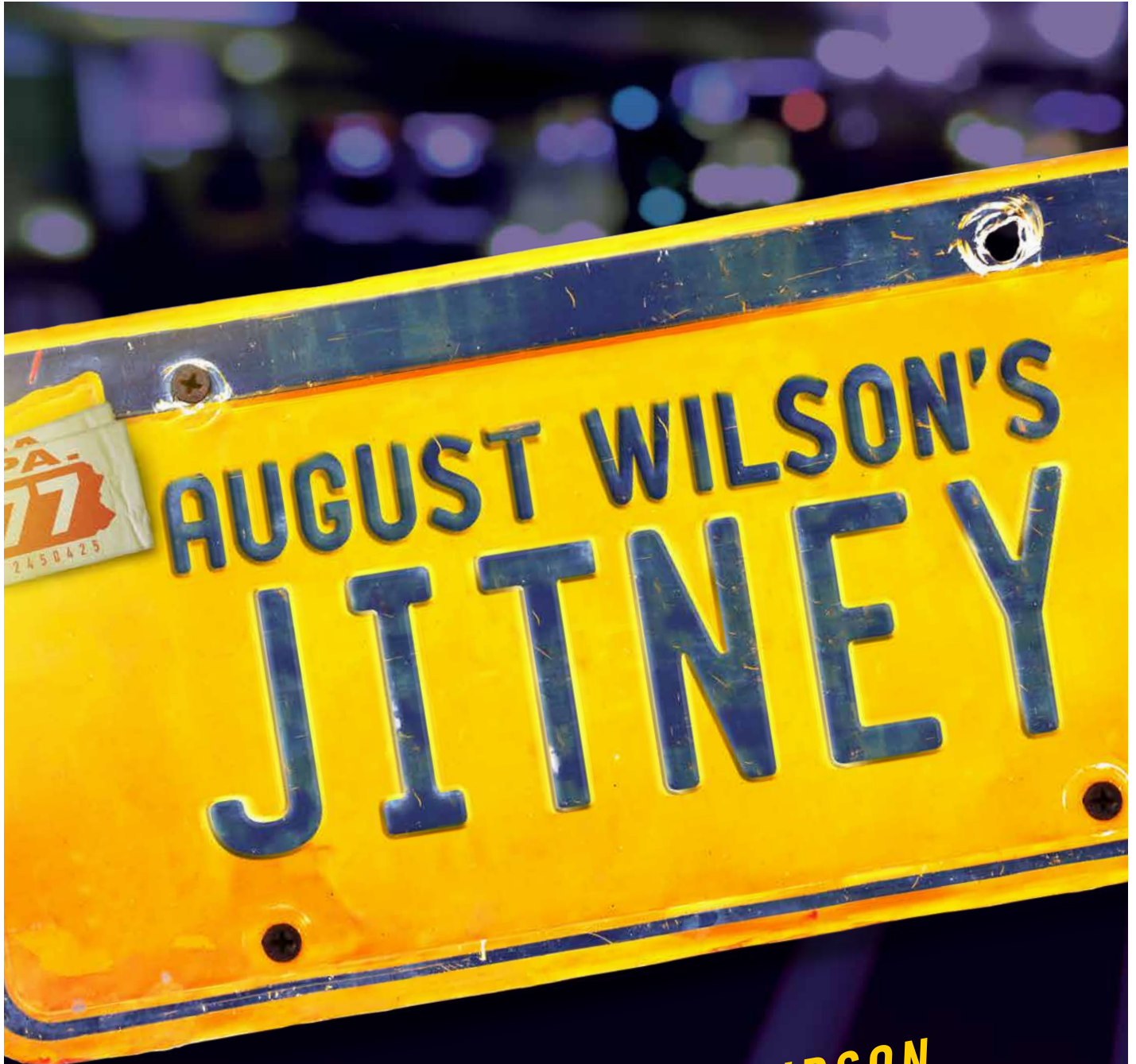


CENTER
THEATRE
GROUP

STUDENT
MATINEE
PROGRAM

EDUCATOR RESOURCES



DIRECTED BY
RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON

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WELCOME

Center Theatre Group is excited to have you and your students join us at the Mark Taper Forum for August Wilson’s *Jitney*. The Educator Resources are designed to help you prepare your students to see the play and to follow-up the performance with options for discussion, reflection and creativity. Thank you for sharing theatre with your students.

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ABOUT THIS PLAY

Jitney is the first play ever written by August Wilson. It eventually became a part of his 10-play *American Century Cycle*, which chronicles black life in America in every decade of the last century. *Jitney* explores the effects of urban redevelopment on Pittsburgh’s Hill District neighborhood in 1977. The play is set in an unlicensed taxi, or jitney station. “Since the 1940s, all my life, that’s how you got around in the black community in Pittsburgh was with jitneys,” explained Wilson of the show’s origins. “They were a natural fact of life.”

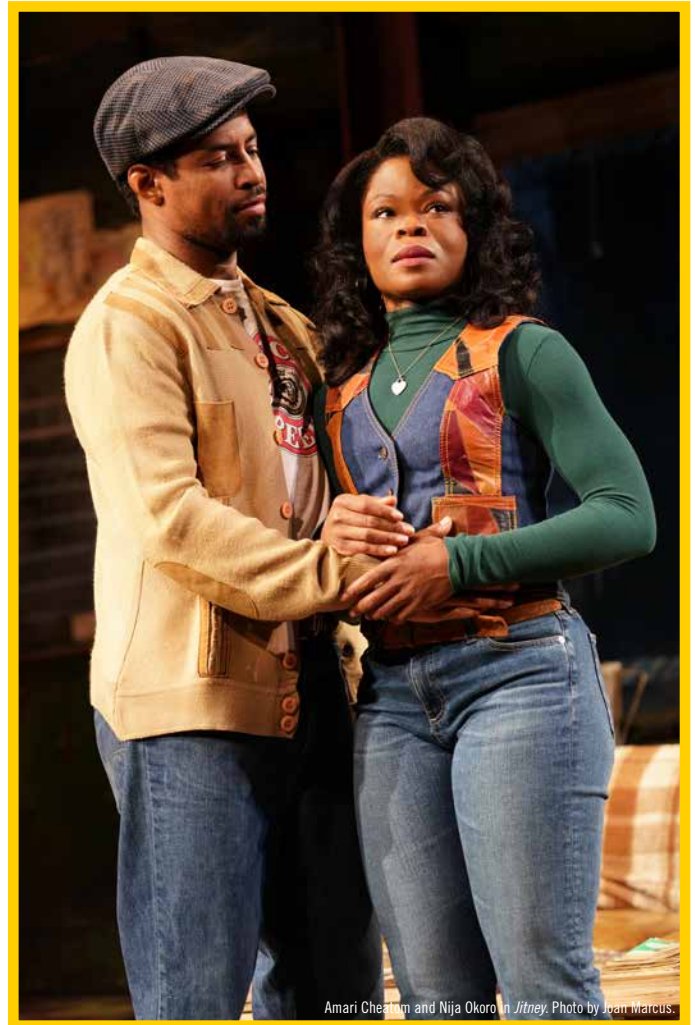
In a 2001 profile of Wilson in *the New Yorker*, John Lahr explained the epiphany that enabled Wilson to write his first play:

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

Productions of *Jitney* have received many awards over the years, including a 2001 Olivier Award for Best Play and a 2017 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play.

“JITNEY...ASPIRES 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.”

—Harrison David Rivers, playwright, in “*Jitney*: Wilson Becoming Wilson”



Amari Cheatom and Nija Okoro in *Jitney*. Photo by Joan Marcus.

SYNOPSIS

“I GOT RESPECT. I CAN WALK ANYWHERE AND HOLD MY HEAD UP HIGH.” —Becker in *Jitney*

August Wilson’s *Jitney* transports us to the world of Becker’s Car Service in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It is 1977 in the city’s Hill District, and taxi companies refuse to serve this predominantly black neighborhood. The residents are forced to rely on unlicensed cabs, or jitneys. The jitney drivers at Becker’s take calls from a pay phone and use their own cars as taxis to provide affordable transportation for the community. As drivers in the station come and go, they joke, argue, and reveal their dreams, hopes, and challenges to each other. Meanwhile their boss, Becker, is about to see his son, Booster, for the first time in 20 years. Booster has been released from prison and is returning home looking for a second chance. We also meet Youngblood and Rena, a young couple struggling to create a better life who don’t always agree on how to make that happen. When real estate investors threaten to board up the business, the citizens of the Hill District must decide whether to stand by and allow this to happen or to stand up for themselves and their community.

August Wilson is considered the most accomplished black playwright in the United States. *Jitney* is one of his 10 plays—one for each decade of the 20th century—that explore the complexity of the African American experience. This collection of works became known as *The American Century Cycle*.

“THERE’S NO IDEA IN THE WORLD THAT IS NOT CONTAINED BY BLACK LIFE. I COULD WRITE FOREVER ABOUT THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA.” —August Wilson



Keith Randolph Smith and Harvey Blanks in *Jitney*. Photo by Jean Marcus.

SETTING (Description from *Jitney*)

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.



Harvy Blanks in *Jitney*. Photo by Joan Marcus.

CHARACTERS

WHEN I FIRST STARTED WRITING PLAYS I COULDN'T WRITE GOOD DIALOGUE BECAUSE I 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. Once I learned to value and respect my characters, I could really hear them. I let them start talking. The important thing is not to censor them. What they are talking about may not seem to have anything to do with what you as a writer are writing about but it does. Let them talk and it will connect, because you as a writer will make it connect. The more my characters talk, the more I found out about them. So I encourage them. I tell them, Tell me more. I just write it down and it starts to make connections. When I was writing *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie suddenly announced that Sutter fell in the well. That was news to me. I had no idea who Sutter was or why he fell in the well. You have to let your characters talk for a while, trust them to do it and have the confidence that later you can shape the material.

—August Wilson in *The Paris Review*

“[IT’S A] LOT OF CHARACTERS THAT EVERYBODY RECOGNIZES—THEIR NOSY UNCLE, THEIR VERY STUBBORN OR AUTHORITATIVE FATHER. AUGUST WROTE RECOGNIZABLE HUMANS THAT HAVE A LOT OF PASSION FOR LIFE AND THEY WANT JUSTICE IN THEIR DAILY LIVES.”

—Constanza Romero, August Wilson’s widow

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(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

AUGUST WILSON (Playwright)

“PINNED ON A BULLETIN BOARD, JUST BESIDE WHERE HE STANDS TO WRITE, ARE TWO QUOTATIONS, AS BOLD AS STREET SIGNS: ‘TAKE IT TO THE MOON’ (FRANK GEHRY) AND ‘DON’T BE AFRAID. JUST PLAY THE MUSIC’ (CHARLIE PARKER).” —John Lahr in *The New Yorker*

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, to Daisy Wilson, a cleaning woman who primarily cared for August and his siblings, and his father, also Frederick August Kittel, a German immigrant and baker. August Wilson was the fourth of six children and the oldest son.

Wilson grew up in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and eventually made it the setting for most of his plays. He attended St. Richard’s Parochial School and then progressed to Central Catholic High School in 1959. In the era of Jim Crow laws and stark prejudice against African Americans, Wilson faced hostility and harassment that forced him to transfer to two other high schools during his freshman year. In 1960, at age 15, Wilson dropped out of Gladstone High School after a teacher accused him of plagiarizing a paper on Napoleon. Despite his troubled high school experience, Wilson continued his education informally at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and on the streets of the Hill District, soaking in the language of its people and the culture of his community.

In 1962, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Army for three years, but left after one year of service. He then worked odd jobs as a dishwasher, porter, cook, and gardener to support himself. In 1965, Wilson purchased his first typewriter for \$20, using money his sister Freda paid him to write her term paper. At this time, Wilson began to write poetry.

In the late 1960s, at the threshold of the Black Arts Movement, Wilson joined a group of poets, educators, and artists who formed the Centre Avenue Poets Theater Workshop. Wilson met his friend and collaborator, Rob Penny, through this group, and in 1968, they co-founded the Black Horizons Theatre, a community-based black nationalist theatre company in the Hill District.

Wilson served as the self-taught resident director, and Penny was the playwright-in-residence, up until the mid-1970s, when the company dissolved. Penny and Wilson produced several plays from and inspired by the black canon and a collection of literature and artwork by African American artists, assembled and celebrated to raise awareness about the African American experience. In 1970, Wilson married his first wife, Brenda Burton, and had his first daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson.

In 1978, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he concentrated more on playwriting and became a company member of the Penumbra Theatre. In 1979, Wilson wrote *Jitney*, which he considered his first real play. Wilson received a fellowship from the Minneapolis Playwrights’ Center in 1980, and the following year, he married his second wife, Judy Oliver.

Wilson’s third *American Century Cycle* play, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, which premiered at the Eugene O’Neill Theater

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AUGUST WILSON (Playwright)

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Center in 1982, was the first to gain him widespread recognition. That same year, Wilson met Lloyd Richards, the African American Artistic Director of the Yale Repertory Theatre, who would direct Wilson's first six plays on Broadway. In 1987, Wilson won the Pulitzer Prize for *Fences*, and in 1990, *The Piano Lesson* earned Wilson his second Pulitzer.

In 1990, he transitioned to Seattle, Washington, where he met costume designer Constanza Romero in 1994. They married and together had a daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, in 1997. Wilson continued to work and earn numerous accolades as he completed his *American Century Cycle*. In June 2005, at the age of 60, Wilson was diagnosed with liver cancer. He died on Sunday, October 2, 2005, in Seattle.

Shortly after his death, on October 16, 2005, the former Virginia Theater on Broadway was renamed the [August Wilson Theatre](#), and on February 17, 2006, the African American Cultural Center of Greater Pittsburgh officially became the [August Wilson Center for African American Culture](#). In addition to these buildings, the [August Wilson Monologue Competition](#), now in its 12th year, further preserves Wilson's legacy.

RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON (Director)

“I WOULD LIKE FOR AUDIENCES COME IN AND SEE THIS PLAY AND NOT ONLY BE ENTERTAINED BUT ENLIGHTENED. I WANT THEM TO FEEL THE JOLT, VIBRANCY, AND ELECTRICITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE. HOW WE FIGHT OUR FIGHTS AND HOW WE WIN. HOW WE STAND OUR OWN GROUND, AND WE’RE NOT TALKING FLORIDA STAND YOUR GROUND, WE’RE TALKING ABOUT INTEGRITY AS HUMAN BEINGS, AS PEOPLE. I WANT PEOPLE TO EXPERIENCE THE DIGNITY OF THE COMMUNITY.”

—Ruben Santiago-Hudson

Ruben Santiago-Hudson was born in the steel-mill town of Lackawanna in upstate New York. He lived in a boarding house with his mother, but eventually ended up being raised by its landlady, Rachel Crosby. He went on to write, direct, and star in *Lackawanna Blues*, which chronicles his time growing up there in the 1960s. In his show, Santiago-Hudson embodies over 20 characters, from lost souls to the boarding house owner. Music plays a major part in the play. “The jukebox in the boarding house was on from when I woke up in the morning to when I went to bed,” said Santiago-Hudson. “At times that jukebox was putting groceries on our table because people were putting quarters in it all day long...When I had been telling people about this incredible upbringing, I knew I couldn’t tell it without music.” The play premiered at The Public Theater in 2001. In March 2019, Center Theatre Group produced the play at the Mark Taper Forum, starring Santiago-Hudson.

After getting a master’s degree in classical drama from Wayne State University in Detroit, he moved to New York in 1983. During that time, he went by the name of Ruben Santiago. Being of mixed heritage (his father was from Puerto Rico and his mother was a black woman from Pennsylvania), he found it difficult to find a theatre company to call home. Dinitia Smith’s 1996 interview with him in *The New York Times* describes this situation:

He tried to get a part at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater and was asked if he spoke Spanish. (He does not.) When he wanted to work at the Negro Ensemble Company, “they laughed and said, ‘We don’t have Puerto Ricans,’ “ he said. So he added his mother’s name, Hudson, and eventually won a part in “A Soldier’s Play” at the Ensemble Company.

Since that time, Santiago-Hudson has acted in and directed numerous productions for theatre, television, and film. His bio in the program for *Jitney* reads:

Ruben’s directing credits include: *The Piano Lesson*, *Skeleton Crew*, *Othello*, *Gem of The Ocean*, *Paradise Blue*, *My Children! My Africa!*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *Cabin in the Sky*, *The Happiest Song Plays Last*, *Two Trains Running*, *Things of Dry Hours*, *The First Breeze of Summer*, and *Your Blues Ain’t Sweet Like Mine*, among many others. Mr. Santiago-Hudson received a Tony Award as featured actor for his performance in August Wilson’s *Seven Guitars*. He made his Broadway acting debut alongside Gregory Hines in *Jelly’s Last Jam*. Other Broadway credits include *Stick Fly* and *Gem of the Ocean*. The multi-award-winning director/writer/actor wrote, executive produced, and co-starred in the HBO film *Lackawanna Blues* based on his Obie and Helen Hayes

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RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON (Director)

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Award-winning play. The movie received several honors including Emmy, Golden Globe, NAACP Image Award, Humanitas, National Board of Reviews, Black Filmmaker Foundation, and Christopher Awards. In a career that spans over four decades, Ruben considers opening The Ruben Santiago-Hudson Fine Arts Learning Center in 2014 in his hometown of Lackawanna, NY as one of his proudest and most cherished accomplishments.

Santiago-Hudson describes *Jitney* as “two parallel love stories.” One is the familial love between a father and a son (Becker and Booster), who are finding out how difficult it is to bring their love together. The other is the romantic love of a young couple (Youngblood and Rena), who are figuring out how to make their love successful and how to “bind themselves into the American Dream.” “Freedom, liberty, justice, equality...in every one of August’s plays, that’s what we’re fighting for,” said Santiago-Hudson. “It’s important that the audiences come in and witness... witness the beauty, the magnificence, the anger, the pain, the joy, the humor, the love in people of color because we’ve got all of it.”

“Whether I’m acting, writing, or directing, I want to tell the truth about human beings, especially my folk.”

—Ruben Santiago-Hudson

“IT’S IMPORTANT THAT THE AUDIENCES COME IN AND WITNESS...WITNESS THE BEAUTY, THE MAGNIFICENCE, THE ANGER, THE PAIN, THE JOY, THE HUMOR, THE LOVE IN PEOPLE OF COLOR BECAUSE WE’VE GOT ALL OF IT.”

—Ruben Santiago-Hudson

AUGUST WILSON'S INFLUENCES: The Four Bs

Originally written for *Radio Golf at the Mark Taper Forum (2004)*
by Hilly Hicks.

In a [1999 interview with *The Paris Review*](#), playwright August Wilson stated that his work was most heavily influenced by “my four Bs”: poet [Jorge Luis Borges](#), playwright [Amiri Baraka](#), painter [Romare Bearden](#), and most importantly, the blues:

My influences have been what I call my four Bs—the primary one being the blues, then Borges, Baraka, and Bearden. From Borges, those wonderful gaucho stories from which I learned that you can be specific as to a time and place and culture and still have the work resonate with the universal themes of love, honor, duty, betrayal, etcetera. From Amiri Baraka I learned that all art is political, though I don’t write political plays. That’s not what I’m about. From Romare Bearden I learned that the fullness and richness of everyday ritual life can be rendered without compromise or sentimentality. To those four Bs I could add two more, Bullins and Baldwin. Ed Bullins is a playwright with a serious body of work, much of it produced in the sixties and seventies. It was with Bullins’s work that I first discovered someone writing plays about blacks with an uncompromising honesty and creating rich and memorable characters. And then James Baldwin, in particular his call for a “profound articulation of the black tradition,” which he described as “that field of manners and ritual of intercourse that will sustain a man once he’s left his father’s house.”

THE BLUES

The blues is a musical form that can be traced back to African rhythms, African American slave songs, spirituals, and dance tunes known as “jump-ups.” Blues performers such as Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey helped popularize this musical continuation of the oral tradition. The blues remain a strong influence in many other popular forms, including jazz, country, rock, and soul music. For Wilson, each character’s ideas and attitudes are rooted in the blues; the philosophies in the music teach the characters how to live their lives.

ROMARE BEARDEN

Romare Bearden (1911–1988) grew up at the height of New York City’s Harlem Renaissance and was influenced by such family friends as Langston Hughes, W. E. B. DuBois, and Duke Ellington. Although he was a successful painter and dedicated civil rights activist, Bearden is best known for his vibrant collages fusing depictions of Harlem life with images and impressions of the American South. This sense of a cultural narrative spanning generations and expressing the African American experience is also a hallmark of Wilson’s plays.

AMIRI BARAKA

Amiri Baraka (1934–2014) was born Everett LeRoi Jones in Newark, New Jersey, but changed his name in 1968 to reflect his African heritage. A passionate advocate of black culture, he achieved wide acclaim for his play *The Dutchman*, which presented a racially charged confrontation between a beautiful but cruel white woman and a naïve black man in a New York City subway car. Wilson was drawn to Baraka’s political poetry and plays and helped found a theatre where he mounted several works by Baraka. A retired professor, Baraka continued to write prolifically up until his death in 2014.

JORGE LUIS BORGES

Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) was one of the most prominent writers and intellects of the 20th century. Although he became an influential Spanish language writer, Borges’ first language was English. In his early life in Buenos Aires, Argentina, he nurtured a deep knowledge and love of American and European literature that would later influence his own work. His short stories, poems, and translations are considered world classics. Among other things, Borges’ fiction is characterized by fantastical elements; his influence is felt in Wilson’s stories with the presence of ghosts, trips to the past, and other magical moments.

THE AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

“WILSON GAVE HIMSELF A MISSION: TO CONTINUE TO CHRONICLE, DECADE BY DECADE, THE ‘DAZED AND DAZZLING’ RAPPORT OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS WITH THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.”

—John Lahr in *The New Yorker*

August Wilson was an American playwright who believed in the importance of history to find out who you are and where you’ve been. He said, “It becomes doubly important if someone else has been writing your history.”

Over the course of 25 years, August Wilson completed ten plays— each set in a different decade of the 20th century— capturing the universal themes of love, honor, duty, and betrayal through the daily lives, dreams, triumphs, and tragedies of African Americans, one decade at a time. “Put them all together,” Wilson once said, “and you have a history.”

Through his *American Century Cycle*, Wilson paints a vivid portrait of life in a particular community—the Hill District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where Wilson grew up. The individuals who reside there—the garbage collector, the ex-convict, the waitress, the unlicensed taxi cab drivers, and their neighbors—are all defined by a relentless struggle for dignity, security, and happiness in the face of often overwhelming obstacles.

“YOU HAVE TO KNOW YOUR HISTORY. THEN YOU’LL HAVE A PURPOSEFUL PRESENCE IN THE WORLD.”

—August Wilson (from John Lahr’s *New Yorker* interview)

AUGUST WILSON AND CENTER THEATRE GROUP

For over 25 years, Center Theatre Group has celebrated August Wilson’s work through productions at our theatres, educational programming, and assistance with his development process.

In the 1990s, Center Theatre Group joined a network of regional theatres producing Wilson’s plays. We participated in such production sharing for seven of Wilson’s 10 plays. Wilson traveled with the plays from theatre to theatre, analyzing and editing at each stop—including at our theatres, where he often sat among the audience—to perfect his works before they moved to New York.

Center Theatre Group has presented nine of August Wilson’s plays: *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *Jitney*, *King Hedley II*, and *Radio Golf* at the Taper; *Seven Guitars* at the Ahmanson Theatre; and *The Piano Lesson* (1990 Pulitzer Prize) and *Two Trains Running* at the James A. Doolittle Theatre in Hollywood.

In addition, Center Theatre Group hosts the annual Los Angeles August Wilson Monologue Competition in which students in grades 10–12 perform monologues from Wilson’s *American Century Cycle*. The regional winners travel to New York to compete in the national finals at the August Wilson Theatre on Broadway. Center Theatre Group also offers an in-school residency as part of the August Wilson Program. This semester-long program provides students with an in-depth study of the work of August Wilson.

1900 GEM OF THE OCEAN

"IT'S ALL AN ADVENTURE. THAT'S ALL LIFE IS. BUT YOU GOT TO TRUST THAT ADVENTURE."

Citizen Barlow arrives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's Hill District in 1904 as part of the wave of freed slaves migrating from the South to the North following the Civil War. Barlow finds a haven—and eventually, redemption—at the home of 285-year-old Aunt Ester.

1910 JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

"WHEN A MAN FORGETS HIS SONG HE GOES IN SEARCH FOR IT...TILL HE FIND OUT HE'S GOT IT WITH HIM ALL THE TIME."

In 1917, Herald Loomis returns to Pittsburgh in search of his wife—but haunted by the memory of bounty hunter Joe Turner, the man who had illegally enslaved him. "Conjure man" Bynum helps Loomis release himself from his past.

1920 MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

"IF YOU COLORED AND CAN MAKE THEM SOME MONEY, THEN YOU ALL RIGHT WITH THEM. OTHERWISE, YOU JUST A DOG IN THE ALLEY."

The only play of The American Century Cycle not set in Pittsburgh takes place in 1927, during a recording session at a white-owned Chicago studio with legendary blues singer Ma Rainey. Ma and her band deal with the pressures of a music business that abuses and victimizes its black artists while trying to find solace in the blues.

1930 THE PIANO LESSON

"YOU CAN SIT UP HERE AND LOOK AT THE PIANO FOR THE NEXT HUNDRED YEARS AND IT'S JUST GONNA BE A PIANO."

In the throes of the Great Depression, in 1936, Boy Willie and his sister Berniece battle over the possession of a piano covered in carvings that illustrate the history of the family and their ancestors. Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to buy land the family worked on as slaves; Berniece wants to keep the piano but has no intention of playing it.

1940 SEVEN GUITARS

"I ALWAYS DID BELIEVE IN LOVE. I FELT LIKE IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN LOVE YOU MAY AS WELL NOT BELIEVE IN NOTHING."

After 90 days in the county jail, Floyd Barton wants to jump-start both his temporarily abandoned recording career and his love affair with Vera. But in 1948 Pittsburgh, Floyd and his friends find that if you're a black man—even if you were willing to die for your country in World War II—the deck is still stacked against you.

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TIMELINE

(Continued from page 12)

1950 FENCES

"A MAN'S GOT TO DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR HIM. I AIN'T SORRY FOR NOTHING I DONE. IT FELT RIGHT IN MY HEART."

Troy Maxson is a garbage collector and a former Negro League home run king who believes racism destroyed his shot at going pro. In 1957—10 years after Jackie Robinson broke the Major League Baseball color line—Troy and his son Cory clash over what Troy sees as Cory's doomed pursuit of a college football scholarship.

1960 TWO TRAINS RUNNING

"THIS WHAT WE CALL LIFE AIN'T NOTHING. YOU CAN BLOW IT AWAY WITH A BLINK OF AN EYE. BUT DEATH... YOU CAN'T BLOW AWAY DEATH. IT LASTS FOREVER."

In 1968—the same year Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated—the city of Pittsburgh plans to demolish Memphis Lee's restaurant. Lee, his neighbors, and his patrons ponder whether their community and identity can survive urban renewal.

1970 JITNEY

"BUT I'M THROUGH MAKING EXCUSES FOR ANYBODY...INCLUDING MYSELF. I AIN'T GONNA PASS IT ON. I SAY WE STAY HERE."

In 1977, the gypsy cab, or jitney, station in the Hill District run by Becker is going to be demolished by the city to make room for new construction. Becker must decide whether to fight City Hall, look for a new place, or close up shop—at the same time as his son, Booster, is released from prison.

1980 KING HEDLEY II

"THE PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW THE STORY. SEE HOW THEY FIT INTO IT. SEE WHAT PART THEY PLAY."

In the backyard of a house in a Hill District blasted by decay and urban blight in 1985 Pittsburgh, King Hedley II, with a warrior spirit but no education or prospects, daydreams with his friend Mister about opening a Kung Fu video rental store using the money they make selling stolen refrigerators.

1990 RADIO GOLF

"NO MATTER WHAT YOU ALWAYS ON THE EDGE. IF YOU GO TO THE CENTER YOU LOOK UP AND FIND EVERYTHING DONE SHIFTED AND THE CENTER IS NOW THE EDGE."

In 1997, Ivy League-educated Harmond Wilks, who wants to become Pittsburgh's first black mayor, plans to redevelop the Hill District and bring in Whole Foods and Starbucks. But when an owner of a house slated for demolition refuses to sell, Wilks finds his morals and ideals tested by those around him.

COMPREHENSION

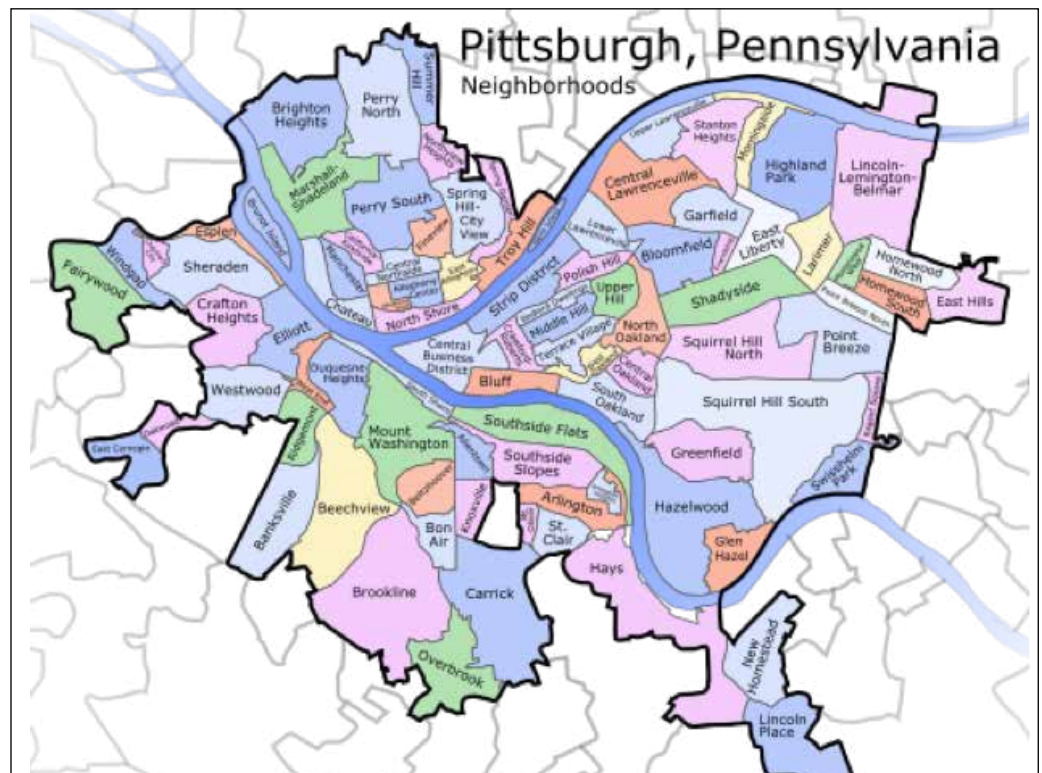
This section includes background information about the setting and subject matter of the play. This information can be shared before the play and/or discussed after the performance. It can also be used to provide research topics for your classroom.

TIME AND PLACE

Jitney takes place in 1977 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's Hill District, a collection of neighborhoods at the city's center.



The Hill District is made up of the following Pittsburgh neighborhoods: Bedford Dwellings, Crawford-Roberts, Middle Hill, Terrace Village, and Upper Hill.



THE HILL DISTRICT

Pittsburgh's Hill District was originally developed as a neighborhood for affluent whites who wanted to live on "The Hill" above the fray of urban life. By the late 1800s, immigrants from Italy, Lebanon, Greece, Syria, Armenia, and Slovakia and Jewish immigrants from Central and Eastern European began to populate the neighborhood. In the early 1900s, Southern blacks arrived looking for work on the railroad and in the steel mills. During the 1920s and 1930s, the area developed a thriving cultural center and a strong sense of community, as John Lahr explained in his *New Yorker* profile of Wilson:

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

By the late 1950s, the neighborhood was in great need of repair, and many parts of it were slated for urban renewal. Unfortunately, this meant clearing hundreds of small businesses and more than 8,000 people to make way for a newly designed cultural district. Over 1,000 families were relocated. Homeowners were not supplied with relocation money. In his essay for Penumbra Theatre Company, "*Jitney: Wilson Becoming Wilson*," Harrison David Rivers wrote:

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."

During the 1960s and 70s, the collapse of the steel industry also meant the collapse of Pittsburgh's economy, especially in neighborhoods like the Hill District. John Lahr described what happened to The Hill over time:

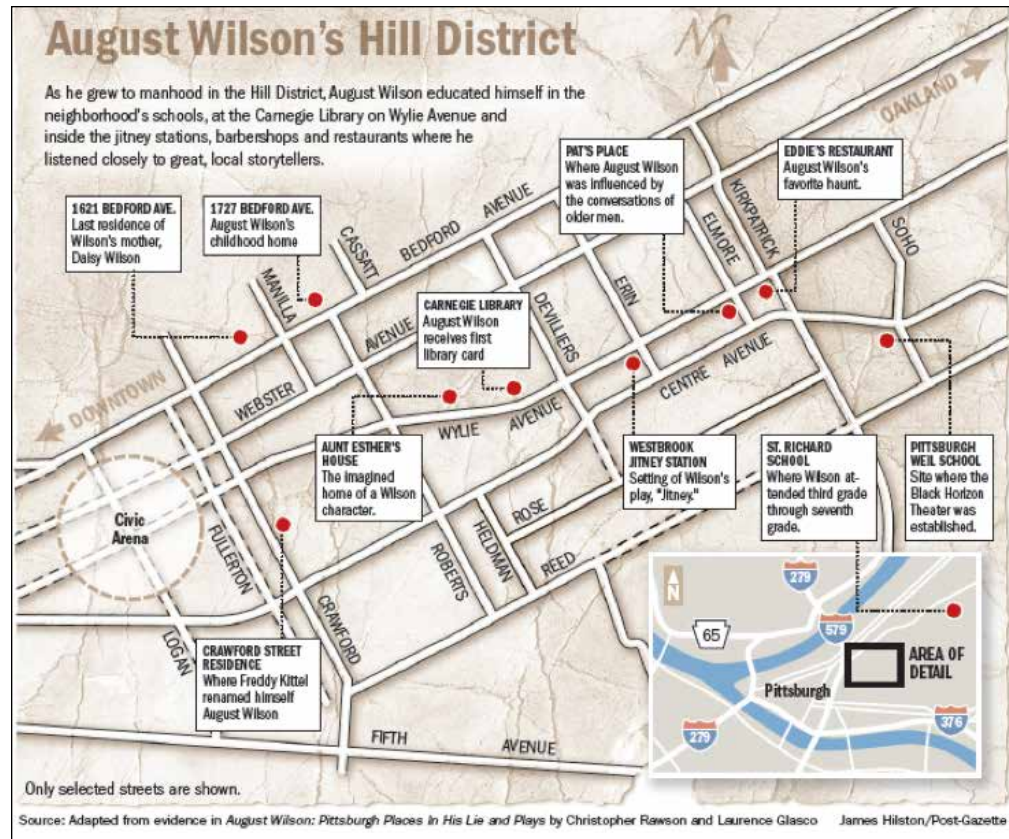
When Wilson was a child, the Hill had a population of fifty-five thousand; since then, as a consequence of the 1968 riots, urban renewal, and competition from white neighborhoods, to which African Americans now have putative access, the Hill's boundaries and its buoyancy have shrunk.

Today, citizens of the Hill District continues to struggle with the forces of urban redevelopment as they strive to preserve their community.

"WE TEND TO PAY MOST ATTENTION TO WHAT IS HAPPENING IN POLITICS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL BUT OFTEN THE POLICIES AND DECISIONS THAT HAVE HAD THE MOST IMPACT IN SHAPING OUR NEIGHBORHOODS HAPPEN AT THE LOCAL LEVEL."

—Devin Rutan, sociologist

URBAN REDEVELOPMENT



"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."

—Doub, *Jitney*

Urban redevelopment is defined by the World Bank as “a rezoning by the government of a given area from a low-density (single-family housing) to higher-density (mixed-use or commercial) development.” Other terms used to describe the act of redevelopment are revitalization, renewal, displacement, or gentrification.

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URBAN REDEVELOPMENT

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Gentrification is defined in *Merriam-Webster* as “the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents. It is derived from the word gentry, which means ‘upper class.’”

People have different opinions about the costs and benefits of redevelopment. A property owner’s right to do what they want with their property may conflict with another’s desire to preserve the history and unique character of a neighborhood.

The citizens of Pittsburgh’s Hill District have battled the forces of urban redevelopment for decades. The city and wealthy real estate developers have taken over much of the neighborhood, and this has forced many of its low-income community members to seek other places to live. Finding affordable housing can be extremely difficult, and this situation often pushes a family deeper into poverty.

The drivers of Becker’s Car Service learn that their station is about to be shut down by outside real estate investors. With their livelihoods in peril, they have to choose between allowing this to happen or fighting for their right to preserve their community.

Which word do you think best describes the process of urban redevelopment: revitalization, renewal, displacement, or gentrification? Why? Is your neighborhood in a state of urban redevelopment? How does this affect you?

“THEY SUPPOSED TO BUILD SOME HOUSES BUT YOU AIN’T GONNA SEE THAT. YOU AIN’T GONNA SEE NOTHING BUT THE TEAR DOWN. THAT’S ALL I EVER SEEN.” —Becker, *Jitney*

JITNEYS

Originally, the term “jitney” was slang for a nickel. This is thought to have come from New Orleans, through the use of the French word “jeton,” which means a coin-sized metal disk, slug, or counter. Jitney rides originally only cost a nickel.

In their 2014 *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, “If you like Uber, you would’ve loved the jitney,” economists Matthew Mitchell and Michael Farren describe the beginnings of jitney service:

The first recorded jitney cab ride was in Los Angeles in July 1914 when L.P. Draper picked up a passenger in his Ford Model T and drove him a short distance. He accepted a nickel (known then as a “jitney nickel”) for payment, because that was the streetcar fare at the time. Like a hybrid between a bus and a taxi, jitneys followed semi-fixed routes, but they were willing to veer from their routes to pick up passengers and to drop them off wherever they wanted.

In less than a year, the spontaneous entrepreneurial movement had spread from Los Angeles to Maine, with an estimated 62,000 jitneys operating in 175 U.S. cities. Traveling by jitney was generally an improvement over the crowded streetcar: Jitneys were faster, more convenient and often more comfortable. And the jitneys served their operators too, allowing people — particularly those who were unemployed — to use their existing resources to earn income. But the new services soon met a wall of opposition — from powerful business interests that opposed the increased street traffic, from streetcar operators who saw the entrepreneurs as a threat to their very existence, and from municipalities that relied on tax revenue from private streetcar companies. This newspaper, then firmly allied with L.A.’s civic elite, ran frequent articles critical of the jitneys, often referring to them as “pestiferous” and highlighting accidents in which they were involved.

Cities responded with a wave of regulations that swept the jitney movement out of existence. Jitney service still exists in Pittsburgh today, providing affordable transportation that would be otherwise unavailable to citizens of struggling communities.

“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.”

—Harrison David Rivers

PLAYING THE NUMBERS

Before lottery games were legalized, the numbers game was the most popular lottery game in the United States. Played mostly in poor and working-class neighborhoods, bettors try to pick three numbers that will match those that are randomly drawn the next day. Small sums, usually less than a dollar, are played. A numbers runner keeps track of the bettor slips, collects money, and disperses money to the winners. If a person “hits the numbers,” they are entitled to a share of the pot.



CONNECTIONS

This section provides ways to explore connections between the ideas presented in the play, students' lives, and the world we live in. Each section contains quotations and questions that may be used for reflection, discussion, and/or writing prompts both before and after the performance.

“YOU GOT TO HAVE SOMEBODY YOU CAN COUNT ON.” —Fielding, *Jitney*

In *Jitney*, the citizens of Pittsburgh’s Hill District face the threat of extinction from real estate investors outside of their community. Within their community, they grapple with poverty, addiction, and violence. The drivers of Becker’s Car Service have created community amongst themselves through their day-to-day interactions. Their relationships are familial, with all of the closeness and tension those dynamics can bring. Ultimately, their camaraderie sustains them and helps them to cultivate the resilience it takes to survive the extreme challenges faced by their community on The Hill.



Ray Anthony Thomas, Francois Battiste, Harvy Blanks and Amari Cheatom in *Jitney*. Photo by Joan Marcus.

- Who lives in your neighborhood today?
- What changes are happening in your neighborhood today? Do you consider them changes for the better or worse?
- What do you wish would change? What do you hope never changes?
- In your community, whose needs are more important? The individual’s or the groups’? Why do you think this is so?

“TOGETHER WE COULD HAVE FOUGHT THE LIE.”
—Becker, *Jitney*

RESPECT

“SEEM LIKE THEY DON’T RESPECT NOBODY. THEY DON’T EVEN RESPECT THEMSELVES. WHEN I WAS COMING ALONG THAT WAS THE FIRST THING YOU LEARNED. IF YOU DIDN’T RESPECT YOURSELF...QUITE NATURALLY YOU COULDN’T RESPECT NOBODY ELSE. WHEN I WAS COMING ALONG THE MORE RESPECT YOU HAD FOR OTHER PEOPLE...THE MORE PEOPLE RESPECTED YOU. SEEM LIKE IT COME BACK TO YOU DOUBLE.”

—Turnbo, *Jitney*

The word “respect” comes from the Latin “re” (again, back, renew) plus “specere,” which means “to look at.” In other words, it means to regard with special attention or even to “re-see.” August Wilson wished to bring special attention to the “undocumented lives” of black Americans, to bring their stories to the forefront of this country’s consciousness.

Many of *Jitney*’s characters are yearning for respect from the world-at-large. They want to be treated as first-class citizens in a racist society that views them otherwise. Others cultivate respect from the inside through their choices and actions. They strive to contribute to their community in a positive way, and in doing so, model dignity and self-respect for their children and their fellow citizens on The Hill.

- Who is someone you respect in your community? Why?
- Are you respected in your community? What does that feel like?
- Does respect come from outside of a person or from within them? Explain.

“I GOT RESPECT. I CAN WALK ANYWHERE AND HOLD MY HEAD UP HIGH.”

—Becker, *Jitney*

FATHERS AND SONS

“I WAS WAITING FOR YOU TO TELL HIM TO SHUT UP...TO GET OFF YOUR PORCH. BUT YOU JUST LOOKED AT HIM AND PROMISED YOU WOULD HAVE THE MONEY NEXT MONTH...MR. RAND KEPT SHOUTING AND CUSSING...AND I LOOKED AT YOU...AND YOU HAD GOT SMALLER. THE LONGER HE SHOUTED THE SMALLER YOU GOT. WHEN WE WENT BACK TO THE BARBERSHOP YOU DIDN'T SEEM SO BIG NO MORE. YOU WAS THE SAME SIZE AS EVERYBODY ELSE...THAT'S WHEN I TOLD MYSELF IF I EVER GOT BIG I WOULDN'T LET NOTHING MAKE ME SMALL.”

—Booster, *Jitney*

The relationship between Becker and his son, Booster, contains some of the most explosive conflict in *Jitney*. Both men have a fierce desire to attain a high level of respectability in their lives, but each goes about acquiring this in a different way. Becker has made himself a pillar of the community, a man who commands respect just by entering a room. He worked hard to create opportunities for his son to have a better life.

As a young boy, Booster interprets one his father's decisions as weak and makes up his mind to approach life in the exact opposite way. This brings disastrous results upon Booster and the rest of his family. We meet him when he is newly released from prison, and his homecoming to The Hill is fraught with tension between him and his father.

- Why is it sometimes difficult for different generations to see eye-to-eye?
- Why do young people sometimes come into conflict with their parents or guardians?
- How can parent/child relationships be approached in a healthy and loving way?
How do growth, maturity, and insight help to deepen these relationships?
- Why is it sometimes so hard to talk to the people we are closest to? What gets in the way?
- If you could say one thing to a family member, what would you want to share?

“AND NOW YOU WANT TO COME IN HERE AND RIDICULE ME CAUSE I DIDN'T KNOCK MR. RAND ON HIS ASS. YOU WANNA KNOW WHY? I'LL TELL YOU WHY. BECAUSE I HAD YOUR BLACK ASS CRYING TO BE FED. CRYING TO HAVE A ROOF OVER YOUR HEAD. TO HAVE CLOTHES TO WEAR TO SCHOOL AND LUNCH MONEY IN YOUR POCKET. THAT'S WHY! BECAUSE I HAD A FAMILY. I HAD RESPONSIBILITY. IF I HAD KNOCKED HIM ON HIS ASS YOU WOULD HAVE WENT HUNGRY. YOU WOULDN'T HAVE HAD CLOTHES ON YOUR BACK OR A ROOF OVER YOUR HEAD. I DONE WHAT I HAD TO DO.” —Becker, *Jitney*

“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.” —Becker, *Jitney*

Low-income neighborhoods are often doubly challenged by the lack of services available in their sections of the city. The drivers in *Jitney* provide a necessary service to their community, because the mostly white-owned cab companies refuse to go into the Hill District or to employ black drivers. Becker, the owner, understands that the transportation he and his drivers provide is crucial for their community’s survival.

- What types of services does your neighborhood have? Who provides these?
- What types of services does your neighborhood need?
- What does it mean to be of service? How do you serve your neighborhood?

“PART OF THAT SERVICE IS PROVIDING PEOPLE WITH A WAY TO GET THEIR GROCERIES HOME OR TO GET THEIR SUITCASE DOWN TO THE BUS STATION OR THE AIRPORT SO THEY CAN GO HOME TO VISIT THEIR MAMA OR WHOEVER IT IS THEY WANT TO VISIT. I WANT EVERYBODY TO PULL THEIR WEIGHT AND PROVIDE THE SERVICE THAT’S EXPECTED OF US.”

—Becker, *Jitney*

SECOND CHANCES

“YOU JUST LOOK AT ME AND SEE THE OLD DARNELL. IF YOU CAN’T CHANGE THE WAY YOU LOOK AT ME...THEN I MAY AS WELL SURRENDER NOW. I CAN’T BEAT YOUR MEMORY OF WHO I WAS IF YOU CAN’T SEE I’VE CHANGED.” —Youngblood, *Jitney*

Youngblood and Rena are a young couple who dream and strive to create better lives for themselves, both as individuals and as a couple. Certain aspects of their past still haunt the relationship, and Youngblood asks Rena to take a chance and trust that he is on a new, improved life path.

Becker worked hard to create a bright future for his son, but Booster’s murder conviction ruined that dream. Booster returns to The Hill from prison, and we find out if he will be embraced upon his return.

- Can people really change? If they have wronged us, are forgiveness and redemption possible?
- How do we see each other? Can you believe dreams do come true?

“I DON’T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS...SOMETIMES I DON’T EVEN HAVE THE RIGHT QUESTIONS, BUT I DO KNOW IT TAKES TWO TO FIND THEM.” —Rena, *Jitney*

QUOTES BY AND ABOUT AUGUST WILSON

“So I write from the center, the core, or myself.”
—August Wilson

“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.’ I just loved to hang around those old guys—you got philosophy about life, what a man is, what his duties, his responsibilities are....”
—August Wilson

“I think it was the ability of the theater to communicate ideas and extol virtues that drew me to it. And also I was, and remain, fascinated by the idea of an audience as a community of people who gather willingly to bear witness. A novelist writes a novel and people read it. But reading is a solitary act. While it may elicit a varied and personal response, the communal nature of the audience is like having five hundred people read your novel and respond to it at the same time. I find that thrilling.”
—August Wilson

“August and I have the same music in our ears.”
—Ruben Santiago-Hudson

“If you in the treetop you can’t do nothing but jump to the ground. But first you got to know how you got up there. Did you climb up to get some apples or was you run up by a bear? You got to know that cause you might have to start running when you hit the ground. If you trying to figure out what to do...you got to first figure out how you got in the situation you in. That’s something simple. But you be surprised how many people can’t figure that out.”
—Fielding, *Jitney*

From John Lahr’s profile of Wilson in *The New Yorker*:
“In the age of the sound bite, Wilson is that most endangered of rare birds—a storyteller.”

“The average struggling non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America,” Zora Neale Hurston wrote in 1950. Wilson has put that man—his songs, his idiom, his superstitions, his folly, and his courage—on the stage. His plays are not talking textbooks; they paint the big picture indirectly, from the little incidents of daily life.”

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QUOTES BY AND ABOUT AUGUST WILSON

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“Wilson’s work is a conscious answer to James Baldwin’s call for “a profound articulation of the Black Tradition.” He says he wanted to demonstrate that black American culture “was capable of sustaining you, so that when you left your father’s or your mother’s house you didn’t go into the world naked. You were fully clothed in manners and a way of life.”

“‘Community is the most valuable thing that you have in African-American culture,’ he explains. ‘The individual good is always subverted to the good of the community.’ Wilson’s plays are distinctive—and longer—because society, not just a psyche, is being mediated. They demonstrate the individual’s interaction with the community, not his separation from it.”

“Between 1959, when Lorraine Hansberry had a hit with “A Raisin in the Sun,” and 1984, when Wilson made his sensational breakthrough with “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” a play about black musicians’ struggle with their white bosses in the twenties, the number of African-American plays to succeed on Broadway was zero.”

“His plays are not talking textbooks; they paint the big picture indirectly, from the little incidents of daily life.”

“Wilson...is more interested in the inner terrain than the external one; writing, he says, “is for me like walking down the landscape of the self. . . . You find false trails, roads closed for repairs, impregnable fortresses, scouts, armies of memory, and impossible cartography.”

CREATIVITY

This section provides opportunities for your students to use theatre to explore and express. Theatre activities are included that examine both specific artistic aspects of the production and delve deeper into the ideas and questions raised. The activities and information in this section can be used both before and after the performance.

[August Wilson Center for African American Culture](#) in Pittsburgh, PA

[August Wilson's Influences: The Four B's](#) (CTG)

[August Wilson Theatre](#) on Broadway

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["Center Theatre Group's August Wilson Monologue Competition](#) enables students from all walks of life to discover August Wilson's profound and deeply relevant works of art, study the craft of acting, explore their own creative voices, and learn more about our shared history and themselves."

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Center Theatre Group Education and Community Partnerships

Center Theatre Group's mission is to serve the diverse audiences of Los Angeles by producing and presenting theatre of the highest caliber, by nurturing new artists, by attracting new audiences, and by developing youth outreach and education programs. This mission is based on the belief that the art of theatre is a cultural force with the capacity to transform the lives of individuals and society at large.

Education and Engagement

Theatre is an enduring and powerful tool for communicating ideas, stories, emotions, and beliefs that fuel the intellect, imagination, and creative spirit. Center Theatre Group believes that stimulating awareness, creativity, dialogue, and an inquisitive mind is integral to the growth and well-being of the individual and the community, and that nurturing a life-long appreciation of the arts leads inextricably to an engaged and enlightened society.

The Student Matinee Program is made possible in part by the Rosenthal Family Foundation.

SPECIAL THANKS:



The Student Matinee Program also receives generous support from the Ella Fitzgerald Charitable Foundation, Renee & Meyer Luskin, Deena & Edward Nahmias, Paramount Pictures, and Union Bank.

