



Acting 1 & 2 (Introductory Acting)
August Wilson & African American Theatre
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Learning Objective:

The student will be introduced to August Wilson and the African American Theatre movement.

Bell Ringer:

What is your favorite work of art that features multiculturalism? Why is it your favorite?

Lesson Steps:

Read the article below and take notes. You will summarize after you have read it.

August Wilson was born in 1945 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was raised with three older sisters and two younger brothers in a two-room, cold-water apartment. His father, Frederick August Kittel, who was white, did not live with the family; his African-American mother, Daisy Wilson, raised her six children herself, relying on welfare until she was able to find work cleaning. Disgusted with the racism he encountered at the various schools he attended and feeling the need to further his creativity, interests, and learning abilities, Wilson dropped out of the ninth grade at age 15 and began educating himself at the local library. He enlisted in the U. S. Army in 1962 and received an honorable discharge the following year.

A turning point in Wilson's life came in 1965 when he bought a typewriter and began writing poetry. His early work was influenced by the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas and by the Black Power movement of the late 1960s. In 1968 he became co-founder, script writer, and director of Black Horizons on The Hill, a black activist theatre company in Pittsburgh. These early plays were not commercial successes, but they did lay the groundwork for his more important work to come. In 1978 Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he continued writing plays that were notable for the truth with which they presented black speech and life.

His first success was Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, about the famed blues singer Ma Rainey and set at a recording session in 1927 in Chicago. This won him the New York Drama Critics Circle award for best play of 1934 – 35. His next play, Fences, about a disillusioned former baseball player in the 1950s, won not only the Drama Critics Circle award but also the Tony Award and the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Joe Turner's Come and Gone, set in a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911, and concerning an ex-convict's efforts to find his wife, solidified Wilson's position as one of the most significant writers of the day. His next major success, The Piano Lesson, set during The Great Depression of the 1930s, concerns the conflict between a brother and sister over selling a treasured heirloom. It earned Wilson his second Pulitzer Prize in 1990 and was adapted for television in 1995. Two Trains Running and Seven Guitars continue Wilson's commitment to portraying African Americans realistically and sensitively and to "raise consciousness through theatre."

Theatre by or about African Americans was very limited throughout much of U. S. history. During the 1800s blacks were portrayed on stage largely as fools, clowns, or incompetents; even the occasional black character that was conceived with a degree of nobility, as in dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, was still a stereotype. The first play by an African-American playwright to appear on a Broadway stage was Garland Anderson's Appearances in 1925.

Because of the number of emerging black writers and artists who congregated in New York's Harlem area during the mid-1920s, the period became known as the Harlem Renaissance. One of the most important of these writers was Langston Hughes. Though primarily a poet, he wrote dozens of plays, including Little Ham, Simply Heavenly, and Tambourines to Glory. His contemporaries Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen collaborated on the musical St. Louis Woman. A watershed in African-American theatre was reached in 1959 when Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun became a great popular success and was later made into a movie.

The 1960s saw a rise in writing on black themes, especially by such playwrights as Amiri Baraka and Ed

Bullins. Many of these works were angry and confrontational. Lonne Edler III won a number of awards for Ceremonies in Dark Old Men, which was later adapted for television.

The first black playwright to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama was Charles Gordone, in 1970, for No Place to Be Somebody. Since that time African-American playwrights have found increasing acceptance. Notable among these was Ntozake Shange, whose Tony Award-winning study of the oppression of black women, for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf (1976), demonstrated that African-American themes had become mainstream.

One of the most important features in Wilson's plays is storytelling: the characters tell each other stories – sometimes at great length – about their lives and histories and about the histories of family, friends, and acquaintances. His characters do so, according to Wilson, not just to pass the time or entertain themselves, but as a way of “creating and preserving themselves.”

Wilson's use of language is distinctive: it includes a variety of verbal structures typical of African-American language. Music is also inherent in Wilson's plays, as it is in the storytelling of the African griot. He calls blues “the wellspring of my art,” and in all of his major plays, characters sing, dance, play musical instruments, or beat out elaborate rhythms. Several of his plays, in fact, take their titles or their themes from traditional blues songs.

Wilson thinks that African Americans have “the most dramatic story of all mankind to tell.” Feeling that his generation of blacks knew very little about the past of their parents, Wilson set out to change the situation by creating a series of 10 plays, each set in a different decade of the 20th Century, tracing hopes and dreams, successes and failures, from one generation to the next. Although Wilson deals with historical black themes, many are universal themes, which make his complex dramatic works not merely African American theatre but universal theatre.

Practice:

Now that you have read about 5 different Theatre eras or units, write a brief paragraph (3 to 5 sentences) about each concerning how the elements of the time and movement would affect acting styles:

Ancient Greek Theatre (Sophocles):

Elizabethan Theatre (Shakespeare):

French Comedy (Moliere):

Realism (Chekhov):

Contemporary (Wilson):