

# Playwright Wilson glorified Black America

By George E. Curry  
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - August Wilson, who successfully captured different periods of Black life throughout the 20th century, was one of America's most successful playwrights — winning two Pulitzer Prizes, a Tony Award and seven New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards — and leaves behind an exceptional body of work on Broadway.

Wilson died Sunday at a hospital in Seattle of liver cancer. He was 60 years old. Wilson won rave reviews for such plays as "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "Fences," "The Piano Lesson," "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" and "Two Trains Running." His 10th play, "Radio Golf" has opened at the Yale Repertory Theater and will make its way to Broadway. With his last work, Wilson had written a play set in every decade of the 1900s.

In a speech in 1991, excerpted by *The New York Times*, Wilson discussed his early days as a writer.

"When I discovered the word breakfast, and I discovered that it was two words, I think then I decided I wanted to be a writer," he said. "I've been writing since April 1, 1965, the day I bought my first typewriter for \$20.

"...My friends at the time were painters. I was not envious of them, because they were always trying to get money for paint and get money for canvas. I felt that my tools were very simple. I could borrow a pencil and write on a napkin or get a piece of paper from anyone. So I began to write out in bars and restaurants little snatches of things."



AUGUST WILSON

Born in the Hill section of Pittsburgh, Wilson lived in St. Paul, Minn., before moving to Seattle. Regardless of where he lived, his thoughts and plays were set in the rough streets of his hometown.

Reviewing "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" in 1983, *The New York Times* critic Frank Rich observed, "This play is a searing inside account of what White racism does to its victims and it floats on the same authentic artistry as the blues music it celebrates."

Early in his life, there were few, if any, signs that Wilson would become a success.

He was the offspring of a Black mother and White German immigrant. After his parents divorced, he and his siblings moved with his mother to a largely White suburb where he was the only Black student in his Roman Catholic high school. In an interview with *The New Yorker* magazine in 2001, Wilson

said: "There was a note on my desk every single day. It said, 'Go home, nigger.'"

After enrolling in two more high schools, Wilson dropped out at the age of 15 when a teacher falsely accused him of plagiarizing a paper on Napoleon. He became a voracious reader, largely educating himself.

Despite such an inauspicious start, Wilson is credited with almost single-handedly restoring Broadway, known as The Great White Way, to a position of prominence.

"The playwright's voice in American culture is perceived as having been usurped by television and film, but he reasserted the power of drama to describe large social forces, to explore the meaning of an entire people's experience in American history," playwright Tony Kushner told *The New York Times*. "For all the magic in his plays, he was writing in the grand tradition of Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, the politically engaged, direct social realist drama. He was reclaiming ground for the theater that most people thought had been abandoned."

Wilson cast such a large shadow on Broadway that Virginia Theater will be renamed the August Wilson Theater on Oct. 17.

Wilson attributes his success to his ability to let his characters take over a play.

"I start — generally I have an idea of something I want to say — but I start with a line of dialogue," Wilson said in the speech excerpted by *The New York Times*. "I have no idea half the time who's speaking or what they're saying. I'll start with the line, and the more dialogue I write, the better I get to know the characters. For instance, in writing the

play 'The Piano Lesson,' one of the characters, Berniece, says something to Boy Willie, her brother, and he talks about how 'Sutter fell in the well.' Well this is a surprise to me. I didn't know that."

"Then I say, 'Well, who is Sutter?' You see, if you have a character in a play, the character who knows everything, then you won't have any problem. Whenever you get stuck, you ask them a question. I have learned that if you trust them and simply do not even think about what they're saying, it doesn't matter. They say things like, 'Sutter fell in the well.' You just write it down and make it all make sense later. So I use those characters a lot. Anything you want to know, you ask the characters."

As for his own inspiration, Wilson cited what he called his four B's: Romare Bearden, the artist; playwright and poet Amiri Baraka; Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentine short-story writer, and blues, which he calls "the biggest B of all."

In his speech, Wilson argued for re-establishing strong family ties in the African-American community.

"I think that we as Black Americans need to go back and make the connection that we allowed to be severed when we moved from the South to the North, the great migration starting in 1915," he stated. "For the most part, the culture that was growing and developing in the Southern part of the United States for 200 and some years, we more or less abandoned. And we have a situation where [today] kids do not know who they are because

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