Because of these conditions, malnourishment, and abuse, disease among the slaves spread quickly. It is estimated that between one and two million people died in the Middle Passage. Often the living were chained to the dead in the cargo decks until they could be cut apart and the dead thrown overboard. The sick were also thrown overboard to prevent the spread of disease. It is those ancestors, turned to bones on the ocean floor, that rise out of the water before Loomis's eyes, refusing to be forgotten.



“If we're going to be pointed toward a future, we must know our past.”

—August Wilson

“I done seen bones rise up out the water.

Rise up and walk across the water. Bones walking on top of the water... Walking without sinking down... They just walking across the water... And then... They sunk down... All at one time.

They just all fell in the water at one time...

When they sink down they made a big splash and this here wave come up... It washed them out of the water and up on the land...

They got flesh on them! Just like you and me!... They black.

Just like you and me. Ain't no difference.”

—Loomis

GREAT MIGRATION

“From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city.

Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrived dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing.

They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope,

marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow, crooked cobbles and the fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth.” —Introduction to *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

The Great Migration (1910-1970) refers to the mass exodus of more than six million African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North, Midwest and West. Large cities held the promise of good jobs, freedom and a better quality of life. By the end of 1919, an estimated one million blacks had left the South.

These journeys took their toll—physically and emotionally. Most people didn't have cars and their resources for travel were limited. Those who could afford it caught trains and boats, or used horse-drawn carriages. But the majority were on foot much of the time. Like Loomis and Zonia when they arrive at the boardinghouse, the miles of road left them dusty and sore, their shoes worn thin, and their energy sapped. Away from their families and everything familiar, the Great Migration created a population disconnected from their roots and their families.

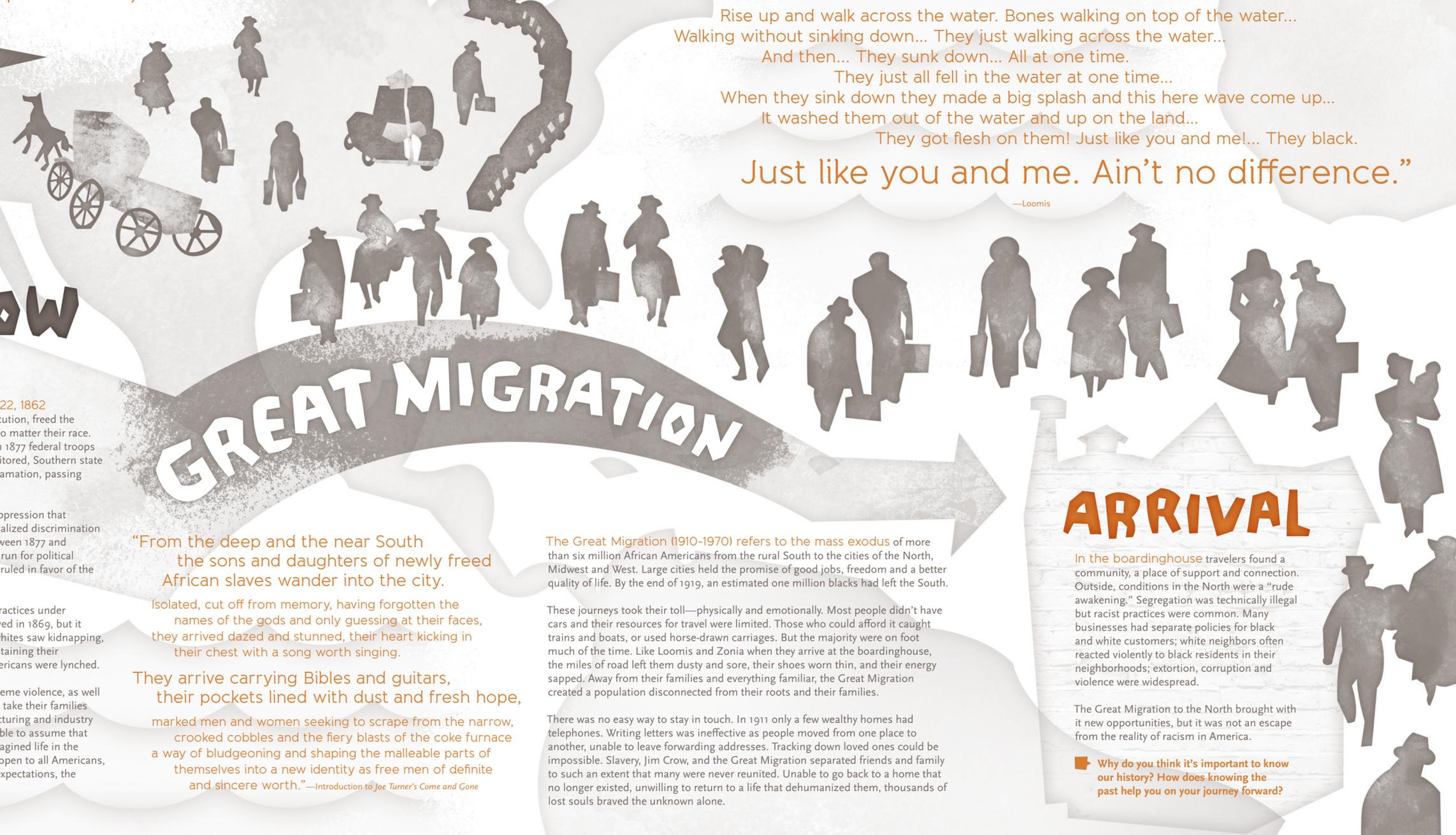
There was no easy way to stay in touch. In 1911 only a few wealthy homes had telephones. Writing letters was ineffective as people moved from one place to another, unable to leave forwarding addresses. Tracking down loved ones could be impossible. Slavery, Jim Crow, and the Great Migration separated friends and family to such an extent that many were never reunited. Unable to go back to a home that no longer existed, unwilling to return to a life that dehumanized them, thousands of lost souls braved the unknown alone.

ARRIVAL

In the boardinghouse travelers found a community, a place of support and connection. Outside, conditions in the North were a “rude awakening.” Segregation was technically illegal but racist practices were common. Many businesses had separate policies for black and white customers; white neighbors often reacted violently to black residents in their neighborhoods; extortion, corruption and violence were widespread.

The Great Migration to the North brought with it new opportunities, but it was not an escape from the reality of racism in America.

Why do you think it's important to know our history? How does knowing the past help you on your journey forward?



“I can look at you, Mr. Loomis,
and see you a man who done forgot his song....
Fellow forget that and he forget who he is.”

—Bynum

YOUR SONG



“Seem like everybody looking for something.”

—Bynum

FREEDOM

Freedom is significant to the lodgers in the Holly’s boardinghouse. They are each deeply affected by the freedom they have, the freedom they’ve lost, or the freedom they long for.

Bynum is a freed slave. He maintains a strong connection to the rituals of his African heritage and has clarity about himself and his song.

Seth tells everyone who will listen that as a Northerner he has always been free. His father was not a slave; his grandfather was not a slave. He owns the boardinghouse and is a skilled metalworker.

Herald Loomis had his freedom stolen by Joe Turner, who forced him into bondage for seven years. When finally released, Loomis is emotionally paralyzed, desperate to find his wife so he can start living. By the end of the play, he finds freedom in self-reliance: “I’m standing!.... I’m standing now!”

■ **What does it mean to be free? What does it look like, feel like, taste like, smell like? Is freedom based on physical circumstances? Internal circumstances? Both?**

■ **The characters we meet are experiencing new-found freedom. In what way is freedom different in 2013? In what way is it the same?**

“You bound onto your song....
All you got to do is sing it.
Then you be free.”

—Bynum

In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, years of forced labor and seeking have taken their toll on Herald Loomis. He has lost his “song”: his sense of self and the ability to live fully. To recover he must come to terms with both his present circumstances and the history that got him there. Wilson believed that “understanding and knowing who you are... is in essence your song.... You in fact need that, and you must not ever let anyone take that away from you.”

A song can be a quality you have inside, a job you do in the world, a belief, a mission, or something you value.

■ **Do you know someone who has a clear sense of their song? How does that person express their song in the world?**

■ **Is there someone you know who has forgotten their song? How can you help them remember it?**

■ **What is your song? How will you share it with the world?**

NAMES

“Anything you can name, you can control and define; that’s what the power of naming is.”

—August Wilson

Names carry great weight. They represent who we are, both to the outside world and ourselves. During slavery, naming functioned as a tool to dehumanize newly-arrived Africans. When sold to slave owners they were stripped of their real names, given an American first name and the slave owner’s last name. This simultaneously severed their connection to home and branded them as property.

Wilson understood the power of naming. Choosing his own name at the age of 20 was a step toward finding his voice. Adopting his middle name (August) and his mother’s maiden name (Wilson), he cut ties with a father who abandoned him and honored the woman who never let him down. With a new name, one that he chose, Wilson was beginning to shape his identity both as a man and an artist.

Wilson often used his characters’ names to highlight their inner qualities. When we meet Herald Loomis he is heavy with darkness—a thick coat and hat like armor; dirt and grime from years on the road; and a broken, bitter heart. He is in tatters emotionally and physically. And his name reflects his journey. A herald is “one who proclaims.” The name Loomis brings to mind “loom”—a device that weaves together thread and yarn to make fabric, and “luminous”—shining, glowing. By the end of the play, Loomis is able to sing his song and can begin to live life fully. He becomes luminous. Exclaims Bynum, “Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!”

■ **What’s the story of your name? Where did it come from? What does it mean? Does your name reflect who you are?**

■ **If you were going to rename yourself, what name would you choose and why?**



MARCOS NAJERA: Ms. Rashad, we are talking just as you start the rehearsal process at the Mark Taper Forum. And I understand there was a gas leak in the building the other day that threw everyone off course! I wonder how you handled that?

PHYLICIA RASHAD: Oh, you know what, it’s wonderful how a good intention will set right things that go awry. And our intention is to come every day and do the work. And we ended up doing the work outside. And it was great! Yes, we rehearsed outside. We rehearsed the scene with the two children. And it was perfect that we did it outside because in the play it takes place outside. And actually being outside was very supportive.

Life is as you see it. Your outlook, your own understanding, will determine to a great extent your experience. It just does. You know, sometimes things happen that are unanticipated. But if your intention is to do something good, something great—that’s the shared intention of a group—you are going to work it out.

The last time our students met you and your artistic team, you were working on *A Raisin in the Sun*. How will your process on *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* be different? Or perhaps the process will be very similar?

This is different because it’s a period piece, for one. So it isn’t just a matter of dialect. It’s a matter of the period: wardrobe is different, manners are different. You have to create a whole world. They are both great playwrights [Hansberry and Wilson], but they write in different ways. And the text necessitates working a certain kind of way. But I think what is the more important question—what’s the same about them? The goal. The objective is to create a world.

As you begin this journey, is that world already starting to feel real to you—or will it not be fully realized until opening night?

Oh no! You see, the cast, it’s an outstanding cast. The playing field is level and we work as a company. It’s a collaborative effort so everyone contributes to the creation of this world. Everyone contributes their ideas and understanding of what we are hearing in the text every time we read it and every time we rehearse a scene. And every single time, we hear more. And that’s how you create a world. You go deeper, and deeper, and deeper every time.

And so to answer your question, I felt the world on the first day [of rehearsal]. At the first reading, I thought “OK! Here we are! Alrighty then! Thank you!” [Laughing] “Yes, yes, yes!”

How are music and sound informing the decisions you are making with your team of artists?

We have a great creative team of designers. And Katherine Bostic is our composer. She’s unique, she’s original, and totally invested in the text. She comes to rehearsals and listens to people.

A conversation with Director PHYLICIA RASHAD

and Center Theatre Group Teaching Artist Marcos Najera.

“And that’s how you create a world.
You go deeper, and deeper,
and deeper every time.”

We began our collaboration when she wrote the original music for *Gem of the Ocean* (Mark Taper Forum, 2003). We were reminiscing about the rehearsal hall. This is the rehearsal hall that we rehearsed in. I played Aunt Esther.

And we talked about Mr. Wilson and where he sat every day. He sat on that side where the director and the stage manager sit, off the center table. He would sit there and he would listen. And he’d close his eyes, and you’d think he was asleep. He wasn’t. He was there listening. And the next day he’d come in, he had refined something. Something he had said in two pages, it was one line and you got the entire story in the one line! Oh yes! He was the embodiment of skill and mastery. He was genius.

I love the image of him sitting with his eyes closed, as if he were listening to the music of his words.

Exactly, exactly. So when he was listening like that, he was hearing things that nobody else was hearing. And he knew when he wanted to shift something, change something, condense something, expand something, replace something, omit something, add something. He knew. He knew by the way he listened. He would listen for the rhythms. And he would listen for the truth of period; period meaning era. He would listen to make sure that it was authentic.

As audience members, if we listen closely to *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, what message will we hear?

This play is about so many things. This play is about knowing the truth about yourself—and loving that. That’s what it’s about, this is a play about love.

Do you think the people in the boardinghouse come to love each other in some way, as a community?

They are not going ‘round tryin’ to love each other, they’re living together! [Laughing] That’s what people do! But when you say to somebody, “What is it that you know about love?” Immediately people go to syrup and ice cream. No! It’s not like that. No! We are not talking about that, we are talking about love. We are talking about that feeling of expansiveness. And being anchored in a truth inside yourself. That’s what love is. Not all this romantic nonsense and syrup.

This play is about truth. Finding that, expanding that, and honoring that and remembering that. And this story is told in the context of these people, particular to 1911 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. People living in the Hill District in 1911. Or passing through. People coming and going. Coming and going.

What happens in a boardinghouse is that a community is formed. It’s almost like somebody’s house. At a boardinghouse, people sit down at one table and eat at one time. Sometimes people live in a boardinghouse for years, and sometimes they stay for a month, a week, a few days. But a community is established.

And that runs through Mr. Wilson’s work. The role that community plays in human existence. You’ll see it in every play [in the Century Cycle], one way or another.

How do you think the magic and the mysticism in this world that Mr. Wilson has created is affecting the people living in the boardinghouse?

Well this was a time when people’s sense and sensibilities were a little different. People were attuned to that which they could not see. The subtle elements of the world. The subtle elements in creation. In many cultures in the world, and in times gone by, people were more aware of the subtler elements in life, of creation.

I thought of my Nana Mary while I was reading the play because she was born during the decade of the story [the 1910s]. And her family was very connected to the mystical side of our Mexican culture. And we all talked about it as if it was very normal. And in the play, mysticism and magic also seem a very normal part of the characters’ lives.

A very normal part of it. Understanding the properties of plants. And that’s love. That’s connection. You see what I’m talking about? It’s a foreign idea these days because people are afraid of nature and are afraid of each other. We lose connection.

The internet is okay, but child! Some people are trapped on that thing! So we are looking at a time [in the play] where there was none of that. We are looking at a time when information traveled from hand to hand, mouth to ear, from mouth to ear, from mouth to ear. When connections were really very human. Community was important for safe haven, for shelter, for companionship, for worship, for justice. Community was important.

I think that in terms of Mr. Wilson’s work, the one thing that I would have young people understand is that there is nothing in or about the play, or any of his plays, that is arbitrary. Everything has a purpose. If you hear an address or a street number, that meant something. Something that he knew. Joe Turner was a real person. And his brother was the governor of the state of Tennessee.

So young people should understand that what they are going to see and hear is real. It’s the truth of how people spoke, it’s the truth of how people thought, it’s the truth of how people behaved, it’s the truth of what people had to face and overcome. It’s the truth. And that is why Wilson’s works are so important and why there is such power in them. He didn’t just conjure up some story here. He’s giving us something based on the truth of what actually happened to people.

And what it does, if you allow it, it touches you in places, it touches you inside in very real ways, it sparks an understanding of humanity and your bond to it. Your bond to other human beings.

That’s the power of the work. That’s the power of theatre, to hold us up toward the mirror of nature.

“To just stand and
laugh and let life flow
right through you.
Just laugh to
let yourself know
YOU’RE ALIVE.”

— Joe Turner’s *Come and Gone*



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PERFORM his powerful words.
And have your voice **HEARD.**

Check out the August Wilson Monologue Competition for high school students.
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SPECIAL THANKS

Education and Community Partnerships receives generous support from the Dream Fund at UCLA Donor Advised Fund, Laura & James Rosenwald & Orinocco Foundation, Eva & Marc Stern, the Artists & Educators Forum, and the Center Theatre Group Affiliates, a volunteer organization dedicated to bringing innovative theatre and creative education to the young people of Los Angeles.

Additional support for Education and Community Partnerships is provided by The Sheri and Les Biller Family Foundation, the Employees Community Fund of Boeing California, The Sascha Brastoff Foundation, Brookside Fund, the Brotman Foundation of California, Diana Buckhantz & Vladimir & Araxia Buckhantz Foundation, the Carol and James Collins Foundation, the Culver City Education Foundation, the James A. Doolittle Foundation, the Fineshriber Family Foundation, the Ella Fitzgerald Charitable Foundation, the Lawrence P. Frank Foundation, The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, the William Randolph Hearst Education Endowment, the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, the Music Center Fund for the Performing Arts, the Kenneth T. & Eileen L. Norris Foundation, Playa Vista, Sony Pictures Entertainment and the Weingart Foundation.



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