

Playwrights: August Wilson

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Image 1. Pulitzer Prize winning playwright August Wilson, photographed in New Haven, Conn. on March 16, 2005. Photo by: Essdras M Suarez/The Boston Globe via Getty Images

August Wilson was famous for writing plays. He had many fans during his life. His writing enjoyed a new interest in 2016. That year his play "Fences" was made into a movie. The film introduced new audiences to Wilson's work. His plays show the lives of working-class African-Americans.

Young Life

August Wilson was born April 27, 1945. He grew up in a low-income black neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His father, Frederick August Kittel, was a German immigrant. His mother, Daisy Wilson, was African-American. His parents divorced. Later the playwright changed his last name to his mother's.

Wilson attended nearly all-white schools. He experienced a lot of racism. This is when someone is targeted or treated badly because of their skin color. He ended up dropping out of high school at age 15. He did not give up on his education, though. He decided to educate himself. He regularly visited the library and eagerly read about many topics. Later he got his high school diploma.

From Poet To Playwright

By age 20, Wilson decided to be a poet. Then he developed an interest in theater. In 1968, he and a friend started the Black Horizons on the Hill Theater. They had no place to perform. They staged their plays at elementary schools.

Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978. There he began turning Native American folktales into children's plays. He also began to recall his old life in Pittsburgh. He used those experiences to write his first play "Jitney."

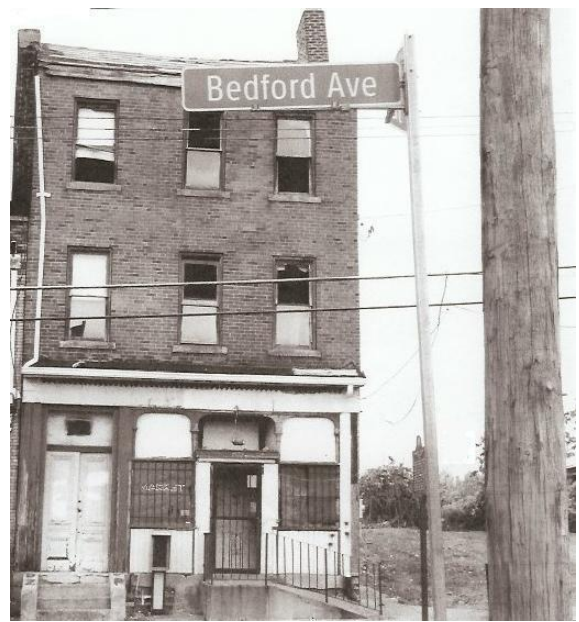
"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" was the play that made Wilson a star. The New York Times reviewed the play. They said it told the story of what "white racism" does to people who experience it.

"Fences"

"Fences" opened in 1984. It takes place in the 1950s. The play tells about the problems between a father and son. The father is a former Negro-leagues baseball player. Now he works as a garbage man. His son dreams of his own sports career.

The Negro leagues were professional baseball leagues. They were primarily for African-American teams. There were also some Latin American teams. The term negro is offensive. It is considered hateful toward African-Americans. It is historically linked with slavery in the United States.

Wilson received the Tony Award for Best Play and the Pulitzer Prize for "Fences." The Tony Award is given to Broadway plays and musicals. The Pulitzer Prize is the highest award given to written works.



Another key work is Wilson's "The Piano Lesson." He received his second Pulitzer for that 1990 play. Most of his plays opened on Broadway. Many were a success. "Fences," for example, made \$11 million in one year. That was a record at the time.

Helping People Think Differently

Wilson's works show the struggles of low-income African-Americans. Everyone can relate to his characters, though. The playwright didn't want to ignore the consequences of slavery. That history had an influence on his characters' lives. It also had a major impact on many African-Americans' lives. He believed that art was political. He didn't think his own plays were specifically political, though.



He talked to The Paris Review in 1999. He said that his plays offer white Americans "a different way to look at black Americans." Love, beauty and duty are part of everyone's lives. He hoped his plays would help white people think differently about black people.

Death In 2005

Wilson died on October 2, 2005, at the age of 60, in Seattle, Washington. His third wife, three daughters and several siblings survived him.

The playwright continued to receive honors. The Virginia Theater on Broadway said it would carry Wilson's name. Its new name went up two weeks after his death.