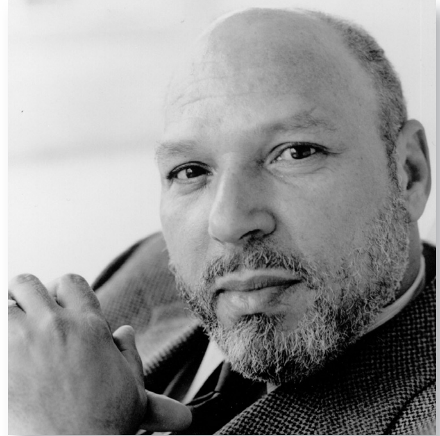
If you had asked me ten years ago what I wanted to accomplish, I would not have said anything about a cycle of plays. I would have wanted as any artist to fashion of the finest gold the proper angel. I don't know if history will find this cycle of plays to be made from a baser metal than my alchemy has permitted, but I do know if it is a measure of the heart and will, a tenacious belief in one's ability to go the distance, to put pen and paper and have it give back joy…then I'm home free."

–August Wilson, 1992



LESSONS FROM HISTORY

by Heather Helinsky

August Wilson knew his history. As a playwright, Wilson bequeathed to the theater 10 plays that powerfully challenge our notion of America. Beautifully interwoven, Wilson created a universe of African-American characters from every decade of the 20th century. Throughout his life, Wilson wrestled with our history, searching for a way to move forward into the 21st century without forgetting this country's complicated past.

At an early age, Wilson read voraciously, starting with Curious George, the Hardy Boys, and the Bible ("skipping the begats"). Wilson's library card at the Hazelwood Branch of the Carnegie Public Library was his most prized possession. At age 14, he discovered the 30 books in the library's Negro Section, which lead him to new ideas and discoveries, but more importantly, it gave him the determination to become a writer.

Although words fascinated Wilson, history intrigued him more. In a *New York Times* article, Wilson described his favorite subject in school. "History as taught by Sister Mary Eldephonse was no mere record of events prior to 1957, but a universe peopled with an assorted gallery of heroes like Charles Martel and dastardly villains like Attila the Hun." Wilson recalled that by eighth grade, "I had already begun to look beyond the colorful characters to the cause and meaning of events and how they connected and contributed to the shaping of other events."

At age 15, Wilson made a decision about his education that shaped the rest of his life. When Wilson submitted a 20 page paper that he had researched on Napoleon, his teacher accused him of plagiarism. Shocked at this injustice, he dropped out of school. Instead, Wilson went every morning to the main branch of Carnegie Library in Oakland, "where they had all the books in the world…I read biography to learn what a man's life might encompass…I read the Emancipation Proclamation and the Constitution of the United States." Later, Carnegie Public Library would issue to Wilson its first and only high school diploma.

Throughout his playwriting career, Wilson was continually asked why it was important to dramatize the history of the African-American experience. Shortly after receiving his second Pulitzer Prize for ***The Piano Lesson***, Wilson explained, "what I want to do is place the culture of black America on stage, to demonstrate that it has the ability to offer sustenance, so that when you leave your parent's house, you are not in the world alone." Wilson believed that the fundamental question for African-Americans regarding American history was: "Are we going to adopt the values of the dom-

inant culture, or are we going to maintain our cultural separateness and continue to develop the culture that has been developing in the southern United States for some two to three hundred years?"

Wilson made this question his central investigation for his final play. The germinating seed of ***Radio Golf*** began when Wilson overheard a successful African-American comment at a party that he kept his golf clubs at the ready in the trunk of his car. For Wilson, the game of golf became a metaphor to represent African-Americans accepting the games of the dominant culture to achieve success. Several characters declare: "We've got one shot at this" as they try to position Harmond Wilks as the first African-American candidate for mayor of Pittsburgh.

Wilson also uses another metaphor in ***Radio Golf*** that illuminates his deeper understanding of American history. As the characters of ***Radio Golf*** debate the ownership of 1839 Wylie Avenue, they compare the situation to the "cowboys and Indians." Although this phrase can conjure a more pop culture image from television and film, it also parallels a larger real estate dispute: how Americans justified their rights to the land from sea to shining sea.

Material growth, increasing population, and spreading settlement were part of the American story from the start. By the early 1800s, the American population exploded to 13 million people, increasing pressure on the United States government to remove the clusters of Native Americans inhabiting the land. The problem confronting westward-looking Americans was very simple. Even by their own rules, the unilateral, uninvited, and unprovoked intrusion over thousands of miles by one culture over another could not be explained or justified by an appeal to "self-defense." Law and morality needed to justify their claim to the land.

When the term "Manifest Destiny" was coined by *New York Morning News* reporter John Louis O'Sullivan in 1845, Americans had a moral justification for their claim to the land.

WILSON ON AMERICAN HISTORY:

"We're all trying to imitate the British to become lords and aristocrats, have a bunch of servants and a gardener, all that kind of stuff. We were founded as a British colony---that's a large part of it. We've managed to be immensely successful in pulling the energy and the brilliance of all those European immigrants that come here and worked hard. Their imagination---Carnegie coming up with a new way to make steel, all that stuff---and we've become the most powerful and richest country in the world. So we've adopted those materialistic values at the expense of some more human values."---from Wilson's final interview published in American Theatre *magazine, November 2005.*

The basic cornerstone of Manifest Destiny advocated by politicians, journalists, and settlers was that white Americans were better suited to use the rich resources of the continent than the Native Americans. Native Americans stood in the way of progress and technology.

Although there are many examples of conflicts between the white settlers and the Native Americans, in ***Radio Golf*** Wilson references the Apache chief Cochise from southern Arizona. At first, Cochise desired peace with Americans. This ended in 1861 when an inexperienced officer hung Cochise's brother and two nephews. Cochise turned to his father-in-law, Mangas Coloradas, for help, and soon the raids escalated in a bloody cycle of revenge and retaliation. His hatred and distrust of Americans escalated when U.S. officers used a peace conference as pretence for capturing and executing his father-in-law.

General Crook was able to capture Cochise by using Merejildo Grijelva, a scout that Cochise had trained like a son, to betray his location. Cochise's tribe was ordered to live on reservations, but they refused to leave their ancestral lands. More skirmishes continued until 1872 when a new treaty was negotiated. This agree-

ment compromised earlier land treaties, so the "law" continued to shift and change to serve America's needs on the frontier.

While the historical personality of Cochise parallels the conflict between the characters in ***Radio Golf***, Wilson does not raise this negative example of American history in order to condemn his audience. Wilson believed that we all need to be reminded of history to move forward into the 21st century. As a result, his characters are given an opportunity to change. "I think it is important that we understand who we are and what our history has been, and what our relationship to society is, so that we can find ways to alter that relationship and, more importantly, to alter the shared expectations of ourselves as a people."

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The Importance of SARAH DEGREE

In ***Radio Golf***, Harmond Wilks is determined to rename his new Health Center after the first black registered nurse in Pittsburgh, a woman named Sarah Degree. Sarah Degree is mentioned as an offstage character in ***Seven Guitars***. While Pittsburgh's real first black nurse was Mrs. Katherine Christopher of the North Side, Sarah Degree was a real person in Wilson's life.

In a 1987 interview, Wilson explained that the real Miss Sarah Degree was a devout Catholic black woman in the Hill District who took August to church. Miss Sarah Degree saw Wilson and his siblings playing in the yard and asked his mother if she could take them to church. "My mother said yes," Wilson recalled, "because Miss Sarah took everybody's kids to church on Sunday…she had 'em all in a line, and she would take 'em all to church."

Wilson remembered that every day at six o'clock he would learn biblical stories from Miss Sarah. "We had to sit there in this hot room in the middle of the summer with Miss Sarah and this huge chart that she got from somewhere, teachin' us stories from the Bible and makin' us say the Rosary every night at seven o'clock." Wilson's early biblical education manifests itself in almost all of his plays.

Back in 1987, Wilson wanted to write the bishop of the Diocese of Pittsburgh after her death to honor her in some way. "There's no question: If she was white, they'd have a Miss Sarah Degree Child Care Center or something. I swear I believe that; maybe I'm wrong, but I believe that wholeheartedly." So it is fitting that in Wilson's last play, his protagonist Harmond Wilks passionately advocated for a building named in her honor.

A griot with lute and two griottes, female singers.

Wilson uses the character of Old Joe in **Radio Golf** like a West African griot and gives him some of the most poetic passages on the Hill District culture. A **griot** is a general term for a wandering poet and storyteller, preserving history through story and song. Griots were originally court musicians, singing the praises of the leaders, and thereby telling the history of the region.