AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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PRESENTS

WORDS on PLAYS
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Gem of the Ocean

BY AUGUST WILSON
DIRECTED BY RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON
GEARY THEATER
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CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF GEM OF THE OCEAN

CHARACTERS AND CAST

Eli: Chuck Patterson
Citizen Barlow: Owiso Odera
Aunt Ester: Michele Shay
Black Mary: Roslyn Ruff
Rutherford Selig: Raynor Scheine
Solly Two Kings: Steven Anthony Jones
Caesar: Gregory Wallace

THE SETTING

Aunt Ester’s house at 1839 Wylie Avenue, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. 1904.

SYNOPSIS

**PROLOGUE:** Citizen Barlow arrives at 1839 Wylie Avenue—home of Aunt Ester, Black Mary, and Eli—late at night and says he urgently needs to see Aunt Ester. Eli, the gatekeeper, says she won’t see him until Tuesday and to come back then. When Citizen refuses to leave without seeing Aunt Ester, Eli tries to throw him out. Aunt Ester appears and tells Citizen she will see him on Tuesday and calmly shows him out.

**ACT I. SCENE ONE:** The next morning after breakfast. Eli and Black Mary, the housekeeper, are talking about Citizen, who has been standing across the street all night waiting to see Aunt Ester. Rutherford Selig, an itinerant merchant, arrives with rocks for the wall Eli is building out back and frying pans and dustpans for Black Mary. Selig describes a scene he witnessed up the river, where the mill has been shut down and a crowd has gathered at the church. Eli explains that they were waiting for a funeral: Caesar, a policeman and Black Mary’s brother, had accused a man of stealing nails. The man went into the river, refused to come out, and drowned. Caesar then refused to let him be buried in the church graveyard because it was against Christian law.
Solly Two Kings arrives, and enters the house singing. Selig goes to unload the rocks he brought. Solly offers to help build the wall; Eli says he wants it to keep the villainous Caesar off the property. Solly asks Black Mary to read him a letter he received from his sister in the South. The sister writes that times are tougher than any since slavery, that “people are having a hard time with freedom” and whites block their attempts to leave and find better lives. Solly decides he has to go back down south and get his sister.

Black Mary leaves to go shopping. Aunt Ester describes her dream of Solly and a ship of men coming across the ocean: in the dream, Solly said he’d come back for her, but when he returned all the men on the ship had drowned and it was sinking. Solly tells Aunt Ester about his sister’s letter and his plans to go south, one last time, to save her.

**scene two:** There is a knock at the door that no one answers. Citizen enters from upstairs and devours some bread in the kitchen, stuffing more pieces in his pocket. Aunt Ester comes down and discovers Citizen; he seems more startled than she, and says he couldn’t wait until Tuesday to see her. He says people sent him to her because she can wash people’s souls. Aunt Ester says he reminds her of her Junebug, a nice-looking rascal. Citizen describes seeing the man drown in the river at the mill, how he kept repeating that he was innocent until he died. Aunt Ester likens the man to Jesus Christ, who was also falsely accused. Citizen tells Aunt Ester about his journey north from Alabama: he had to sneak out to avoid trouble with whites and traveled on back roads for two weeks. He found work at the mill, which then threatened to arrest him for owing money. He had been planning to leave, but then killed a man, and he is now wracked with guilt and fear of going to hell and bringing shame and sadness on his mother. Aunt Ester assures him that only God, not people, may stand in judgment. She sings Citizen a lullaby and he falls asleep. She asks Black Mary, who has returned with groceries, to make up the spare bedroom. She tells the sleeping Citizen that he has begun an adventure he doesn’t even know about.

**scene three:** Eli and Black Mary are in the kitchen talking about Citizen. Solly comes in and reports there’s been a riot at the mill; the police charged the crowd, trampling many on horseback. Eli tells Solly that they have someone to help build the wall, that Citizen is outside busting rocks. Solly asks Black Mary to write a letter to his sister telling her to keep faith and that he is coming for her before fall. Aunt Ester enters, Citizen comes in, and she introduces him to Solly. When he hears that Citizen is from Alabama, Solly asks him if he wants to go south with him. Citizen says he just left and there are no jobs there. They consider how troublesome freedom can be, that you can have it without really feeling it. “Freedom is what you make it,” says Eli.

Caesar enters and rants about the rioters. When he finds out Citizen is from Alabama and looking for a job, he tells him to stay out of trouble, that if he catches him stealing he’ll
throw him in jail. Caesar scoffs at all the mill workers now heading to jail for loitering and at how many blacks can’t handle freedom. Solly says he’s leaving, and Caesar warns him not to carry his walking stick because there are laws against carrying weapons. Furious, Solly exits.

Eli goes back to work on the wall. Caesar tells Black Mary he’s embarrassed to see his sister working as a washerwoman, but she says she’s never been so at peace with herself since she moved in with Aunt Ester. Caesar wants her to come back to work for him, in his bakery, but she says she wants no part of his corrupt methods, overcharging and exploiting people. Caesar says he respects the law, but Black Mary counters with a memory of him killing a boy for stealing a loaf of bread. Caesar tells Black Mary how he became the man he is, trying to enforce order at all costs, even though he’s widely despised for acting more white than black. Black Mary says she’s not mad at him; she honors him as her brother, but they don’t owe each other anything more. As he leaves, Caesar tells Black Mary that if you give up on your family you have nothing.

Scene Four: Aunt Ester is asking Black Mary if Citizen is in any trouble, when he comes in to fetch some water. Citizen notices Black Mary has pretty hands and asks if Eli is her man. She replies she doesn’t have one, and he tells her he left his woman in Alabama. Citizen asks if she wants to come to his room that night and puts his arms around her. She twists out of his grip, then relents and opens her arms to him. She rattles off a list of men who have slipped through her hands, leaving nothing to hold onto. She says she’ll come to his room, but wants him to look at his hands in the morning and see what he truly has.

Scene Five: Black Mary is washing Aunt Ester’s feet. Aunt Ester tells her she is 285 years old—born in the first year slaves were brought from Africa to America—and carries the memories of many people, as well as her own. She asks Black Mary to send Citizen to her. He comes in and she asks him to tell her about the man he killed. Citizen confesses that it was he who stole the bucket of nails from the mill, but he couldn’t bring himself to confess and save Garret Brown, wrongly accused and now drowned. Aunt Ester tells him he won’t ever forget Brown, but that he has to find a way to live with the truth. She reminds him that Brown died in truth, refusing to live a lie. Aunt Ester tells Citizen that, to be healed, he must journey up the river and find two pennies lying side by side. He leaves on his quest. Aunt Ester tells Black Mary that the errand is a ruse to make him feel useful and special. When he finds them, he’ll believe those pennies have special power.

Act II. Scene One: The next morning, Selig is in the kitchen with Black Mary telling her about a fire at the mill. Aunt Ester enters, and Eli comes in to report the fire is huge and still burning, and the town is looking for the man who started it. Selig
leaves to see his girlfriend before heading south. Eli answers a knock at the door. Citizen enters and announces he has found the two pennies. Aunt Ester shows him her quilt, on which there is a map showing a city made entirely of bones. Aunt Ester calls the City of Bones “the center of the world,” built by all the people who didn’t make it across the water on the journey from Africa into slavery. She says her mother, an aunt, and three uncles live there. She tells Citizen the story of losing everything she had ever known in life on the perilous journey. While she talks, she makes a paper boat from her own bill of sale into slavery and tells Citizen she’s going to take him to the City of Bones in that magic boat. “If you believe, it can take you,” she says. She instructs him to get cleaned up, put on his best clothes, and pray. She leaves to get ready, as well.

**Scene Two:** Black Mary and Eli have everything ready for their voyage. Solly stops in to say goodbye; Citizen enters and Solly tells him he has been to the City of Bones and it’s unlike anyplace else. He shows Citizen a link of chain that used to be around his ankle when he was a slave. He recalls how it felt to escape all the way to Canada (called “Freedom-land”) in 1857; yet, upon arriving, he didn’t feel right being free while others were in bondage, so he joined the Underground Railroad to help carry others to freedom. He shows the 62 notches on his walking stick: one for each person he guided to freedom. He and Eli remember traveling through swamps, hiding from attacking dogs along the way. Solly remembers there were kind white people up in Canada, but “down here it’s a war.”

Solly and Eli give Citizen a drink of whiskey and toast his upcoming trip. Solly says, “They never made Emancipation what they say it was.” Eli says that’s what Caesar can’t understand; some people have fought for so long and have nothing to lose. Aunt Ester enters and asks Solly to help take Citizen to the City of Bones. Black Mary enters with some masks, as Aunt Ester hands Citizen the paper boat, called the *Gem of the Ocean*. Eli, Solly, and Black Mary sing as Aunt Ester describes the seafaring journey with such vivid feeling it comes to life for Citizen. Aunt Ester, Black Mary, Solly, and Eli lead Citizen in a ritual of singing and chanting, symbolically chaining Citizen to the boat. Terrified, Citizen throws down the boat and a storm blows up. Black Mary and Aunt Ester say he can’t get to the City of Bones without his boat, and he struggles against the storm to reach it. Citizen sees the beautiful City of Bones. They tell him to pay the gatekeeper, whom Citizen recognizes as Garret Brown, his two pennies to get in. Aunt Ester says Citizen must tell the truth; he confesses to his crime, and the gatekeeper allows him to pass. Overwhelmed by the city’s beauty and its people with their tongues on fire, Citizen begins to cry, now reborn as a man of the people. The journey is over. The group tells Citizen that he has made it back to Aunt Ester’s house and continue to sing in celebration.
A loud knock shatters the mood, and Caesar enters to arrest Solly for setting fire to the mill. Solly strikes Caesar with his stick and runs out. Caesar shouts that he will catch him.

**Scene Three:** Two hours later. Black Mary says that even if Solly is innocent, Caesar will surely kill him. Aunt Ester asks Citizen to go find Selig up the river. Aunt Ester picks on Black Mary, seeing how much criticism she’ll take. Finally, Black Mary says she’s sick of being told how to do everything and will from now on do things her own way. Aunt Ester asks what took her so long.

**Scene Four:** Selig enters and Aunt Ester asks him to take Solly down the river, away from Caesar’s reach. Solly enters, proud and defiant that he did burn down the mill and doesn’t mind paying for his crime: “[F]reedom got a high price.” Citizen volunteers to go with Solly on this dangerous journey. Solly knows Caesar will kill him if he finds him, and asks Aunt Ester to say a prayer for him. Citizen tells Black Mary he thinks they could be “right with each other” and wants to stop by when he returns; she tells him to come by any time. Eli suddenly sees Caesar coming down the street. Solly and Citizen quickly exit.

Caesar enters and tells Aunt Ester he has a warrant. She says she has her own piece of paper, and hands Caesar her bill of sale, asking him what it’s worth. It reads: “a Negro slave girl named Ester, 12 years five months old, for the sum of $607.” Caesar says he wouldn’t give her 10 cents for it. Aunt Ester responds that you can put laws on paper but that doesn’t make them right. Caesar tells her she is aiding and abetting a fugitive by hiding Solly and therefore under arrest. Eli threatens Caesar with a shotgun, but Aunt Ester stops him. She lets Caesar lead her out by the arm.

**Scene Five:** Eli and Aunt Ester return home. Eli tells Black Mary he paid $100 bond for Aunt Ester’s release. Citizen enters, telling Eli that Caesar has shot Solly. Citizen and Selig bring Solly into the house. He collapses on the floor, occasionally muttering, “So live.” Aunt Ester and Black Mary try to stop his bleeding, while Citizen and Selig explain what happened: They got as far as West Virginia, when Solly told them to turn around and head back so he could free the mill rioters. He said he didn’t feel right being free with so many others still in bondage. Before they reached the jail, Caesar caught up with their wagon and started shooting. Black Mary and Aunt Ester realize Solly is dead. Aunt Ester tells Citizen to get his two pennies; Solly will need them to pay his passage. There is a knock at the door. Citizen goes into Aunt Ester’s room, and Eli answers the door. Caesar enters looking for Citizen, and Selig says he ran off. Caesar sees Solly’s dead body and says good riddance. Black Mary, furious and sad, disowns her brother. Caesar is stunned and leaves. The others sing around Solly’s body, and Citizen puts on Solly’s coat, finding the sister’s letter in a pocket. He takes Solly’s stick and three bottles of kerosene and exits. Eli toasts Solly: “So live.” A fire bell is heard, growing louder as the lights dim.
OBITUARY: AUGUST WILSON, PITTSBURGH PLAYWRIGHT WHO CHRONICLED BLACK EXPERIENCE

BY CHRISTOPHER RAWSON (PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, OCTOBER 3, 2005)

Last December, Pittsburgh-born playwright August Wilson’s thoughts turned to mortality. With his 60th birthday approaching, he said, “There’s more [life] behind me than ahead. I think of dying every day. . . . At a certain age, you should be prepared to go at any time.”

In May, he was diagnosed with liver cancer and the next month his doctors determined it was inoperable. But he showed that he was indeed prepared, telling the Post-Gazette in August, “I’ve lived a blessed life. I’m ready.”

The end came yesterday morning when Mr. Wilson, 60, died in Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, “surrounded by his loved ones,” said Dena Levitin, his assistant.

Mr. Wilson took a characteristically wry look at his fate, saying, “It’s not like poker; you can’t throw your hand in.” He also noted that when his long-time friend and producer, Benjamin Mordecai, the only person to work with him on all ten of his major plays, died this spring, the obituary in the New York Times included a picture of him and Mordecai together. “That’s what gave God this idea,” he said.

The fierce poignancy of his eulogy for Mr. Mordecai in a recent American Theatre magazine sounds self-reflexive: “How do we transform loss? . . . Time’s healing balm is essentially a hoax. . . . Haunted by the specter of my own death, I find solace in Ben’s life.”

Mr. Wilson also told the Post-Gazette in August, “I’m glad I finished the cycle,” referring to the unprecedented series of ten plays with which he conquered the American theater. In the process, he opened new avenues for black artists, changed the way theater approaches race and changed the business of theater, too.

Often called the Pittsburgh Cycle because all but one play is set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh where Mr. Wilson spent his youth and early adulthood, this unequaled epic chronicles the tragedies and aspirations of African Americans in a play set in each decade of the 20th century.

In dramatizing the glory, anger, promise, and frustration of being black in America, he created a world of the imagination—August Wilson’s Hill District—to rank with such other transformational fictional worlds as Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, Hardy’s Wessex, or Friel’s Donegal. Critics from Manhattan to Los Angeles now speak knowingly of
“Pittsburgh’s Hill District,” not just the Hill as it is now or was when Mr. Wilson grew up in the ’50s, but August Wilson Country—the archetypal northern urban black neighborhood, a construct of frustration, nostalgia, anger and dream.

Mr. Wilson’s plays present this world as a crucible in which the identity of black America has been shaped.

The final play in the cycle—the last written, set in the final decade—is Radio Golf. It premiered in March 2005 at New Haven’s Yale Repertory Theatre, where the earlier plays in the cycle were first produced in the 1980s. Even while suffering from cancer and recovering from a small stroke, Mr. Wilson kept rewriting for the play’s second production at Los Angeles’ Mark Taper Forum, July 31–September 18.

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945; his family long called him Freddy. His mother, Daisy Wilson, whose own mother had walked north from North Carolina, raised her six children in a cold-water flat behind Bella’s grocery on Bedford Avenue in the Hill. She died of lung cancer in March 1983, just before her son’s first great success on Broadway.

His father, also Frederick Kittel, was a German baker who died in 1965. “My father very rarely came around,” Mr. Wilson said. “I grew up in my mother’s household in a cultural environment which was black.” He also had a stepfather, David Bedford, who died in 1969.

There were six children: his older sisters, Freda, Linda Jean, and Donna, and his younger brothers, Edwin and Richard, all of whom survive him. His brothers kept their father’s name, but at 20, he signaled his cultural loyalty by taking his mother’s, becoming August Wilson. . . .
Mr. Wilson remembered that his mother “had a very hard time feeding us all. But I had a wonderful childhood. . . . As a family, we did things together. We said the rosary every night at seven o’clock. We all sat down and had dinner at a certain time. . . . We didn’t have a TV, so we listened to the radio.”

One of his mother’s enduring gifts was to teach him to read when he was four. Mr. Wilson called it transforming: “You can unlock information and you’re better able to understand the forces that are oppressing you.”

Years later he told a library celebration, “when I was five years old, I got my first library card from the Hill District branch on Wylie Avenue. Labor historians do not speak well of Andrew Carnegie . . . [but he] will forever be for me that man who made it all possible for me to be standing here today. . . . I wore out my library card and cried when I lost it.”

His mother also valued education, sending him to St. Richard’s parochial school in the Hill, then to Central Catholic High School in Oakland. As the only black student in the school, he was constantly taunted and harassed, so he left just before the end of his freshman year.

He started the next year at Connelley Vo-Tech, which he found pointless, so he switched to Gladstone High School, just across the street from the Hazelwood home the family had moved to when he was 12. He was supposedly in the tenth grade but because he hadn’t graduated from the ninth at Central, they had him taking ninth grade subjects. The work was well behind what he had already done, so he was bored and didn’t work at it until he decided he wanted to get into the after-school college club run by one of the teachers.

It was that teacher who, in an often-told story, doubted he’d written a 20-page paper on Napoleon he submitted. Insulted, the future August Wilson dropped out of school at 15 and for a while didn’t tell his mother.

“I dropped out of school, but I didn’t drop out of life,” he recalled. “I would leave the house each morning and go to the main branch of the Carnegie Library in Oakland where they had all the books in the world. . . . I felt suddenly liberated from the constraints of a prearranged curriculum that labored through one book in eight months.”

The other important part of his education came on the streets of the Hill. He once told an interviewer, “Pittsburgh is a very hard city, especially if you’re black,” and another, “when I was 22 years old, each day had to be continually negotiated. It was rough.” As he memorably put it, “I grew up without a father. When I was 20, I went down onto Centre Avenue to learn from the community how to be a man.”

That community provided many fathers—the old men chatting in Pat’s Place or on street corners; the inhabitants of the diners where Wilson sat and listened; like-minded
friends with artistic inclinations. His true father was both the small community that nurtured him and the larger Pittsburgh that, by opposing, stimulated and defined.

He rented a room and worked at many jobs. He discovered the blues. He followed various black identity movements and fought for social justice. And he featured himself a poet, sitting in diners, scribbling on napkins.

“The exact day I became a poet was April 1, 1965, the day I bought my first typewriter,” using $20 Freda paid him for writing a term paper for her on Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg.

Many years later he recalled, “The first time I became aware of theater was Pearl Bailey in Hello, Dolly! around 1958, 1959. My mother was in New York and brought back the program, her first and only Broadway show.”

In the late ’60s, Mr. Wilson became part of a talented group of poets, educators, and artists of the future, young men such as Rob Penny, Nick Flournoy, and Chawley Williams, with regular haunts at the Halfway Art Gallery and the Hill Arts Society. Mr. Wilson remembered that “I always had a napkin and a pencil. That’s one of the things about writing—the tools are so simple.”

He was involved in the debates of the ’60s and continued to consider himself “a black nationalist and a cultural nationalist.” He and his friends formed the Centre Avenue Poets Theater Workshop. Later, he and Mr. Penny started the Black Horizon Theater, which toured, and they were involved in the Kuntu Repertory Theater.

But Mr. Wilson’s first brushes with theater had been off-putting. In 1965, he saw a 30-minute excerpt of The Rhinoceros at Fifth Avenue High School. “That was the first theater I recall, and I wasn’t impressed.” He met some of the actors in John Hancock’s 1966 Pittsburgh Playhouse company, but he stayed for only 20 minutes of Bertolt Brecht’s A Man’s a Man. It was 1976 before Mr. Wilson saw a whole, professional play, Athol Fugard’s Sizwe Bansi Is Dead, a comi-tragic account of life under apartheid at the Pittsburgh Public Theater.

But in 1968, Mr. Penny wrote a play and the Tulane Drama Review had a special issue on black theater. “That was the first time I’d seen black plays in print—there hadn’t been any plays on the Negro shelf at the library. So we did them all.”

Mr. Wilson’s first staged play was Recycle, which drew on the unhappy 1972 termination of his 1969 marriage to Brenda Burton. (A happy result was their daughter, Sakina Ansari, born in 1970.) Two other one-act plays from this time are Homecoming and The Coldest Day of the Year. Soon thereafter, his friend Claude Purdy moved to St. Paul to work with its black theater group, Penumbra, and he soon invited Mr. Wilson to join him.

In 1978, he went, taking with him a satirical play, Black Bart and the Sacred Hills, adapted from his poems at Mr. Purdy’s suggestion. They did a workshop of Black Bart in St. Paul,
and Mr. Wilson stayed. In 1981 he was married for the second time, to Judy Oliver, a friend of Mr. Purdy’s wife.

Mr. Wilson once explained that St. Paul and Seattle—cool, northern, Scandinavian cities—appealed to him precisely because of their unlikeness to Pittsburgh, allowing him to look back more intently at the true material of August Wilson Country, source of his rich stream of stories, characters, images, and conflicts.

He called *Jitney*, written in St. Paul in 1979, his first real play. He submitted it twice unsuccessfully to the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center’s National Playwrights Conference, and it was staged in Pittsburgh by the small Allegheny Repertory Theater in 1982. He unsuccessfully submitted three other early plays to the O’Neill before *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* was accepted.

At the O’Neill, Wilson met the artistic director, Lloyd Richards, dean of the Yale Drama School, head of the professional Yale Repertory Theatre and director of the breakthrough Broadway staging 25 years earlier of the most influential modern black American play, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.

It was a turning point in both lives. Mr. Richards was the artistic father and collaborator Mr. Wilson needed, an experienced director who taught him stagecraft and helped him learn to rewrite. Mr. Wilson’s plays were a gift to Mr. Richards, who went on to direct the first six from workshop to Broadway.

*Ma Rainey* went quickly from the O’Neill to its premiere at Yale Rep to Broadway. Then time sped up, often with one play in initial workshop, another on Broadway, and a third midway from one point to the other, simultaneously.

In 1990, Mr. Wilson’s second marriage ended and he moved to Seattle. In 1994, he married Constanza Romero, a costume designer—his third marriage, one in each of his three home cities—and together they had a daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, in 1997 . . .

His most popular play, *Fences*, was long ago optioned for film, but Mr. Wilson insisted on a black director of his choice, and although he wrote several screenplays, the project is still in the offing.

But onstage, his clout is great. With his one Tony, two Pulitzers, three American Theatre Critics awards and seven New York Drama Critics’ Circle Awards, he has become the flagship of contemporary black theater. In a roundtable discussion among four black playwrights in 1999, Marion McClinton said, “When theaters make money on August Wilson they might say, ‘Let’s do two [black plays] next year.’”

In 1996, he took on a spokesman role, proclaiming his protest against the marginalization of black theater in a keynote address at the annual convention of professional regional theaters. This led to his very public dispute with critic/producer Robert Brustein, culmi-
nating in their January 1997 public debate in New York City that put theater back at the center of the national debate about race and culture.

He was surprised to be called “rich” in a New Yorker profile, but agreed he was not poor. If you invested $1 in August Wilson in 1984, when Ma Rainey hit Broadway, he said, “You’d have gotten it back and maybe 40 cents more.”

His awards were many, including more than two dozen honorary doctorates (from the University of Pittsburgh among others), Rockefeller and Guggenheim Fellowships, a National Humanities Medal, the 2003 Heinz Award in Humanities and Arts, and the only high school diploma issued by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. He was a member of both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

He also anchored his own achievements in his heritage. At the Pittsburgher of the Year ceremony in 1990, he said:

I was born in Pittsburgh in 1945 and for 33 years stumbled through its streets, small, narrow, crooked, cobbled, with the weight of the buildings pressing in on me and my spirit pushed into terrifying contractions. That I would stand before you today in this guise was beyond comprehension. . . . I am standing here in my grandfather’s shoes. . . . They are the shoes of a whole generation of men who left a life of unspeakable horror in the South and came North . . . searching for jobs, for the opportunity to live a life with dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. . . . The cities were not then, and are not now, hospitable. There is a struggle to maintain one’s dignity. But that generation of men and women stands as a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit. And they have passed on to us, their grandchildren, the greatest of gifts, the gift of hope refreshed.

Asked for his own greatest accomplishment, he said he would like to be known as “the guy who wrote these ten plays.”

More specifically, “after I wrote Loomis’s speech [in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone] about seeing the bones” on the track of the Atlantic route of the slaver-traders, “I thought, as an artist, right there, I’d be satisfied.”

*This article originally appeared in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Staff writers Nate Guidry and Bob Hoover contributed to this report. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 2006, all rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.*
SALVATION IN THE CITY OF BONES
Ma Rainey and Aunt Ester sing their own songs in August Wilson’s grand cycle of blues dramas.

BY RANDY GENER

In *Gem of the Ocean*, the penultimate entry in August Wilson’s decade-by-decade cycle of plays chronicling the black experience in 20th-century America, Aunt Ester embraces into her fold Citizen Barlow, a restless soul who breaks into her house through a window. A troubled man in search of salvation, Citizen has been unsuccessfully trying to claim the citizenship promised in Abraham Lincoln’s 1865 proclamation on the emancipation of America’s slaves. Having committed some mortal crime, he has come to see Aunt Ester ostensibly to get his soul washed. Because he reminds her of her Junebug, she gives him a meal, a job, and a place to stay.

Soon we find Ester and Citizen sitting in her Pittsburgh parlor and sailing, as if by magic, on a paper boat she has made out of her bill of sale as a slave. The year is 1904. It is the day before Aunt Ester turns 285 years old. The boat, a slave ship [called the Gem of the Ocean], rocks wildly as a gathering storm disturbs the waters and pounds its hull. Their destination is the City of Bones, a noble kingdom made out of nothing, located a half-mile by a half-mile in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean—it is the city of “the just dead,” the largest unmarked graveyard in the world.

“Those bones,” August Wilson will tell you, “are symbolically representative of the Africans who were lost during the Middle Passage”—the voyage of slaves from Africa to the Sea Islands and other destinations—“those whose ships sank into the ocean, the Africans who never made it to America. We find out through the course of the play what it is Citizen has done, and why he did this. Aunt Ester leads him to the answer. He has to find out what his duty is, and through that he can be redeemed.”

August Wilson’s bluesy dramas rarely center on women, but Aunt Ester has emerged as one of three or four powerful exceptions in the epic cycle of plays he began writing in 1979. Much like the singer Ma Rainey, who doesn’t arrive until almost an hour into the play that bears her name, the conjure woman Ester surfaces late as a visible or literal entity. In the two plays that have previously invoked her name, Aunt Ester was a mystical off-stage figure—the distant voice of Africa.

“Aunt Ester carries the memory of all Africans, the memory of the ancestors,” Wilson explains. “She embodies the wisdom and traditions of all those Africans, starting with the first one. It is a tremendous responsibility to carry all this—to remember for everyone, as
well as to remember for yourself—and she’s accepted the responsibilities of it, starting when she was nine years old.”

Ester is first invoked as 349-year-old spiritual guru in Two Trains Running (1992), Wilson’s sixth entry in the cycle, a slice-of-life drama about the threatened redevelopment of a Pittsburgh restaurant in 1969. The personification of an older African spirituality, she is discussed, along with Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement, as one of the few possible alternatives for blacks who might not want to turn to Christianity for sustenance and direction. Aunt Ester’s name is once again summoned, this time in graver and more alarming tones, in King Hedley II, Wilson’s tragedy, set in 1985, about the stunted lives of Hedley and other key characters from the earlier, 1940s entry Seven Guitars. In Hedley, the pack-rat griot Stool Pigeon reports that Ester is dead at 366 years old—her age being the historical equivalent of the number of years Africans have been in America. She dies—or seems to—before the cycle is even finished, before Wilson even gets around to completing his 1990s entry. “Part of the picture in Hedley,” Wilson notes, “is that the path to Aunt Ester’s house is all grown over with weeds and leaves. You can hardly find the door any more. People have simply stopped tapping into that memory. They’ve simply stopped visiting her. There is no use for her.” The link to ancestral roots has been broken. “She died too soon,” cries Stool Pigeon, while laying flowers and peanuts on the grave of Aunt Ester’s cat. “She wasn’t supposed to die at all. She wasn’t but 366 years old.”

Has Aunt Ester—the image of Africa, whose metaphysical presence influences the behaviors of many of Wilson’s characters on stage, the black cat whose looming absence invites a belief in otherworldliness—lived out her nine lives? There is a suggestion at the end of King Hedley that she has not. To resurrect her again, a blood sacrifice is required. Her black cat is buried in the yard, and Stool Pigeon works out a bloodletting ritual in order to make God accept the sacrifice, to bring about a rebirth. “As it turns out, it was all preordained,” Wilson says finally. “Hedley has proven himself to be a worthy sacrifice. So the sound of a cat’s meow is heard. It’s the black cat that Aunt Ester came to represent.”

Playwright August Wilson—born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, the son of a white German baker and a black cleaning woman named Daisy Wilson—is one formidable and complex cat.

In the two decades since Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom brought him national attention and breakaway success in October 1984, Wilson has emerged as one of American theater’s heavyweight champions. That play, his crowning debut, launched him into a major career: He became the first black playwright to achieve commercial success on Broadway since Lorraine Hansberry, whose A Raisin in the Sun had appeared in 1959. The odyssey he has
so far undertaken—with (in the order the plays were written) *Jitney* (1970s), *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1920s), *Fences* (1950s), *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1910s), *The Piano Lesson* (1930s), *Two Trains Running* (1960s), *Seven Guitars* (1940s), *King Hedley II* (1990s), and *Gem of the Ocean* (1900s)—is visionary in size, ambition, and scope. Eugene O’Neill, by comparison, barely managed to eke out two plays in a planned nine-play cycle.

Wilson’s fame and stature has risen meteorically as the poet-dramatist has assumed the various mantles of producer, leader, public speaker, and intellectual, cultural nationalist, self-described “race man,” critics’ darling, provocateur, trickster-like figure, African griot, blues artificer, inspiration, folk hero, and American icon. . . .

The kiln in which August Wilson was fired was the blues. The Black Arts Movement profoundly influenced him, too, but it is in the idiom of classic blues songs that his dramas find expressive forms to ritually recast and carry forth. Just as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith gave musical expression to the new social and sexual realities encountered by African Americans as free women and men, so has Wilson, as the most prominent African-American dramatist of his generation, done his part in reflecting (and helping to construct) a graphlike unfolding of black consciousness in the past century.

Classic blues are as inward-looking as Wilson’s dramas. Both insist on the meaningfulness of black lives by pushing white characters to the periphery or rubbing them out of the central picture altogether. Like blues songs that are full of life and energy even as they sing of the pain, suffering, anger, and disillusionment of black working-class people, Wilson’s play-cycle maps and registers the changes and variations in values, concepts, attitudes, and symbols from the Reconstruction Era, to the Harlem Renaissance and Great Depression, to the Civil Rights and Black Power years, to the decades of racial integration and supply-side economics. When his characters speak, the discourse is a jam session of individual struggles and collective woes—and the determination to conquer them.

Indeed, the womb from which Wilson’s plays were born was Ma Rainey (née Gertrude Pridgett, 1886–1939)—she was the historical “Mother of the Blues” and, inevitably, the mother of Wilson’s volcanic outburst of creativity. Bessie Smith, too, had fired his imagination (in particular, “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Jelly Roll Like Mine,” which Wilson says he played 22 times after he first heard it in 1965). Ma Rainey was, in fact, Bessie’s mentor; anchored in the folk culture of southern blacks as they emerged from slavery, Rainey was the pacemaker. Bessie patterned herself after Ma Rainey, who liberated the blues from the fields and backwoods of rural black America and made it an accepted form of professional entertainment. . . .

*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* bears all the earmarks of [Wilson’s] later plays, in form and context—their luxuriant length (usually clocking in at over three hours), the easygoing yet
complex treatment of each specific era that suggests the slapdash sprawl of life itself, the nominal realism that is often an anchor for many-sided conflicts and robust carryings-on, the showstopping monologues, the three-line pattern of repeated refrains—and the hard-won scenes about hardscrabble lives that somehow explode into impromptu concerts or ecstatic blues numbers that are all the more profound for turning frustration and heartbreak into a defiant expression of joy.

One of the idiosyncrasies of *Ma Rainey* is that it is not a biographical drama. Like Wilson’s later plays, *Ma Rainey* makes no attempt to rewrite history; it does not dredge up almanac facts or excavate anthropological items, and it is certainly not an episode in a serialized novel or a multi-sequel Hollywood franchise.

“If she ain’t used up her nine lives Aunt Ester coming back.”

—Stool Pigeon in *King Hedley II*

The Faustian overtones in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* foreshadow the supernatural or metaphysical presence of a spirit world that has become increasingly important to Wilson’s work. . . Wilson’s theater ritually signifies an African presence. Like a blues refrain, the memory of Africa ebbs and flows in ways both conspicuous and subtle, in major and minor keys, through the literal/metaphysical characters of Toledo in *Ma Rainey*, Harold Loomis and Bynum Walker in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson*, Archangel Gabriel in *Fences*, the tubercular Hedley in *Seven Guitars*, and Aunt Ester in *Two Trains Running* and *King Hedley II*.

“The thematic concerns, the conflicts, in *Gem of the Ocean,*” Wilson says, elaborating on that progression, “are African spirituality versus Christianity, moral versus man-made law, and individual expression versus community cohesion. Some of these themes are permanent in all the plays, leaning probably most heavily on the failure of Christianity—the idea of having to follow somebody else’s god as opposed to your own gods, while most African gods are on the way out. There may be no African gods left.

“I don’t know how Aunt Ester got into my head, but she’s become increasingly important to my way of thinking,” the playwright continues. “She has emerged for me as the most significant persona of the cycle. The characters are all her children. The wisdom and tradition she embodies are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personalities and for dealing with a society in which the contradictions, over the decades, have grown more fierce.”

One of the problems of forging an African-American aesthetic is that important elements of black people’s West African heritage had been distorted by slavery and later
by emancipation and the migration to the cities. These ruptures are reflected in the narrative teleology of the canon: Belief in mysticism and the power of rituals, based in part in the religions of the Yoruba and Igbo tribes of West Africa, are strongest in the early decades of Wilson’s cycle, but by the 1960s, the very idea of an African heritage, which Aunt Ester represents, is receding into the collective unconscious. By the 1980s, amnesia has set in.

Folktales, hoodoo practices, and the blues are ways, conscious or not, to keep alive and maintain one’s connections with African roots. So both Aunt Ester and Ma Rainey are archetypal figures in Wilson’s plays—their voices are central to his large-scale vision, and he has positioned them far more symbolically than the more earthbound women in the cycle, like Rose (Troy’s wife) in Fences, Berniece in The Piano Lesson, Risa in Two Trains Running, Vera and Louise in Seven Guitars, and Ruby and Tonya in King Hedley II.

In Ma Rainey, Wilson has appropriated Gertrude Pridgett and refashioned the blues singer to fit the role of a maternal functionary—the iconic image of the strong black woman as star, self-made artist, entrepreneur, nurturer, and warrior. In Gem of the Ocean, Aunt Ester emerges as a mythic figurehead, an African-descended conjurer who inherits the mantle of power from her great grandmother—she is the Great Mother of Wilson’s flock. Through her, spirituality and belief can bridge the Atlantic gap between America and Africa, between life and afterlife, between the earthly and the superearthly.

“Women are the givers of life,” says the playwright. “She’s not called Ma Ester—she’s called Aunt Ester. So there’s a relationship that is about female membership in a family. It’s significant that Ester is a mother—in fact, she has a bunch of kids that she talks about in Gem of the Ocean. As you can imagine, she would have a lot of kids after being around for 285 years. She named the stars in heaven after all her children, because when she was lost and she didn’t have anything else in the world, at least she could hold on to them. And one way of holding on to them was to name them. Anything you can name, you can control and define; that’s what the power of naming is.”

Ma Rainey’s harsh pathos early in the cycle and the manifestation of Aunt Ester as spiritual beacon in the latest entry echo the blood-memory of Africa. This collective memory comes alive not just in the funky-poetic language and salty conversations of Wilson’s characters but also in the canon’s blues legacy—its swaggering, wailing world view. The blues are the Word.

Excerpted from an article that originally appeared in American Theatre November, 2005.
AUGUST WILSON has been thinking lately about Aunt Ester. Audiences first encountered her in Two Trains Running, Wilson’s play set in a Pittsburgh diner in 1969. She was never seen but was spoken of often as a mystical, supernatural presence. She was 349 years old, according to Wilson, although she’s 322 in the published version of the play. (“She look like she five hundred,” a character says. “You be surprised when she say she ain’t but three hundred and twenty-two.”)

She popped up again in King Hedley II. In that grim drama, set in the 1980s, her death was reported at the age of 366. (“The people . . . got lost. They don’t even know the story of how they got from tit to tat,” a character says. “Aunt Ester know. But the path to her house is all grown over with weeds you can’t hardly find the door no more.”)

Now Wilson’s working on a new play, set in 1904. And he’s thinking about promoting Ester from unseen prophet to a principal role at center stage. “She became increasingly important to my vision of this cycle thing, so I wanted to go back and bring her onstage as a mere 285,” Wilson said with a gleam in his eye.

But shaping that idea into a play has been a struggle and a mysterious journey, the way Wilson describes it. He said that’s how it is when he begins a new play. He has to be patient. He has to wait until the characters are ready to talk.

“So I pulled out my tablet and wrote: Aunt Ester. And the first thing she said was, ‘There’s a lot of things I don’t talk about.’ That kind of threw me. I couldn’t think of anything else to write because she didn’t want to talk. So about a month later, I came back to my tablet and I said, ‘OK, what is it you don’t want to talk about?’

“She said, ‘Oh, I don’t talk about the water.’ And she proceeded to give me two paragraphs about the water . . . and her experience of coming to America, the new land, and the first thing she noticed was like the trees didn’t have spirits. So she knew she was in an alien landscape. I said, ‘OK. I got that. But that does not make a play.’

While there is a strong spiritual aspect to his plays, Wilson, who was raised a Catholic, follows no specific religion. “I consider myself a spiritual person,” he said. “I pray every day, more or less. But I don’t practice any organized religion. I believe it all. I’m a Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, you name it. I don’t think any religion teaches people to do wrong.”

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Ruben Santiago-Hudson has a reverence, as both an actor and a director, for “the larger-than-life spirit in August Wilson’s plays that has the power to transport us to places we never could have imagined possible.” Santiago-Hudson won a Tony Award for his portrayal of Canewell in Wilson’s Seven Guitars (also at A.C.T. in 1995) and played Caesar in the Broadway production (2004) of Gem of the Ocean, before he made the daunting transition last year to directing Wilson’s work.

Gem of the Ocean is the penultimate play in Wilson’s extraordinary dramatic cycle of ten plays, each set in a different decade of the 20th century, and each a link in an ongoing chain of experience and emotion connecting the successive generations of this country’s African Americans. "August did something no other writer has done in our generation, by chronicling an entire history and predicament of a people in this country," says Santiago-Hudson. "No one else has done this. Not Edward Albee. Not Eugene O’Neill. Not Tennessee Williams. Not any of these wonderful writers."

Wilson set Gem of the Ocean, like eight of his other plays, in his beloved Hill District of Pittsburgh, an impoverished but vital neighborhood, in 1904—a year Wilson said captivated his imagination because “you could walk around and find the people who [had been] slaves. I find that incredible.” The home of 285-year-old former slave Aunt Ester at 1839 Wylie Avenue—mentioned, like Aunt Ester herself, in several of Wilson’s plays—serves as a safe haven in Gem for all those lost souls, young and old, who seek out her grace and guidance.

Santiago-Hudson spoke to the cast and A.C.T. staff on the first day of Gem of the Ocean rehearsals in January about celebrating Wilson’s passionate visions and magnificent legacy. An unusually musical artist—who was last seen at A.C.T. in 2002 in his autobiographical play Lackawanna Blues (accompanied by blues guitarist and Gem of the Ocean composer Bill Sims, Jr.), remembered a conversation he had had with Wilson.
just weeks before the playwright’s death in October 2005. Santiago-Hudson was inspired by the potential of incorporating traditional African music, ritualized drumming and chanting, into the production, to unlock the magic in the play. The music and percussive energy, says Santiago-Hudson, allow the actors and the audience alike to “feel the balance of the room change, feel the magnificence of the spirit.”

I don’t look at *Gem of the Ocean* as just a play. I look at it as an experience and an illuminating journey. We are going to start in one place, and we’re going to end up in a completely different place. And anyone who participates in this journey, onstage or in the audience, will go someplace with us that you’ve never been before—as long as you give your heart to it.

We, the audience, can’t take the journey until Citizen [Barlow, who is led in *Gem’s* central scene by Aunt Ester to the City of Bones, a mythical graveyard at sea] believes in what he feels, and not until Aunt Ester believes what she sees: that a paper boat made from her own bill of sale into slavery has become a ship called the *Gem of the Ocean* and will transport them to a place where Citizen’s soul can be cleansed. Only then can we, the audience, do the same thing and journey along with them.

During the run of *Gem of the Ocean* on Broadway, I felt like the City of Bones scenes remained problematic. They are crucially important to the play, and to our understanding of Citizen’s spiritual journey, and yet it felt like we hadn’t ever really solved, theatrically, the journey to the City of Bones. I had been watching the problems in rehearsals and had my own thoughts about how we might solve it. And finally one day during a technical rehearsal, I was sitting in the back of the theater with August, and we were going ‘round and ‘round, changing the City of Bones scenes back and forth and in all directions. As August got up to go smoke a cigarette, we started talking about the scene and he said to me, “ok, fix it. Tell me one thing you’d do.” And I told him my idea: the City of Bones is an African ritual. It starts with drums and it ends with drums. Real drums. Nothing modern.

So later, as director, I took out all the synthesized music and started instead with real acoustic sounds, even some drumming played onstage by the actors. I want the people onstage transported into a ritual, and this has to mean that things will happen that don’t normally happen. Languages change and will be spoken that aren’t normally spoken. We speak Yoruba. We speak Twee. We speak Wolof. We speak as Africans. Looks change. Smells change. Touches change. Movements change. And we bring you, the audience, through a change, too.
It’s important that the actors do this themselves, live and in their own voices, so the characters feel that they are experiencing something new and magical. When they do, then anything at all can happen in the City of Bones. But not until then.

Bill Sims, Jr., has written all of the incidental and opening and closing music, so that throughout Gem of the Ocean there is a consistent voice of the African-American community. There is a voice of our history. All the music is acoustic: banjo, piano, guitar, djembe (drums), percussion, and voice. I remember telling August, “In every single one of your plays, there is an opportunity for something much bigger than life to happen. And I think that special something needs to emanate from inside your characters.” I don’t think characters should come flying in or levitate above the stage, unless we can first get to that feeling inside ourselves. If we can feel something is ethereal, larger than life—something that you can’t imagine happening, but that must happen—only then can it reveal its power.

So go ahead and laugh. Clown. Have fun. Cry. Enjoy yourself. But this is August Wilson and it is history, and when you leave the theater I want you educated, illuminated, and nurtured. I want your heart full with an experience that you haven’t had before.

—Ruben Santiago-Hudson

SO LIVE, THAT WHEN THY SUMMONS COMES TO JOIN
THE INNUMERABLE CARAVAN, THAT MOVES
TO THAT MYSTERIOUS REALM, WHERE EACH SHALL TAKE
HIS CHAMBER IN THE SILENT HALLS OF DEATH,
THOU GO NOT, LIKE THE QUARRY-SLAVE AT NIGHT,
SCOURGED TO HIS DUNGEON, BUT, SUSTAINED AND SOOTHE
BY AN UNFALTERING TRUST, APPROACH THY GRAVE,
LIKE ONE WHO WRAPS THE DRAPERY OF HIS COUCH
ABOUT HIM, AND LIES DOWN TO PLEASANT DREAMS.

—From “Thanatopsis,” by William Cullen Bryant
(published in Poems, Harper and Brothers, 1840), quoted by Solly Two Kings in Gem of the Ocean
AUGUST WILSON’S OPERATIC SWEEP ADDED
NOBILITY TO ALREADY–NOBLE LIVES

BY BEN BRANTLEY (OCTOBER 4, 2005)

August Wilson did not sound a thing like Bessie Smith. He didn’t, anyway, when I spent an afternoon with him in Pittsburgh ten years ago. His voice was soft, amused, a bit academic, like that of someone enjoying a bustling view from a comfortable distance. Comfortable and distant are not words that come to mind with Smith, whose recordings from the 1930s still thunder with bottomless anger and appetite.

Yet recently, I haven’t been able to listen to Smith without hearing Mr. Wilson, too, singing along in a whispery annotation. That day in Pittsburgh, he was elaborating on something he had said before, about how discovering Bessie’s recordings had upended and transformed the way he wrote plays. And suddenly, after apologizing that he couldn’t “sing a lick,” Mr. Wilson was intoning lines from the first Smith recording he owned, when he was a teenager.

“Daddy, I want some diamond rings,” he rasped quietly, his eyes bright and conspiratorial. He was leaning over a table in a diner in the Hill District, where he grew up and where most of his plays are set, beating time with a coffee spoon on the Formica, making the rhythm ring.

That half-sung, half-spoken phrase and its metallic percussion have been stuck in my mind since I learned that Mr. Wilson was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer at 60. For those are the sounds of how one dramatist—a great dramatist—listens. Mr. Wilson was letting me hear something I thought I knew, but with his ears. And after that, with every play by Mr. Wilson I’ve attended, I’ve felt as if I could hear him hearing Bessie’s blues.

People talk about an artist having an eye. But with playwrights, it’s the ear that counts. Mr. Wilson had a peerless pair. His writing comes closer to the sweep of Shakespearean music than that of any of his contemporaries. Edward Albee creates intense and elegant chamber pieces; David Mamet, machine-gun jazz; Sam Shepard, rhapsodic plainsong; Harold Pinter, monastic chants; and Tom Stoppard, jaunty concertos. But these days only Mr. Wilson has written plays that sound like grand opera—and it is no contradiction to say that it is opera rooted in the blues.

Mr. Wilson’s majestic cycle of ten plays of the African-American journey through the 20th century doesn’t just sound operatic. Even though his characters are almost all poor and socially powerless, their stories bring to minds the gods of Wagner and the doomed royalty of Verdi.

Poltergeists, mad prophets, fatal curses, visions of unavenged dead men and of roads to heaven, genealogies that twist into constellations of legend, and bloody crimes of passion
that seem as inevitable as they are unnecessary. These elements recur regularly in the works of the Wilson cycle, the last of which (Radio Golf) was first produced this year.

Yet the mythic and otherworldly are always anchored to a landscape dominated by the physical and economic facts of hard lives: the exact costs of shoes and coffins and bottles of liquor; the potential for profit in stolen refrigerators and dog feces; precise psychological descriptions of bodies scarred and shattered by knives and bullets; the hungry before and depleted after of quick sexual couplings. It is the music of Mr. Wilson’s prose that connects the mundane and the mystical, and allows earthbound men and women to raise voices that fly to heaven.

In Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Mr. Wilson’s 1984 breakthrough drama about a fractious recording session of blues artists in the 1920s, the combustible title character speaks about the music she performs. “White folks don’t understand about the blues,” she says. “They hear it come out, but they don’t know how it got there. They don’t understand that’s life’s way of talking. You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ’cause that’s a way of understanding life.”

Not everyone in Mr. Wilson’s plays—including, by the way, Ma Rainey—is always in touch with this music of illumination. Nor is this music the same for everyone. Mr. Wilson’s major characters are all in search of songs that define them both as individuals, as specifically as handwriting, and as parts of a shared history.

In a prefatory note to his masterpiece, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (on Broadway in 1988), set in 1911, Mr. Wilson writes of the African Americans who have made the exodus from the South to the North: “Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their bags a long line of separation and dispersement” as they “search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy.”

This describes not only the quest of Mr. Wilson’s major characters but also his own emergence as a playwright. Mr. Wilson said—and said so many times that the story has acquired the burnished sheen of myth—that it was discovering vintage blues recordings, as a young man living in a Pittsburgh boarding house, that made him start to listen to the people around him with a new sense of the notes beneath the words.

Transforming that perception into fluid theater took Mr. Wilson years. He spoke with wry disparagement of the self-conscious poetry of his early work. But it would be foolish to mistake the voices in his plays as mere transcription of overheard conversations from the Hill. That would be like assuming that Elizabethans spoke in Shakespearean blank verse.

The actor Charles S. Dutton, who has starred in several of Mr. Wilson’s plays, has said of the dialogue: “It is a lingo that has an inherent rhythm of its own. Most of us have been
black all our lives. But we kid each other about August’s writing. We’ll say, ‘I’ve never heard anything in my life like that, have you?’”

Pick up any play by Mr. Wilson, and a few pages into it, you’ll start to pulse to the music. He uses real songs, from children’s game-playing chants to raunchy scorchers à la Smith like “Anybody Here Wanna Try My Cabbage” (in Seven Guitars). And his characters, especially those wild-eyed soothsayer types who show up a bit too persistently, will sometimes speak in the manner of oracular professors about the nature and importance of song.

But none of this would count for much if Mr. Wilson didn’t deliver the music that infuses his characters’ talk. It buzzes like traded jazz riffs when men argue about subjects as pedestrian as train schedules. It acquires the wistfulness of Puccinian lament when lonely souls recall love. It shifts into subversively antiphonal call and response when fathers and sons quarrel in the voices of their respective generations. And it soars into gospel chorales when characters journey into the historical night of their slave ancestors, as in Joe Turner and Gem of the Ocean.

In such passages, the subliminal movement is from disjointedness and friction into transcendent, seemingly unwitting harmony. And then there are the arias—the monologues of remembered losses and thwarted ambitions that build in Wagnerian crescendos, given reverberant life on Broadway by actors like James Earl Jones (in Fences) and Delroy Lindo (in Joe Turner). Some of these arias end in defeated dying falls; others in moments of epiphany. But in either case, there is triumph in the very music, in the sense of pain and chaos woven, however briefly, into an ecstatic symmetry.

Music here is always a way of remembering, a congenital, instinctive force that reaches back through the centuries to the first slave ships. It seems telling that in the last play of the cycle, a tale of capitalist pipe dreams set in the 1990s, the music often sounds fainter than before. The central character in Radio Golf is an urban redeveloper, which in the world of the Hill means he is an eraser of history. In other words, he has lost his song. Mr. Wilson sets him on the path to looking for it by the end.

Last month, it was announced that the Virginia Theater will be renamed the August Wilson Theater. This suggests a kind of Ovidian metamorphosis—playwright becomes playhouse—that is appropriate to a dramatist whose work is so appreciative of mythic transformations. I prefer to think of the theater less as a memorial to Mr. Wilson, who is after all still very much alive through his work, than as a living reminder of the dynamic of memory that great theater turns into song.
AUNT ESTER’S CHILDREN: A CENTURY ONSTAGE

BY AUGUST WILSON

This essay, which serves as the preface to King Hedley II (TCG Books), was written in the spring of 2000, before the playwright had begun the final two plays in his 20th-century cycle. It first appeared in the New York Times (April 23, 2000).

In 1975 I wrote a short story titled “The Greatest Blues Singer in the World.” As it turned out, the text of the story was very short. I began, “The streets that Balboa walked were his own private ocean, and Balboa was drowning.” That seemed to communicate the idea with more clarity than I could hope to gain by adding to it, so I stopped and typed “The End.”

I had conceived a much longer story that spoke to the social context of the artist and how one’s private ocean is inextricably linked to the tributary streams that gave rise to, and occasioned, the impulse to song.

Before one can become an artist one must first be. It is being in all facets, its many definitions, that endows the artist with an immutable sense of himself that is necessary for the accomplishment of his task. Simply put, art is beholden to the kiln in which the artist was fired.

Before I am anything, a man or a playwright, I am an African American. The tributary streams of culture, history and experience have provided me with the materials out of which I make my art. As an African-American playwright, I have many forebears who have pioneered and hacked out of the underbrush an aesthetic that embraced and elevated the cultural values of black Americans to a level equal to those of their European counterparts.

Out of their experiences, the sacred and the profane, was made a record of their traverse and the many points of epiphany and redemption. They have hallowed the ground and provided a tradition gained by will and daring. I count it a privilege to stand at the edge of the art, with the gift of their triumphs and failures, as well as the playwrights down through the ages who found within the turbulent history of human thought and action an ennobling conduct worthy of art. The culture of black America, forged in the cotton fields of the South and tested by the hard pavements of the industrial North, has been the ladder by which we have climbed into the New World. The field of manners and rituals of social intercourse—the music, speech, rhythms, eating habits, religious beliefs, gestures, notions of common sense, attitudes toward sex, concepts of beauty and justice, and the responses to pleasure and pain—have enabled us to survive the loss of our political will and
the disruption of our history. The culture’s moral codes and sanction of conduct offer clear instructions as to the value of community, and make clear that the preservation and promotion, the propagation and rehearsal of the value of one’s ancestors is the surest way to a full and productive life.

The cycle of plays I have been writing since 1979 is my attempt to represent that culture in dramatic art. From the beginning, I decided not to write about historical events or the pathologies of the black community. The details of our struggle to survive and prosper, in what has been a difficult and sometimes bitter relationship with a system of laws and practices that deny us access to the tools necessary for productive and industrious life, are available to any serious student of history or sociology.

Instead, I wanted to present the unique particulars of black American culture as the transformation of impulse and sensibility into codes of conduct and response, into cultural rituals that defined and celebrated ourselves as men and women of high purpose. I wanted to place this culture onstage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us in all areas of human life and endeavor and through profound moments of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves.

From *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (which is set in 1911) to *King Hedley II* (set in 1985), the cycle covers almost 80 years of American history. The plays are peopled with characters whose ancestors have been in the United States since the early 17th century.

They were brought across an ocean, chained in the hulls of 350-ton vessels. In the southern part of the United States, they were made to labor in the vast agricultural plantations. They made do without surnames and lived in dirt-floor cabins. They labored without pay. They were bought and sold and traded for money and gold and diamonds and molasses and horses and cows. They were fed the barest of subsistence diets. When they tried to escape, they were tracked down by dogs and men on horseback. They existed as an appendage to the body of society. They had no moral personality and no moral status in civic or church law.

After 200-odd years, as a political expediency, they were granted freedom from being the property of other men. During the next hundred years they were disenfranchised, their houses were burned, they were hung from trees, forced into separate and inferior houses, schools, and public facilities. They were granted status in law and denied it in practice.

Yet the characters in the plays still place their faith in America’s willingness to live up to the meaning of her creed so as not to make a mockery of her ideals. It is this belief in America’s honor that allows them to pursue the American Dream even as it remains elusive. The conflicts with the larger society are cultural conflicts. Conflicts over ways of being and doing things. The characters are all continually negotiating for a position, the high
ground of the battlefield, from where they might best shout an affirmation of the value and worth of their being in the face of a many-million-voice chorus that seeks to deafen and obliterate it.

They shout, they argue, they wrestle with love, honor, duty, betrayal; they have loud voices and big hearts; they demand justice, they love, they laugh, they cry, they murder, and they embrace life with zest and vigor. Despite the fact that the material conditions of their lives are meager. Despite the fact that they have no relationship with banking capital and their communities lack the twin pillars of commerce and industry. Despite the fact that their relationship to the larger society is one of servitude and marked neglect. In all the plays, the characters remain pointed toward the future, their pockets lined with fresh hope and an abiding faith in their own abilities and their own heroics.

From Herald Loomis’s vision of the bones rising out of the Atlantic Ocean (the largest unmarked graveyard in the world) in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, to the pantheon of vengeful gods (“The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog”) in The Piano Lesson, to Aunt Ester, the then 349-year-old conjure woman who first surfaced in Two Trains Running—the metaphysical presence of a spirit world has become increasingly important to my work. It is the world that the characters turn to when they are most in need.

Aunt Ester has emerged for me as the most significant persona of the cycle. The characters, after all, are her children. The wisdom and tradition she embodies are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personality and for dealing with a society in which the contradictions, over the decades, have grown more fierce, and for exposing all the places it is lacking in virtue.

Theater, as a powerful conveyer of human values, has often led us through the impossible landscape of American class, regional, and racial conflicts, providing fresh insights and fragile but enduring bridges of fruitful dialogue. It has provided us with a mirror that forces us to face personal truths and enables us to discover within ourselves an indomitable spirit that recognizes, sometimes across wide social barriers, those common concerns that make possible genuine cultural fusion.

With the completion of my latest play, King Hedley II, I have only the “bookends,” the first and last decades of the 20th century, remaining. As I approach the cycle’s end, I find myself a different person than when I started. The experience of writing plays has altered me in ways I cannot yet fully articulate.

As with any journey, the only real question is: “Is the port worthy of the cruise?” The answer is a resounding “Yes.” I often remark that I am a struggling playwright. I’m struggling to get the next play on the page. Eight down and counting. The struggle continues.
AT THE CLOSE OF A CENTURY
By DON SHIRLEY

When August Wilson wrote his breakthrough success, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, in 1984, he had no idea he had embarked on a cycle of plays that would take more than two decades to complete.

It wasn't until he was writing *The Piano Lesson*, three plays later, that it dawned on him that by setting his plays in different decades of the 20th century, he was gradually constructing a cycle. It would focus on "the largest issues and ideas that black people faced in those times," he said in 1986, shortly after he realized what was taking shape.

Many playwrights have had dreams on that scale; few have seen them realized. Yet Wilson's ambitious goal has been reached. All of the plays have been produced, with eight reaching Broadway.

As the cycle continued, the plays became more sprawling and more referential to one another—with characters showing up in more than one play. The atmosphere of the neighborhood where Wilson grew up, Pittsburgh's Hill District—hardly present in the first two produced plays—became stronger.

GEM OF THE OCEAN
Plot: A young man seeks an old seer's counsel about a violent incident, while a former Underground Railroad guide frets over his sister and a black constable tries to enforce the white man's law.
Inside Info: This was Wilson’s first play since *Ma Rainey* with a dominant female character, the 285-year-old seer Aunt Ester, who was mentioned but not seen in *Two Trains Running* and *King Hedley II*. Wilson said, in 1904, “you could walk around and find people who were slaves. I find that incredible.”

**Joe Turner’s Come and Gone**
Plot: A mysterious man in search of his wife, accompanied by his young daughter, arrives at a boarding house where a neighbor tries to help him rediscover his identity.

Inside Info: Wilson has called this play his favorite. His inspiration came from a photograph of Romare Bearden’s painting *Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket*. The titular character is offstage—he’s the white man who pressed the leading character into peonage in the South.

**Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom**
Plot: In a Chicago recording studio, “Ma” Rainey and her band—exploited by the white-run music industry—fall into strife among themselves.

Inside Info: The fourth play Wilson wrote was his first to be produced—and the only play in his 20th-century cycle set outside Pittsburgh. Wilson said: “*Ma Rainey* isn’t about ‘This is what you took from us’ but ‘This is so valuable what you’ve taken from us.’”

**The Piano Lesson**
Plot: Boy Willie, a sharecropper from the South, wants to sell his family’s ancestral piano. His Pittsburgh sister Berniece insists on keeping it—the piano has the carved faces of their great-grandfather’s wife and daughter, who were sold in exchange for the piano during the days of slavery.
**Inside Info:** Wilson picked up his second Pulitzer for this story. Skip James’s blues song “Special Delivery” was part of Wilson’s inspiration—he said he “wanted to write a play like that song—with the same grace, elegance, power.”

**SEVEN GUITARS**
Plot: A group of neighbors in the backyard of a tenement house returns from a funeral, and the play flashes back to the final week of the young singer-songwriter who died.  
**Inside Info:** “All of the things in the play are very necessary, but they all appear to be quite unnecessary,” Wilson said.

**FENCES**
Set in: 1957  * Premiere: 1985  
Plot: A former Negro League baseball player who was born too soon to make the transition to the major leagues now collects garbage and nurses grudges against his athletic 17-year-old son.
**Inside Info:** Probably because of its original star, James Earl Jones, this Pulitzer- and Tony-winning play is considered Wilson’s foremost star vehicle.

**TWO TRAINS RUNNING**
Plot: A group of regulars hangs out at a cafe that might be condemned—or might be bought by the nearby mortuary owner. Romance blossoms between an excon and a waitress.
**Inside Info:** This play is more conversation-oriented than most of Wilson’s previous plays. The oral tradition is “how the values of black...”
culture are passed along,” Wilson said. “The history is not written down; the mythology is not written down.”

**JITNEY**

*Set in: 1977 *  *Premiere: 1982*

**Plot:** The owner of an unlicensed cab business faces the threat that his building will be demolished, while his son—out of prison after 20 years—seeks a reconciliation.

**Inside Info:** The first play that Wilson wrote for his cycle is the only one of the ten that never reached Broadway—although it did play off Broadway. Although Wilson is known for king-size first drafts, he had to expand the original *Jitney*. He joked: “If it’s a 90-minute play, no one will know it’s mine.”

**KING HEDLEY II**

*Set in: 1985 *  *Premiere: 1999*

**Plot:** The title character, just out of jail, is saving money to open a video store but instead becomes a bank robber.

**Inside Info:** Marion McClinton took over the reins from Lloyd Richards as Wilson’s director with this play, which is set in the same backyard and has two of the same characters as *Seven Guitars*. McClinton said, “I’ve worked on Shakespeare, Beckett, and Genet, and they were a walk in the park compared to this play.”

**RADIO GOLF**

*Set in: 1997 *  *Premiere: 2005*

**Plot:** While Aunt Ester’s house is scheduled for demolition, Harmond Wilkes II wants to teach kids in the neighborhood how to play golf—and wants to become Pittsburgh’s first black mayor. His partner helps a white radio investor take advantage of minority ownership tax breaks.

**Inside Info:** Wilson examines the contemporary black middle class. The play includes a character from *Two Trains Running*, two descendants of characters in *Gem of the Ocean*, part of the set from *Jitney*, and a speech that was cut from *King Hedley II*.

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THE BONES OF THE MIDDLE PASSAGE
Introduction to *The Middle Passage: White Ships | Black Cargo*

BY DR. JOHN HENRIK CLARKE

Nowhere in the annals of history has a people experienced such a long and traumatic ordeal as Africans during the Atlantic slave trade. Over the nearly four centuries of the slave trade—which continued until the end of the Civil War—millions of African men, women, and children were savagely torn from their homeland, herded onto ships, and dispersed all over the so-called New World. Although there is no way to compute exactly how many people perished, it has been estimated that between 30 and 60 million Africans were subjected to this horrendous triangular trade system and that only one third—if that—of those people survived.

The triangular trade system was so named because the ships embarked from European ports, stopped in Africa to gather the captives, after which they set out for the New World to deliver their human cargo, and then returned to their point of origin. The Middle Passage was that leg of the slave trade triangle that brought the human cargo from West Africa to North America, South America, and the Caribbean. This perilous trip was the most cruel and terrifying part of the triangular trade system, and its crippling effects are still very much with us today.

To endure the Middle Passage required great physical strength, mental toughness, and spiritual resolve. Under ideal sailing conditions the trip from Africa to the Americas could be sailed in little over a month, but conditions were never ideal during the Middle Passage, and the average voyage took from five to twelve weeks.

It was not atypical to see a massive school of sharks darting in and out of the wake of the ships filled with human cargo plying the Atlantic. For miles they followed the battered and moldy vessels, waiting to attack the disease-ravaged black bodies that were periodically tossed into the ocean. Except for mutiny, death was the only liberation those tormented souls—Ashantis, Mandingoes, Ibos, Fulanis, Wolofs, Coromantees, and others—could expect from the stifling, fetid hold of the ship, where they had been crammed for more than a month, and where the menace of smallpox was especially fearsome.

Pinioned in the stench between the ship’s decks, shackled two by two, the right wrist and ankle of one to the left wrist and ankle of another, the African captives struggled to breathe, struggled to find comfort on rough boards that tore at their naked bodies with each lurch of the ship. The captives’ cries of grief erupted in several different tongues; their...
moans and wails a common chorus of misery and hopelessness. They were human ballast, abducted from family and friends, severed from a communal life that had throbbed with compassion and possibility. The agony was so relentless, their deprivation so deep and terrible, that even the sky became a faded memory.

In the dank, crowded hold, which was about five feet high, the captives were confined in a prone position, occupying no more space than a coffin. On the larger slave ships this limited space was further constricted by a horizontal shelf or platform in the middle of it, making it possible for a second row of captives to be shelved. This practice was particularly evident on vessels captained by the dreaded “tight packers,” those slavers who chose to compensate for their anticipated losses by hauling more human cargo than specified by regulations based on the size of the ship. That is, if a ship were restricted to carrying 300 captives and the shipping company’s contract called for 250, the captain would pack 350 people on board to make up for those who would likely succumb to sickness or be killed during an uprising.

On the other hand, the captains that were “loose packers” believed that by giving the Africans a little more room, with better food and a limited amount of exercise and liberty, they would reduce the mortality rate and thereby command a better price for the captives at the end of voyage. However, because the profits from the slave trade were so great, most of the slavers during the 18th century were tight packers.

John Newton, himself a slave-ship captain, witnessed this nefarious practice and reported on the captives’ cramped quarters and the heavy leg irons that linked them together: “Every morning, perhaps, more instances than one are found of the living and the dead fastened together.” After several voyages Newton quit the slave trade, became a minister, and wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace,” with its autobiographical line “...that saved a wretch like me.”

Many of the Africans huddled in the darkness cursed their fate, while others prayed and shrieked in horror each time the hatch cover closed above, virtually entombing them. They had no idea what to expect; what cruel injustices still remained on the captors’ list of degradations. Having been stripped from their homeland, from their gods, they could only guess what bitter misfortune awaited them. Were they to be eaten or sacrificed to the gods of their captors? The weaker ones in the hold begged their chain-mates to kill them while they slept. Others slipped into severe melancholy and trances, while others simply went mad. Even for those who survived the lice, fleas, and vicious rats, there were still the violent crews waiting topside to torture the men and to rape the women. The Middle Passage,
the second leg of the Atlantic slave trade, was a horrendous experience, and death followed the ships like the wind.

The manacled and terrified Africans knew very little about the process in which they had been ensnared. While there were those among them who had experienced slavery in Africa, they were not prepared for this new form of captivity that dehumanized them and carted them away from their cherished homeland. Slavery in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans was comparatively benign; it was more akin to indentured servitude, where slaves sometimes even rose to positions of influence. In this respect it can be likened to the slavery of ancient Greece and ancient Rome. The Africans knew nothing of the enforced chattel slavery of the invaders. Nor did they know who they were or from whence they came.

Among the European invaders, the Portuguese led the way, although their explorations came 800 years after the Arab slave trade began across the Sahara Desert and which later occurred with increased frequency along the coast of East Africa. For years the Portuguese mariners had heard stories about the great riches of Africa, and they began to trade with the African countries as early as 1434. During these early trading expeditions along the coast of West Africa the Portuguese were mainly interested in gold. But soon they envisioned in the African people reserves of cheap labor. Black humanity was suddenly more precious than gold. By 1482 the Portuguese had erected the fortress of Elmina Castle on the West Coast of Africa, near present-day Takoradi, Ghana, in order to stabilize the process of capture and detention of slaves.

The Portuguese were followed by the Spanish entry into the slave trade. Yet even though slaves were taken in large numbers to Spain's New World settlements, the Spanish did not have a prominent role in the trade itself. Toward the end of the 15th century the English and the French entered the slave traffic. However, the first real challenge to the Portuguese was the relatively late Dutch involvement. The Dutch were ruthless in their attempts to catch up, and in 20 years they established a monopoly in the West African slave trade. This lead was not threatened until the middle of the 17th century, when the English and French intensified their activities. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English continued their participation in slaving on the West Coast of Africa until well into the 19th century, and even during the Civil War. And many of these captives were delivered to merchants in the United States.

To facilitate the capture of Africans, the Europeans devised a method of divide and conquer, pitting one African village against the other, and then taking the spoils for themselves. The Africans were soon confronted with a dilemma: either capture or be captured.
To reject the guns offered by the invaders in exchange for other Africans often proved detrimental to a village because those same guns could end up in the hands of a traditional enemy, giving them a military advantage.

The Europeans did not go to Africa bearing civilization or to uplift the people they defined as savages; their purpose was to pillage and plunder. Poor Europeans involved in the slave trade quickly prospered, improved their status, and acquired an undreamed-of wealth. By enslaving millions of Africans to labor on the plantations in the Americas, the Europeans dramatically rescued and reshaped the economies of their own destitute countries.

The Africans could not combat this European desire for conquest. They came from societies where nature was kind, furnishing them with enough food, enough land. Their societies were governed by honor and obligation, and land was neither bought nor sold.

In contrast, the European temperament was shaped in part by a thousand-year-old feudal system, which was a form of slavery. Europeans came from societies where nature was stingy; where brother competed against brother for his breakfast, land, and women. Europe was just emerging from the Middle Ages, a time when poverty and disease were rampant, “an age haunted by death and damnation.” The Africans had never dealt with such a fiercely competitive people, a people set on asserting its dominance at any cost. . . .

African captives found a measure of relief on the slave ships through revolts and mutinies, which were a common occurrence. One clear indication of this is the costly insurance premium the shipping companies had to pay. Lloyd’s of London, one of the world’s wealthiest insurance companies, was virtually launched by insuring slave ships. Certainly the Africans did not accept their servitude peacefully. To deter the possibility of mutiny, the captives—particularly the men—were kept chained at all times, even during the brief periods topside when they were forced to exercise by dancing and jumping, in order to protect the slavers’ investments as well as to vent mounting hostility. These exercises were often accompanied by Africans playing banjos, and beating drums or upturned kettles. Even so, the potential mutiny was an event that bothered the sleep of every captain of a slave ship.

Nor did the crew rest without fear. In fact there was little rest for them at all as they faced an endless round of duties. They were lucky to survive one voyage, and rarely made a second. The conditions of their employment forced them to deny the humanity of the Africans; and all too often they began to question the value of their own humanity.

There were successful uprisings in which the Africans gained control of the ships and were able to steer them back to their homeland. A memorable mutiny was led by Joseph
Cinque in 1839. Cinque and the other rebels killed the captain and took over the slaver *Amistad*. They were eventually captured and tried for murder and piracy on the high seas. However, in the end they were acquitted of all charges. Other revolts resulted in the loss of crew members as well as captives. Those who could not mutiny resorted to other forms of resistance. Women were often the most troublesome. They would devise ways of making constant, loud, and unnerving noises that would drive the crew to distraction. And of course there were many who chose suicide—mainly by jumping into the shark-infested ocean—rather than allow the Europeans to determine their destiny.

But despite the miserable conditions, inadequate space and food, deadly diseases, and the violence from crew members, millions of African captives survived, demonstrating their strength and implacable will. In humankind’s shameful history of forced migrations, the journey of the Africans from their bountiful homeland to the slave markets of the New World is one of the most tragic. It is a story that can never be told in all its gruesome details. Of the countless number of Africans ripped from the villages of Africa—from the Sénégal River to northern Angola—during the nearly four centuries of the slave trade, approximately one third of them died on the torturous march to the ships and one third died in the holding stations on both sides of the Atlantic or on the ships. It is estimated that ten to twenty million arrived in the New World alive, to be then committed to bondage. If the Atlantic were to dry up, it would reveal a scattered pathway of human bones, African bones marking the various routes of the Middle Passage.

But those who did survive multiplied, and have contributed to the creation of a new human society in the Americas and the Caribbean. It is a testament to the vitality and fortitude of the Africans that ten to twenty million lived through the heinous ordeal that many consider the greatest crime ever committed against a people in human history.
NARRATIVES FROM THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

OLAUDAH EQUIANO, ENSLAVED

Born in 1745 in what is now Nigeria, Olaudah Equiano was kidnapped and sold into slavery in Barbados. Owned at various times by a captain of the British Royal Navy and a Quaker merchant (this last was unusual, as most Quakers opposed slavery), he eventually was able to buy his freedom. He became a seaman and traveled the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the Atlantic, and even the Arctic, in an unsuccessful attempt to reach the North Pole. In London, he became involved in the movement to abolish slavery, and in 1789, to aid the cause, he wrote an autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African*. The book became immensely popular and made Equiano a wealthy man. Here is an excerpt describing the Middle Passage:

At last, when the ship we were in had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel. But this disappointment was the least of my sorrow. The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship’s cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily perhaps for myself I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck; and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters. In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries. Often did I think many of the
inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself; I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs. Every circumstance I met with served only to render my state more painful, and heighten my apprehensions, and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites. One day they had taken a number of fishes; and when they had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who were on the deck, rather than give any of them to us to eat, as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again, although we begged and prayed for some as well we could, but in vain; and some of my countrymen, being pressed by hunger, took an opportunity, when they thought no one saw them, of trying to get a little privately; but they were discovered, and the attempt procured them some very severe floggings.
One day, when we had a smooth sea, and a moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings, and jumped into the sea: immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship’s crew, who were instantly alarmed. Those of us that were the most active were, in a moment, put down under the deck; and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat to go out after the slaves. However, two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate; hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade. Many a time we were near suffocation, from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs [used for bodily waste], carried off many. During our passage I first saw flying fishes, which surprised me very much: they used frequently to fly across the ship, and many of them fell on the deck. I also now first saw the use of the quadrant. I had often with astonishment seen the mariners make observations with it, and I could not think what it meant. They at last took notice of my surprise; and one of them, willing to increase it, as well as to gratify my curiosity, made me one day look through it. The clouds appeared to me to be land, which disappeared as they passed along. This heightened my wonder: and I was now more persuaded than ever that I was in another world, and that every thing about me was magic. At last we came in sight of the island of Barbadoes, at which the whites onboard gave a great shout, and made many signs of joy to us.

ALEXANDER FALCONBRIDGE, SHIP’S SURGEON
Alexander Falconbridge was employed as a surgeon aboard various slave ships and had first-hand knowledge of many aspects of the slave trade. He related them in detail in his book, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*. The work covered the trade from when the ships first acquired African captives along the African coast, through the treatment of these people during the Middle Passage, to the time they were sold into slavery in the West Indies. Here is an excerpt:
Nor do these unhappy beings, after they become the property of the Europeans (from whom, as a more civilized people, more humanity might naturally be expected), find their situation in the least amended. Their treatment is no less rigorous. The men Negroes, on being brought aboard the ship, are immediately fastened together, two and two, by handcuffs on their wrists and by irons rivetted on their legs. They are then sent down between the decks and placed in an apartment partitioned off for that purpose. The women also are placed in a separate apartment between decks, but without being ironed. An adjoining room on the same deck is appointed for the boys. Thus they are all placed in different apartments.

The hardships and inconveniences suffered by the Negroes during the passage are scarcely to be enumerated or conceived. They are far more violently affected by seasickness than Europeans. It frequently terminates in death, especially among the women. But the exclusion of fresh air is among the most intolerable.

It is not in the power of the human imagination to picture a situation more dreadful or disgusting. Numbers of the slaves having fainted, they were carried upon deck where several of them died and the rest with great difficulty were restored. It had nearly proved fatal to me also. The climate was too warm to admit the wearing of any clothing but a shirt and that I had pulled off before I went down. In a quarter of an hour I was so overcome with the heat, stench, and foul air that I nearly fainted, and it was only with assistance I could get back on deck. The consequence was that I soon after fell sick of the same disorder from which I did not recover for several months.

This devastation, great as it was, some years ago was greatly exceeded by a Liverpool ship. This ship, though a much smaller ship than in which I have just mentioned, took on board at Bonny at least six hundred Negroes. By purchasing so great a number, the slaves were so crowded that they were obliged to lie one upon another. This caused such a mortality among them that without meeting with unusually bad weather or having a longer voyage than common, nearly one half of them died before the ship arrived in the West Indies.

As very few of the Negroes can so far brook the loss of their liberty and the hardships they endure, they are ever on the watch to take advantage of the least negligence in their oppressors. Insurrections are frequently the consequence; which are seldom expressed without much bloodshed. Sometimes these are successful and the whole ship's company is cut off. They are likewise always ready to seize every opportunity for committing some acts of desperation to free themselves from their miserable state and notwithstanding the restraints which are laid, they often succeed.
A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF SLAVERY IN NORTH AMERICA

1619 The first slaves arrive in America when a Dutch trader lands in Jamestown, Virginia, and exchanges his African cargo for food.

1620 Pilgrims establish the Plymouth colony in Massachusetts.

1636 Colonial North America’s slave trade begins when the first American slave carrier, Desire, is built and launched in Massachusetts.

1656 The word “slave” first appears in Virginia records. Statutes defining the status of blacks will appear in the 1660s, as slavery spreads throughout the American colonies. A recognizably race-based system of slavery will not emerge until the 1680s.

1688 Quakers in Pennsylvania sign an antislavery resolution, the first formal protest against slavery in the western hemisphere.

1698 The British Parliament creates the “triangle passage”: British merchants carry New England rum to African slavers, African slaves to the West Indies (the “Middle Passage”), and West Indian sugar and molasses to New England distilleries for distilling rum.

1705 The Virginia Slave Code codifies slave status, declaring all non-Christian servants entering the colony to be slaves. It defines all slaves as real estate, acquits masters who kill slaves during punishment, forbids slaves and free colored peoples from physically assaulting white persons, and denies slaves the right to bear arms or move abroad without written permission.

1775 The slave population in the colonies is nearly 500,000. In Virginia, the ratio of free colonists to slaves is nearly 1:1. In South Carolina it is approximately 1:2.

1776 The American colonies declare their independence from Britain. By the end of the War for Independence in 1783, ten thousand blacks will have served in the continental armies and five thousand as regular soldiers.

1777 Vermont is the first of the 13 colonies to abolish slavery and enfranchise all adult males.

1787 The Constitutional Convention declares that each slave is to be counted as three-fifths of a free man for purposes of taxation and representation. When the Constitution is approved, it extends slavery for 20 years.

1780 Pennsylvania becomes the first state to abolish slavery.
1790 The first U.S. census lists a population of 757,000 blacks, composing 19 percent of the total population. Nine percent of blacks are free.

1792 Eli Whitney’s cotton gin makes growing cotton extremely profitable. This increases demand for workers (slaves) and rejuvenates the slave labor economy.

1793 The first Fugitive Slave Law is passed, allowing slave owners to cross state lines in the pursuit of fugitives and making it a penal offense to abet runaway slaves.

1803 Ohio is admitted to the Union as a free state.

1806 In Pennsylvania the Underground Railroad is organized to aid escaping slaves. Ohio passes black laws to deter runaway slaves from settling in the state.

1808 The importation of slaves into the United States becomes illegal.

1819 U.S. law declares slave trading to be a capital offense. Canada denies the American government the right to pursue runaway slaves within its borders.

1820 The Missouri Compromise establishes the dividing line between free and slave states and territories.

1830 The slave population in the United States numbers more than two million, making the ratio of free to enslaved Americans approximately 5:5.

1831 William Lloyd Garrison begins to publish the Liberato, an abolitionist paper, in Boston. Nat Turner leads a slave rebellion in Virginia. The Underground Railroad is given its name.

1833 Britain abolishes slavery in all of its colonies, effective the following year.

1838 Frederick Douglass escapes slavery and becomes an important abolitionist and advocate for African Americans.

1841 The U.S. Supreme Court rules that the individuals who revolted on the slave ship Amistad in 1839 were freemen (not born in bondage in the West Indies) and orders their release.

1842 In the case of Prigg v. Pennsylvania, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law is constitutional, while state personal liberty laws make unconstitutional demands on slave owners. Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law is declared the federal government’s responsibility, not the states’.

1850 The Compromise of 1850 admits California to the Union as a free state, allows the slave states of New Mexico and Utah to be decided by popular sovereignty, and bans slave trade in D.C. A second fugitive slave law, enforced by the federal government, strengthens the rights of slave owners and threatens the rights of free blacks. Many states pass personal liberty laws in response.
1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is an immediate bestseller and helps turn public opinion against the Fugitive Slave Act and slavery itself.

1857 In the Dred Scott case, the U.S. Supreme Court decides that African Americans are not citizens of the United States, and that Congress has no power to restrict slavery in any federal territory. This means that a slave who makes it to a free state is still considered a slave.

1859 The last slave ship to bring slaves into the United States lands in Mobile Bay, Alabama.

1859 A group of whites and blacks, led by John Brown, conducts an unsuccessful raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, in an attempt to undermine slavery in the South.

1860 The slave population is now nearly four million, making the ratio of free to enslaved Americans approximately 7:1.

1861 Tension, exacerbated by the slavery issue, has been building between the North and South for decades as they jockeyed for power. Prompted by Abraham Lincoln’s election, slave states and territories, led by South Carolina, secede from the Union. The Civil War begins when Confederate General Beauregard fires on Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. Seventy-five thousand blacks volunteering for the U.S. army are rejected.

1862 The first part of the Emancipation Proclamation is issued by President Lincoln. It declares all slaves in areas of rebellion to be free, but exempts slaves in states that have not seceded from the Union. Congress abolishes slavery in Washington, D.C., and the territories.

1865 The Civil War ends. With the ratification (by 27 of the 36 states) of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, slavery is abolished in the United States. The amendment reads: “Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” Newly re-elected President Lincoln is assassinated.

1866 Congress approves the 14th Amendment, granting due process and equal protection under the law to all citizens, and granting citizenship to blacks. It is designed to protect the recently freed slaves. Virginia legally recognizes marriages between African Americans and grants children of those marriages legitimacy and inheritance rights. The Ku Klux Klan is organized in Tennessee as a social organization of Confederate veterans. It quickly becomes a terrorist organization. All-white legislatures in the former Confederate states pass so-called “Black Codes,” sharply curtailing African Americans' freedom and virtually re-enslaving them.

1867 Congress overrides presidential vetoes to pass the first, second, and third Reconstruction Acts, ushering in the period known as “Radical Reconstruction,” during
which the governments of all southern states, except Tennessee, are declared invalid, and the states are broken up into military districts overseen by federal troops.

1870 The 15th Amendment is ratified. It states that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Congress also passes the Enforcement Acts, a series of criminal codes that protect blacks’ right to vote, hold office, serve on juries, and receive equal protection of laws. Aimed at punishing Ku Klux Klan activities, the acts allow the federal government to intervene when the states do not.

1875 The Civil Rights Act of 1875 is passed, guaranteeing the rights of all Americans to public accommodations, such as inns, restaurants, and theaters, regardless of race. It is never enforced.

1881 The Tuskegee Institute is founded in Alabama to train African Americans as teachers and in agriculture and industry. Tennessee passes the first “Jim Crow” laws, segregating the state railroad. Other states follow the lead and legalize segregation.

1883 The Civil Rights Act of 1875 is ruled unconstitutional.

1895 Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise speech, in which he suggests that blacks forgo civil and political rights in favor of economic rights. It supports a “separate but equal” mentality, and vocational education for blacks. It is very well received by the white press, less so by many other African-American leaders, including W.E.B. DuBois.

1896 In Plessy v. Ferguson, the Supreme Court rules that “separate but equal facilities” are proper under the 14th Amendment, giving legal sanction to Jim Crow segregation laws. The ruling will stand until 1954.

1898 Louisiana tries to disenfranchise its African Americans by passing a “grandfather clause” limiting the right to vote to anyone whose father and grandfather were qualified on January 1, 1867. (No African Americans had the right to vote at that time.)

1901 Booker T. Washington dines at the White House, which led to a scandal for the president who extended the invitation, Theodore Roosevelt.

1903 W.E.B. DuBois publishes The Souls of Black Folk, which presents the “color line” as the major problem of the 20th century. In 1905 he will help found the Niagara Movement, demanding full equality for African Americans.

1909 The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is founded by a group of African American and white activists, including W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois is the only one of the seven founding African-American activists to serve on the NAACP board.
THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

BY MICHAEL PALLER

The Underground Railroad, in which Gem of the Ocean’s Solly Two Kings and Eli served, was, as Nigerian-born scholar Nilgun Anadolu Okur writes,

a secret organization that aimed to receive, conceal, and forward fugitives from the South to the North and Canada. . . . The Underground Railroad was a loosely connected system relying for the most part on the concern of those who participated to help other persons, in most cases spontaneously. Due to the circumstances of enslavement, the fugitives were distrustful, and rightfully suspicious of even other fugitives.

The first record we have of Underground Railroad activity is a 1786 letter by George Washington. He writes of a runaway slave from Alexandria, Virginia, whom a group of Philadelphia Quakers was attempting to liberate. Some historians have named Columbia, Pennsylvania, in Lancaster County in the eastern part of the state, as the home of the first organized movement to aid escaping slaves. Activities there began as early as 1806.

The origins of the term “Underground Railroad” are hard to trace. One anecdote tells of a Kentucky slave owner who in 1831 chased an escaping slave named Davids as far as the northern shore of the Ohio River. There, Davids disappeared. The owner searched the river town of Ripley, Ohio, which was known as an abolitionist stronghold, but he never saw Davids again. When he was asked back home what happened to his slave, the owner supposedly said he “must have gone off on an underground road.” At some point, “road” became “railroad,” but why and when is not clear (railroads were little known in most parts of the country at the time).

Here is Okur’s description of how the Underground Railroad operated:

the “railroad” was made up of a loosely knit network of stations, located at points a day’s journey apart, to which a runaway would be brought by a “conductor.” Conductors, sometimes referred to as “pilots,” were the men and women who often went to the heart of southern territories and helped the fugitives to escape by leading them along secret routes to freedom. Along these routes were the houses or places of friendship, known as “stations” or “depots,” and men and women who ran them were known as “station masters.” Without having a formal organization, leadership in the Underground Railroad was
reached by individual performance and example, not by election or appointment. The conductors had to conceal their identities; they were unknown except by those in need of their help, and they had good reasons to avoid publicity. Usually a field agent who posed as a peddler, map maker, or census taker would establish the initial contact with the fugitive. Once he or she gained the confidence of the suspecting fugitive, the agent would leave the runaway in the hands of another “conductor,” who would take the runaway to the first station. There the runaway would be fed, rested, and sometimes given a disguise to start the journey by contributors who were known as “stockholders.” These people, who played a less active, less dangerous but equally important role, contributed money for bribes and transportation as much as for food and clothing. The traveling was done at night with the aid of the North Star on clear nights, which became a symbol of celestial pilot for the fugitives. Many slaveholders,
on the other hand, expressed their hatred for the North Star and declared that, if they could, they would tear it from its place in the heavens.

As for the conditions of northbound travel, during the day the fugitive would be concealed in a barn, cave, sail loft, or hayrick. Most houses that were stations had secret passages and chambers to facilitate hiding or escaping.

Between 1830 and 1850, more than 2,000 fugitives were assisted by the Underground Railroad. It was Pennsylvania, Ohio, Massachusetts, and even Connecticut, mainly those states that are close either to Canada or the southern regions, that established the most successful operations of the Underground Railroad.

In Gem of the Ocean, Solly tells Citizen that in his day working the Railroad, he carried 62 people to freedom as a dragman—the one who guarded the rear as the group moved at night. It was perhaps the most dangerous position, as the dragman would be the closest to the pursuing dogs and armed men (and in fact Solly bears the scars of being attacked by dogs as he traveled).

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AND THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW

In Gem of the Ocean, Eli says, “If you stay in the North you subject to end up back down South in slavery with half a foot and waving one arm.” He’s referring to the fact that, beginning in 1850, slaves who had successfully escaped to nonslave states could be legally returned to slavery.

In 1842, the Supreme Court ruled that states did not have to aid in the return of runaway slaves. National tensions over slavery grew during the following decade, however, and Congress eventually passed a bill called the Compromise of 1850. It contained, among other things, the Fugitive Slave Bill. The law gave slaveowners the right to hunt for and reclaim any runaway slaves wherever they might find them in the United States. Not only police forces and courts but also private citizens were obligated to assist in the recapture of runaways. Furthermore, people who were caught helping escaped slaves risked serving jail time as well as paying fines and restitution to the slaveowner.

As a result, the Underground Railroad saw a great increase of traffic along its secret paths. It is estimated that between 1850 and 1861, when the Civil War began, between 15,000 to 20,000 blacks found their way to Canada. Not all of these were slaves; many were exslaves who had previously fled to American cities in the North but who were now in jeopardy of being retaken.
THE GREAT MIGRATION

BY MICHAEL PALLER

Although the play takes place in 1904, before the Great Migration began, the reasons that many of Gem of the Ocean’s characters came to Pittsburgh, and the conditions faced by their family members who remained in the South, are similar, so it is worth looking at the phenomenon, why and how it occurred.

Most scholars place the Great Migration between 1916 and 1945 (although some extend it as far as 1970). Historical movements like the Great Migration, however, have no definitive beginning and end points. More important is what it was: the vast movement of African Americans from the South (it’s long been assumed that most were from rural areas but this has never been proved definitively) to the urban centers of the North. Between 1910 and 1920 alone, it is estimated that 400,000 African Americans migrated; by 1930, the total was more than a million. Northern cities saw their African-American populations increase by 20 percent or more between 1910 and 1930.

WHY DID THEY COME?

Economic Reasons. In 1900, 89.7 percent of the African-American population still lived in the South, and most of them, especially those in rural areas, were no better off economically than they had been during the years of slavery (and several would later say in oral histories that they were worse off). Conditions were poor, especially for those in rural areas who were sharecroppers. Since most southern African Americans were not allowed to purchase their own land to farm (unless it was the worst land to be found), they worked the land that belonged to whites, growing mostly cotton. In most cases, they bought their seed and farm implements from the landowner, and turned over to him, in return for a small sum, the bulk of the crop they grew. Generally, the prices they paid for seed and tools were so high, and the amount they received for their crop so low, that they were in permanent debt to the landowner—amounting to an economic form of slavery. Many tenant farmers were regularly cheated by their landlords. In the last years of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th, this was made even worse by a boll weevil infestation across the South that destroyed millions of tons of cotton. Meanwhile, according to historian Stewart Tolnay, “Occupational segregation in southern towns and cities concentrated male workers into unskilled jobs and female workers into domestic service.”
Violence. Historian Joe William Trotter, Jr. tells us:

In 1917, the African Methodist American Church Review articulated the forces that propelled blacks out of the South. “Neither character, the accumulation of property, the fostering of the Church, the schools, and a better and higher standard of the home” had made a difference in the status of black southerners. “Confidence in the sense of justice, humanity, and fair play of the white South is gone,” the paper concluded. One migrant articulated the same mood in verse:

An’ let one race have all de South
Where color lines are drawn
For ‘Hagar’s child’ done [stem] de tide
Farewell
we’re good and gone.

As much or more than the economic conditions, however, it was the brutality of injustice, ubiquitous as the air African Americans breathed, that created the urge to migrate. Jim Crow laws had been in growing force since 1883, when the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. That law stipulated “that all persons . . . shall be entitled to full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement.” (Sadly, one of the cases brought before the court to strike down the law was over a case of discrimination in a San Francisco theater.) In 1896 the court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that segregation was legal. Separate public accommodations—everything from schools to restaurants to theaters to drinking fountains—were constitutional. “Separate but equal” was now the law of the land.

The most conspicuous threat was the constant danger of lynching. Between 1889 and 1932, more than 3,700 people were lynched in the United States, more than 85 percent of them in the South. Migration was significantly higher out of counties that recorded many lynchings; during these years, the Chicago Urban League reported that after each lynching, the number of people arriving from the area where the murder had taken place increased.

The Southwestern Christian Advocate, an African-American newspaper, wrote on April 26, 1917:

[S]ome months ago Anthony Crawford, a highly respectable, honest and industrious Negro, with a good farm and holdings estimated to be worth $300,000, was lynched in Abbeville, South Carolina. He was guilty of no crime. He would
not be cheated out of his cotton. That was insolence. . . . [The mob] overpowered him and brutally lynched him. Is any one surprised that Negroes are leaving South Carolina by the thousands? The wonder is that any of them remain.

The Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture tells us that by the turn of the 20th century, lynching had become more gruesome. “Whereas in the past, lynching often happened in secrecy, by the early 20th century, it was commonly seen as a form of family entertainment. Local newspapers widely advertised the place and time of upcoming lynchings.”

The Great Migration hardly ended violence against African Americans; if anything, the intensity and frequency of white-on-black brutality increased as tenant-farm owners and other employers saw their very inexpensive labor force disappearing. Many blacks were forcibly kept from leaving: roads were blocked, threats were made, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, were terrorized into staying behind, like Solly’s sister Eliza in Alabama.

WHO CAME NORTH?

Until recently, the assumption of most scholars was that the majority of those who came north were rural African Americans who had little skill beyond farming, and low rates of literacy and education. Newer research, however, suggests that the migrants were from a more diverse background, although these are still disputed matters. We now know, for example, that a great many migrants to Allegheny County (where Pittsburgh is located) moved from southern towns and cities (although some of those may have first moved to those cities from rural areas, since the Great Migration also saw much movement from country to city within the South). Recent evidence also indicates that the early migrants tended to be more literate than other southern African Americans (they tended, however, to be less literate and educated than African Americans already living in the North). Some research has also suggested that the participants in the Great Migration had greater ambition, a stronger work ethic, and a willingness to defer gratification than many of those who stayed behind (this has been shown to be true generally of most migrant and immigrant groups).

According to Joe William Trotter,

Southern blacks helped to organize their own movement into the urban North. They developed an extensive communications network, which included railroad employees, who traveled back and forth between northern and southern cities, northern black weeklies . . . and an expanding chain of kin and friends. Using their networks of families and friends, African Americans learned about transportation, jobs, and housing beforehand. As one contemporary observer noted, “The chief stimuli was discussion. . . . The talk in the barber shops and
grocery stores . . . soon began to take the form of reasons for leaving.” Also fueling the migration process were the letters, money, and testimonies of migrants who returned to visit.

Other migrants formed migration clubs, pooled their resources, and moved in groups. Deeply enmeshed in black kin and friendship networks, black women played a conspicuous role in helping to organize the black migration. As recent scholarship suggests, women were the “primary kin keepers.” Moreover, they often had their own gender-specific reasons for leaving the rural South. African-American women resented stereotyped images of the black “mammy,” who presumably placed loyalty to white families above her own. African-American women’s migration reinforced the notion that lifting the race and improving the image of black women were compatible goals.

Historian John Bodnar and his colleagues collected dozens of oral histories from families of African Americans who came to Pittsburgh in the early years of the 20th century. Here is an excerpt from their summary:

As a teenager, Jean B. began working at a sawmill near Mobile, Alabama, while living on his parents’ farm. It was at a sawmill that he heard mention of Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago. Such conversation prompted him to come North. He decided upon Pittsburgh based on information supplied by two friends already living there. After saving 45 dollars, he took a train from Mobile through Cincinnati to Pittsburgh where his friends obtained a room for him. . . . Another black, who preferred to remain anonymous, told how his father became dissatisfied with his career of “hiring out” from farm to farm in Virginia. He decided to come to Pittsburgh in 1902, where he gained “permanent” work and later brought his family. Several relatives on his mother’s side followed his father to Pittsburgh, lived with him until they found work, and then moved out.

Many of the first wave of migrants were single men; of those who were married, the men tended to come first in order to find a job and place to live, before sending for the rest of the family. New research also suggests that migrant families—either those who were reunited in the North or those who moved together—were unusually stable and cohesive.

Sometimes, temporary trips up north for work turned into extended stays and then permanent relocation. The oral history of Hezikiah M. is a case in point. Born in Virginia in 1886 of former slaves who now were struggling farmers, his father heard about better, more regular wages in the coal fields of West Virginia and began making trips there. Twice a
year, he would return home with much-needed wages. In the meantime, Hezikiah’s mother raised the children, worked the farm, and earned extra income by taking in laundry. When he was 13, Hezikiah and his brothers accompanied their father to Sunswitch, West Virginia, where they loaded coal. Hezikiah worked the mines there for four years, living in shanties with older men. He left the mine for a series of jobs in hotel kitchens, which eventually took him to Pittsburgh.

For the most part, the North did not promise better economic conditions for African Americans until the onset of World War I. The war set off a boom in manufacturing, especially in such vital commodities as steel, and the mills around Pittsburgh were major beneficiaries of the demand. Agents from many northern manufacturers went south to recruit African Americans, and African-American newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* not only carried ads for jobs but ran articles and editorials urging southern African Americans to join the migration. Railroads were so desperate for labor to build new lines to major ports that they transported thousands of the migrants to the North for free. Indeed, beginning in 1915, the need for manpower in Pittsburgh, as in other northern cities, became so great that a single railroad line brought 12,000 blacks to Pittsburgh free of charge to smelt its iron and steel.

**WHAT THEY FOUND WHEN THEY GOT THERE**

Most of the early migrants went to the large cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Cities that saw the largest increases in African-American population included Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, New York, and Philadelphia. Migrants in Louisiana and Mississippi flocked to Chicago due to access to the Illinois Central Railroad. Philadelphia, New York, and Boston were common destinations for migrants from Georgia and South Carolina, as the nearest railroad lines took them to these cities.

More important, though, in making the decision on where to move was the existence of a thriving African-American community. The existence of strong African-American churches and newspapers was important; so were chapters of the NAACP and the Urban League. Tolnay writes, “The presence of family or friends in the North improved the flow of information about specific destination to potential migrants, especially the availability of jobs, and eased their transition upon arrival.” Joe William Trotter:

African Americans often viewed the Great Migration to northern cities in glowing terms: the “Promised Land,” the “Flight out of Egypt,” and “Going into Canaan.” One black man wrote back to his southern home, “The [colored] men are making good. [The job] never pays less than $3 per day for (10) hours.” In her
letter home, a black female related, “I am well and thankful to say I am doing well. . . . I work in Swift’s Packing Company.” “Up here,” another migrant said, “Our people are in a different light.” Over and over again, African Americans confirmed that: “Up here, a man can be a man.” As one southern black man wrote home from the North, “I should have been here 20 years ago. . . . I just begin to feel like a man. My children are going to the same school with the whites and I don’t have to humble to no one. I have registered. Will vote in the next election and there isn’t any yes Sir or no Sir. It’s all yes and no, Sam and Bill.”

Unfortunately, it was not all milk and honey. Very often the new arrivals were greeted with suspicion from black and white northerners alike. Says Tolnay,

> With generally miniscule black populations before the Great Migration, northern and western cities had achieved a relatively stable state of race relations, albeit one characterized by distinct racial inequality. That situation began to change, however, as waves of migrants from the South produced extraordinary growth in local black populations. Many whites grew increasingly uncomfortable with the shifting racial balance in their cities, and some blacks resented the unfavorable consequences that they attributed to the rapid influx of migrants.

Indeed, as early as 1910, segregation in housing was beginning to be widespread, even though it was, in most northern cities, illegal. The more the new arrivals experienced hostility, the more they banded together in what soon became ghettos.

One African-American citizen of Chicago expressed what many apparently felt: “There was no discrimination in Chicago during my early childhood days, but as the Negroes began coming to Chicago in numbers it seems that they brought discrimination with them.” Many scholars believe that the disproportionate presence, in the first phases of the migration, of single men and women among the new arrivals accounted for many of these feelings.

Carter Woodson, one of the earliest African-American historians to write about the Great Migration, noted that many pre–Great Migration African-American migrants had little but disdain for the new arrivals: he wrote that the southern migrants were “treated with contempt by the native blacks of the Northern cities, who consider their brethren from the South too criminal and too vicious to be tolerated.”

Interestingly, many of the new arrivals felt least comfortable in the place one might have expected them to be most welcome: churches. The black churches of the North were largely Baptist and Methodist, and had become relatively secular over the years to meet the
needs of their members, who tended to be long established in the North and belonged to the middle-class bourgeoisie. Most of these had broken away from more traditional African-American church practices. In the process, Robert L. Boyd tells us, these churches “lost their predominantly otherworldly outlook and began to focus attention upon the Negro’s condition in this world. The established African-American churches in the urban North thus failed to satisfy those African-American migrants who were looking for the traditional or otherworldly religious outlook they had known back in the South.” The new arrivals “were accustomed to services accompanied by improvisational singing, ‘shouting,’ and other forms of active participation and demonstrative enthusiasm.”

So the new arrivals found these northern churches rather cold, with their sermons, the prescribed and scripted nature of most services, and congregations that often looked down on them. Certainly, the congregants of these churches would have little to do with someone like Aunt Ester and her cleansing of souls. One result was the founding of hundreds of storefront churches that still exist all over the North (run by preachers such as Avery in *The Piano Lesson*).

WHERE THEY LIVED

Many of the migrants moved in with family or friends who had preceded them. Others rented small kitchenette apartments or rooms in boarding houses overcrowded with other tenants—not unlike the one Caesar runs in *Gem of the Ocean*. More often than not, these dwellings were located in neighborhoods with many African-American residents. In 1900, almost half the black population of Pittsburgh lived in “black neighborhoods.” Just before World War 1, half the black population lived in just three of Pittsburgh’s twenty-seven wards. It is worth pointing out, however, an oral history given in 1976 to the Pittsburgh Oral History Project by a man named James N. Early in the century, James had been working periodically as a “sawmill man” in an Alabama steel mill. He heard about better jobs in the North, and followed a younger brother to Pittsburgh. They lived in the Hill District, where *Gem of the Ocean* (and most of the plays in Wilson’s ten-play cycle) take place. James described it as a neighborhood that then teemed with blacks, Italians, and Jews.

Their homes tended to be run-down affairs, but not significantly more so than the housing for other immigrants, especially those who were arriving in large numbers from southern and eastern Europe in the same early years of the 20th century. Tolnay relates, “Although the available evidence is largely anecdotal, descriptions by observers during the early part of the century suggest that the neighborhoods available to blacks typically were concentrated in the least desirable sections of the cities, densely populated, and dominated by dilapidated multifamily dwellings with poor lighting, inadequate ventilation, and unsanitary plumbing.”
A BIT ABOUT PITTSBURGH

African-American communities can be traced in Pittsburgh at least as far back as the 1830s, when 472 blacks lived there. By 1850, the population was 1,959, mostly living together in a few wards. By 1890, the African Americans living in Pittsburgh came primarily from Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and, interestingly, New Jersey—except for the last, border states and states from the upper South. The jobs they took were mostly as laborers, janitors, laundresses, and servants. Other jobs were largely closed to them.

By 1910, the city’s total population was 234,000, many attracted by the growing number of industrial jobs, mostly in steel factories. Many of these jobs were unskilled, and they were filled by immigrants from Europe and the Great Migration. (By 1918, 95 percent of the African Americans employed in the Carnegie Steel mill were unskilled.) Many of the African Americans who came had been recruited by agents from the plants; others came because they heard there was work. Also by 1910, 85 percent of black women were working outside the home, mostly in domestic service and in the clothing industry.

Black workers earned better wages than they had in the South, where many earned less than $2.00 a day. In Pittsburgh, in the factories and plants, they earned up to $3.60 a day. But it was difficult to make more, because the nascent union movement largely excluded black workers. As early as 1905, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers decided that black workers should not be organized: they feared that if African Americans learned the trade, they would be competitors for skilled jobs that had always belonged to whites.

African Americans, in Pittsburgh and elsewhere, tended to depend heavily on family for news of jobs and housing. But family ties were not always successful in obtaining jobs; indeed, in the steel mills they were of little help at all—the foremen doing the hiring were white, and they would usually hire white immigrants. There were exceptions, however: we know that in 1907–08 (and for perhaps longer than that) there was a cluster of African-American steel workers at the Clark Mills division of the Carnegie Steel Company. They had all worked as hod carriers (that is, laborers who carry supplies to bricklayers, stonemasons, etc., on a job) on the railroad before coming to Pittsburgh. Two-thirds of this group came from Virginia, which suggests to researchers that they belonged to a chain migration—that is, one or two members came, obtained jobs at the mill, and then were able to get jobs for others in the group. Still, most of the migrants had to find work on their own, with little help from family or friends. Some started their own businesses, such as plasterers, cement finishers, and wallpaper hangers. Because African Americans were effectively shut out of skilled jobs due to union discrimination, they worked in a wide variety of industries not controlled by unions: janitorial work, teamsters, dray men, and domestic service among them. Relatively few were in the unionized steel industry.
QUESTIONs TO CONSIDER

1. Names have a special significance in *Gem of the Ocean*. Think of Solly Two Kings and Citizen Barlow, for example, and the story each man tells about his name. Why do the names have such significance? How does each name fit the character? Why were names, given or changed, of particular importance to slaves and exslaves? Does your name have any biblical or other connotations? Do you feel it is a fitting tribute to your character? What name would you choose for yourself?

2. What is the significance of Aunt Ester’s age? What kinds of things do you think she has seen throughout her lifetime? Do you think we are supposed to take her age literally? If so, how, and why, do you think she has lived so long?

3. Aunt Ester leads Citizen on a journey to the City of Bones. What is the purpose—symbolic and spiritual—of this journey? How does it affect Citizen? What makes the experience so powerful?

4. What is the significance of the music in this production? How does the music affect your experience of the story?

5. One of the key questions raised in the play is exactly how free African Americans became after slavery was abolished. What do you think it means to be legally free but not enjoy the benefits of real freedom? What is “real freedom”? What do you think were the major differences between being a slave and a free laborer in the Reconstruction South after the Civil War? What do you think Eli means when he says, “Freedom is what you make it”? Read the Emancipation Proclamation (http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/transcript.html) and relate the ideas articulated in the document to the world of the play (Pittsburgh in 1904) and to the world today. Has our definition of freedom changed?


7. With which character do you identify most in the play (if any)? Do any of the characters remind you of people you know or have known?

8. What do you think of Wilson’s dialogue? Is it realistic? Poetic? Does it sound like dialogue you hear spoken in your everyday life? How is it different?
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION . . .

ON AND BY AUGUST WILSON


**ON AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY**


