



RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

AUGUST WILSON

AND THE PLAYWRIGHTS' CENTER



JUSTIN MAXWELL

When he first set foot in St. Paul, 32-year-old August Wilson was taking the next step in becoming one of America's preeminent playwrights, his reputation secured by critical acclaim as well as a string of prestigious awards and Broadway hits. Although he was born in Pittsburgh in 1945 and died in Seattle in 2005, Wilson would spend a dozen transformative years in the Twin Cities. His success ties directly to his development during those years and particularly to his work with the Playwrights' Center.¹ Artists like Wilson and institutions like the Playwrights' Center form a cosmos held together by the gravity between them. Their reciprocal relationships allow both parties to flourish, each drawing energy from the other—energy that converts into both artistic and institutional success.

FACING PAGE: Scene from Wilson's *Fences*, a 1997 *Penumbra Theatre* production presented at the Guthrie Theater and featuring Lou Bellamy (seated) and James A. Williams

ABOVE: Playwright August Wilson, 1990s

In November 1977 Wilson's friend Claude Purdy was directing a play at St. Paul's *Penumbra Theatre*, which had been founded the year before to create a forum for African American voices in the Twin Cities. Purdy invited Wilson to visit to rewrite a play, and Wilson not only accepted but returned the following March to settle in St. Paul. He soon became involved in an active theater community whose hub was the Playwrights' Center, then located with *The Loft*, a literary center, in the basement of a former church at 2301 Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis.²

At this time, Wilson saw himself primarily as a poet; however, in 1968 he had co-founded *Black Horizons* (or *Horizon*) Theater in Pittsburgh, evidence of his burgeoning role in theater. There were few opportunities for artists in Pittsburgh, however. In fact, as Minneapolis theater critic Mike Steele put it, there were few oppor-

Justin Maxwell's play The Moon Falls Into Ruin was produced in 2005 in Minneapolis, and he is currently working on a comedy called Marie Antoinette's Head. He teaches in the English department at Minneapolis Community and Technical College and is a frequent contributor to Rain Taxi Review of Books.

tunities anywhere: “In the United States, playwrights are viewed on the social spectrum somewhere between circus contortionists and lunatics.” Places like New York City and the Twin Cities, at least, had theater communities and organizations to support playwrights.³

Wilson’s work, in any genre, is intimately tied to the African American soul. He was deeply attuned to the rhythm and sound of black life and language, influenced early on by the poet and playwright Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement. Wilson’s epic ten-play cycle, for example, is a study of the black experience in twentieth-century America, with one play devoted to each decade. Historical characters like Ma Rainey and Joe Turner

populate the oeuvre. Moving to St. Paul, Wilson left the predominantly black Hill District of Pittsburgh with an African American population of 55,000 for a state with an African American population of only 34,000. Finding himself in a city where blacks were a minority could only have heightened his awareness of African American cultural idioms, fueling a kind of linguistic homesickness. Though he wrote six of the plays in his decades cycle (and other small works, as well) while living in St. Paul, none are set there, while nine of the plays in the cycle are set in Pittsburgh. (*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* takes place in 1920s Chicago.)⁴

Cultural history was something the playwright had to learn for himself. Wrongly accused of plagiarism by an African American teacher, Wilson dropped out of school at 15. He played basketball outside his old classroom for several days, hoping someone would invite him back. When no one did, he went to the library and took up his own education. Wilson’s education was more than an intellectual endeavor; he absorbed the sound of the African American experience. Jazz records, which he bought at random from thrift stores, gave him the tone and the rhythm that would drive his plays. He remembered that hearing Bessie Smith’s “Nobody Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine” was an epiphany: “It was unlike anything I ever heard before. And I go, ‘Wait a minute. This is mine. There’s a history here.’ . . . The universe stuttered and everything fell into place.” Scholar and playwright Paul Carter Harrison describes Wilson as being “able to pick up the rhythms and rituals of black men wherever they might show up.” This attunement allowed his characters to evolve from the believ-

able to the transcendental; one *New York Times* critic found Wilson’s 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fences* indistinguishable from his own childhood. This awareness of voice and culture came with Wilson from Pittsburgh, but he developed the ability to make it manifest onstage during his years in St. Paul.⁵

The Twin Cities in the late 1970s were home to an energetic theater scene closely tied to the Playwrights’ Center. While the Center did not produce plays, it offered resources including a community of support and actors who performed staged readings. Backed by the local Jerome Foundation, it also awarded a small number of one-year grants that offered a stipend of several thousand dollars and many development opportunities. Thus, Wilson found himself in a radically new artistic environment, one where a playwright could thrive.⁶

ONE OF WILSON’S FIRST JOBS IN THE TWIN CITIES WAS AT THE SCIENCE MUSEUM OF MINNESOTA, WRITING SHORT, EDUCATIONAL SKITS.

Several strong regional theaters and a cadre of up-and-coming playwrights drove this active community. Because the Twin Cities supported the arts, larger theaters like the Guthrie and the Children’s Theater and smaller organizations like Penumbra and the Midwest Playwrights’ Program (which merged with the Playwrights’ Center in 1980) were able to coexist. Writers such as



Playwrights’ Center, formerly Olivet Lutheran Church, 2301 Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis



Guthrie Theater opening, 1963

Kevin Kling, Jon Olive, John Fenn, Lee Blessing, and Jeff Hatcher were making high-quality plays. High-profile fundraising contributed, as well. For example, a 1979 event at the Playwrights' Center (then called the Playwrights' Lab) featured Attorney General Warren Spannaus, Secretary of State Joan Groves, and State Treasurer Jim Lord performing staged readings of plays written for them.⁷ Still, while the coupling of opportunity and energy created a nurturing environment, for a writer, environment is only context.

One of Wilson's first jobs in the Twin Cities was at the Science Museum of Minnesota, writing short, educational skits. This stint provided him a regular opportunity to see his work through the whole creative process—from idea to script to rehearsal to staging—without having to wait the months and years between productions that most struggling playwrights must endure. The Science Museum experience was a profoundly writerly activity, a warm-up akin to a dancer's stretching routine. Wilson, by his own account, left this job after two years to work four hours a day as a cook, as he wanted more free time: "I said, 'Hey, look, I want to quit my job at The Sci-

ence Museum,' where I was making a fairly decent salary, to go make \$88 dollars a week at Little Brothers here, because I wanted some time to write."⁸

Meanwhile, St. Paul's Penumbra Theatre continued to play an important part in his career. Lou Bellamy, Penumbra's founder and artistic director, worked with Wilson's plays from the time he moved to the Twin Cities bringing his script, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, probably the one he was revising during his 1977



Lou Bellamy, Penumbra Theatre's founder and artistic director (left) with August Wilson, 1980s

visit. Penumbra's focused, talented African American community helped Wilson create works that spoke so fundamentally to the black experience that they could reach across racial and cultural divides without giving up their own cultural identity. Bellamy describes Wilson's early plays as structurally awkward—"You saw it coming a mile away"—and sometimes asking for the impossible in terms of staging and plot structure. But these are standard struggles for any novice playwright. At Penumbra, Wilson found a place to focus on his playwriting *and* a place where his work would be performed intelligently and consistently. These opportunities, along with the 1980 production of *Black Bart* by Inner-city Theater in Los Angeles, helped Wilson take the next big step of his career: winning a Jerome Fellowship from the Playwrights' Center.⁹

In the early 1980s there were few organizations like the Playwrights' Center in the country. New York City's New Dramatists Guild was a similar organization, one that Wilson would later join.¹⁰ And there were development opportunities like the O'Neill Festival on Long Island that would eventually accept Wilson's work. But he was not skilled enough to compete successfully for the O'Neill Festival or New Dramatists membership until he had honed his talent at the Playwrights' Center.

Since 1976 the Center had awarded promising writers one-year "memberships" supported by the Jerome Foundation. Wilson, along with four others, won this fellowship for 1980–81. The \$2,400 grant, which bought Wilson the time he needed to write, represented a pivotal moment in his career: his true birth as a playwright. Clearly, Center staff already saw him as such. Tom Dunn,

executive director, wrote at the time: “His play *Jitney* has got a controlled sense of theatrical crazy that is interesting,” and Archibald Leyasmeyer, president of the board, recalled his choice as “one of the greatest decisions of my life.” But Wilson, himself, was still wearing the poet’s mantle he had earned in Pittsburgh. The biographical statement in the prize announcement, which Wilson probably wrote, declared: “As a poet August has been published in the magazines: *Journal of Black Poetry*, *Umbra*, *Black Lines*, *Nkombo* and in the book: *The Poetry of Black America—Anthology of the 20th Century*.” Wilson later recounted a decisive moment at the Center: “The first time I saw myself as a playwright I was sitting in a room of sixteen playwrights, I looked around and realized that since I was sitting there and there were only playwrights in the room that I must be a playwright also.”¹¹

IN THE EARLY 1980s THERE WERE FEW ORGANIZATIONS LIKE THE PLAYWRIGHTS’ CENTER IN THE COUNTRY.

In this environment, Wilson’s technical proficiency developed quickly. At the Playwrights’ Center, he found a community of peers. Under various programs, 17 writers had been selected from a field of 61 applicants to be Playwrights-in-Residence that year. Wilson’s play *Fullerton Street* had a staged reading there in March 1981 and was included in a “Celebration of New Plays” at the Center the following month. Next came *Jitney*, a play about unlicensed cab drivers set in 1970s Pittsburgh. Although not Wilson’s first play to go to Broadway, it was the first of what was to become



Poster for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* from *Penumbra Theatre's* 1986–87 season

his bound-for-Broadway cycle. John Fenn moderated a reading of *Jitney* at the Playwrights’ Center, attended by local playwrights like Lee Blessing. According to Fenn, everyone in attendance realized that “we had a major piece here. There was a general agreement that this was something pretty hefty. . . . We knew it was bound for glory.”¹²

Along with a community came connections, a chance to reach out to the larger theater world. Wilson later recalled, “The workshop I had with John Richardson on *Fullerton Street* opened up the world of playwriting as nothing had before, and armed with that glimpse of its possibilities and the confidence gained from my acceptance as a Jerome Fellow, I sat

down and wrote *Ma Rainey*. It has been a short four years and a lot of territory covered for me both personally and professionally since then.”¹³

Wilson came upon the concept of his decades cycle gradually, as his sense of stagecraft matured. Promoting *Fullerton Street*, the Center’s newsletter described Wilson as “currently working on a trilogy” titled *Dangerous Music*.¹⁴ This may or may not have been a precursor to the ten-play cycle but, in any case, it represents the thinking of a playwright, someone who sees the rest of his life in terms of theater and production instead of writing in general. Wilson’s perspective on himself had changed. In the basement of a converted church, he completed his transformation from a man who writes poetry and other things into a playwright. While successes would take him farther and farther away from the Playwrights’ Center, that converted church held a place in his heart for the rest of his life.

In 1982 *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* was selected for the O’Neill Festival. Wilson, who had been sending

work there since 1980, remembered, “They promptly rejected five of my scripts until the summer of 1982 when I . . . was invited by Lloyd Richards and his staff to participate in the conference.”¹⁵ This was a major success, as Richards ran both the O’Neill program and the Yale Repertory Theater. Yale Repertory became the home of new Wilson productions, giving him opportunities larger than those in Minnesota, where his work was produced exclusively at Penumbra Theatre. Ironically, while Wilson was moving to the national arena and solidifying his place in the theater world, the Playwrights’ Center experienced a fiscal crisis that threatened to undo all the opportunities it had to offer.

The Playwrights’ Center, established in 1971 by graduate students from the University of Minnesota, was run in an informal fashion that was surreptitiously moving it toward a major crisis. Its first executive director, playwright Tom Dunn, moved to New York City to run the New Dramatists Guild and was replaced by Christopher

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Kirkland in late 1981. In 1982 Kirkland, the board of directors, and the Center’s small staff suddenly found themselves in the institutional equivalent of the 1929 stock market crash. One day everything seemed fine. The next day they discovered “a major deficit” of \$155,000. The Center had been a fairly informal organization; everyone involved had plays to write or other jobs to do. Along with the informality, a certain amount of the endemic chaos was probably necessary to maintain the flexibility Center members required. Nevertheless, disorder and an underdeveloped administrative structure allowed fiscal issues to go unnoticed, monies to be misspent, and bookkeeping glitches to accumulate in spite of professional annual audits. Discovering this debt sent the center into a crisis, which board president Leyasmeyer described concisely: “Since January our playwrights have not been regularly paid. Our acting company is working without remuneration. Members of the Board have been writing emergency personal checks to avoid bankruptcy—over and over again. Playwrights and actors and directors have contributed \$20 and \$25 checks just to keep the Center alive.”¹⁶

In ten years the Center had gone from supporting 16 actors and four directors with an operating budget of \$2,000 to supporting 100 actors, 12 directors, and five full-time staff with an operating budget of \$268,000, but this increase was not paralleled in administrative structure. Leyasmeyer remembered, “Suddenly we were

Wilson and director Lloyd Richards on the set of the Broadway touring production of The Piano Lesson, presented at the World Theater, St. Paul, 1992





*Archibald Leyasmeyer, board president
who helped shepherd the Playwrights'
Center through its crisis*

having meetings every week. . . . Passing the hat to keep things going.” Bills mounted, creditors came calling. Yet the people carrying the day-to-day operations decided that declaring bankruptcy and closing was not an option. They held to this choice beligerently, and for a while, it was all that kept the Center going. Then, in August 1982 the newly hired managing director, Sara Orem, wrote Leyasmeyer a late-night letter proposing a new organizational structure and budget: “This will come fast and furious and I will mail it in the morning if I still feel the same way.”¹⁷

BY 1984 AUGUST WILSON HAD CHANGED FROM A LOCAL PLAYWRIGHT TO A NATIONAL PLAYWRIGHT WHO CHOSE TO LIVE IN ST. PAUL.

The Center began a serious administrative reorganization under new executive director Carolyn Bye

and, through hard work and stubbornness was able to maintain the grants necessary to survive and establish realistic payment plans for its debts. The Jerome Foundation supplied “an emergency, three-month grant of \$14,400.” Board member Sarah Lawless expressed a sense of grim hope: “If we survive all this, the Center will be a much stronger, more focused place for everything. . . . and the community continues to support us in heart. . . . and hopefully, in their pocketbooks when we ask.”¹⁸

Not to discredit the board’s hard work, but it was the playwrights who saved the Center. The board could prove the success of the Center’s programs through the success of its members, which validated the organization’s mission and competence. Suddenly, writers like Wilson became a return on an investment in a way that the Center could not have foreseen. Playwright Marsha Norman said it like this: “August Wilson’s magnificent play, *Fences*, began its life on the stage at Yale Rep. But Mr. Wilson began his life *writing* for the stage at the Playwrights’ Center in Minneapolis. It was the Playwrights’ Center which gave him his first grant, his first reading, his first conversations about what a play has to do.”¹⁹

The Center’s writers remained involved with the institution while it struggled, lending clout to its mission and purpose, testifying to its value, and contradicting negative impressions created by the money problems. Had the writers abandoned the Center, the artistic gravity that drew grant money would have dissipated and the institution would have died in an economic vacuum. With proof that the Playwrights’ Center was clearly succeeding at its primary mission came some forgiveness for failing at its secondary tasks.

Wilson was among the writers who supported the Center. In December 1983 he took part in a panel discussion exploring the problems facing playwrights and directors working together on new scripts. Sharing the panel with Wilson were renowned theater professionals including Susan Gregg (director-in-residence at New Dramatists) and playwrights Barbara Field, John Olive, Lee Blessing, John Orlock, Larry Whitely, Sean Dowse, and Marisha Chamberlain. Later that evening, the Center hosted a company reading of Wilson’s new play, *Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket*, which would go on to open at Yale Repertory Theater in early 1984.²⁰

Along with their personal involvement, playwrights contributed as they could. Lee Blessing, for example, waived the \$2,722 the Center owed him from his 1982 McKnight Fellowship. Writer Waring Jones helped ensure the Center’s survival when in August 1983 he purchased the building housing it and provided what was politely described as “a favorable long



term lease” of one dollar a year. The capstone event of the Center’s recovery came in mid-October 1984 when, according to a press release, it had “a special board meeting and debt-burning,” having completed final payments. The Center was now able to continue assisting playwrights, both new and established—including Wilson.²¹

By 1984 August Wilson had changed from a local playwright to a national playwright who chose to live in St. Paul. That year, he was one of four recipients of a McKnight Fellowship which, according to a press release, provided fellows a two-month residency to develop their work, an \$8,500 stipend, and “full access to the Center’s developmental services including a staged reading of one of their works using the Center’s professional acting company.” Wilson used this opportunity to write *The Piano Lesson*. This play would, in 1990, go on to earn Wilson a rare accolade: his second Pulitzer Prize, putting him in an historical cadre with only six other playwrights.²² The Playwrights’ Center, which had launched Wilson to national prominence on the eve of its crisis, again helped propel him toward rare honors shortly after the crisis ended. The established writers, who helped keep the Center alive, were seeing the rewards of its survival. And, as the reciprocal relationships continued, the doors stayed open for new playwrights who could trace Wilson’s meteoric rise back to 2301 Franklin Avenue.

Wilson’s rise was meteoric in both speed and altitude. Only six years elapsed between winning his Jerome Fellowship with *Jitney* and winning

→ AUGUST WILSON’S PLAYS

Though the date of Wilson’s first play is not known, the prolific writer continued creating right up to his death in 2005. Dividing the list by place of residence reveals his remarkable output during his Twin Cities sojourn.

The works in Wilson’s ten-play cycle are in bold type with the decade in parentheses.

PITTSBURGH

- Rite of Passage
- Recycle, 1973
- The Homecoming, 1976 (later revised as **Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom**)
- The Coldest Day of the Year, 1977
- Black Bart and the Sacred Hills, 1977

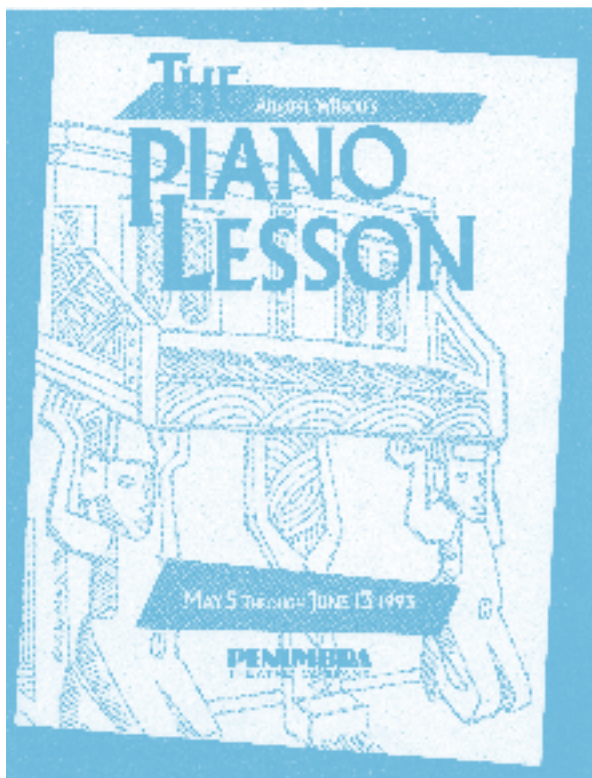
ST. PAUL

- How Coyote Got His Special Power and Used It to Help the People, 1978 (Science Museum of Minnesota)
- An Evening with Margaret Mead, 1979 (Science Museum of Minnesota)
- Fullerton Street, 1980
- **Jitney** (1970s), 1982
- Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket, 1983 (later revised as Joe Turner’s Come and Gone)
- **Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom** (1920s) 1984
- The Janitor, 1985
- **Fences** (1950s), 1985; Pulitzer Prize winner
- **Joe Turner’s Come and Gone** (1910s), 1986
- **The Piano Lesson** (1930s), 1987; Pulitzer Prize winner
- Malcolm X, 1988
- **Two Trains Running** (1960s), 1990

SEATTLE

- **Seven Guitars** (1940s), 1995
- **King Hedley II** (1980s), 1999
- **Gem of the Ocean** (1900s), 2003
- How I Learned What I Learned, 2003
- **Radio Golf** (1990s), 2005

Sources: Unless otherwise noted, the dates for plays written before 1995 are from Sandra G. Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1995), 241; after 1995, from *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* timeline, Oct. 3, 2005, also available at www.post-gazette.com. Lou Bellamy provided the date for *Malcolm X*; *Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket* is from a Playwrights’ Center press release, Dec. 13, 1983.



his first Pulitzer Prize for *Fences* in 1987. In between, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* brought Wilson his Broadway debut at the Court Theatre in October 1984. This success won him national recognition, with the *New York Times* saying, "The play has all the ingredients to be a conventional, well-made message drama—but Wilson, through the sheer force of his theatrical drive, flies higher." Elaborating on its praise, the article continued: "None of the speeches could exist anywhere but on the stage, and they couldn't exist on the stage if Wilson hadn't the talent to go all the way and write them like music."²³

Wilson primarily wrote these plays—and most of his decades cycle—in Estaban's Mexican restaurant, (now Dixie's) on St. Paul's Grand Avenue, a few other local bars, and in his home. Up late, cigarette in hand, music from the era he was depicting playing behind him and shaping his voice, Wilson moved from an unknown to a playwright consistently compared to the greats of American theater. Over the course

of his career he won two Pulitzers, a Tony Award, an Olivier Award (in Great Britain), and seven New York Drama Critics Circle awards, while the cast recording from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* won a Grammy Award. His fellowships and honors include a National Humanities Medal and multiple honorary degrees, as well as Rockefeller and Guggenheim fellowships. St. Paul Mayor George Latimer and Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich made May 27, 1987, August Wilson Day in St. Paul.²⁴ As Wilson's successes mounted, he would reinvest in the Twin Cities

theater community.

Wilson moved to Seattle in 1990 after a divorce, when "he was looking for a 'relaxed, civilized' place to live." He chose Seattle because it reminded him of St. Paul. Still, the Twin Cities remained very much a part of his professional life. Penumbra Theatre regularly produced his work, dedicating a whole season to his plays in 2002–03 and mounting works outside the ten-play cycle, like *Malcolm X* and the one-act *Homecoming*. The theater staged more of Wilson's

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work than any other, including the definitive production of *The Piano Lesson* and several other plays. And although Wilson would, after a five-year slow down, finish his ten-play cycle in Seattle with *Seven Guitars* (1995), *King Hedley II* (1999), *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), and *Radio Golf* (2005), the works that he produced in St. Paul earned him his greatest accolades.²⁵

In the course of research, evidence surfaced indicating that Wilson's relationship with the Playwrights' Center was sometimes perceived as contentious. In a 1996 interview Wilson did reveal, "Frankly, I was disappointed that my name wasn't on the list" for a second Jerome Fellowship in 1981–82. Despite this public statement, Wilson privately gave thousands of dollars to the Center. He donated his time to the organization's Young Playwrights Summer Confer-

Bellamy, flanked by Wilson and presenter Danny Glover, accepting for Penumbra the Jujamcyn Theaters Award for development of artistic talent, New York City, 2000



ence in 1988 and that same year also contributed a fundraising letter to the Center's membership campaign:

Recently I had the opportunity to attend what were for me two important theatre events. In San Diego, at the Old Globe Theatre, where my own "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" was playing, I saw John Olive's "Voice of the Prairie," and, in New York on Broadway at the Booth Theater, Lee Blessing's "A Walk in the Woods."

It was important because it recalled the time we were all three Jerome Fellows at the Playwrights' Center. I was working on "Fullerton Street," Lee had written "Oldtimer's Game," and John was getting lots of productions in Chicago and elsewhere and working on "Standing on my Knees." We were all part of the Playwrights' Center's Tenth Anniversary "Celebration of New Plays," and I still have that wonderful champagne bottle poster hanging in my home.²⁶

Wilson was clearly not carrying a heartfelt grudge. At his death in 2005, he chose the Playwrights' Center as one of four national institutions to receive donations in his name. Thus Wilson continues to contribute to the Center, maintaining a relationship the Center can now reciprocate only by continuing its support of new playwrights.

Wilson's life moved him westward across America in two geographical leaps that took him farther and farther from New York City where his plays were earning him global recognition. His jump from

Pittsburgh to St. Paul in the middle of his career initiated the most artistically productive period of his life, a period made all the more success-

ful because of the relationship he formed with the Playwrights' Center. This relationship was a microcosm of the mutually rewarding relationships that develop between artists and arts organizations wherever they exist. □



Notes

1. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 3, 2005, p. 1A. Wilson lived in St. Paul from 1978 until 1990—at 587 Grand Ave., 469 Selby Ave., and 752 Laurel Ave. Playwrights' Lab, "Playwrights-In-Residence 1980–81" and "Playwrights 1983/1984 Cont.," photocopies, p. 1, Archibald Leyasmeyer collection; August Wilson to Carolyn Bye, June 14, 1984, Playwrights' Center (PWC) archives, Minneapolis. Unless otherwise noted, all documents cited are in the PWC archives.

2. Dinah Livingston, "Cool August: Mr. Wilson's Red-Hot Blues," *Minnesota Monthly*, Oct. 1987, p. 26; John Fenn, playwright, conversation with author, Sept. 28, 2005; "The History of Penumbra Theatre," penumbratheatre.org/content/blogcategory/1/14/.

3. Mike Steele, "Center Provides Nurture for Playwrights," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 13, 1981, p. 13B.

4. Yvonne Shafer, *August Wilson: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (London: Greenwood Press, 1998), 9; Paul Carter Harrison, playwright, conversation with author, Jan. 14, 2006. Ma Rainey was a blues singer; Joe Turner, subject of a blues song, was an early-twentieth-century plantation owner who enslaved African Americans.

5. Livingston, "Cool August," 27; Debbie Elliott, "Profile: Pulitzer Prize Winning Playwright August Wilson Dies Today in Seattle," *All Things Considered*, NPR News, Oct. 2, 2005, transcript; Harrison conversation; Brent Staples, "Fences': No Barrier to Emotion," *New York Times*, Apr. 5, 1987, Arts and Leisure sec. 2, p. 1.

6. Todd Boss, PWC, conversation with author, Jan. 6, 2006.

7. *Minneapolis Tribune*, Apr. 15, 1979, p. 5G; Midwest Playwrights' Program internal document, Oct. 1980, photocopy.

Among this group's accomplishments: John Fenn went on to write *A Servant's Christmas*, a perennial holiday favorite in Minnesota; Kevin Kling would write *21A*, a one-man play about that local bus route (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, May 1, 1986, p. 7C); Jeff Hatcher has had consistent productions of theater, film, and television (see Playwrights' Center, www.pwccenter.org/profile.asp?userid=78); and Lee Blessing would enjoy a large variety of successes, including a Pulitzer Prize nomination for



A Walk in the Woods (www.njrep.org/bios/blessingbio.htm).

8. PWC, press release, Jan. 30, 1984, photocopy; Livingston, "Cool August," 32; communication from Mike Henley, who supervised Wilson at Little Brothers, Nov. 2, 2006.

9. Livingston, "Cool August," 26, discussing a musical satire; *Black Bart* is the only musical or satire Wilson ever wrote. PWC, press release, Jan. 30, 1984, photocopy; Lou Bellamy, conversation with author, Jan. 6, 2006. Penumbra later produced *Black Bart*, as well.

10. *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 31, 1981, p. 1G.

11. PWC, press release, 1980, photocopy; Archibald Leyasmeyer, conversation with author, Oct. 7, 2005; Tom Dunn, "Memo to

Charles, Archie and Barbara about playwright-in-residence applicants," undated photocopy, Leyasmeyer collection; "The 1980–81 Starting Line-Up 17," *SubText, The Playwrights' Center Monthly Newsletter*, Sept. 1980, p. 2; Jessica D. Morell (Wilson's personal assistant) to Jeffrey Hatcher, PWC, Feb. 3, 1994. At this time, Leyasmeyer also served on the Guthrie's board of directors and taught in the University of Minnesota English department.

12. PWC, press release, undated photocopy; Kevin Berigan to Archibald Leyasmeyer, undated, inviting Leyasmeyer to moderate a discussion following one of the new plays. Wilson's readings during the Celebration of New Plays were directed by Claude Purdy on April 17 and 18; PWC, internal memo, undated photocopy; John Fenn and Lee Blessing, conversations with author, Sept. 28, 2005; *SubText*, Apr. 1981, p. 2, Leyasmeyer collection.

13. August Wilson to Carolyn Bye, June 14, 1984.

14. "Fullerton Street," *SubText*, Apr. 1981, p. 2; PWC, promotional flyer for *Fullerton Street*, undated photocopy.

15. August Wilson, *August Wilson: Three Plays* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), xii.

16. Archibald Leyasmeyer to Playwrights' Center Board of Directors, Aug. 14, 1983, p. 1; Arthur Anderson & Co., *The Playwrights' Lab, Incorporated, Financial Statements, as of June 30, 1979 and 1978 together with Auditors' Report*, Sept. 6, 1979, and Jerith S. Kish to Playwrights' Center Board of Directors, Jan. 30, 1983, both in Leyasmeyer collection; Archibald Leyasmeyer to Christopher D. Kirkland, Apr. 18, 1983, p. 1.

17. PWC, promotional/fundraising flyer, undated; Leyasmeyer conversation, Oct. 7, 2005; Sara Orem to Archibald Leyasmeyer, Aug. 10, 1982, Leyasmeyer collection.

18. Cynthia A. Gehrig to Archibald

Leyasmeyer, Feb. 8, 1983; Sarah Lawless to Archibald Leyasmeyer, Jan. 18, 1983.

19. Marsha Norman, draft of letter on behalf of Playwrights' Center, undated.

20. PWC, press releases, Nov. 21, Dec. 12, 1983.

21. Lee Blessing to Archibald Leyasmeyer, Apr. 19, 1983; Leyasmeyer to Board of Directors, Aug. 14, 1983, p. 1; PWC, press release, Aug. 9, 1983, Oct. 15, 1984; Leyasmeyer, conversation with author, Dec. 3, 2005. After remodeling in 1999–2001 the Center named its new performance space the Waring Jones Theater.

22. PWC, "Breuer, Gray, Wilson Receive McKnight/Playwrights' Center Fellowships," press release, Jan. 30, 1984, photocopy, Leyasmeyer collection. The Pulitzer drama award began in 1917. Other repeat winners are Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, and George S. Kaufman (two); Edward Albee and Robert E. Sherwood (three); and Eugene O'Neill (four)—see www.pulitzer.org.

23. *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, Aug. 2, 1982, p. 1B, quoting Frank Rich in the *New York Times*.

24. Livingston, "Cool August," 26; biographical note, *American Theatre*, Nov. 2005, p. 88; *Subtext*, Summer 1987, p. 1. Descriptions of Wilson's smoking are legion. Lee Blessing remembers Wilson smoking in the shower at the O'Neill Festival; conversation with author, Sept. 28, 2005.

25. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 18, 1990, p. C1, Apr. 8, 1993, p. C1; Bellamy conversation.

26. Dwight Hobbes, "August Wilson Doesn't Live Here Anymore," *Mpls. St. Paul*, Oct. 1996, p. 51; Boss conversation, Jan. 6, 2006; Jim Berg, "Membership Department Meets Bush Challenge," *SubText*, Summer 1988, p. 1, including photo caption; August Wilson, fundraising letter, 1988.

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