

SEATTLE
REP

**AUGUST
WILSON'S**

HOW I

LEARNED

WHAT I

LEARNED

PLAY GUIDE

CO-CONCEIVED BY Todd Kreidler

DIRECTED BY Tim Bond

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 2 A Note from Arts Engagement**
- 3 Oregon Shakespeare Festival Study Guide**
- 9 Interview With August Wilson**

A NOTE FROM ARTS ENGAGEMENT

There's a giant archway, shaped like a doorway, at the southwest corner of Seattle Rep. Above it is a plaque that reads, "August Wilson Way." I love stepping through the portal on my way to and from work – August Wilson literally comes to my mind every day.



It was Wilson's work that originally guided me to Seattle Rep. I'd seen the Netflix documentary about the August Wilson Monologue Competition, *Giving Voice*. In it, I witnessed the work I most wanted to do: raise up the art of Black writers to all and give theater opportunities to BIPOC youth. A few months later I was coaching students for the Next Narrative Monologue Competition (NNMC) and eventually took two students to NYC to perform at the Apollo Theater. While in Times Square, we noted the Historical Marker dedicated to August Wilson. It felt poetic to have touched plaques dedicated to Wilson on both coasts of the U.S. And now a documentary is being made of our regional NNMC by Nico Vargas of Ground Zero Productions.

I'm so excited for *How I Learned What I Learned* at Seattle Rep. A world premiere in 2003 originally performed by Wilson himself, it's a joy to celebrate its 20-year anniversary. In education, when we reflect on HOW we learn what we learn, we call it "metacognition" – thinking about our thinking. After all of these Wilson touchstones in my life, I'm curious about the playwright's own metacognition. And as I reflect on my own thinking, I'm grateful for the portal he created for American theater-makers who are following in his path.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Deanna Martinez". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Deanna Martinez
Associate Director of Arts Engagement, Youth & Community

OSF STUDY GUIDE

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, to Daisy Wilson, an African-American housekeeper, and Frederick Kittel, a white baker who had emigrated from Germany to Pittsburgh. When August was a young boy, his father abandoned the family, leaving Daisy Wilson to raise the family on her own. He changed his name to August Wilson in 1965. He and his family lived in the Hill District, a Pittsburgh neighborhood that later provided the setting for most of his plays.

Wilson quit high school as a teenager after a teacher wrongfully accused him of plagiarism. He later educated himself in Pittsburgh's libraries.

Wilson began his writing career as a poet, influenced largely by the writings of political poet and playwright Amiri Baraka. His political interests led him to become involved in theater in the late 1960s as a co-founder of Black Horizons, a Pittsburgh community theater.

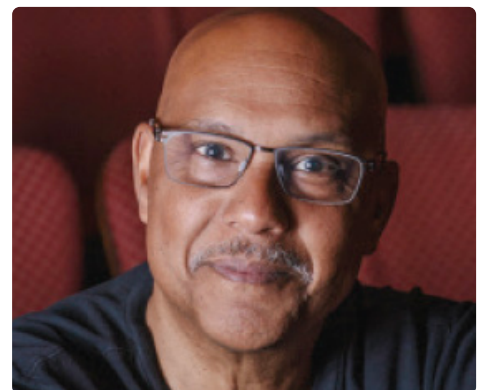
August Wilson's best-known work was a ten-play series, the American Century Cycle, about the African-American experience. The Cycle contained one play for each decade of the 20th century. Wilson died on October 2, 2005, leaving behind a body of work that makes him one of America's greatest playwrights.

TIM BOND

Tim Bond directed August Wilson's *How I Learned What I Learned* at OSF. Bond has directed 7 of the 10 American Century Cycle plays by August Wilson. He is currently Artistic Director of TheaterWorks Silicon Valley. He served as OSF's Associate Artistic Director for 11 seasons.



August Wilson

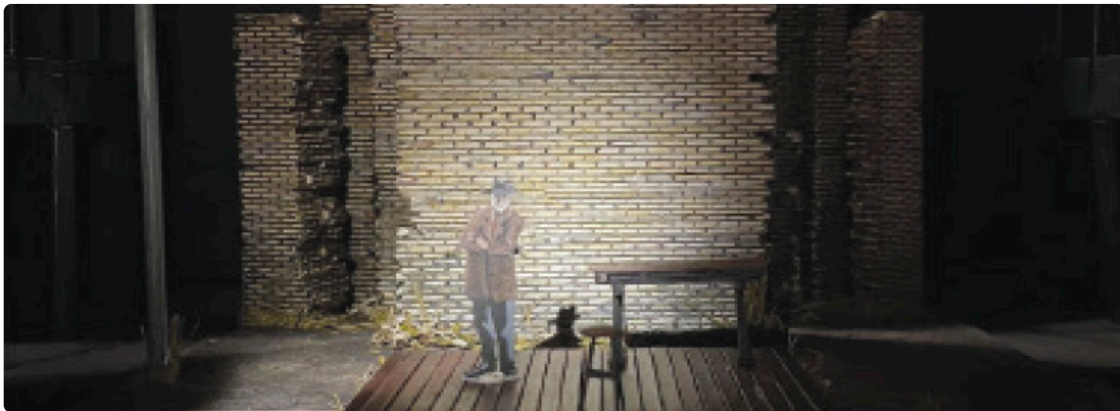


Tim Bond, photo by Hillary Jeannette

OSF STUDY GUIDE

ABOUT THE PLAY'S PRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT

How I Learned What I Learned had its world premiere at the Seattle Rep on May 22, 2003, performed by August Wilson and directed by Todd Kreidler. Other premieres include the Signature Theatre in New York (2013), True Colors Theatre Company in Atlanta (2014), Pittsburgh Public Theater in Pittsburgh (2015), Huntington Theatre Company in Boston (2016), and Round House Theatre (2017), all directed by Todd Kreidler.



2022 *How I Learned What I Learned* set model, designed by Nina Ball

OSF STUDY GUIDE

TIMELINE OF PITTSBURGH'S HISTORIC HILL DISTRICT

1758:

The "Hill District" is formed and becomes a group of historically African American neighborhoods of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

1890s:

The neighborhood's Black population reaches 10,000.

1910s:

The Hill has an influx of migrants from other US states, specifically the rural American South and immigrants from abroad such as Italians and Eastern European Jews.

1920:

The neighborhood's Black population booms to over 37,000. A housing shortage due to the influx of new residents is further aggravated by a system of segregation that limits housing for Blacks solely to the Hill District.

1920s – 1950s:

The Hill develops as a lively entertainment district that becomes Pittsburgh's cultural hub for Black life and a major center for jazz. A large roster of night spots including nightclubs, bars, and gambling dens are established and run by Black entrepreneurs. Famous artists such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington make the Hill District a regular stop on national tours.

Mid 1950s:

95 acres of the Hill District are selected for "redevelopment" and 1,300 structures are demolished, displacing more than 8,000 residents, who are mostly Black.

1960 – 1990:

The Hill District suffers a dramatic economic decline due to the redevelopment cutting it off from surrounding neighborhoods. The Hill loses 71% of its residents (more than 38,000 people) and about 400 businesses, leaving the neighborhood virtually barren.

OSF STUDY GUIDE

BEFORE SEEING/READING THE PLAY

1 Research the Hill District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. These and other websites provide information:

- <https://www.pittsburghbeautiful.com/2017/08/07/the-rich-history-of-pittsburghs-hill-district/>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_District_\(Pittsburgh\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_District_(Pittsburgh))
- <https://aaregistry.org/story/the-hill-district-pittsburgh/>
- <https://augustwilsonhouse.org>

2 Research August Wilson’s American Century Cycle. These and other websites provide information:

- <https://www.biography.com/news/august-wilson-pittsburgh-cycle-century-cycle-plays-summary>
- <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-scenes-and-synposes-of-august-wilsons-10-play-cycle/3701/>

3 Research the Transatlantic Slave Trade. These and other websites provide information:

- <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/>
- <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-scenes-and-synposes-of-august-wilsons-10-play-cycle/3701/>

4 Research the Emancipation Proclamation. These and other websites provide information:

- <https://americanhistory.si.edu/changing-america-emancipation-proclamation-1863-and-march-washington-1963/1863/emancipation>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/emancipation-proclamation5>

5 Research Jim Crow laws. These and other websites provide information:

- <https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedom-riders-jim-crow-laws/>

OSF STUDY GUIDE

AFTER SEEING/READING THE PLAY

- 1** August Wilson's *How I Learned What I Learned* was originally performed by August Wilson. The script specifies that the character in the play is "the Actor." The character played by the Actor is based on August Wilson. How might the performance be different if it is played by August Wilson versus a different actor?
- 2** Refer to your research on the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Emancipation Proclamation. What historical event in the early 17th century is the Actor referring to that brought his ancestors to America and made sure they "never had a problem finding a job" for 244 years? How and why did the fate of his ancestors change in 1863? Why was migrating north their only option for a better future?
- 3** Who were the "unwanted" who lived in the Hill District neighborhood in 1963 when the Actor's mother moved there? Why were they considered "unwanted"?
- 4** Why was it so significant when Fred Rogers from the TV show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* told the Actor "you're always welcome in this neighborhood"? How was the Actor typically received in white neighborhoods like Hazelwood? What were the consequences for the Actor and others who moved to accept Blacks as parishioners at the Catholic Church in the Hill district? How do these events influence the Actor's journey in life?
- 5** Why was the moment when a man greeted the Actor by saying "Mr. Wilson, you know I don't see color" so problematic? What does this statement say about this man's view of Blacks in America? What does the Actor understand from this encounter?
- 6** Why does the Actor describe the Hill District in 1965 as a third-world country? What is the impact of a predominantly Black neighborhood having 9 drug stores, 145 bars, but only one supermarket? Why was this supermarket the only business targeted during the riots following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968? What does the Actor learn by living in this configuration?
- 7** What is the significance of "The Set"? How does the Actor describe it? What opportunities did standing on the corner of The Set provide the Actor and his siblings? How is this different from the opportunities that were available to someone who lived in Squirrel Hill? How do these opportunities define the Actor?
- 8** Why was it expected that a 20-year-old Black man from the Hill District would go to jail?
- 9** What does the Actor mean when he says, "I dropped out of school but I didn't drop out of life"?
- 10** How did Barbara Peterson make her way into art school at Carnegie Mellon when the doors were closed to her? What lesson does the Actor learn from her?

OSF STUDY GUIDE

11 Why does the Actor find it impossible to ignore the toy store owner’s warning, “If I catch you stealing anything, I’m gonna shoot you”? Why does he quit when Pat, the owner of the grass cutting business, fails to defend him against a client’s bigotry? What did the Actor learn from these incidents?

12 Who taught the Actor that “something isn’t always better than nothing”? Why? What are some examples in the play of nothing being better than something? How does this shape the way the Actor moves through the world? How does this simple phrase open doors for him?

13 What lands the Actor in jail four months after leaving his mother’s house? How does he get out of jail so quickly? Why is he so humbled by his first experience in jail? What does he learn from this experience?

14 What two life-changing experiences teach the Actor early on how to cut his losses? What does he fear will happen if he doesn’t cut his losses? How does the ability to move back to his mother’s house help him look out for himself?

15 Why is the Actor’s friendship with Chawley so important to his future success? What is Chawley’s reaction when a friend offers the Actor drugs? Why? What does the Actor learn from Chawley’s defense?

16 Why does Cy Morocco leave such an impression on the Actor? What about Cy causes the Actor to describe him as a “John Coltrane in spirit”? How does Cy hold on to his sense of dignity when encountering lack of opportunity? Why does the Actor refer to him as “the original homeless man” and “an African lost in America”? What does the Actor learn from Cy?

17 What causes the Actor to initially disregard jazz music as not important? How does this change dramatically when he joins a crowd outside of Crawford’s Grill listening to John Coltrane’s music filtering out into the street? What stops the crowd from going inside to listen? Why do the guys outside see Coltrane as their weapon and shield?

18 What does it mean for an artist to reach “the limitation of the instrument”? What does the Actor learn about himself and his art from this idea?

19 How does the Actor justify Philmore defending the honor of his wife above all else? Why is the victim of Philmore’s rage seen as the one to blame in his own killing? What unspoken rule does all the neighborhood follow? What does the Actor learn from this event?

20 Why was it so important for the Actor to keep his mouth shut to survive in the Hill District? What were the immediate consequences he faced for not keeping his mouth shut? According to the unspoken rules of the Hill District, in what ways was Jeanine’s violent reaction toward the Actor justified? What does he learn from this incident??

21 What does the Actor learn from his experience with Nancy Ireland and Catherine Moran? How does it influence his meeting his wife, Constanza Romero?

22 What does the Actor know by the end of the play? What does he not know? What has he learned from his youth in the Hill District?

INTERVIEW WITH AUGUST WILSON

The Paris Review Interview – Issue 153, Winter 1999
THE ART OF THEATER NO.14 – AUGUST WILSON

INTERVIEWER: Can you say what first drew you to the theater?

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.

INTERVIEWER: When did you first become involved?

AUGUST WILSON: In 1968, during the Black Power movement, when black Americans were, as one sociologist put it, “seeking ways to alter their relationship to the society and the shared expectations of themselves as a community of people.” As a twenty-three-year-old poet concerned about the world and struggling to find a place in it, I felt it a duty and an honor to participate in that search. With my good friend Rob Penny, I founded the Black Horizons Theater in Pittsburgh with the idea of using the theater to politicize the community or, as we said in those days, to raise the consciousness of the people.

INTERVIEWER: Does that mean you were looking for plays that dealt with those issues? What kind of plays did you produce?

AUGUST WILSON: We did everything we could get our hands on. Scripts were rather scarce in 1968. We did a lot of Amiri Baraka’s plays, the agitprop stuff he was writing. It was at a time when black student organizations were active on the campuses so we were invited to the colleges around Pittsburgh and Ohio, and even as far away as Jackson, Mississippi.

INTERVIEWER: You were the director.

AUGUST WILSON: And I acted when the actors didn’t show up. As the director, I knew all the lines and I took over more times than I wanted to. I didn’t know much about directing, but I was the only one willing to do it. Someone had looked around and said, “Who’s going to be the director?” I said, “I will.” I said that because I knew my way around the library. So I went to look for a book on how to direct a play. 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.”

INTERVIEW WITH AUGUST WILSON

AUGUST WILSON (continued): So I went to the first rehearsal very confidently and I said, “OK, 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.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a theater?

AUGUST WILSON: No. We worked in the elementary schools—they let us use the auditoriums there. That was our base of operations. The audiences were mostly black. We charged fifty cents admission. Eventually that got up to a dollar. We literally went into the street a half-hour before the show and talked people into going in. Once they got in, they really liked it—“Hey, hey, you gonna do another play?” “Next Thursday.” “I’m gonna be there!”

INTERVIEWER: Were you writing plays at the time?

AUGUST WILSON: I was writing poetry. But I found the theater such an exciting experience that one day I went home to try. 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. I didn’t try to write a play for a number of years after that first experience.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of luck were you having getting the poems published?

AUGUST WILSON: It was early on in 1965 when I wrote some of my first poems. I sent a poem to Harper’s magazine because they paid a dollar a line. I had an eighteen-line poem and just as I was putting it into the envelope, I stopped and decided to make it a thirty-six-line poem. It seemed like the poem came back the next day, no letter, nothing. “Oh” I said to myself, “I see this is serious. I’m going to have to learn how to write a poem.”

INTERVIEWER: What was your first play in which characters talked to each other?

AUGUST WILSON: In 1977, I wrote a series of poems about a character, Black Bart, a former cattle rustler turned alchemist. A good friend, Claude Purdy, who is a stage director, suggested I turn the poems into a play. He kept after me, and not knowing any better I sat down from one Sunday to the next and wrote a hundred sixty-seven page, single-spaced musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*.

INTERVIEW WITH AUGUST WILSON

AUGUST WILSON (continued): Claude started taking it around to theaters and Lou Bellamy at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul produced it in 1981. It ended up being my first professional production. I had moved to St. Paul in 1978 and got a job at the Science Museum of Minnesota writing scripts—adapting tales from the Northwest Native Americans for a group of actors attached to the anthropology department. So I began work in the script form almost without knowing it. In 1980 I sent a play, *Jitney*, to the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, won a Jerome Fellowship and 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 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.

INTERVIEWER: Would an audience recognize those early works as yours?

AUGUST WILSON: My early attempts at writing plays, which are very poetic,

did not use the language that I work in now. I didn't recognize the poetry in the everyday language of black America. I thought I had to change it to create art. 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.” Very different from what I'm writing now.

INTERVIEWER: How do you look back on those early efforts?

AUGUST WILSON: They had validity. I was exploring the same themes as I do now, but in a different language. It turns out I didn't have to do it that way.

INTERVIEWER: What have been your influences?

INTERVIEW WITH AUGUST WILSON

AUGUST WILSON: 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 defined as "that field of manners and rituals of intercourse that can sustain a man once he's left his father's house." I thought, Let me answer the call. A profound articulation, but let's worry about the profundities later. I wanted to put that on stage, to demonstrate that the "manners and rituals" existed and that the tradition was capable of sustaining you.

INTERVIEWER: And from mainstream theater?

AUGUST WILSON: Everything I could or can. While I certainly recognize that there are other forms, other approaches to theater, African ritual theater and Japanese Kabuki theater, for example, the theater that I know and embrace is essentially a European art form—the age-old dramaturgy handed down by the Greeks and rooted in Aristotle's Poetics. I bring an African-American cultural sensibility to that art form and try to infuse it with the principles of aesthetic statement culled from a variety of sources, but primarily—as I was saying from the great literature of the blues.

INTERVIEWER: Is it a concern to effect social change with your plays?

AUGUST WILSON: 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. For instance, in *Fences* they see a garbage man, a person they don't really look at, although they see a garbage man every day. By looking at Troy's life, white people find out that the content of this black garbage man's life is affected by the same things—love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty.

INTERVIEW WITH AUGUST WILSON

AUGUST WILSON (continued): Recognizing 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.

INTERVIEWER: How would that same play, *Fences*, affect a black audience?

AUGUST WILSON: Blacks see the content of their lives being elevated into art. They don't always know that it is possible, and it's important for them to know that.

INTERVIEWER: Are you worried that aspects of black culture are disappearing?

AUGUST WILSON: No, I find the culture robust, but I worry about a break in its traditions. I find it interesting that in the convocation ceremonies of the historically black colleges that I have attended they don't sing gospel, they sing Bach instead. It's in the areas of jazz and rap music that I find the strongest connection and celebration of black aesthetics and tradition. My older daughter called me from college, all excited, and said, "Daddy, I've joined the Black Action Society and we're studying Timbuktu." I said, "Good, but why don't you study your grandmother and work back to Timbuktu? You can't make this leap over there to those African kingdoms without understanding who you are."

You don't have to go to Africa to be an African. Africa is right here in the southern part of the United States. It's our ancestral homeland. You don't need to make that leap across the ocean."

INTERVIEWER: You speak of your early plays as being poetic. What caused the change?

AUGUST WILSON: 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 find 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.