

# Welcome to the August Wilson Center



## Spirits on Stage: Exploring the Use of Myth and Mystical Practice in August Wilson's Century Cycle

Michael Downing  
Professor of English  
Kutztown University  
April 2018



# Origins:

1992

Pittsburgh Public Theatre  
*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

A deep sense of spirituality



## Question:

How did August Wilson, as a writer,  
develop a sense of spirituality in  
his Century Cycle plays?

In other words, why does it feel like Church?



# Spirit Formula:

- 1) Compelling subject matter
- 2) Immersive mystical/ creative practice
- 3) Black cultural mythology



# 1) Compelling Subject Matter

Politics, economics, racism, history, ancestry, memory, slavery, murder, black empowerment, gender—even the supernatural.

These topics summon the spirits within us to create an emotional / metaphysical / psychic connection between the audience and the situations and characters.

These topics have been expanded upon by various writers.

My angle is the creative practice itself, along with specific writing strategies.



## 2) Immersive / Mystical Creative Practice

### Definition of mystical:

#### Merriam-Webster's:

"A direct subjective communion with ultimate reality."

#### Working definition:

"An immersive practice designed to connect an artist to his/ her sense of ultimate reality."



# August Wilson:

"Jitney was the first play where I actually listened to the dialogue rather than trying to force it into the mouths of the characters. Once I got the characters talking, it was difficult to shut them up."

August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*,  
PBS American Masters Documentary, 2015



# Example of voices brought to life:

**August Wilson:**

**"I discovered it as the characters began to talk: one guys wants to sell the piano, the sister doesn't want to. I thought, *Why doesn't she want to sell it?*"**

"August Wilson." Interview with David Savran. 1987. *Conversations with August Wilson*. Edited by Jackson Bryer and Mary Hartig. 2006. University of Mississippi Press.





# A mystical artistic practice

Connecting to energies from the spirit world and  
bringing them to life on stage.

Immersion. Listening. Conjuring. Ancestry. Africa. Animism (vodun).

Spiritual conversations with past, present, future.

This is a big part of why it feels like a religious experience.



## 3) Creating a Mythology

1. Music
2. Story/ Narrative
3. History
4. Ritual/ Dream/ Magick
5. Transformations



## In his own words:

“the one thing we did not have as black Americans—we didn’t have a mythology. We had no origin myths.”

“August Wilson Explains His Dramatic Vision: An Interview.” Sandra Shannon. *Conversations with August Wilson*. Eds. Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig. UP of Mississippi. 2006. Print.



# 1. Music:

10-part staff = ten-bar blues



finding one's song; music or musical reference in every play

## 2. Story/ Narrative:

Ensemble casts, which provide extended (and connected) narratives.

Extended monologues, including the rhetorical forms of witnessing, testimony, complaint, confession, recollection, invocation, etc.



### 3. History

Individual, interpersonal, familial, cultural, local, regional

### 4. Ritual/ Dream/ Magick

Everyday rituals, supernatural encounters,  
extended dream sequences,  
transformations of object and character



# Myth is powerfully spiritual:

Wilson's mythology includes various archetypes: shaman, goddesses, travelers, warriors, mothers, fathers, lovers, kings and queens, entrepreneurs, those who are lost, those who are found, those who are scarred, those who have been healed, and those who are trying to find and sing their song.



# 5. Transformations

Mundane to sacred

Stereotype to archetype



# Differences:

The difference between transforming the mundane into the sacred and transforming stereotype to archetype is that stereotypes are “charged” forms, while “mundane” items are not.

For example, while the ham in *Two Trains Running* is certainly a potent symbol of exclusion, the ham itself is not a pre-existing, pejorative, racist stereotype.

On the other hand, the watermelon in *The Piano Lesson* are charged coming into the play, as is Seth Holly’s description of Bynum as performing “old, mumbo jumbo nonsense,” which taps directly into pre-existing stereotypes related to “witch doctors.”





# Daisy Wilson and “the contents of her pantry”

In August’s own words:

“I happen to think that the content of my mother's life—her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips ... are all worthy of art.”

(Note from *Seven Guitars*)

Chris Rawson:

“The amazing thing to me about the language is that it's got a kind of gritty, earthy reality to it, but it has been injected with some kind of ten percent super reality, even though it's the most mundane things they're talking about.” (PBS American Masters)



## Mundane to sacred:

The jitney station in *Jitney*

The Coke in *Ma Rainey*

The fence in *Fences*

Biscuits in *Joe Turner*

The piano in *The Piano Lesson*

The ham in *Two Trains Running*

A guitar in *Seven Guitars*

Seeds and earth in *King Hedley II*

A slave's bill of sale in *Gem of the Ocean*

A can of paint in *Radio Golf*



# Stereotype to archetype:

Booster in *Jitney*

Levee in *Ma Rainey*

Troy in *Fences*

Bynum in *Joe Turner*

Watermelon in *The Piano Lesson*

Hambone in *Two Trains Running*

Hedley in *Seven Guitars*

Stool Pigeon in *King Hedley II*

Aunt Ester in *Gem of the Ocean*

Harmond Wilks in *Radio Golf*



# Legacy

I personally believe that August Wilson has given us a black mythology on par with Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, and Game of Thrones, whose authors all created detailed and spirit-filled mythological worlds that provide sustenance to the cultures they speak to.

And despite the fact that The Century Cycle might not prove as monetarily successful as GoT, I think we need to brace ourselves for unexpected and possibly rapid expansion of August's artistic legacy into the mainstream.

And if you look around the room, I think it's already happening.



# The End



# Notes



# Henry Louis Gates, Jr.:

“black poets should forge myth”

Henry Louis Gates Jr. currently serves as Professor and Director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University. He is also known for the series Finding Your Roots on PBS.



Joseph Campbell:

"Mythology...is not an outmoded quaintness of the past, but a living complex of archetypal, dynamic images ... fundamental [to] the human psyche. And that stratum is the source of the vital energies of our being. Out of it proceeds all the fate-creating drives and fears of our lives. While our educated, modern waking-consciousness has been going forward on the wheels and wings of progress, this recalcitrant, dream-creating, wish-creating, under-consciousness has been holding to its primeval companions all the time, the demons and the gods."

—The Ecstasy of Being, a collection of Campbell's works on Mythology and Dance from JCF and our partners at New World Library.





# The Plays

*In written order:*

1979 - *Jitney*

1982 - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

1983 - *Fences*

1984 - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

1986 - *The Piano Lesson*

1990 - *Two Trains Running*

1995 - *Seven Guitars*

2001 - *King Hedley II*

2003 - *Gem of the Ocean*

2005 - *Radio Golf*



### Jitney

TURNBO: But Sarah Vaughan got more nature... got a prettier smile...got more personality... and she can sing better.

### Ma Rainey

LEVEE: I done give Mr. Sturdyvant some of my songs I wrote and he say he's gonna let me record them when I get my band together.

### Fences

TROY (Singing): Hear it ring! Hear it ring! I had a dog his name was Blue. You know Blue was mighty true.

### Joe Turner

BYNUM: Told me he was gonna show me how to find my song.

### Piano Lesson

(Wining Boy sits down at the piano and plays and sings.)

### Two Trains Running

WEST: I done buried people with Bibles, canes, crutches, guitars, radios, baby dolls.

### Seven Guitars

CANEWELL: There's a song what go (Singing:) He'll come to your house/ He won't stay long/ You look in the bed/ Find your mother gone

### King Hedley II

RUBY: That was King's favorite song. He used to walk around saying, "Sing 'Red Sails,' Mommy. Sing "Red Sails.""

### Gem of the Ocean

(Citizen begins to sing an African lullaby to himself, a song his mother taught him.)

### Radio Golf

Old Joe: I used to go around singing songs and the people like that. They take care of me. If I had my guitar I'd sing one for you.

Music/ musical references in every play



# Creating something organic:

August told Vera Sheppard that he didn't read the great Western playwrights (although he does admit to reading Ed Bullins and Amiri Baraka).

In his own words:

"I stood around in Pat's place and listened to [the elders of the community]. They talked philosophy, history ... the newspapers, the politics of the city, baseball games, and invariably they would talk about themselves and their lives when they were young men ... a lot of what I know of the history of blacks ... I picked up standing there in Pat's Place."

*Vera Sheppard, Conversations with August Wilson*



# Creating something organic:

August told Vera Sheppard that he didn't read the great Western playwrights (although he does admit to reading Ed Bullins and Amiri Baraka).

In his own words:

"I stood around in Pat's place and listened to [the elders of the community]. They talked philosophy, history ... the newspapers, the politics of the city, baseball games, and invariably they would talk about themselves and their lives when they were young men ... a lot of what I know of the history of blacks ... I picked up standing there in Pat's Place."

*Vera Sheppard, Conversations with August Wilson*



Listening to voices in his head—mostly voices of Pittsburghers—conjuring them from afar, and bringing them to life on stage.



# Assertions:

August Wilson's art was largely based upon an immersive practice that led directly to communion with spiritual energy.

This meant listening carefully to the voices that surrounded him and then channeling those energies to bring them to life on stage in poetic fashion.

Don't underestimate the results: Everything is brought to life. Family/ ancestors, average people who he may or may not have known personally but heard speak at one time or another, a piano, a City of Bones, Sutter's ghost ... animation is persistent throughout.

And with animism comes spirit.



# Defining Myth:

It is not:

- Fallacy
- Fantasy
- “mumbo jumbo nonsense”

Instead, it is:

- Interrelated narrative
- Metaphor
- Symbols, rituals, dreams
- Stories
- Songs, dance, chorus
- Numinosity
- Archetypes



# Review: A mystical artistic practice

Immersion. Listening. Conjuring.  
Ancestry. Africa. Animism.

Spiritual conversations with past,  
present, future.

Connecting to energies from the spirit  
world and bringing them to life on  
stage.

That's a big part of why  
it feels religious.



*Africa, Portable Vodun Altar - Fon people - Benin,  
Mid. 20th C., Wood, clay, metal, pigment, shells,  
mirror, 19.5 x 14 x 6.5 inches, Af 354*

