"Our own visions": August Wilson, Lloyd Richards, and the O'Neill--the making of Ma Rainey and a playwright

Tift, Jeanne

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Dissertation

“OUR OWN VISIONS”:
AUGUST WILSON, LLOYD RICHARDS, AND THE
O’NEILL – THE MAKING OF MA RAINEY AND A PLAYWRIGHT

by

JEANNE TIFT
B.A., Vassar College, 1990
M.A., Boston University, 2004

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Acknowledgments

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Thank you to Professor Joan Herrington and writer Daniel Gabriel for speaking with me. I am very grateful to John Lahr for his thoughts about, recollections of, and expert perspective on the Wilson-Richards collaboration, and for his words of encouragement regarding the significance of this subject. I am extremely grateful, too, for the time, recollections, and wisdom shared with me by Lloyd Richards’ son, Scott Davenport Richards, and by actor/writer/director Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who is perhaps Wilson’s greatest champion.

My deep gratitude and affection to Christopher Ricks and Archie Burnett at the Editorial Institute, for their kindness, guidance, and inspiration.

Finally, my infinite love and infinite thanks to my family for their support and understanding as I worked on this project.
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JEANNE TIFT

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2015

Major Professor: Archie Burnett, Professor of English

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I examine the creation of August Wilson’s first commercially
and critically successful play, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, and the essential roles of his
mentor—director Lloyd Richards—and the O’Neill Theater Center in that creation. A
three-part chronology gives detailed biographical sketches of the two men, including their
work at the O’Neill Center and their similar familial backgrounds, as well as an overview
of American theater in the twentieth century, with a special emphasis on African-
American drama, placing Wilson’s and Richards’ work in context. Drawing on
interviews and articles about these men and their working relationship, a close view is
given of the in-depth revision that Wilson and Richards practiced on Ma Rainey and
subsequently on the six plays that they produced together; revision began as soon as
Wilson completed a draft of the play and continued well into rehearsals and even
performances as each production travelled around the country, ending with a run on
Broadway. After working together on the Ma Rainey script for almost two years after
meeting at the O’Neill, Wilson and Richards staged the play first at Yale and finally on
Broadway in October 1984. The many changes made to Ma Rainey between the time
Wilson first submitted the play for consideration for the National Playwrights Conference
at the O’Neill and the Broadway script was finalized reveal the profound influence of Richards in terms of overall structure, characterization, scope of stage directions, tone, and message, and other aspects of the play. The program that Richards shaped as artistic director of the O’Neill was focused on extensive rewriting within a workshop environment for playwrights; this approach was the foundation for the way he and Wilson worked together and made it possible for the playwright to realize ambitions that had eluded him. With Richards’ genius for working with playwrights—his own original success was with Lorraine Hansberry and *A Raisin in the Sun*—and his powerful connections in the theater world, he was able to propel his discovery, Wilson, to become one of the most acclaimed American playwrights in history.
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Editorial Arrangements

I chose to use a chronology chart, rather than a narrative biography, to tell the life stories of August Wilson and Lloyd Richards, in order to show how their lives overlaid each other and the theatrical world. Richards’ professional breakthrough, directing the original production of Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun*, came more than twenty years before Wilson’s first Broadway opening, for *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Both of these productions were historic: *Raisin* was the first Broadway play written by an African-American woman and the first to have a black director. *Ma Rainey* was historic mostly due to its introduction of Wilson’s voice and powerful storytelling, and for its status as the first staged play of what became Wilson’s famed Century Cycle. For the column in the chronology on American theater in the twentieth century, my goal was to include at least one high point for any prominent playwright, actor, or actress, with special focus on African-American drama. A few prominent directors and producers are included. I omitted plays that originated in other countries (such as Andrew Lloyd Webber’s and Peter Shaffer’s), except for long-running plays, such as *Les Miserables*. I left out individuals and productions that seem to fall more under the heading of music, opera, or dance (such as Jerome Kern, Liza Minnelli, the Gershwins, *The Mikado, Porgy and Bess*, and *The Pirates of Penzance*). Gertrude Stein’s dramatic work was mostly used in opera, for example. I looked only at plays written in the twentieth century, and I left out individuals who were involved in theater in the twentieth century, but who became prominent only in the twenty-first; Cherry Jones, for example. There are fewer quotations
in August Wilson and Lloyd Richards’ sections of the chronology after Ma Rainey’s 
Black Bottom Broadway premiere in 1984, because of the focus of my work.

I relied heavily on Arthur Bartow’s The Director’s Voice for views of many 
twentieth-century directors, in their own words. Joan Herrington’s book I Ain’t Sorry for 
Nothin’ I Done was one of the most valuable sources to me, and I learned much from my 
own interview with Herrington. I made sure to go through and compare drafts of Ma 
Rainey on my own, though, before reading her record of and observations about those 
revisions. My focus also has been on making comparisons with later drafts (the script 
accepted by the O’Neill Theater Center and the final script), as opposed to her focus on 
the earliest drafts of the play. Other sources that were valuable to me, but from which I 
did not quote directly, include:

Bean, Annemarie, ed. A Sourcebook of African-American Performance: Plays, People, 


---. A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Volume One: 1900-

---. A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Volume Two: 


Bogumil, Mary L. Understanding August Wilson. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 
1999.

Elam, Harry J., Jr., and David Krasner, eds. African-American Performance and Theater 


For citations for Wilson’s words, when no other author given, it is a quotation from one of his own works, such as the speech “The Ground on Which I Stand,” or his Preface to the volume *Three Plays*. Quotations from *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* are taken from the Samuel French edition, unless otherwise indicated.
Chapter 1: “Face to face”

“You ought to have learned yourself to read,” the character Toledo admonishes fellow band member Levee in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, the breakthrough play for August Wilson, “then you’d understand the basic understanding of everything” (20). Like his character Toledo, Wilson educated himself, beginning in the stacks of the Carnegie library in 1950s Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, after traditional schooling – and its accompanying racism and alienation – proved unbearable to him. Open to many various brands of learning, Wilson continued to expand his mind and his art throughout his life, but there was surely no greater teacher and influence for him than director Lloyd Richards, whom he met at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut; Richards and the O’Neill Center together had a transformative effect on Wilson and his work. Launching – in all but one case – from summers at the O’Neill National Playwrights Conference, Wilson and Richards mounted productions for the first six plays of what became the Century Cycle, which ultimately included a play set in each decade of the twentieth century, portraying the lives of black Americans, mostly in Pittsburgh, Wilson’s own hometown and a city that has seen thriving times for African-American culture, as well as times of terrible hardship and discrimination.

Critic John Lahr, the most prominent admirer of Wilson’s work, believes “We still don’t have the measure of August Wilson, whose theatrical accomplishment in the twentieth century is surpassed only, in my view, by Tennessee Williams” (“Top Ten”). Only months before his death in 2005, Wilson completed work on the final play in his
Century Cycle; though the plays illustrate the financial pain faced by black Americans over time, Lahr calls Wilson’s work primarily “an oral, not an economic, history of his time.” And despite that and many other varieties of pain in Wilson’s work, Lahr finds it “all the more profound and persuasive because it teaches through joy, not through reason” (“Black and Blues” 100). Wilson won the Pulitzer Prize for two of his plays, *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*, and Lahr believes he should have earned a third for *Seven Guitars* (101). As a child in a struggling Pittsburgh household in the 1940s and 50s, Wilson’s family “used to admonish him, ‘Don’t go out there and show your color’ ” (101). Reversing this advice, “Wilson has dedicated his life and his art to doing just that: making a spectacle of blackness.” Wilson’s loving spectacle continues its impact; “no other theatrical testament to African-American life has been so popular or so poetic or so penetrating” (101). At the same time, Wilson’s achievement has inspired a revived generation of black playwrights, directors, and actors with many revivals of Wilson’s plays – in 2013 Wilson was the second most produced playwright, after Shakespeare – and many new African-American works around the world. Wilson’s accomplishment as an American playwright is unique; as Lahr terms it, “No one else – not even Eugene O’Neill, who set out in the mid-thirties to write a nine-play cycle and managed only two plays – has aimed so high and achieved so much” (“Black and Blues” 101).

Wilson’s achievement and success are recognized across the theater world: he was the first living playwright to have a Broadway theater named for him. Charles Isherwood called the “majestic” Century Cycle “a landmark in the history of black culture, of American literature, and of Broadway theater.” Playwright Tony Kushner
found that “the diligence and ferocity of effort behind the creation of his body of work is really an epic story” (Isherwood). Focusing on Wilson’s characters of modest background, critic Richard Christiansen noted, “Wilson’s genius for translating common language into poetry through rhythm, repetition and telling imagery reveals a world of myth, religion, and folk spirit.” Many of Broadway and Hollywood’s most acclaimed actors have appeared in Wilson productions, including James Earl Jones, Viola Davis, Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, Charles S. Dutton, Whoopi Goldberg, and Phylicia Rashad.

O’Neill Theater Center founder George White considered director Lloyd Richards to have a “genius for play analysis” (“First Five”). Working with writers months or even years before arriving at the rehearsal hall, Richards guided and supported the writing and rewriting of playwrights who would become stars, including Lorraine Hansberry, Lee Blessing, and Wendy Wasserstein. With a quiet but intense, attentive approach that aimed to elicit ideas and solutions from the playwright and actors – Wasserstein called him “the black Santa Claus” – Richards enabled them to grow and establish themselves in a theatrical world that usually precluded this opportunity. Echoing Wasserstein’s intimate perspective, the actor Charles Dutton said, “Lloyd had only two sons, but he had a lot of children.” (Robertson “Lloyd Richards”).

“Apart from the Kazan-Williams partnership, the Richards-Wilson partnership was the most important in the twentieth century theatre’s history,” believes John Lahr (personal interview). Because of the closeness of their collaboration – which encompassed casting, sets, and almost everything else – along with a deep level of
written revision before and during productions of the plays, and their tremendous resulting success, with critics and audiences, this artistic relationship stands apart. In fact, Wilson likely could not have realized his talent without Richards: in Lahr’s view, “There would have been no August without the tutelage and the connections to the mainstream which Lloyd provided” (personal interview). Wilson had been writing for many years – first as a poet, then as a playwright – before meeting Richards, but his plays tended to be too long for traditional theater and were not always sensitive to the parameters of the stage. Richards guided Wilson toward meeting these parameters but never in ways that might compromise Wilson’s intent and voice. At the same time, Richards – in his multiple roles as artistic director of the O’Neill Theater Center’s National Playwrights Conference, dean of the Yale School of Drama, artistic director of Yale Repertory Theatre, and experienced Broadway director – was able to connect Wilson with opportunities to stage his plays at venues around the country, refining them all along the way.

The O’Neill Theater Center brought Wilson and Richards together, when it’s possible nothing else could have, and the process Richards had established at the O’Neill’s National Playwrights Conference allowed Wilson to learn from an experienced, talented, successful African-American man in theater, with a personal background similar to his own. The O’Neill further allowed Wilson to learn on the job, and grounded him from the beginning in the work-in-progress sense of theater and the essentialness of revision. At the annual summer conference, a selected group of new and experienced playwrights gather in Waterford, Connecticut, to stage readings of new works in a non-
competitive environment, and to gather ideas and responses from others working in many aspects of the theater world. The intent is for the plays to grow and change throughout the conference, with revisions welcome until the last minute.

Somehow the meeting of these two men at this place and time launched Wilson’s work into a new realm, where his distinctive voice and elemental concern with American slavery and its legacy were fully realized by Richards’ perspective, insight and experience. It could be that the key was in the meeting of two artists who were brilliant in their roles, in a setting that encouraged their collaboration. Critic Peter Wolfe says, “It is always difficult to find the spot where an artist jumps the gap from being a promising technician with some sharp insights into creative genius. Perhaps Wilson made this leap when he and Lloyd Richards were revising and polishing *Ma Rainey*. In any case, his first Broadway production has the distinguishing marks of a genius of the theater” (54).

Something in the chemistry of this writer and director pair, able to work together off the record, in some senses, created extraordinary success. As Malcolm Gladwell put it in his study of success, *Outliers*: “Success is not a random act. It arises out of a predictable and powerful set of circumstances and opportunities” (155). In any case, *Ma Rainey* brought Wilson immediate and profound recognition.

The fictionalized account of an actual recording session in Chicago, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* portrays race relations in 1920s America through the lives of the blues singer, her African-American band members, and the white recording industry professionals. As the guitar player, Cutler, summons the band to begin, calling, “A-one. A-two. You know what to do,” the audience recognizes our behind-the-scenes status;
even the characters, though, have no idea how this fateful session will end (23). *Ma Rainey* was Wilson’s breakthrough play – in terms of both commercial success and artistic achievement – and a number of influences and supports helped this self-educated playwright, but none more than his mentor and coach, Lloyd Richards. Critic Frank Rich, who first discovered Wilson as a visitor to the O’Neill conference, saw Yale Repertory Theatre’s production of *Ma Rainey* and called Wilson “a major find for the American theater,” finding the play “extraordinary,” “alarmingly fresh” with a “spellbinding voice” ("Theater"). Reviewing the Broadway production, Rich said *Ma Rainey* “sends the entire history of black America crashing down upon our heads”; he makes his characters’ “suffering into art that forces us to understand and won’t allow us to forget.” Wilson did not do it alone, though; Lloyd Richards is “the man who was born to direct it” ("Wilson’s Ma Rainey"). John Lahr called *Ma Rainey* “exquisite” ("Rhythm and Blues"). Actor, director, and writer Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who won a Tony award for his role as Canewell in Wilson’s *Seven Guitars* – and whom the *New York Times* recently called “the foremost interpreter” of Wilson and John Lahr called “the real keeper of August’s flame” – recalls seeing the second act of *Ma Rainey* on Broadway, entering the theater after intermission because he could not afford a ticket (Miller, “Stepping”; personal interview). Afterward, he sent letters to Wilson and Richards, hoping to work with them. The play allowed him to envision himself in theater; “The human beings who occupied that stage were so familiar to me. It let me know there was a space and a place where people that I knew could be celebrated, and so I said, ‘I want to be a part of that celebration, somehow’ ” (Haun). Wilson himself called this first success of his “probably
my boldest play, structure-wise” and sometimes referred to it as his second favorite of his own plays, after *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (Pettengill, “Historical” 222).

Wilson and Richards would go on to stage five more productions – *Fences* (set in the 1950s), *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1910s), *The Piano Lesson* (1930s), *Two Trains Running* (1960s), and *Seven Guitars* (1940s) – all of which ended up on Broadway, collectively earning millions of dollars at the box office and garnering two Pulitzer Prizes and seven Tony awards, among many other honors. After their working relationship ended, Wilson created three additional plays – *King Hedley II* (1980s), *Gem of the Ocean* (1900s), and *Radio Golf* (1990s) – which went to Broadway, and he staged an earlier play, *Jitney* (1970s), which played at regional theaters. Taken together, these are the ten plays of Wilson’s Century Cycle, tracing African Americans’ lives after slavery, decade by decade, to the end of the twentieth century.

When Wilson and Richards met in 1982, their lives and circumstances were very different. A fledgling playwright – though he had written poetry for many years – Wilson was starting to see a small amount of his work staged at regional theaters. He had applied twice to the annual National Playwrights Conference at the O’Neill Theater Center, having identified the summer program as the key to his future in playwriting, but had been turned down. Writer Daniel Gabriel, a friend in St. Paul, says Wilson’s attitude was, “If the O’Neill didn’t like *Ma Rainey*, maybe he wouldn’t write plays anymore.” Richards, successful, settled, and connected, was at the other end of the theater establishment. He had directed plays on Broadway, most notably the groundbreaking *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry; for Broadway, she was the first female African-
American writer, and he was the first African-American director. Since 1968 Richards had served as artistic director of the O’Neill’s National Playwrights Conference, and in 1979 he had been appointed Dean of the Yale School of Drama and Artistic Director of Yale Repertory Theatre. The two men, nevertheless, shared much in terms of their backgrounds and early lives: each grew up with a strong, impoverished mother and the lack of a father, and each was sustained by the larger black community. These connections certainly led to Richards’ recognition of the characters in Wilson’s plays; as Richards put it, “We are sensitive to the same things” (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 126).

Both Wilson and Richards were inspired and shaped by the places of their youths. Claude McKay called Pittsburgh’s Hill District the “crossroads of the world”; growing up there, Wilson made it the crossroads of his own world, pulled between love for the vibrant African-American culture around him and outrage at the abuse he saw visited upon that culture and its members. Through his plays, Wilson made the Hill District also an essential crossroads in the imagination and meaning of American Theater, especially but not only for African Americans. Recalling the countless hours he spent at the cigar shop Pat’s Place on the Hill, Wilson said, “I just loved to hang around those old guys – you got philosophy about life, what a man is, what his duties, his responsibilities are” (Lyons and Plimpton). For Wilson, his neighbors were his fathers, teachers, and role models.

Detroit, Michigan, was Richards’ home after he emigrated with his family from Canada as a very young child, and he, too, recalls listening to the men of his community when they gathered, in this case at a barbershop, which was “akin to sitting around the
fire while the tribal elders talk. It was a combination of discussion, storytelling and a kind of civics education” (Freedman, “Leaving”). Here, too, community stories shaped Richards both as a man and as a creator of theater. The city’s tradition in the performing arts, additionally, inspired him as he came of age. He recalled, “Detroit used to be one of the major cities on the theatre circuit. There used to be resident companies in Detroit; and Detroit was also the number three city in the country for radio. You had New York, Chicago, and then Detroit. The Lone Ranger and The Green Hornet originated in Detroit. There was a basic set up for professionalism. Jam Handy Films was in Detroit, and Jam Handy turned out as many films as Hollywood” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”). These established outlets gave the young Richards opportunities for experience and employment, and even the imagination to choose theater as a career over more secure and respected fields for young black adults.

Wilson’s Hill District suffered greatly during his childhood due to the city’s building of the Civic Arena at the cost of the historic neighborhood: “In the 1950s and 1960s some 1,300 buildings on 95 acres of land were demolished in the Lower Hill to make space for the arena, displacing 412 businesses and more than 8,000 residents and cutting the Hill off from the downtown area” (Jablow). The venue did not provide the local jobs and revenues that were forecasted; the Hill was not able to rebuild, and today the neighborhood still struggles to maintain itself. Wilson’s childhood home is abandoned and falling apart, though it is identified with a historical marker, and family members have talked about turning it into a café and community gathering spot. As a child, Wilson, too, suffered from poverty and loss. His father was virtually absent from his life,
and his mother worked as a house cleaner to support her six children.

Richards’ father died before he was ten, and soon after that his mother lost her vision to glaucoma; Richards and his older brother, Allan, worked a number of odd jobs to help support the family and to keep them from being separated. Living through the Great Depression, he said, “you ate less” and “were hungrier than you wanted to be. You put cardboard inside your shoes when they got holes. . . . We would borrow coal from my uncle. You would borrow a few dollars from here and there. What you were doing was staying alive” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”). Richards carried heavy physical and emotional responsibilities at a young age. His son Scott Davenport Richards, a composer and professor, says his father frequently cooked for his wife and children, and that he was “controlling” in the kitchen. Not only had he cooked for his own mother and siblings at a young age, but he had set up his childhood kitchen carefully for his blind mother to navigate. This description of Richards at home corresponds closely to others’ descriptions of him as a director: exacting, patient, intuitive, creative.

Despite the family’s obstacles, Daisy Wilson was greatly encouraging of her son, August (called Freddie as a child). Wilson said his mother “made me believe I could do anything. I wanted to be the best at whatever I did. I was the best dishwasher in Pittsburgh. I really was. I got a raise the first day I was there.” Her support and empowerment stayed with him as he started writing: “When I sit down and write, I want to write the best play that’s ever been written. Sometimes that’s a fearsome place to stand, but that’s when you call on your courage” (Lahr, “Been Here” 55).

Richards, too, learned confidence and pride from his mother, and other family
members. His mother’s sister, “my aunt Mae, who was the head of her generation, gave all of her nieces and nephews standards by which to raise themselves. My mother’s maiden name was Coote. Aunt Mae would say with great authority, ‘You are a Coote, and a Coote does not do that.’ Between her, my mother, and other members of the family, you knew that nobody was better than you.” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”). Richards applied these high standards to his own work as he moved from acting into teaching into directing; he was quiet and respectful, but he did not give up when something was not working. As a child, Richards had schooling unlikely for someone in his circumstances: he said, “Were it not for the strength of character of my family, my education would have been left to Epaminondas and Little Black Sambo” (Hill and Hatch xii). The emphasis on education continued through the generations; his son Scott Davenport Richards recalls that when he was a child his paternal grandmother frequently asked to hear him read; she would follow along in Braille to check his work.

Growing up in Pittsburgh in the mid-twentieth century, Wilson experienced and witnessed racism frequently, especially when he found himself living in neighborhoods or attending school that were mostly white. Richards, too, acknowledges that “I have lived in the conditions of blacks in this society” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”). Despite the injustices he faced, “he had gentleness and strength. Always,” said his sister Joyce Richards Mann (Freedman, “Leaving”). Moving to New York City in 1947 to pursue acting, Richards faced the obstacles that director Elia Kazan described to John Lahr in talking about his own entry to the theater world: “I knew what I was. An outsider. An Anatolian, not an American. . . . Every time I saw privilege from then on, I wanted to tear
it down or to possess it” (Kazan on Directing xi). Kazan sounds like Stanley Kowalski in A Streetcar Named Desire, talking to Stella about tearing her from the columns of her family estate, but the alienation he encountered is what Richards must have met himself. Newly in New York, Richards had been inspired and saddened by the work and experiences of the actors Canada Lee and Paul Robeson. Richards saw that the extraordinarily talented Robeson, whose biographical play he later directed, “was not fulfilled. What he had to contribute was not totally appreciated or used” because of the political trouble he encountered under McCarthyism (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”). Canada Lee also suffered during the McCarthy era, though he had a longer and more successful career than Robeson; for Richards, Lee was part of my inspiration for continuing in the theatre. Canada was out there; he was trying to do things that had meaning. There was courage in the fact that Canada was there, dealing with very tough situations and difficult problems. He had a wonderful talent, and the society did not choose to truly use that talent. They would let it get out now and then, but they would not use it as they would others. There was something terribly sad but wonderful about his career, in that his talent was never realized to the extent that it could have been. (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”)

Richards saw the obstacles facing African Americans in the theater world, but chose to pursue his own career there. The obstacles were not just for blacks; as director Alan Schneider, a contemporary of Richards’, said, “There are no secret shortcuts, there are no formulas, there are no rules. There’s only yourself and your talent and your taste and your choices” (Bartow xvi). Richards had a seemingly unshakeable confidence in his taste and point of view, and it carried him through years without enough money or work, until he
became a successful acting teacher, then directed more, and finally made his Broadway breakthrough with *A Raisin in the Sun* – a production that was also a breakthrough in many aspects, for many African Americans in the theater. From there Richards continued to build his career as director and teacher, going on several years later to define and lead the O’Neill National Playwrights Conference and similarly to shape and redirect the theater program at Yale. Fortunately for August Wilson, Lloyd Richards’ influential roles had as one primary purpose to discover, develop, and introduce new playwrights and new work; Richards would give Wilson the recognition and professional guidance he had not been able to find elsewhere.

And fortunately for Lloyd Richards, August Wilson had developed a style that was both conversational and passionate, centered around realistic and engaging dialogue. In Wilson, moreover, Richards would discover not only a vital and prolific new author, but also one whose voice and culture were personally meaningful and excitingly familiar to himself. Wilson’s style had not always been so arresting. It had taken him years of writing, first poetry and then moving on to plays, to learn to value and incorporate the kind of everyday African-American speech that he had always cherished in his personal life. In the late 1970s, he felt he had made a breakthrough with dialogue in his play *Jitney* – but the play was not accepted at the O’Neill for the summer conference, the forum that seemed to Wilson to be essential to his future in theater. He took stock:

> When they sent them [*Jitney* and a previous submission, *Fullerton St*] back to me the second time I said maybe they’re not as good as I think. So I told myself, well you’ve got to write a better play, if you want to go to the O’Neill. And I asked myself how do I do that because I was already writing the best play that I can write. And that’s when I decided to up my sights, so to speak. Instead of writing a play just to get to the O’Neill, I thought, well, I would write the best play that’s
ever been written And then I would go to the O’Neill of course, if it’s the best play that’s ever been written. And that’s when I wrote *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. (Herrington 15)

Somehow Wilson pushed himself to a higher level of writing, and he did so on his own, but it was Lloyd Richards and his O’Neill process that took him from there, helping him realize *Ma Rainey* and his own transformation into a playwright of resounding impact.
### Chapter 2: Chronology: “Giving me a place to stand”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>August Wilson</th>
<th>Lloyd Richards</th>
<th>American Theater in the 20th century</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The musical <em>In Dahomey</em> opens on Broadway, with lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar and starring Aida Walker and Bert Williams.</td>
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<td>1907</td>
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<td>Bob Cole stages the musical <em>Shoo-Fly</em></td>
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<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td><em>Regiment,</em> which appears in Washington, DC, and other cities, as well as in New York.</td>
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<td>1908</td>
<td><em>Salvation Nell</em> by Edward Sheldon appears.</td>
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<td>1909</td>
<td><em>The Easiest Way</em> by Eugene Walter appears on Broadway</td>
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<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>The national Little Theatre movement begins with Maurice Brown’s theatre in Chicago. Harvard’s Workshop Theater is established. The Neighborhood Playhouse is established. <em>Peg ’o My Heart</em> by J. Hartley Manners appears.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>The Provincetown Players are created by George Cook and Susan Glaspell, soon joined by Eugene O’Neill. The Washington Square Players and the</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Events</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Lafayette Players are also established. Rachel by Angelina Weld Grimké appears.</td>
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<td>1918</td>
<td>The Theatre Guild forms, arising from the work of the Washington Square Players.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Born Lloyd George Richards on June 29 in Toronto. Father Albert George Richards is a carpenter from Jamaica and a follower of Marcus Garvey. Mother Rose Isabella Coote Richards is also from Jamaica. His older brother Allan is about three years old. Siblings born later include Joyce [Mann] (became a stenographer), Buddy (became a lawyer), and Max (became a teacher). The Howard Players are established. Gold Diggers appears on Broadway.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: Eugene O’Neill’s Beyond the Horizon, which wins the Pulitzer Prize (his first). Marilyn Miller stars in the musical Sally. Spanish Love by Mary Roberts Rinehart.</td>
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The Theater Owners Booking Association is established to schedule productions that feature African-American performers; at its height, it would incorporate more than one hundred theaters. *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O’Neill is staged by the Provincetown Players and then moves to Broadway, starring Charles Gilpin, who is later succeeded by Paul Robeson.

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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Miss Lulu Bett</td>
<td>Miss Lulu Bett by Zona Gale appears on Broadway; it becomes the first play by a woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize.</td>
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<td>1923</td>
<td>With his family, moves to Detroit, Michigan, for his father to start a job in the automobile industry after seeing a flyer from Henry Ford. “The theatre was not discussed around our dinner table, for we didn’t go. Why should we? The stories were not about us, nor did we have an opportunity to speak our mind” (Hill and Hatch xii).</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: The musical <em>Poppy</em>, starring W. C. Fields. <em>The Chip Woman’s Fortune</em> by Willis Richardson; it is the first serious work by an African American to appear on Broadway. The expressionistic work <em>The Adding Machine</em> by Elmer Rice, with a cast including Margaret Wycherly.</td>
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<td>1924</td>
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<td><em>All God’s Chillun Got Wings</em> by Eugene O’Neill, starring Paul Robeson, appears.</td>
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<td>1925</td>
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<td>The Yale Drama program is</td>
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<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>The Negro Art Theatre is launched. Elmer Rice’s <em>Street Scene</em> appears.</td>
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<td>1930</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: The Green Pastures by Marc Connelly, which wins the Pulitzer Prize. The musical Flying High, starring Bert Lahr and Kate Smith. The McCarter Theatre Center opens in Princeton, NJ.</td>
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<td>1931</td>
<td>The Group Theatre is created by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, Morris Carnovsky, and Lee Strasberg. Its first production is The House of Connelly by Paul Green, with a cast including Rose McClendon. Susan Glaspell wins the Pulitzer Prize for Alison’s House. With her production company, Katharine Cornell stages The Barretts of Wimpole Street by Rudolf Besier.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: Both Your Houses by Maxwell Anderson, which wins the Pulitzer Prize. Run Little Chillun by Hall Johnson. The Theatre Union forms.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>1930s: During the Great Depression, with brother Allan, Richards works to support the family, in a barbershop, shining shoes, delivering newspapers, etc. This</td>
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<td>Opening on Broadway: The Children’s Hour by Lillian Hellman. Cole Porter’s Anything Goes, starring Ethel Merman.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: <em>The Old Maid</em>, adapted by Zoë Akins from Edith Wharton’s novel, which wins the Pulitzer Prize. <em>Mulatto</em> by Langston Hughes, starring Rose McClendon. <em>Awake and Sing!</em> and <em>Waiting for Lefty</em> by Clifford Odets of the Group Theatre. Sidney Kingsley’s <em>Dead End</em>. <em>Harriet Tubman</em> by May Miller appears. The New Deal’s Federal Theatre Program is established, supported by the Works Progress Administration, helping keep theater afloat in the wake of the Great Depression. Led by Hannie Flanagan, the project develops Living Newspaper productions, including <em>One-Third of a Nation</em> (which was originally staged at Vassar College). The government also supports the American National Theatre and Academy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>1930s: In high school, a Shakespeare class sparks his interest in theater, and “I fell in love with language.” Reciting, Opening on Broadway: <em>Idiot’s Delight</em> by Robert Sherwood, starring Alfred Lunt; it wins the Pulitzer Prize.</td>
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“using language, beautiful language that affected people--their response to it was like being in a warm bath--the same sense I felt when I read lessons as a vestryman” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”).

“I experienced being in front of a group of people, speaking my thoughts and my feelings through other people’s words. I saw what effect that could have. As I went into the arts and into the theater, I have asked: ‘What is the material that I am working with? What does it have to say?’ And that has governed my decisions in life, my career-making decisions” (Fitzgerald).

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<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>1930s: Is the youngest vestryman at his Episcopal church. Inspired by “meaningful words expressed in beautiful language,” he considers becoming a minister until “I became somewhat disillusioned with church politics. There was more to it than the religious aspect of it” (Fitzgerald; Nesmith “Lloyd Richards”).</td>
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<td>1938</td>
<td>(date approx.) In his first experience of the American South, escorts his sister to her Virginia wedding. They arrive in Washington, D.C., and see “the Capitol and all the places that represent America,</td>
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<td>Opening on Broadway: <em>Our Town</em> by Thornton Wilder, directed by Jed Harris and with a cast including Frank Craven as the Stage Manager; it receives the Pulitzer Prize.</td>
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justice, and human rights – the things we fight for.” There they are forced to move to a car with “poor seats and screens in the places of windows. . . . the black smoke would come in through the screens. This experience was shocking and very hurtful. This was my introduction to segregation. I had experienced it before, but not like that – not with the Capitol in the background” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”).

| 1939 | (date approx.) Enrolls in Wayne University (later renamed Wayne State University), planning to become a lawyer – “the most secure position a young black person could aspire to,” along with medicine, teaching, the ministry, and social work – but soon changes focus to theater. “I was very impressed with what I read about Clarence Darrow – I could see myself in that role. That probably was my initial recognition of my flair for dramatics.”

He soon becomes heavily involved in Wayne University’s theater program. Because of Detroit’s history in the performing arts, there is “this theatre spirit” in the city, and many from the community on Wayne’s faculty. He is also involved in the campus’s radio |

| Hellzapoppin, which goes on to run for 1,404 performances. Haiti by William Dubois. Big White Fog by Theodore Ward opens in Chicago. The Swing Mikado opens in Chicago; a New York production follows. |

<p>| Opening on Broadway: William Saroyan’s The Time of Your Life, which wins the Pulitzer Prize. The Philadelphia Story by Philip Barry, with Shirley Booth and Katharine Hepburn. The Little Foxes by Lillian Hellman, starring Tallulah Bankhead. Life with Father by Clarence Day, Jr., Howard Lindsay, and Russel Crouse. The American Negro Theater is established. Participating actors include Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, and Ruby Dee. The Rose McClendon Players are also established. Rachel Crothers helps establish the American Theatre Wing. |</p>
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<td>1940</td>
<td>Early 40s: Is passed over for a teaching recommendation by his professors, because of his race. “I left school with a sense of rebellion and I decided that I would never teach except as a part of professional experience” (Bartow 261).</td>
<td>The Negro Playwrights’ Company and the American Negro Theater are established. The musical <em>A Cabin in the Sky</em> appears on Broadway.</td>
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<td>1941</td>
<td>Early 40s: Finds new opportunities in the theater because the war has left the university’s department “decimated.”</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: Richard Wright’s <em>Native Son</em>, directed by Orson Welles and starring Canada Lee. <em>Arsenic and Old Lace</em> by Joseph Kesselring.</td>
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<td>1942</td>
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<td><em>The Skin of Our Teeth</em> by Thornton Wilder, directed by Elia Kazan and starring Tallulah Bankhead, Frederic March, and Montgomery Clift, opens. It wins the Pulitzer Prize.</td>
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<td>1943</td>
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<td>Rodgers and Hammerstein’s first musical, <em>Oklahoma</em>, opens on Broadway, starring Alfred Drake and Joan Roberts; it runs for 2,212 performances, a record at the time. Hammerstein wins a special Pulitzer Prize for the work.</td>
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<td>1944</td>
<td>Serves in the military during World War</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: E. Y.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Born</td>
<td>Frederick August Kittel on April 27 in Pittsburgh, PA, in Hill District (1727 Bedford Ave), to Daisy Wilson (an African-American cleaning woman, whose mother migrated mostly on foot from North Carolina to Pittsburgh) and August Kittel (a white German baker who had emigrated at age 10); he is the fourth child and the first son; his siblings: Freda (Ellis), Linda Jean (Denoya), Donna (Conley), Richard and Edwin. His father was “mostly not there” and “you stayed out of his way if he was there”; he told Bill Moyers that “the cultural environment of my life was black” (Lahr, “Been Here”; 174).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945-47</td>
<td>Acts on radio in Detroit and</td>
<td>Returning to Detroit, helps start the theater group These Twenty People, performing in the large living room of an old house in River Rouge Park. The group later becomes The Actors Company.</td>
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II. His division receives his assignment, but he learns “the order was not meant for black troops.” The war ends while he is in training. Son Scott Davenport Richards says that though his father was second in his class at Tuskegee, he “hated the lack of control.” After lights out, they would put blankets over the windows and tutor the men who were struggling with the training. Harburg’s *Bloomer Girl* and *Anna Lucasta* by Abram Hill, starring Earle Hyman and Alice Childress.
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<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Moves to New York City to pursue acting, in theater and on radio. Lives at the YMCA, works as waiter, and acts in Off-Broadway productions. His friend James Lipton had told him about a new play with “a number of roles for Negro characters. He said he knew the director and could get me an audition. He said it was time for me to come to New York anyhow. . . . Everyone told me that I would be back in a week.” Lipton and his wife teach Richards “how to survive” in the theater world (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”).</td>
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Works as a social worker – reluctantly and briefly – to support himself while he pursues a career in acting; after the interview “I left feeling confident that I convinced them that I wasn’t the proper person to hire. They called and asked me if I could start the next day” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”).


Opening on Broadway: A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams, directed by Elia Kazan, starring Marlon Brando and Jessica Tandy, who wins the Tony award for best actress; the play wins the Pulitzer Prize. All My Sons by Arthur Miller wins the first Tony award for best play. Alan Jay Lerner’s Brigadoon. The Heiress, adapted from Henry James’ Washington Square by Ruth and Augustus Goetz. Finian’s Rainbow by E. Y. Harburg.
Richards”). Performs in a show with Rod Steiger and Jack Klugman.

The Actors Studio is founded by Elia Kazan, Cheryl Crawford, Robert Lewis, and Anna Sokolow.

The La Jolla Playhouse opens in California, and the Alley Theatre opens in Houston, Texas.

“Everyone in those days, who went into the theatre, knew that they had to end up in New York. That’s where it all happened. There weren’t any regional theatres in those days. They had community theatres, but not on a professional level. If you were going to be serious about the theatre, you had to come to New York. You had to join those four hundred people per day who were coming to New York to be in the theatre” (Nesmith “Lloyd Richards”).

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<td>1948</td>
<td>&quot;Mister Roberts&quot;, based on Thomas Heggen’s novel, opens on Broadway with a cast including Eli Wallach and David Wayne; Henry Fonda wins the Tony award for best actor.</td>
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<td>1949</td>
<td>According to lore, learns to read at age four. His mother “had a sixth-grade education, but she was a very good reader. She taught all of us to read” (Livingston). She “kept books</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sees Arthur Miller’s <em>Death of a Salesman</em>, directed by Elia Kazan, on its second night. The <em>New York Times</em> called it “superb,” “so simple in style and so inevitable in theme that is scarcely seems</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: Rodgers and Hammerstein’s <em>South Pacific</em>, which earns a Pulitzer Prize and wins ten Tony awards. Juanita Hill becomes the first African American to win a</td>
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around the house; it was very important. We had a time that we would all sit down and she would read a few pages and then she would let us go out and play” (Shafer 163).

like a thing that has been written and acted.”

Tony award, for her role as Bloody Mary. Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, directed by Elia Kazan and starring Lee J. Cobb, wins the Tony award for best play.

Stella Adler founds the Stella Adler Theatre Studio.

| 1950 | “When I was 5 I had my library card”; his mother said, “if you can read you can do anything, because it opens all the doors there are” (Berson). | (date approximate) Meets Paul Mann when he auditions for Mann’s play; begins to study and then teach at Mann’s actors’ workshop. Students include Sidney Poitier, Hal Linden, and a dancer, Barbara Davenport. Is connected to Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. “I came to theatre from acting, and that is how I relate to directing. It is very useful for me in terms of understanding both the inner workings of the actor as well as the ways to lead an actor toward what I want to happen” (Bartow 258).

Son Scott Davenport Richards calls him “an acting teacher who had a playwright-centered vision” (personal interview). | Opening on Broadway: *Guys and Dolls*; it wins the Tony award for best musical. *The Cocktail Party* by T. S. Eliot wins the Tony award for best play. Ethel Waters and Julie Harris star in *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers.

The Arena Stage opens in Washington, D.C. |

1951 | Opening on Broadway: *The King and I*, starring Yul Brynner and Gertrude Lawrence; it wins the Tony award for best musical. Lillian Hellman’s *The Autumn Garden*. |
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<td>1952</td>
<td>Lee Strasberg steps in to lead the Actors Studio.</td>
<td>Summer and Smoke by Tennessee Williams, starring Geraldine Page, appears Off Broadway.</td>
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<td>1953</td>
<td>(date approximate) “In Pittsburgh when we went to a store we couldn’t get a paper bag; we had to carry our purchases out in our hands. I didn’t find this out until I was older. My mother was smart. She knew if she had told me this, I would have come home one day with 2000 bags that I’d stole from somewhere and then ask her what else she needed” (Boyd).</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: The Crucible by Arthur Miller; it wins the Tony award for best play. In the Summer House by Jane Bowles, starring Judith Anderson. The musical Wonderful Town, with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green; it receives five Tony awards, including best musical. Picnic by William Inge, which receives the Pulitzer Prize. Take a Giant Step by Louis Peterson, starring Louis Gosset. Tea and Sympathy by Robert Anderson, directed by Elia Kazan and starring Deborah Kerr.</td>
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<td>1954</td>
<td>The musical Peter Pan, starring Mary Martin and Cyril Ritchard, debuts on Broadway; both stars receive Tony awards. The Shakespeare Workshop, later renamed the Public Theater, is founded by Joseph Papp.</td>
<td>In Splendid Error by William B.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>(date approximate) Daisy Wilson wins a radio contest; the prize is a new washing machine. When the station discovers she is black, they offer her instead a credit at the Salvation Army for a used machine, which she refuses. “My mother said, ‘Something is not always better than nothing’ ” (Lahr, “Been Here” 55).</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: Tennessee Williams’ <em>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</em>, directed by Elia Kazan and starring Ben Gazzara and Barbara Bel Geddes, among others; it wins the Pulitzer Prize. <em>Damn Yankees</em>; it wins seven Tony awards, including best musical and best actress in a musical for Gwen Verdon. <em>Inherit the Wind</em> by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee; it stars Tony Randall, among others. <em>No Time for Sergeants</em>, starring Andy Griffith. The Court Theatre is established in Chicago, Illinois.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955-58</td>
<td>Returns to Detroit during the summers to direct plays at the Northland Playhouse.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>1955-58: Returns to Detroit during the summers to direct plays at the Northland Playhouse.</td>
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<td>1956</td>
<td>Mid-50s: Looks up to family friend Charley Burley, a prize fighter, who had great success and then very humble circumstances. His is “the first male image that I carry” (Lahr, “Been Here” 50). Delivers newspapers to help pay for the family’s groceries (Plummer and Kahn).</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: Long <em>Day’s Journey into Night</em> by Eugene O’Neill, starring Frederic March and Jason Robards, Jr. O’Neill is awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony award for best play posthumously. Alan Jay Lerner’s <em>My Fair Lady</em>, starring Julie Andrews and Rex Harrison; it wins the Tony award for best musical. <em>The Diary of Anne Frank</em>, dramatized by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, opens on Broadway. It receives the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony award for</td>
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<td>1956</td>
<td>(date approx.) Opens the Lloyd Richards Studio for Acting Training, in New York.</td>
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relation to other people living it through. The actor’s contribution comes out of that fact, and it is a major and important one to be encouraged. Actors are selected because of the possibility of their making a contribution” (Bartow 265).

“My intent with actors is to ‘feed them’ in such a way that they arrive at the conclusion or the performance that they ultimately feel is theirs because they discovered it. . . . I don’t really put the limitations of my vision on the work. The actor’s creativity is encouraged to the limit” (Bartow 265). best play.

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<td>1957</td>
<td>In the local Carnegie library, discovers the Negro section, “thirty or forty books, and I read them all. After I read Langston Hughes, I became interested in writing”</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: The Music Man, starring Robert Preston and Barbara Cook; it wins the Tony award for best musical. West Side Story, which wins the Tony award for best choreography. Eugene O’Neill’s Moon for the Misbegotten.</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>Attends St. Stephen’s School, where he is the only black child in his class. At some point, considers priesthood.</td>
<td>Bus Stop by William Inge appears on Broadway.</td>
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<td>1959</td>
<td>(date approximate) Daisy Wilson remarries; her new husband is David Bedford, who had been a football star in high school and had wanted</td>
<td>Directs Lorraine Hansberry’s groundbreaking Raisin in the Sun for Broadway. Sidney Poitier had requested Richards; Broadway’s first African-</td>
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<td>Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun opens on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, to a standing ovation. Directed by Lloyd Richards,</td>
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<td>1960</td>
<td>Briefly attends Connelly Trade School. “My mother wanted me to be a lawyer. . . . she said; ‘Well, O.K., if you’re not gonna be a lawyer, go down there and learn how to be a doctor, but was convicted of theft and murder when he tried to steal the money needed for medical school. With family, moves to Hazelwood, a predominantly white neighborhood; someone throws a brick through their window with a note: “Nigger stay out” (Livingston). Attends Central Catholic High School, where he is the only black student. “There was a note on my desk every single day. It said, ‘Go home, nigger.’” The school sent him home by taxi for his protection. “They would have to walk me through a gauntlet of, like, forty kids. I would always want to say to them, ‘But you’re not saying anything to these forty kids. You’re just escorting me through them as if they have the right to stand here’ ” (Lahr, “Been Here” 56). His English teacher, Brother Dominic, encourages him to write.</td>
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<td>American director, he is nominated for a Tony award.</td>
<td>It stars Sidney Poiter, Claudia McNeil, Louis Gosset, Ruby Dee, and Diana Sands. It is the first Broadway play written by an African-American woman and the first directed by an African American. Richards, Poitier, McNeil, and the play are nominated for Tony awards. Also opening on Broadway: The last Rodgers/Hammerstein musical, <em>The Sound of Music</em>; it plays for 1,443 performances and receives six Tony awards. <em>The Miracle Worker</em> by William Gibson; it wins the Tony award for best play, and Anne Bancroft wins the Tony for best actress.</td>
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<td>Opening on Broadway: <em>Bye Bye Birdie</em>; it wins the Tony award for best musical. Tad Mosel’s <em>All the Way Home</em>, adapted from the novel <em>A Death in the Family</em> by James Agee;</td>
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“to fix cars or something” (Livingston). “When his shop teacher, angry that Wilson had knocked in a thumbtack with a T-square, punched Wilson so hard that he knocked him off his chair, Wilson lunged at the teacher and ‘bounced him off the blackboard.’ ‘Give me a pink slip,’ he said. ‘I’m leaving this school’ ” (Lahr, “Been Here” 56).


Jean Genet’s *The Blacks* has its American premiere off Broadway, running for three years; its stars include James Earl Jones, Cicely Tyson, Roscoe Lee Browne, and Louis Gosset, Jr.

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| 1961 | Attends Gladstone High School. “Brother Dominic was one of my favorite teachers. He would always tell me I could be an author, and I needed to hear that” but he also said, “I should write about something other than blacks. He was well-meaning, but he was all wrong. He suggested that I should write about more universal stuff, but that was suggesting that the black experience was outside of the universal experience. I started writing nature poems, but I got over that” (Watlington).

For a class taught by an African-American man, Wilson chooses Napoleon as his subject for an essay and works hard on it. “The fact that he was a self-made man, that he was...
a lieutenant in the army and became the emperor, I liked that” (Lahr, “Been Here” 56). The teacher accuses Wilson of cheating, and in frustration he drops out of school for good. He plays basketball outside of the principal’s office for days, “but no one ever said a word. The principal never came out” (Livingston).

Early 60s: Focuses on self-education, especially at the library. “The world opened up. I could wander through the stacks. I didn’t need anyone to teach me. All you had to do was have an interest and a willingness to extract the information from the book” (Lahr, “Been Here” 57).

“One thing I took beyond all others that that shelf of books gave me was the proof that it was possible to be a writer” (A. Wilson, “Feed Your Mind”)

Sent out of home by mother.

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<td>1962</td>
<td>Joins the army. According to his friend Charles Johnson, he performs “quite well, but, being a proud and hot-blooded young man, he quit when he was told he was still too (date approximate) Son Scott Davenport Richards is born. Wilson recalled that Lloyd Richards “told me that raising his kids was the single most important accomplishment in his life. That led me to</td>
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<td>Opening on Broadway: Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, starring Uta Hagen and directed by Alan Schneider. It wins the Tony award for best play. Stephen Sondheim’s A</td>
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Opening on Broadway: Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, starring Uta Hagen and directed by Alan Schneider. It wins the Tony award for best play. Stephen Sondheim’s A
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<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>1960s: At various times, works as a gardener, porter, metal worker, and cook.</td>
<td>(date approximate) With wife, tries to buy Greenwich Village townhouse, but the owner refuses to sell to a black man. (Freedman, “Leaving”).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Free Southern Theatre is established.</td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>(date approximate) Son Thomas is born. Directs the Buddy Hackett musical <em>I Had a Ball</em> on Broadway.</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: <em>Barefoot in the Park</em> by Neil Simon, directed by Mike Nichols, who wins the Tony award. <em>Blues for Mister Charlie</em> by James Baldwin, starring Diana Sands. <em>Hello, Dolly!</em>, starring Carol Channing; it runs for 2,844 performances and wins ten Tony awards, including Best Musical. <em>Funny Girl</em>, starring Barbra Streisand. <em>Dutchman</em> by LeRoi Jones and <em>Funnyhouse of a Negro</em> by Adrienne Kennedy open off Broadway, each winning an Obie award.</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Company is established in Providence, RI.</td>
<td>Father August Kittel dies. Acquires first typewriter (there are conflicting accounts of the circumstances). This “meant I was not going to be a bus driver and I was not going to be a lawyer”; “What I discovered is that writing was the only thing society would allow me to do. . . . Nobody said, ‘Hey, you can’t do that.’ So I felt free” (Brantley; Lahr, “Been Here” 59). Adopts the name August Wilson, replacing Frederick (Freddie) Kittel. Discovers the blues through Bessie Smith’s “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll like Mine.”</td>
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<td>Directs the musical <em>The Yearling</em> on Broadway.</td>
<td>Son Scott Davenport Richards says his father’s commercial ventures didn’t go as well, which made him more controlling and more determined to avoid having to make professional decisions based on money.</td>
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<td>1966</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: <em>The Odd Couple</em>, Zero Mostel wins.</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: <em>Fiddler on the Roof</em>, it wins the Tony award for best musical, and Zero Mostel wins the Tony for best actor. It runs for more than 3,000 performances. <em>Man of La Mancha</em>; it wins the Tony award for best musical. Neil Simon’s <em>The Odd Couple</em>, starring Walter Matthau, opens on Broadway, earning the playwright his first Tony award. The East West Players, the first Asian American theater group, is formed. George White launches the O’Neill Theater Center; the first year’s focus is on reading unpublished plays and choosing two to stage. Roscoe Lee Browne stars in <em>The Old Glory</em> by Robert Lowell.</td>
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<td>Opening on Broadway: <em>Mame</em> runs for 1,508 performances; Angela Lansbury wins a Tony award for best actress. <em>Cabaret</em>; it wins the Tony award for best musical. Yale Repertory Theatre is founded by Yale School of Drama dean Robert</td>
<td>At George White’s invitation, goes to the new O’Neill Theater Center to direct a play about the Civil War, <em>Bedford Forest</em> by Joel Oliansky, who had requested Richards to direct. “I got a call from a man I never heard of, named George White, asking me to come to a place I</td>
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<td>was unfamiliar with. I lived in New York and was in the habit of going to different plays and seeing different people. <em>Mame</em> runs for 1,508 performances; Angela Lansbury wins a Tony award for best actress. <em>Cabaret</em>; it wins the Tony award for best musical. Yale Repertory Theatre is founded by Yale School of Drama dean Robert</td>
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twenty-one at the time and had no idea I was going to write about it. I wasn’t keeping notes. But I loved listening to them” (Lyons and Plimpton).

Co-founds Centre Avenue Poets’ Theater Workshop in Pittsburgh with Rob Penny. Looking back, Wilson said if he had not become a playwright, “the only thing I know for sure is that I would have been involved in what Borges called “the problematic practice of literature.” I fell in love with words as concretized thought when I was a kid. . . . I remember when I was twenty years old and the world was wide open as to how I was going to live my life and make a contribution, to mark my passing. . . . I was intrigued and fascinated with the idea of painting. I didn’t question whether I had any talent for it. In my youthful arrogance and exuberance I felt I could do anything” (Lyons and Plimpton).

Serves as Poetry Editor for the journal *Signal* (later called *Connection*), published by the Halfway Art Gallery (the gallery had never heard of (Waterford, Connecticut) to direct a play I had never heard of. He asked me to come and do an epic play about the Civil War with a cast of about 60, in a theatre that was yet to be built. And this would all happen in a couple of weeks. Now, this was the kind of thing that gets me. I see what people are trying to do and how they are struggling to make it work. I wanted to be part of this” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”).

Works as Master Teacher of Acting at New York University’s new department, staying there until 1972; it is one of the first programs of its kind in the U.S. “I wrote them about my availability and interest. They immediately engaged me to be on the staff in actors’ training” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”).

“I try and elicit from the actor that which I want him to achieve. In other words, I try to stimulate, provoke, or question, and in the process of the actor’s discovery, he should arrive at the point where I want him to be, both physically and otherwise” (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 125).

New York University opens “one of the first complete actors’ training programs in the country. . . . It was one of the first real conservatory actors’ training programs in the country. Others evolved after that,” according to Richards (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”).
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<th>Year</th>
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Hallelujah, Baby! opens, starring Leslie Uggams; it wins the Tony award for best musical.  
Barbara Ann Teer opens the National Black Theatre in Harlem.  
The American Conservatory Theatre opens in San Francisco, California.  
The Mark Taper Forum opens in Los Angeles, California. |
| 1968 | With Rob Penny, co-founds Black Horizons Theater Company; they reach out to at-risk young people.  
Attends a three-day vigil in tribute to the death of Malcolm X. (date approximate) Admires the work of Amiri Baraka, who “takes his anger and makes art out of it. It’s funny and it gets his point across.  
Baraka wanted to make everything that he could, that he could do, that he could express himself through it.”  
Named Artistic Director of the National Playwrights Conference at the O’Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut, which opened two years earlier. He changes the structure to focus on the playwrights’ words. Over the years, he works with Wendy Wasserstein, Christopher Durang, Lee Blessing, David Henry Hwang, and many others. Richards said, “I wanted... | Opening on Broadway: The Great White Hope by Howard Sackler; it wins the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony award for best play, and James Earl Jones wins the Tony for best actor (the first African American to do so). Hair, Neil Simon’s Plaza Suite, directed by Mike Nichols and starring George C. Scott and Maureen Stapleton. |
big. And I thought that this was one of the ways that he was most effective. Very theatrical – sometimes I couldn’t understand drama but I understood theatrics. It’s truly art” (Herrington 30-31).

them to get a great knowledge of what they had achieved, and what they had to do to advance it. In order to help and guide them in their thinking, I gave each a very knowledgeable cast, talented professionals, and I gave them an opportunity to live with playwrights who were going through the same thing. This access is a rare opportunity for working playwrights. Here it is two o’clock in the morning, in the dorm that they stay in, and everybody is working. You have a community” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”).

Moves with his family into a brownstone on the Upper West Side, where he lives for the rest of his life.

The Boys in the Band by Matt Crowley opens off Broadway.

The Living Theater produces Paradise Now.

The Alliance Theatre is established in Atlanta, Georgia.

Producer David Merrick receives a special Tony award.

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<th>Year</th>
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| 1969 | Stepfather David Bedford dies.  
       Marries Brenda Burton.  
| 1970 | Daughter Sakina Ansari born on January 22. |

Ceremonies in Dark Old Men by Lonne Elder III opens on Broadway.  
The Open Theater produces The Serpent.

Opening on Broadway: Purlie, the musical based on Ossie Davis’s Purlie Victorious; it stars Cleavon Little, who becomes the first African American to win the Tony award for best leading actor in a musical. Co-star Melba Moore also receives the
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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: Godspell. Jesus Christ Superstar. Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death by Melvin Van Peebles. To Be Young, Gifted, and Black: A Portrait of Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words, produced by her husband, Robert Nemiroff, and Harry Belafonte, opens off Broadway. Philip Hayes Dean’s The Sty of the Blind Pig opens. Black Girl by J.E. Franklin, directed by Shauneille Perry, appears off Broadway.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Divorces Brenda Burton. Later says that Toledo’s description of his failed marriage in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom is based on his experience with Burton.</td>
<td>Serves as Professor of Theater and Cinema at Hunter College (until 1979).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: The River Niger by Joseph A. Walker, which wins the Tony award for best play, the first time for a play written by an African American. Grease, which runs for more than 3,000 performances. Pippin; Ben Vereen wins the Tony for best actor in a Tony award. No Place To Be Somebody by Charles Gordone, who receives the Pulitzer Prize, the first African-American playwright to do so. Company, starring Elaine Stritch; it wins the Tony award for best musical.</td>
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<td>1975</td>
<td>Mid-70s: Continues writing poetry, which he later says is “the bedrock of my playwriting. Primarily not so much in the language as it is in the approach and the thinking. . . . The idea of metaphor, which is a very large idea in my plays” (Shannon, “Long Wait”).</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: <em>A Chorus Line</em>, earning a Pulitzer Prize and winning the Tony award for best musical; it runs for more than 6,000 performances. <em>The Wiz</em>, starring Stephanie Mills and Andre De Shields; it wins the Tony award for best musical. <em>Chicago. The First Breeze of Summer</em> by Leslie Lee. Ed Bullins’ <em>The Taking of Miss Janie</em> debuts. Starting this year, as playwright-in-residence at the Magic Theatre, Sam Shepard premieres a number of plays, including <em>Buried Child</em> and <em>True West</em>. Woodie King, Jr., establishes the National Black Touring Circuit. Vivian Robinson establishes the Audience Development Committee,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Introduced to the work of Romare Bearden, by friend Claude Purdy, with the book “The Prevalence of Ritual”: “I looked. What for me had been so difficult, Bearden made seem so simple, so easy. It was the art of a large and generous spirit that defined not only the character of black American life, but also its</td>
<td>Directs <em>Paul Robeson</em> by Phillip Hayes Dean, starring James Earl Jones, on Broadway. Opening on Broadway: <em>American Buffalo</em> by David Mamet. <em>Ain’t Misbehavin’</em>; it wins the Tony award for best musical. The musical <em>The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas</em>, directed by Tommy Tune; it receives two Tony awards. <em>Paul Robeson</em> by Phillip Hayes Dean, starring James Earl Jones.</td>
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At Claude Purdy's urging, moves to St. Paul, Minnesota, to join him at the new Penumbra Theatre and to work on playwriting. Living in a state with a very small African-American population, "in that silence, I could hear the language for the first time." Remembering his neighborhood friends and associates, "I got lonely and missed those guys and sort of created them. I could hear the music" (Lahr, "Been Here" 60).

Adapts a series of poems entitled *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, about "a former cattle rustler turned alchemist," into a play, a "musical satire" (Lyons and Plimpton). "I was intrigued with the idea that I was able to take these forms and make something larger out of them" (Sheppard).

(date approximate) Takes a script-writing job at the Science Museum of Minnesota, "mostly something to pay the bills," according to writer friend Daniel Gabriel; also works as a cook for the staff of Little Brothers of the Poor.
which Gabriel says had a “bigger impact.”

| 1979 | Writes *Jitney* and has a breakthrough on dialogue. “I started writing poetry in 1965, and I read anything and everything that was out there. As a consequence it took me until 1973 before I could find my own voice as a poet, before I could write a poem that was my poem, that was not influenced by John Berryman or Amiri Baraka or anyone else. So when I started writing plays in earnest in 1979, I had not read the body of western theatre that is Ibsen and Chekhov and Shaw and Shakespeare and O’Neill and Williams. I had read Ed Bullins and Baraka and the black playwrights of the 60s, but I thought, I do not want to go back and read all of the ones I have not read because I will just do it my way – I will just say this is my idea of a play” (Sheppard). | Named Dean of the Yale School of Drama and Artistic Director of Yale Repertory Theatre and given a “free hand” to shape the program (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 125). “I was engaged very much in training. I was engaged in new play production. I was engaged in the professional theater. And those were all components that Yale had as parts of its program. So when they were looking at people for the position, I guess I was one of the few people in the country with the qualifications in all areas. It was very important for me, because Yale was a bellwether program. There were very few really professional training institutions in the country, about a dozen. They were struggling to develop and maintain standards, to exist. And if Yale went down the drain – having the greatest visibility and with a professional theater attached – it would affect the whole pyramid” (Fitzgerald). James Earl Jones gives Richards the script for *A Lesson from Aloes* by South African playwright Athol Fugard; this is | Stephen Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* opens on Broadway; it wins eight Tony awards, including best musical. |
the first of several collaborations between Fugard and Richards, who later says of their connection, “Everything that surrounds him is seen through his sense of the struggle for humanity to become human. I dare to presume that I come from somewhere in that neighborhood” (Bartow 267).

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<td>1980</td>
<td>Rob Penny sends Wilson a brochure for The Eugene O’Neill Theater Center’s National Playwrights Conference, with a note saying, “Do this!”; Wilson applies and is rejected twice. Returns to the Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom manuscript.</td>
<td>Opening on Broadway: Children of a Lesser God by Mark Medoff, which earns the Tony award for best play. 42nd Street, which wins the Tony award for best musical, and runs for more than 3,000 performances. Talley’s Folly by Lanford Wilson, which wins the Pulitzer Prize. The American Repertory Theater is founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by Robert Brustein. Helen Hayes receives the Lawrence Langner Award for Distinguished Lifetime Achievement in the American Theatre.</td>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>Marries Judy Oliver. Claude Purdy and the Penumbra Theatre stage Black Bart and the Sacred Hills. Resumes writing Ma Rainey. “It took me eight years to develop my</td>
<td>At Yale, creates “Winterfest of New American Plays,” a showcase providing short runs for four plays involving a combination of students and professionals.</td>
<td>Dreamgirls opens on Broadway; Jennifer Holliday wins the Tony award for best actress in a musical. An all-black Long Day’s Journey into Night is produced by Hazel Bryant.</td>
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voice as a poet. I didn’t want that to happen as a playwright” (Whitaker 86).

| 1982 | *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is accepted at the O’Neill National Playwrights Conference; Wilson is notified by telegram in the spring. Meets actor Charles Dutton at the O’Neill Conference. Later says Dutton’s “intuitive sensibilities match my own. His inventive portrayal of Levee in *Ma Rainey* inspired me to write the roles of Harold Loomis in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* for him. I am still challenged to write a role to match his talent” (*Three Plays* xiii). Begins writing *Fences* after O’Neill conference ends. *Jitney* is staged in Pittsburgh; every performance is sold out. “Many audience members, African Americans attending the theater for the first time, refused to leave when the play was over” (Herrington 15). |
| 1983 | Returns to the O’Neill to work on *Fences*. |

Selects *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* by August Wilson for the O’Neill National Playwrights Conference. “I knew all of those characters. I had met them in barbershops, which is a wonderful, exciting, hilarious place to listen to those characters and all of the discussions that used to go on in those barbershops” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”). In the fall, begins working with Wilson on revising *Ma Rainey* for the Yale Repertory Theatre production.

Opening on Broadway: *Cats*, which wins seven Tony awards – including a posthumous one for author T. S. Eliot – and runs for eighteen years. *A Soldier’s Play* by Charles Fuller, which wins the Pulitzer Prize.
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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Daisy Wilson dies.</td>
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<td><strong>Ma Rainey</strong> is produced at Yale Repertory Theatre, running April 6-21.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Returns to the O’Neill in the summer to work on <em>Joe Turner’s Come and Gone</em>.</td>
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<td><strong>Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom</strong>, set in the 1920s, opens on Broadway on October 11; it runs until 9 June 1985, with 276 performances, winning the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best play. It is nominated for three Tony awards: best play (which ultimately goes to Neil Simon’s <em>Biloxi Blues</em>), best featured actor (Charles Dutton), and best featured actress (Theresa Merritt). “People were talking Pulitzer Prize, Tony Award, Drama Desk Award, this award, that award. Early on in Ma Rainey, they wrote me a letter and said I got this TOR Award. I said, ‘What’s that?’ They had a ceremony, and I didn’t go. They sent me a little trophy about**</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Directs Ma Rainey</strong> at Yale Repertory Theatre in April. **</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Directs Ma Rainey</strong> on Broadway in the fall. **</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Begins working with Wilson on revising <em>Fences</em>. “What would happen very often is the person who ended a scene would start the next scene, and it might be a day later. Once it’s six months later. You’re always working in the theater. There’s very little time between scenes. And if you end a scene with one person and you’re starting the next scene six months later with the same person – and the first one has a very dramatic conclusion – and the next scene is a very different emotional attitude, then what you’ve got in that time – and you have less than ten seconds to do it – or you want less than ten seconds to do it – is you have to change the scene, you have to change the costumes, and the actor has to make that leap, that emotional leap. Now, an experienced playwright would know better than to do that. He’d bring**</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom</strong> by August Wilson, directed by Lloyd Richards, opens on Broadway. **</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David Mamet wins a Pulitzer Prize for <em>Glengarry Glen Ross</em>. **</td>
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*Ma Rainey* by August Wilson, directed by Lloyd Richards, opens on Broadway.

David Mamet wins a Pulitzer Prize for *Glengarry Glen Ross*.
six inches high. I just threw it in a box with my stuff. Well, let me tell you, Pulitzer came, and I didn’t get it. Outer Critics Circle, and I didn’t get that. No Drama Desk either. I said, Wait a minute, let me find that. Well, I pulled it out, and it sits on my desk to this day as a reminder that someone gave me an award and I didn’t appreciate it. I said, August, they’re all important, no matter where they come from” (Watlington).

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<tr>
<th>1985</th>
<th><em>Fences</em> is produced at Yale Repertory Theatre.</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Directs <em>Fences</em> at Yale Repertory Theatre.</td>
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<td>Opening on Broadway: <em>Sunday in the Park with George</em> by Stephen Sondheim, which wins a Pulitzer Prize. <em>Big River</em>, it wins the Tony award for best musical. Herb Gardner’s <em>I’m Not Rappaport</em>, it wins the Tony award for best play.</td>
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<th>1986</th>
<th>Returns to the O’Neill to work on <em>The Piano Lesson</em>.</th>
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<td>Directs <em>Joe Turner’s Come and Gone</em> at Yale Repertory Theatre. (date approximate) Named president of the Theatre Communications Group.</td>
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<td><em>The Colored Museum</em> by George C. Wolfe opens off Broadway.</td>
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<th>1987</th>
<th><em>Fences</em>, set in the 1950s, opens on Broadway and runs for 525 performances; it wins the Pulitzer Prize and four Tony awards, including best play, best director for</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Directs <em>Fences</em> on Broadway, receiving the Tony award for best director. Directs <em>The Piano Lesson</em> at Yale Repertory Theatre.</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td><em>Joe Turner’s Come and Gone</em>, set in the 1910s, opens on Broadway – running for 105 performances – while <em>Fences</em> is still running. <em>Joe Turner</em> is nominated for six Tony awards, and wins best featured actress for L. Scott Caldwell. It is also nominated for seven Drama Desk awards. It wins the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the New York Public Library Literary Lion Award, and the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for best play.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td><em>Fences</em> is the “second-most</td>
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<td>successful play ever*</td>
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*The Heidi Chronicles* by Wendy
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<td>1990</td>
<td>Divorces Judy Oliver. Moves to Seattle. <em>The Piano Lesson</em>, set in the 1930s, with a cast including Charles Dutton and S. Epatha Merkerson, opens on Broadway and runs for 328 performances; it wins the Pulitzer Prize. It is nominated for five Tony awards and for five Drama Desk awards; it wins for best play. It also wins the Drama Critics Circle Award, the American Theatre Critics, and the Outer Circle award for best Broadway play of the year. Wilson is given the John Gassner award for best American playwright and is named the Chicago Tribune artist of the year. <em>Two Trains Running</em> opens at Yale Repertory Theatre.</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>Attends the O’Neill conference as a dramaturg. “[I have not seen many black plays] I almost never go out. I haven’t been to the theatre in a few years” but “Theatre has made me</td>
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<td>Steps down as Dean of the Yale School of Drama and Artistic Director of Yale Repertory Theatre. Yale names him Professor Emeritus of the School of Drama.</td>
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<td>Miss Saigon opens on Broadway and runs for more than 4000 performances; Hinton Battle wins the Tony award for best featured actor in a musical. <em>From the Mississippi Delta</em> by</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Two Trains Running</em>, set in the 1960s, opens on Broadway and runs for 160 performances. It is nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. It is also nominated for four Tony awards, and Laurence Fishburne wins for best featured actor; he also wins the Drama Desk award. The play also wins the Drama Critics Circle for best play, the American Theatre Critics Award, and the Clarence Muse Award.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Directs <em>Two Trains Running</em> on Broadway.</td>
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<td>1993</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>Marries the costume designer Constanza Romero, who is originally from Colombia. Returns to the O’Neill to work on <em>Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992</em></td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Seven Guitars</em>. The television movie of <em>The Piano Lesson</em> appears; Wilson produces.</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td><em>Seven Guitars</em>, set in the 1940s, opens on Broadway and runs for 188 performances. It is nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and for eight Tony awards (winning best featured actor for Ruben Santiago-Hudson) and for five Drama Desk awards (winning for set design). It is the last Wilson play directed by Lloyd Richards. <em>Jitney</em> is produced at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre, directed by Marion McClinton, who wins an Obie award. It is well reviewed but does not move to Broadway. Becomes a production partner with Benjamin Mordecai, who had been Richards’s managing director at Yale. Delivers the speech “The Ground on Which I Stand” at the National Black Theater Festival.</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Starts the African Grove Institute of the Arts to support independent black theaters.</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>Receives the National Humanities Medal from President Clinton. Has quadruple bypass surgery in April. Steps down from the National Playwrights Conference at the O’Neill Theater Center, after 31 years.</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>“Azula has her father’s ear and number, as well as total control of the living room, which, apart from a jukebox and a piano – props from Wilson’s productions – hasn’t a stick of adult furniture” (Lahr, “Been Here” 50).</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td><em>King Hedley II</em>, set in the 1980s, directed by Marion McClinton, opens on Broadway and runs for 72 performances. It is nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and for six Tony awards.</td>
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awards; Viola Davis wins for best featured actress. It is also nominated for four Drama Desk awards; Charles Brown wins for best featured actor and Viola Davis wins for best featured actress. In the play, recurring character Aunt Esther dies. Wilson said, “Aunt Esther is the tradition. If you don’t value that, then you lose it. So, in 1985, these kids are out there killing one another. Aunt Esther dies of grief. People quit going up to her house. The weeds are all grown over. You can’t even find the door no more. So she dies. . . . If you had a connection to your grandparents and understood their struggle to survive, you wouldn’t be out there in the street killing someone over fifteen dollars’ worth of narcotics. You have to know your history. Then you’ll have a purposeful presence in the world” (Lahr, “Been Here” 64).

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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Receives the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>A Broadway revival of <em>Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom</em>, directed by Marion McClinton, opens, starring Charles</td>
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Dutton, reprising the role of Levee, and Whoopi Goldberg as Ma Rainey. It runs for 68 performances. Thomas Jefferson Byrd is nominated for a Tony award for best featured actor.

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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td><em>Gem of the Ocean</em>, set in the 1900s and directed by Kenny Leon, opens on Broadway and runs for 72 performances. It is nominated for five Tony awards and one Drama Desk award.</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td><em>Radio Golf</em> is produced at Yale Repertory Theatre in April and May. In August receives diagnosis of cancer. “Working on <em>Radio Golf</em> in rehearsal, knowing that Wilson’s health was failing, was a bittersweet experience. ‘It instilled in us a sense of mission,’ [actor James A.] Williams said. ‘He could have taken medication to prolong his life, but the medication would have ... made it very difficult for him to write coherently. So he made the choice to finish the play’ ” (“August Wilson: Broadway’s”). The Broadway theater at 245 West 52nd Street is renamed The...</td>
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August Wilson Theater.  
Dies on October 2.  
Actor Ebony Jo-Ann recalled, “He told me during *Gem of the Ocean*, ‘I have done what God put [me] on earth to do.’ I didn’t know what he was trying to tell me. He was trying to tell me, ‘I’m leaving here’ ” (Miller, “August Wilson’s”).

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<td>2006</td>
<td>Dies on June 29, his eighty-seventh birthday, of heart failure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td><em>Radio Golf</em>, set in the 1990s, the final work in Wilson’s Century Cycle, opens on Broadway, at the Cort Theater, where Wilson’s first Broadway show, <em>Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom</em>, played. Kenny Leon directs. It is nominated for four Tony awards and three Drama Desk awards.</td>
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From the beginning, American theater was concerned with identity and portraying a new nation – but the aspect of slavery was ignored or trivialized. In the nineteenth century, there was much focus on progress – the United States was growing, new technologies were emerging. Sometimes the costs of this progress were addressed on stage, but much of the drama was unsophisticated, with little nuance. Minstrel shows with white entertainers in blackface, demeaning portrayals of African Americans, were common, and continued well into the twentieth century. Serious black actors were shunned in the United States; the admired actor Ira Aldridge, for example, ended up performing mostly in Europe. Moving into the twentieth century, the theater world focused more on discovering and developing American playwrights, rather than restaging European and classic works. Particularly with the Provincetown and Washington Square Players, and playwright Eugene O’Neill, plays became more realistic, more naturalistic, more concerned with alienation and loss. There were more serious works about African-American life, but mostly by white authors. Because it was difficult to find financial backing for plays by black authors, periodicals such as Opportunity and Crisis solicited and published a number of them. Langston Hughes as playwright and actor Canada Lee both had strong commercial success in the 1930s, and in the 1940s, and World War II brought additional opportunities for black actors in military productions. By mid-century, the movie industry and McCarthyism had each taken a terrible toll on the theatrical world, in different ways.

In 1959, pursuing an unlikely goal, young playwright Lorraine Hansberry – enabled by actor Sidney Poitier, unconventional producers, and tenacious director Lloyd
Richards – brought *A Raisin to the Sun* to Broadway. Richards recalled the beginning of it all:

Lorraine’s husband (Bob Nemiroff) worked with Philip Rose in the recording business. Sidney was part of their ongoing poker game. Bobby got Lorraine’s play to Philip, and Philip wanted to produce it, and he passed it to Sidney. Once they convinced Sidney to do it, then they could start moving. None of them had ever done a Broadway show, or produced a play. It started around the poker table. (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”)

Not only was this group facing a theater world that discriminated mightily against African Americans, but they all lacked experience in this world to begin with. Richards and Poitier had been friends as they started out in theater, but Poitier had since found fame. Richards says,

Sidney Poitier and I were out-of-work actors together. He knew that I had directed some stock, and he said to me – it was one of those strange things that two broke people say to one another in the middle of the night – “You know, if I ever get a major show, I’d like you to direct it.” You respond, “Yeah, and if I get a show I’d like you to be in it.” Those kinds of things. And then I got a call from Sidney. He said that he had been offered a play and he wanted to submit me as the director. (Bartow 261)

It turned out to be a play that Richards both admired and related to: “I read *A Raisin in the Sun* and fell in love with it. He [Poitier] set up a meeting with Philip Rose, who produced it. We hit it off and he arranged a meeting with Lorraine Hansberry. And we also hit it off. Together, we worked on the play for a year before we went into rehearsal” (Bartow 261). There was not enough money for the production: “We were all committed to it, and went about trying to raise money. That was not easy,” said Richards (Nesmith,
“Lloyd Richards”). Plays about African Americans had been very difficult to stage on Broadway. “In 1959, who was going to invest in a play about a black family?” (Bartow 262). The traditional producers stayed far away, so the group turned to nontraditional backers:

The “smart money’ on Broadway did not invest in that show. There was no “smart money” in it. _Raisin_ had more investors than any other show that had previously been done on Broadway. It was all small, little amounts of money. There was one big investor, Harry Belafonte. I think he invested two thousand dollars. He was doing well at the time, and he was, of course, a friend of Sidney’s. But the rest was fifty dollars, a hundred dollars, two hundred dollars. That came together to make the show happen. (Fitzgerald)

The play needed work, as well, and Richards and Hansberry worked together extensively: “For a year I met with Lorraine once a week,” he recounts (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”). Conceptually, Hansberry had struggled with identifying the central narrative; Richards recalled, “When I went into the play, Lorraine had already accepted that it was not a play about Mama, or getting into the new neighborhood, it was about the evolution, the growing up, and the taking of responsibility by Walter Lee.” Richards and Hansberry’s work together centered on “making it a play about Walter Lee.” Earlier in the writing, Hansberry’s focus had been different; Richards explained the resulting challenge for the play, particularly for the character of Walter Lee:

When the play was first written (and that was a draft that I was not involved with), by the second act the family was already in their new house and the play was about that and about Mama. It was suggested to Lorraine that the real play was in the first act, and that she should review that, which is what she did. I wasn’t there, so I can’t say who said what to whom. But then, the problem was
that it became a play about the son, Walter. The original play had been about 
Mama. If you look very carefully at the first act, it still has those elements of a 
play about Mama. So the demands on the actor who plays Walter are tough 
because he gets up in the first scene, in the first five minutes, and goes out of the 
house. He doesn’t come back until the end of the act, and then he’s got to carry 
the play. It was a really tough struggle to bring what had been the third act of the 
play back into the first act. We did a lot of rewriting and reworking . . . took forty-
five minutes out of it in rehearsal. (Bartow 261-62)

Richards helped the playwright give Walter Lee a more consistent and central position in 
the world of the play; he remembered one subtlety noticed and changed by Hansberry:

The play

lost one character, the woman upstairs, which was very painful. That role later 
appeared in the musical version, *Raisin*. It’s a wonderful character, a wonderful 
scene. Beah Richards, an actress for whom I have great respect, was playing it in 
rehearsal. One day Lorraine came in and watched while we were in the run-
through stage and said, “That character should go.” “Why?” I said. “The scene is 
great and it works.” She said, “It’s redundant. That character takes something 
away from the later seen with Lindner.” She was absolutely right. The character 
going out, the scene went out. (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”)

Revisions to the script continued even after rehearsals ended and performances began;
Richards said, “There were a lot of changes made on the road. We did a lot of reworking 
in Chicago” (Bartow 261). Changes continued even without the playwright in attendance; 
after opening night in Chicago, Hansberry had to stay away from the city, coincidentally 
because of “a legal problem she had involving real estate interests in New York and 
Chicago.” The new revisions were “all made over the phone, and I would write them 
down for her every night and make suggestions. She didn’t see the play for seven weeks, 
until we got back to New York” (Bartow 262). These revisions went beyond extended
discussions of performances Hansberry had seen; Richards had to be her eyes and ears:

We had to devise a way of working with her not being there for the last six weeks. This meant that I’d look at the show every day, come back to my hotel and call her on the phone and tell her what I had perceived and what I thought was necessary. And she would go to work on it, and in the morning she would call me and give me her thoughts and her changes. I took those to rehearsals with me. We worked that way for all those weeks. (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”)

Hansberry trusted Richards and his understanding of her play enough to revise it based on his reports and observations. Richards’ intuitive ability to connect extended well beyond his relationship with the playwright: producer Philip Rose recalled, “He was able to deal with all these people and get the best out of them. He directed it as though we had a group of stars, which, of course, they all turned out to be” (Robertson, “Lloyd Richards”). In this unconventional, unlikely production, Richards was able to lead calmly and facilitate outstanding performances by Poitier as Walter Lee and Claudia McNeil as the matriarch (both were nominated for Tony awards), and by future stars Louis Gossett, Ruby Dee, and Diana Sands; Richards himself was nominated for a Tony, and the play that he helped revise for a year won the Pulitzer. He was calm, but he was not mild or anything less than a driving force; Dee remembered, “Lloyd was an intense director even though he was light-footed” (Robertson, “Lloyd Richards”).

_A Raisin in the Sun_ opened on Broadway on March 11 at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, moving to the Belasco in October, and ran for 530 performances altogether. Richards recalled, “_Raisin_ was a wonderful experience, a fantastic, tough experience – a play that almost never got on” because of the lack of financing; “finally, it had more
investors than any other play that had appeared on Broadway at that time” (Bartow 262). The play appealed to a broad range of people, with its universal charms; Richards said, “Broadway is not that receptive to a serious play, but Raisin had a great deal of humor in it, a great deal of very warm feeling in it, familial feeling that transcended any ethnic concepts, just leaped over them” (Bartow 262).

Despite the play’s success, African-American theater – soon to be encountered by Wilson – moved in a different direction after A Raisin in the Sun. In the Black Arts movement of the 1960s, Amiri Baraka and others introduced violent, shocking, and confrontational plays about race. In the 1970s, following the trends of Broadway, black musicals – such as The Wiz and Purlie – were common, and very few non-musical plays by African-American writers appeared on Broadway. Politically, August Wilson, too, considered himself a radical, even decades later; speaking about Malcolm X in the late 1980s, he said “I still consider myself a Black Nationalist” (Livingston). Wilson called the Black Arts movement “the kiln in which I was fired” and talked about its influence the rest of his life (“Ground”). Baraka himself was a hero, but not as much in terms of style: “Baraka’s influence has less to do with the way that he writes and more to do with the ideas that he espoused in the 60s as a black nationalist – ideas that I found value in then and still find value in” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). He found that the movement identified and celebrated his community’s distinctive context: “It posited black Americans as coming from a long line of honorable people with a cultural and political history, a people of manners with a strong moral personality that had to be reclaimed by strengthening the elements of the culture that made it unique and by developing
institutions for preserving and promoting it” (Three Plays ix). Wilson wanted to tell the unheard and under-heard stories of the African Americans who descended from slaves and who continued to bear that legacy; he came of age at a time when many Americans did not believe that blacks were “honorable” or even in possession of a “cultural and political history.” Also essential to Wilson were the black nationalist “ideas of self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense” and the way that those ideas affirmed both the power and the possibilities of African Americans (Three Plays ix). Inspired by Baraka and claiming to have little exposure to most other theater, Wilson nevertheless acknowledged, “I certainly couldn’t have written my plays without Lorraine Hansberry, and Ed Bullins, and Ron Milner . . . and all of those playwrights who have preceded me. Because they did their work, that enables me to do mine” (Livingston). As a noted playwright, Wilson spoke out against such controversial practices as color-blind casting and all-black productions of classic plays written by and about whites, such as 1981’s revival of Long Day’s Journey into Night; he believed that African-American actors should play roles rooted in their own communities, rather than portraying whites or characters seemingly without a race. Though devoted to making theater by, about, and for African Americans, Wilson’s audiences tended to have more white members than blacks or members of other minorities. He did not draw many of the larger black audience who supported the “chitlin circuit,” as Henry Louis Gates describes it, of popular, less literary and challenging plays, which follow in a historical tradition of plays “for the moment, not for the ages,” “the kind of melodrama or farce – or as often both – in which nothing succeeded like excess” (49). Wilson’s understanding of his community’s challenges gave
him perspective on this situation: “People always ask me why black folks don’t go to the theater. I try to tell them we’ve got *enough* drama and ritual in our lives already” (Johnson 142).

In the 1960s, after *A Raisin in the Sun*, Richards directed other plays on Broadway and continued to teach acting; he and his wife also had two sons. One directing job, perhaps the least conventional, was at the brand-new O’Neill Theater Center’s National Playwrights conference in 1966, when a participating playwright requested Richards as his director. The center was new and chaotic and the play was complex – with a war setting and a huge cast – but Richards calmly orchestrated a smooth, strong production. In 1968 Richards accepted a position as Artistic Director at the O’Neill, which had been created by George C. White in his hometown of Waterford, Connecticut. In 1963, aware of property available on the sound, White had tried to partner with the Yale School of Drama, where he had attended and was on an alumni board, and where Eugene O’Neill had donated his papers, but Yale declined. White continued his quest in 1964 with Waterford residents and theater colleagues; in the summer of 1965 they held the first gathering, twenty selected playwrights to hold discussions with other members of the theater world. Over the next few years, the conference evolved into a place where playwrights came to shape and revise new works away from commercial concerns, and to produce staged readings, working with new and established professionals from all areas of theater. Actors were required to have scripts in hand, even if they had memorized lines, to keep the focus on the play itself; this also assured that playwrights could continue to rewrite up until curtain time. In attempts to preclude commercial transactions,
directors were not assigned plays until they arrived at conference, and theater critics were allowed only to observe; no deal making was allowed until a set amount of time after the conference.

George White was naturally drawn to Richards for the role of artistic director; he had proven himself to work well under the makeshift conditions of the O’Neill conference, and he was a Broadway director who had developed *A Raisin in the Sun* under similarly challenging conditions, as well as more traditional productions. And Richards was naturally drawn to the job:

> To do an original play is, for me, the ultimate formation of the piece. That’s it. You’ve proved the play, its value. . . . When I was in high school, I used to take swimming instead of gym. Every day, you’d race there to be the first one to jump into the settled water, to dive in and swim the length of the pool. You are making the first waves, and those waves reverberate. Other people come afterward and do whatever they do in the pool, but you have set the pattern. That is a sense of what it is like to do a play for the first time. (Fitzgerald)

Richards not only was capable of handling new, uncharted material well, but preferred creating the first iteration to working with plays whose patterns had been established. The fit was ideal: “This is where you see Lloyd at his best, see what he’s made of,” says actor Michael Rogers, who first performed at the O’Neill after graduating from Yale’s Drama School in 1985. “He is patient with actors and playwrights. When they leave here, they’re much smarter” (Fitzgerald). Richards combined patience with a determination not to control but to enable the best possible work to emerge, taking “as my responsibility to illuminate the material, not to impose on it’ (Freedman, “Leaving”). He believed in his
own ability to recognize talent, and in his playwrights and actors’ ability to bear it out;

“He was someone who hired people and then trusted them,” said playwright Christopher
Durang, an O’Neill alumnus (Robertson, “Lloyd Richards”).

Richards had been with the O’Neill for fourteen years when he first encountered
Wilson’s writing among the submissions for the upcoming summer conference. He had
been invited in to work on A Raisin in the Sun early in the life of the play, and he
certainly helped shape it to a large degree, but Wilson was his own discovery, one based
on connection to the voices of his own childhood – and it was a discovery that depended
on the structure and opportunity of the O’Neill, which was designed to find, nurture, and
establish emerging talent in a place protected from the commercial world of theater. After
working together on several plays, Richards described Wilson’s gifts: “one of the most
compelling storytellers to begin writing for the theater in many years, he has taken the
responsibility of telling the tale of the encounter of the released black slaves with a
vigorous and ruthless growing America decade by decade” (Introduction, Fences vii).
Richards recognized the responsibility Wilson had adopted, not just to tell his people’s
story, but to show how that story had evolved and was evolving over many years.
Richards recognized Wilson’s place in art, tradition, and history:

To call August Wilson a storyteller is to align him at one and the same time with
the ancient aristocrats of dramatic wiring who stood before the tribes and made
compelling oral history into legend, as well as with the modern playwrights who
bring an audience to their feet at the end of an evening of their work because that
audience knows that they encountered themselves, their concerns, and their
passions, and have been moved and enriched by the experience. (Introduction,
Fences vii)
Though Richards recognized a powerful and authentic African-American voice and mission in Wilson’s work, he also saw its universality, the way it furnishes a place where all people can encounter themselves and their lives.
Wilson’s journey to the O’Neill and his mentor, Richards, was one of many years; his long period of trial-and-error struggles to find his voice as a writer likely made Wilson a particularly natural fit for the O’Neill’s workshop approach to theater. Wilson was largely self-educated, and after spending his young adult years working odd jobs and spending idle time on the Hill in Pittsburgh, he entered the black arts world in the idealistic and radical atmosphere of the 1960s. He focused on poetry for many years, though he helped create and run the Black Horizons theater center, and in the 1970s he gradually began writing plays. He was interested in the everyday alongside the mythical, as he articulated to his young daughter Azula many years later: “You can have a three-hundred-and-sixty-six-year-old woman and you also gotta pay your bills. They exist side by side. They infuse life with a something that lifts it up, almost into another realm. Closer to God” (Lahr, “Been Here” 65). It was the combination, not one or the other, that Wilson considered life to be.

Wilson’s ambitions were high from the beginning; Constanza Romero, his third wife, to whom he was married when he died, remarked on his perfectionism: “He really doesn’t allow himself any mistakes, any leeway” (Lahr, “Been Here”). To reach those high aspirations, Wilson was also willing to push himself as an artist to an intensely personal place; he described writing as “like walking down the landscape of the self. . . . You find false trails, roads closed for repairs, impregnable fortresses, scouts, armies of memory, and impossible cartography.” This sense of false starts, rerouting, and
attempting the impossible is what Wilson clearly called upon when he felt he must “write a better play” than his best.

Wilson was a longtime poet before he turned to playwriting, as a form that he hoped would prove an effective vehicle for his message. He explained, “I would describe my poetry as intensely personal. I needed something as big as a play because my ideas no longer fit in the poems, or they fit in a different way, for myself only. I needed a larger canvas that would include everyone” (Powers). Wilson felt that the theater could offer a more universal experience of art for its audience. He was naturally drawn to storytelling and saw that a play could bring together the powers of various forms; “fiction was a story told through character and dialogue, and a poem was a distillation of language and images designed to reveal an emotive response to phenomena that brought it into harmony with one’s knowledge and experience. Why couldn’t a play be both?” (Three Plays xi). His expectations and ambitions for his material were high, and he aimed to elicit intense responses.

Part of Wilson’s inspiration to move away from poetry came from his experience with community theater in Pittsburgh: “I was writing poetry. But I found the theater such an exciting experience that one day I went home to try.” He did not immediately succeed, however;

I had one character say to the other guy, “Hey, man, what’s happening.” And the other guy said, “Nothing.” I sat there for twenty minutes and neither of my guys would talk. So I said to myself, “Well, that’s all right. After all, I’m a poet. I don’t have to be a playwright. To hell with writing plays. Let other people write plays.” I didn’t try to write a play for a number of years after that first experience. (Lyons and Plimpton)
Here Wilson had hit on the main challenge he would face in his early striving to write powerful plays: authentic dialogue – which would also, ultimately, turn out to be his greatest strength; indeed, one day his characters would want to talk to him unceasingly, it would seem. Moving from his idea of poetry to humans talking out loud to each other did not come easily at first, though, and his characters’ dialogue started off very different from where it ended up: “My early attempts at writing plays, which are very poetic, did not use the language that I work in now. I didn’t recognize the poetry in the everyday language of black America.” In trying to use a non-native vocabulary and style, Wilson worked without the benefit of the unintentional research he had done for all those years on the Hill. He loved the stories he heard, but “I thought I had to change it to create art”; he gives an example from an early play, *The Coldest Day of the Year*:

The old man walks up and he says, “Our lives are frozen in the deepest hate and spiritual turbulence.” She looks at him. He goes on, “Terror hangs over the night like a hawk.” Then he says, “The wind bites at your tits.” He gives her his coat. “Allow me, Madam, my coat. It is made of the wool of a sacrificial lamb.” “What’s that you say?” she says, “It sounded bitter.” He says, “But not as bitter as you are lovely . . . as a jay bird on a spring day.” (Lyons and Plimpton)

This disjointed and fairly melodramatic dialogue is “very different from what I’m writing now,” he said years later; it sharply contrasts with the musical, unpretentious words of Wilson’s successful works. Concerned, at this early stage, because “the dialogue wasn’t good. I couldn’t write plays because I couldn’t write dialogue,” he asked friend and director Rob Penny, “‘How do you make them talk,’ and he said, ‘You don’t make them talk – you listen to them.’ And I realized my mistake. I was trying to force words into their mouths instead of listening and not only listening but recognizing the poetry that
was inherent in the way black people spoke” (Herrington 13). Wilson’s realization was a profound one, and one that inspired him to adopt the mission he would pursue for the rest of his life: to tell the tragic, comic, and universal story of African-American life in the United States – in the beautiful and compelling speech of everyday people. Wilson also realized that he had taken on the literary standards of those who he came to feel represented those who hurt his own community; he now believed that “language describes the idea of the one who speaks; so if I’m speaking the oppressor’s language I’m in essence speaking his ideas, too. This is why I think blacks speak their own language, because they have to find another way” (Lahr, “Been Here” 61). So there was a political agenda here, as well as a poetic one, and Wilson cared deeply about both, and their intersection.

Wilson moved radically from failing to engage with characters to an almost mystical connection with them and their words. Reiterating his journey, he said, “When I first started writing plays I couldn’t write good dialogue because I didn’t respect how black people talked. I thought that in order to make art out of it I had to change it, make it into something different” (Lyons 13). After he “learned to value and respect my characters,” though, “I could really hear them.” He recognized, too, just what speech means to a character, not to mention a person: “How you talk is how you think; the language describes the one who speaks it.” His newfound appreciation for the role of dialogue brought about a new way of writing for him: “When I have characters, I just let them start talking. The important thing is not to censor them, to trust them to just talk. What they are talking about may not seem to have anything to do with what you as a
writer were writing about, but it does. Let them talk and it will connect, because you as the artist will make it connect.” Here Wilson described how he simultaneously gave control to his talking characters and maintained control of the play itself, knowing he would decide later where, when – and if – the character’s words would appear; he, as the writer, would shape and make clear the connections across the play. Giving an example, Wilson said,

Let’s say one guy goes, “Always seemed like I had a halo around my head.” Another guy says, “Yeah, I remember the time you come and asked me did you have a halo, talking about did you have a halo.” And the first guy says, “You see I went to everybody, I went and asked my mama. She said, ‘You ain’t got no halo but you still my angel child.’ ” You might think, “What are these guys doing standing on the corner talking about having a halo?” You find out that this is a really interesting conversation, that they are saying what they think of themselves. The more my characters talk, the more I find out about them. So I encourage them, I tell them, “Tell me more.” I just write it down and it starts to make connections. (Lyons 13-14)

Wilson’s experience was hearing his characters as if they were separate human beings, complete with lives and relationships with each other; Wilson himself listened in from the side, giving them opportunity to open up, learning about them, and constructing a story. There was much for Wilson to learn about them because usually each character at first encounter was a stranger, with a life and history new to the author; for example, Wilson said, “When I was writing The Piano Lesson, Boy Willie just announced that Sutter fell in the well. That was news to me. I had no idea who Sutter was or why he fell in the well. . . . You have to let your characters talk for a while, trust them to do it and have the confidence that later you can shape the material” (Lyons 14). Wilson worked on an unconscious level, creating people, relationships, and events so far below the surface
of his mind that they came to him as from outside himself. Joan Herrington called him an “instinctual artist” (*I Ain’t Sorry* 7).

Wilson’s ear for speech was developed by a number of factors. He acknowledged the dialogue of playwright Philip Hayes Dean (*The Owl-Killer*, *The Sty of the Blind Pig*) as an influence (Savran 292). And of course there were the hours Wilson spent at the Hill District cigar store Pat’s Place, listening to the men who gathered there; “that’s where I learned how black people talk” (Lyons and Plimpton). Ironically, it was finally moving away from Pittsburgh in 1978 that gave Wilson the distance to hear and recreate the sounds of the streets of his youth – and because he had always felt himself an outsider, playing that role more fully may have further propelled his creative abilities. Talking about the unconscious aspect of his writing, Wilson said, “I don’t have a strong sense of myself being in there at all. It’s like, I’m there, I’m writing this down, but the characters are really in control. I have the choice to censor them, to say, no, I don’t want you to do that. But basically I just watch them and they do or say whatever they want” (Feingold). So he made a deliberate choice to sit back and let them talk and expand; that part of the process was conscious: “You listen to them, but you never lose consciousness that they are your creations” (Lyons 13). He said that he experienced these kind of visitations from white characters, too, but he had to “listen a little differently” (Feingold). Wilson’s creative work took on a life of its own through his seemingly autonomous characters; Joan Herrington, who knew Wilson and has written about him extensively, said there was something “magical” about his process, that he would “act out his conversations with these characters” (personal interview). She thinks his instinctual way of writing was very
possibly due in part to his growing up in a “storytelling culture, an oral tradition” (personal interview). Wilson grew up in a community where you defined yourself through the stories you told and often had little else with which to work. Often Wilson’s characters would even begin a new play for their author: “I start with the characters’ dialogue. Often, I don’t know who’s talking or what they’re talking about. But I start with a single line of dialogue and the more they talk, the more I get to know the characters” (Herrington 6). Wilson’s sense was that these characters’ words were never wrong and never without value – but at the same time, not everything they said belonged in the play at hand. He explained, “I believe that whatever a character says is true. So I write down everything the character says – pages and pages. Then, the trick is weeding through all that and finding the story that is really buried in there. And sometimes you really have to dig. You have to discover the connection of all the characters to the story that you’re writing, to the play. That’s the fun part” (Herrington 6). Wilson played editor to the speeches given to him by the characters within himself; he consciously selected and arranged what he had received more or less unconsciously.

Wilson’s instinctual practice was not limited to listening to internal characters; he found similar inspiration visually, particularly in the work of artist Romare Bearden, who modeled for him the celebration of black culture that Wilson finally adopted concerning black speech. First introduced to Bearden’s painting and collages in the late 1970s, Wilson said, “What I saw was black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence. In
Bearden I found my artistic mentor” (Lyons and Plimpton). Wilson saw an artistic representation, even a voice in visual terms, of what he aspired to do: find the grandeur in the everyday. Bearden’s work showed African-American life in an unadorned, almost humble style that, because of its loving attention, revealed its universal and even noble aspect. Bearden was another found teacher for Wilson, though the two men never met personally: “In Bearden I found my artistic mentor and a solidifying purpose to my work” (Ma Rainey liner notes 3). He gave Wilson an articulation of mission as well as a stylistic model, and “I saw in Bearden a painter of tremendous emotive power who interpreted Black life in cultural, ritual and sacred terms that affirmed and connected it to the traditions of world art thereby molding its universal attributes into character.” Bearden’s example helped Wilson crystallize his own vision of showing the universal and the sacred through the specific everyday life and stories of African-American culture.

Perhaps Wilson’s greatest influence and inspiration came from the blues, which he discovered in the 1960s in Bessie Smith’s “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll like Mine,” a record he happened upon and then played twenty-two times in a row:

For the first time someone was speaking directly to me about myself and the cultural environment of my life. I was stunned. By its beauty. By its honesty. And most important by the fact that it was mine. An affirmation of my presence in the world that would hold me up and give me ground to stand on. I began to look at the occupants of my [rooming] house in a different light. I saw behind the seeming despair and emptiness of their lives a force of life, and an indomitable will that linked to their historical precedents became noble in a place where nobility wasn’t supposed to exist. (Herrington 1)

It sounds as if the music introduced Wilson to a home of which he had not known, an entire context for his experiences and his community. Though he had read the great black
authors on his own, here was an aural art that communicated its ideas and values in a
different, perhaps, for him, more intimate way. Seeing himself – and the other struggling
African Americans around him – being recognized and celebrated enlarged his view to
include their people’s history of suffering and overcoming, to the point of seeing nobility
where before he had seen only the opposite. Describing his living situation and this
significant moment in more detail, Wilson wrote,

In 1965 I lived in Pittsburgh across the street from a St. Vincent de Paul
secondhand store in a rooming house with a retired counterfeiter, a convicted
arsonist, a would-be Billy Eckstine and Jean, a lonely woman of curious and deep
melancholy. The landlady was a woman of aggressive morality whose
relationship with Jesus did not preclude keeping a bottle of gin and who involved
herself, and us, in each other’s affairs thereby welding us into a single unit of
extended family. I mention this because it is important to know where I was
standing when I first discovered my full presence in the world, and because my
life and my art have come full circle many times to that house and its occupants.
In a manner of speaking, I have never left it. Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom is as
firmly rooted there as the Black American is rooted on the shores from which his
ancestors came fully clothed in manners and a way of life that is still in 1985, part
of the blood’s memory. (Ma Rainey liner notes 1)

Wilson’s friends and neighbors are far from the sort that most people would consider
noble; the beauty and authenticity of Bessie Smith’s music, though, inspired Wilson to
see every African American’s connection to a brutal past and a forced otherness, no
matter what the present and future bring. Having responded so intensely and so
personally to the blues, it is no wonder that Wilson finally came into his own as a
playwright when he dramatized the process of making blues music and its impact on
musicians and audience. As for those neighbors in 1965, “somehow there was something
about them, that came through in Bessie Smith, that I hadn’t known before.” He
explained, “I began to look at them differently; I began to connect them to a history. And
then I realized that I was part of that. And so I claimed that record there as mine. And from that moment on, you know, I began to, in my writing, you know, to embrace and explore this African presence in America” (“American Shakespeare”). Wilson seemed to find both himself and his literary calling in an epiphany with the blues. Wilson newly sensed

a nobility to the lives of blacks in America which I didn’t always see. . . . I discovered a beauty and a nobility in their struggle to survive. I began to understand the fact that the avenues for participation in society were closed to these people and that their ambitions had been thwarted, whatever they may have been. The mere fact that they were still able to make this music was a testament to the resiliency of their spirit. (Moyers 169)

The music did not communicate despair to Wilson; instead, it seemed miraculously to express warmth and strength despite the potential causes of despair. As Wilson would explore in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, music was a way of surviving and finding meaning in the midst of deprivation.

Though he had already cared for music, Wilson now felt that “all the rest of the music I was listening to did not concern me, was not a part of me”; this new music “spoke to something in myself. It says, this is yours” (*Three Plays* ix). The music seemed a personal gift, and the response in Wilson was dramatic:

The universe stuttered and everything fell into place. . . . It was a birth, a baptism, a resurrection, and a redemption all rolled up in one. It was the beginning of my consciousness that I was a representative of a culture and the carrier of some very valuable antecedents. With my discovery of Bessie Smith and the blues I had been given a world that contained my image, a world at once rich and varied, marked and marking, brutal and beautiful, and at crucial odds with the larger world that contained it and preyed and pressed it from every conceivable angle. (*Three Plays* ix)
This stuttering suggests a radical change of view, even a reversal, for Wilson, that perhaps he had previously had trouble seeing his black community as valuable with a meaningful foundation, as he would also in his writing have difficulty recognizing the beauty in the natural African-American speech around him. When he discovered Bessie Smith’s music, he for the first time recognized that he could allow his characters to speak in the manner of his friends on the streets of the Hill, rather than try to make them speak the more formal English of writers he had emulated, such as Dylan Thomas; he had found the “everyday poetry of the people I’d grown up with” (“Intersections”; Plummer and Kahn). He felt he became a new person with a new history – or perhaps felt born into an awareness of his personhood and communal history. 1965, the date he gives for his this first encounter with the blues, was – certainly not by coincidence – a landmark year for Wilson in his other ways: he acquired his first typewriter and renamed himself to go with this baptism; from then on, he went by his middle name, August, and his mother’s maiden name, Wilson (he had previously gone by his first name, Frederick, and his father’s last name, Kittel). The messages and sensibility of the blues created in Wilson a new recognition of both a community to which he deeply belonged and a larger context for that community:

I saw the blues as a cultural response of a nonliterate people whose history and culture were rooted in the oral tradition. The response was to a world that was not of their making, in which the idea of themselves as a people of imminent worth that belied their recent history was continually assaulted. It was a world that did not recognize their gods, their manners, their mores. It despised their ethos and refused to even recognize humanity. In such an environment the blues was a flag bearer of self-definition, and within the scope of the larger world which lay beyond its doorstep, it carved out a life, set down rules, and urged a manner of being that corresponded to the temperament and sensibilities of its creators.

(Three Plays x)
Wilson uses the neutral term nonliterate, rather than illiterate; Africans in America originally used the few art forms that were available to them to define and express themselves. They reflected on and responded to the world in which they had been placed, where they were dehumanized and where their history was denied. The music created in response to these conditions shared feelings and ideas, and offered encouragement and a philosophy for survival and life. Three of the four band members in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* are illiterate – by the 1920s, nonliterate as a category no longer applies in Chicago – and are particularly riveted by powerful storytelling because they can’t read. The one (highly) literate member, Toledo, must still communicate his ideas and beliefs through stories because he has no peers with whom to share his literacy; after trying to make a point about spelling, he resigns himself: “if don’t nobody know but me, how am I gonna prove it to you?” (17). For all of these men, and for Ma Rainey herself, the blues are key for solace, joy, and survival.

Wilson described in more detail the practical function of the Blues in a society that relied heavily on oral communication:

The blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they find themselves in. Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work. You get the ideas and attitudes of the people as part of the oral tradition. This is a way of passing along information. If you’re going to tell someone a story, and if you want to keep information alive, you have to make it memorable so that the person hearing it will go tell someone else. This is how it stays alive. The music provides you an emotional reference for the information, and it is sanctioned by the community in the sense that if someone sings the song, other people sing the song. They keep it alive because they sanction the information that it contains. (Moyers 168)

The blues create and continue the ongoing story that the community keeps vital,
providing a powerful, visceral context for the members’ past and present experiences. In this way, the music not only describes black Americans’ lives, it also provides them with a mode of withstanding and even elevating existence in a racist society. Writer Wilson acknowledged that “blues is the best literature we have” and the most established: “If you look at the singers, they actually follow a long line all the way back to Africa and various other parts of the world. They are people who are carriers of the culture, carriers of the ideas – the troubadours in Europe, etc.” (Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 204). These artistic leaders had not been adequately recognized, though, “except among the black folks who understood,” not even by the full African-American community. Wilson himself viewed them as “sacred because of the sacred tasks that they had taken upon themselves to disseminate this information and carry these cultural values of the people,” despite the lack of appreciation (Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 204). Wilson further believed that the blues had an extremely personal and individual effect on struggling African Americans; for them the music was a “spiritual conduit that gave spontaneous expression to the spirit that was locked in combat and devising new strategies for engaging life and enlarging itself” (*Three Plays* x). The blues offered its listeners an emotional release and lift in the face of forces that pressed relentlessly down; the music was a “true and articulate literature” that defined them, acting powerfully in the “development of both character and consciousness.” Wilson found himself personally giving the music “biblical status,” finding that it offered the redemption of “life being lived in all its timbre and horrifics, with zest and purpose and the affirmation of the self as worthy of the highest possibilities and the highest celebration” (*Three Plays* x). Those who created, sang, and honored the
blues offered Wilson the loving leadership in art, education, and life overall, of which he had felt bereft previously.

The full power of the blues was only possible in song. Wilson explained, “We are not a people with a long history of writing things out; it’s been an oral tradition: passing information, knowledge, ideas, and attitudes along orally” (Livingston). Music gave the stories and philosophy “an emotional reference” (again) to the content of the song, and the collective contents of the blues were all-inclusive: “I’ve found that whatever you want to know about the black experience is contained in the blues. They couldn’t stop ’em singing and passing along all their information in songs. . . . So it is the Book. It is our sacred book. Every other people has a sacred book, so I claim it as that. Anything I want to know, I go there and I find it out” (Livingston). Wilson claimed the blues as text, the primary spiritual text, but text whose truth and strength could be truly felt only through the medium of music. His identification with the music was complete: “I am the blues. Willie Dixon said, ‘I am the blues.’ I love that saying” (Rosen). Indeed, musicality runs through Wilson’s work. Director Marion McClinton described “the rhythm of hurt, the rhythm of pain, the rhythm of ecstasy, the rhythm of family” in his plays, and Richards said, “I handle his plays as though they were music. . . . I direct them with rhythms and just how that play in itself moves both physically and vocally” (Lahr, “Been Here” 50; Shannon, “From Lorraine” 132). Wilson himself described the connection between music and his plays: “I find in the music the ideas and attitudes of the characters and I dig ’em out” (Drake). Reviewing Wilson’s Seven Guitars, John Lahr described how Wilson makes his characters stories “into beautiful, complex music – a funky, wailing,
irresistible Chicago blues” (“Black and Blues” 99). Wilson said, “I take the same approach as a bluesman, the same ideas and attitudes” and explained the function of the blues to be virtually performative utterance: “When the old folks sang, ‘Everything’s gonna be all right,’ it was all right, simply because they sang. They made it all right by their singing. . . . The blues emboldened their spirits and enabled them to survive whatever the circumstance was” (Lahr, “Black and Blues” 99). In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, the title character expresses these ideas when she says the blues are “life’s way of talking”; she notes, “You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ’cause that’s a way of understanding life. . . . The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone” (63). The music serves to remind its listeners who they are and who they can be.

Wilson wanted to convey and affirm – for himself and for all black Americans – just what it was that they could be; the blues articulated the strength and ideas that have allowed them to “survive their confrontation with the Western world,” and now offered the means to “build out of that historical experience a fine and illuminating spirit that is resilient and otherwise remarkable” (*Ma Rainey* liner notes 4). He saw the blues as containing the past and also offering a map for the future for African Americans to thrive. The beauty and strength of the music was directly empowering for Wilson; he recounted a moment in an all-white Boston bar, where he sensed a lack of welcome: He was about to leave when he heard a rhythm and blues song coming from the jukebox and then decided to stay, feeling that “You can’t say that you want my music here but you don’t want me” (Nadel 2). Recalling once more his 1965 introduction to the blues, he wrote, “I
was then a twenty-year-old poet trying to live as fully and as honestly as I could in a world that was all too willing to deny me a place to stand and a worthy image of myself so that I might, as all men, meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon” (*Ma Rainey* liner notes 1). Struggling to find his dignity and his eloquence, with the help of the blues he moved forward from that moment when he “came face to face with myself and did not find it wanting” (*Ma Rainey* liner notes 4). Music was his inspiration and his means as he moved into his life as a writer.

It is no wonder, then, that Wilson’s breakthrough play – and his breakthrough to being a playwright – was *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, a live play not just about the blues, but about a recording session – a session that the play’s audience sees live. The story seems to dramatize Wilson’s consideration of recorded work – which poetry, though also an aural form, ultimately is – versus work that is only to be experienced in performance. Wilson explained his ultimate attraction to theater:

> I was, and remain, fascinated by the idea of an audience as a community of people who gather willingly to bear witness. A novelist writes a novel and people read it. But reading is a solitary act. While it may elicit a varied and personal response, the communal nature of the audience is like having five hundred people read your novel and respond to it at the same time. I find that thrilling. (Lyons and Plimpton)

Wilson’s preference – to reach an audience as community, in a charged moment in time – was clear to him, but the creation of his first truly successful play, *Ma Rainey*, was a long and uncertain process. Though he apparently did not see or read many plays, he was inspired by several other playwrights, including Ed Bullins: “It was with Bullins’s work that I first discovered someone writing plays about blacks with an uncompromising
honesty and creating rich and memorable characters” (Lyons and Plimpton). While Bullins’ example focused Wilson on deep characterization, James Baldwin’s plays inspired Wilson to consider his overall mission as a writer, as he tried to join Baldwin’s quest for a “profound articulation of the black tradition” and “that field of manners and rituals of intercourse that can sustain a man once he’s left his father’s house.” Wilson’s goal was to “demonstrate that the ‘manners and rituals’ existed and that the tradition was capable of sustaining you,” to pay attention to the traditions and values and worth of black American life (Lyons and Plimpton). From the start, Wilson was deeply ambitious; he wanted to “stun people into silence” (Reynolds).

With *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, which Wilson wrote over many years’ time, his goal was to take the belief system of the blues and

to concretize these values and to show the characters as part of something larger than themselves. I thought that by showing that the largest ideas could be contained by their lives it would help me to mark and score their adaptation to a life whose terms and conditions have been forced on them, and to a culture whose philosophical tenets often stand in complete opposite to the character’s historical precedents. I also wanted to show that the key to survival is simply a belief in yourself that is larger than anyone’s disbelief.” (*Ma Rainey* liner notes 4)

Wilson uses musical terminology, “mark” and “score,” to describe his writing process, and identifies his primary goal to be a play in which the characters almost personify the blues and what they represent for African Americans striving for self-worth in a society that limits and opposes them. Wilson approaches the music purely as a layperson, though, not as musician or music scholar: “The only research I do is to listen to the music. There’s a lot of history of our people in the music” (Boyd). Similarly, Wilson said he did not conduct historical research on his subject, Ma Rainey:
Listening to her singing gave me a good sense of who she was. When I wrote it, I gave her a nephew whom she promised her sister she’d take care of. I said, “Oh, my God, I hope she has a sister,” ’cause she’s got one now. And as it turned out, I was dead on the money because Ma adopted six or seven kids. I just sensed from her music that she had this nurturing kind of a thing and gave her a nephew. . . . I believe if you do research, you’re limited by it. . . . It’s like putting on a straitjacket. (Boyd)

Letting the sound and feel of Ma Rainey’s music create his impression of her, Wilson let the blues take the central role in his story. Biographical research about the singer would have led him into a very different work. The first spark for the play came, naturally, from the music itself, more than a decade after his first discovery of the blues: “on the day in 1976 when he decided to start a new play, Wilson was listening to one of Ma Rainey’s records. He began writing, inspired by the words of the blues songs echoing off the turntable” (Herrington 41). Writer friend Daniel Gabriel was surprised Wilson didn’t choose Bessie Smith as his subject, but understood that Wilson “thought Ma was overlooked and wanted to bring that out” and also wanted the song “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” Wilson also said that he “was always interested in songs in which the singer said her name” (Feingold). Compelled by the politics and cultural capital of black art, the “idea of black music as a marketable commodity whose control would have provided the black American with an economic stability and freedom to explore further their potential,” Wilson nevertheless had trouble developing this subject and character. This early start was quite different from the final version; “the original work had only five characters; it did not include the four band members who are ultimately central to the play. Wilson wrote for several months, but created only a few scenes” (Herrington 41). He was still very new to playwriting and was not able to come up with different,
promising directions in which to take the material. “I didn’t think of myself as a playwright then and the idea of making the musicians characters did not occur to me”; this idea, to which he came years later, would be the key to the play (*Ma Rainey* liner notes 2-3). For the moment, in 1976, “he completed twenty pages of the project and then dropped it” (Crawford 32).

Leaving Pittsburgh for the first time, to move to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978 indirectly moved Wilson’s *Ma Rainey* work forward: “I had gone from the Hill District, a community with 55,000 Black people, to Minnesota, a state with [only] about 19,000 Black people. And being there is what finally enabled me to hear the voices and to recognize and respect them. And that freed me up” (Whitaker 86). He said he was “hearing all these white voices against the black” (Brantley). Moving away from his home – he would never live in Pittsburgh again – gave him distance and perspective on the conversations and speaking styles that he had never before had, and on African-American community life in general. Respecting and honoring the voices, as well as stepping away from them, in some senses, allowed him finally to break into the natural, vibrant dialogue that would be a hallmark of his work. He went to a reading of a new play in 1979 or 1980 and was “unimpressed . . . I thought, well I can write a better play than this. So I kind of filed that away in my head and resolved myself that I would write a better play” (Herrington 13). His confidence was growing, as well as his concept of what a good play should be. In 1979 he wrote *Jitney*, which was accepted by a theater group, giving Wilson a larger sense of acceptance in theater;

When I went to the Playwrights Center and I sat in the room and there were sixteen playwrights in the room I thought I must be a playwright cause I’m sitting
here with these other sixteen playwrights. And it was important for me to start to think of myself as a playwright. Claiming it and thinking of myself as a playwright enabled me to do the work. And my creative energy, that unnamed, unformed thing, that for me previously went toward poetry now began to siphon off and began to go into theater, into playwriting. (Herrington 14)

His move from poetry to playwriting had taken real shape, and soon his mind returned to his set-aside play, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*: “In 1981, after listening to several recordings by male blues singers, Wilson returned to work on the play. ‘I suddenly realized there were these four musicians there, waiting in the band room. In them, I found the key to the play – the divisions, the tensions, the meaning of their lives’ ” (Herington, *I Ain’t Sorry* 41). The eponymous character was important to the play, but the heart of the story would belong to the band members, the everyday black men struggling in 1920s America. Wilson’s split attention to Ma Rainey and the band members would remain, even into his work at the O’Neill conference, once the play was accepted. Wilson recalled that Ma was

the main character of one of those plays. See, there was a play that took place in the recording studio and a play that took place in the bandroom, which were totally separate plays initially. So if you took that one little play about the recording studio, she was the central character in that and if you took the little play in the bandroom, somebody else was the central character in that. But when you put those two plays together – we didn’t put it together to make up a good role for Ma Rainey. [Levee is] the person who generates the action of the play. (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 128-29)

Working at the conference, and afterward with Richards, Wilson would have to resolve the play into a single story, with appropriate space for both Ma Rainey and her hired band members; her success – and her ongoing struggles – would provide the fuel for Levee’s trajectory.
A number of influences contributed to Wilson’s characterization of the band members. He recalled frequently seeing former prize fighter Charley Burley in his neighborhood when he was growing up; Burley wore such clothing as a “hundred-dollar Stetson, cashmere coat, yam-colored Florsheim shoes” (Lahr, “Been Here” 50). These luxurious clothes sound like the costume descriptions at the end of the *Ma Rainey* script: Levees “yam lace-up shoes (new)” and Sylvester’s “brown cashmere overcoat” – though no one in the play wears a Stetson of any price. The stories Wilson heard were even more striking than the clothes he saw, of course; he spent much time at the cigar store Pat’s Place and remembered

One of the exchanges I heard made it into *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Someone said, “I came to Pittsburgh in ’42 on the B & O,” and another guy said, “Oh no, you ain’t come to Pittsburgh in ’42 . . . the B & O Railroad didn’t stop in Pittsburgh in ’42!” And the first guy would say, “You gonna tell me what railroad I came in on?” “Hell yeah I’m gonna tell you the truth!” Then someone would walk in and they’d say, “Hey, Philmore! The B & O Railroad stop here in ’42?” People would drift in and they’d all have various answers to that. They would argue about how far away the moon was. They’d say, “Man, the moon a million miles away.” They called me Youngblood. They’d say, “Hey, Youngblood, how far the moon?” And I’d say, “150,000 miles,” and they’d say, “That boy don’t know nothing! The moon’s a million miles.” (Lyons and Plimpton)

In the play, Levee argues with Cutler, who’s telling a story involving railroad travel:

“Ain’t but one train come out of Tallahassee heading north to Atlanta and it don’t stop at Sigsbee. Tell him, Toledo . . . that train don’t stop at Sigsbee. The only train that stops at Sigsbee is the Santa Fe, and you have to transfer at Moultrie to get it!” (75). The men are bemused by the conversation, but they are also passionate in their debate; stories matter, details matter, the truth – their truth – matters. Wilson gave his own nickname, Youngblood, to the character in *Jitney*, who is young, inexperienced, and curious.
Describing how he found Pat’s Place to begin with, Wilson acknowledged, “I have read some of the history of Africans in America,” but said “I think where I get most of my information from is all of these walking history books, the people themselves who have gone through various experiences” (Sheppard). It was through his self-education at the library that he discovered the cigar store: “I was reading *Home to Harlem*, and Claude McKay had mentioned that their railroad porters would stop in Pat’s Place, a place where he hung out. And I thought, well, I know where that’s at. I went to Pat’s Place and, sure enough, there were these elders of the community standing around, and at that time I was twenty-three years old and it was a time when life had to be continually negotiated.”

Looking for guidance in his choices and negotiations,

> I was really curious as to how they had lived as long as they did. So I stood around in Pat’s Place and listened to them. They talked philosophy, history; they discussed whatever the topic of the day was – the newspapers, the politics of the city, the baseball games, and invariably they would talk about themselves and their lives when they were young men. And so a lot of what I know of the history of blacks in a very personal sense I picked up standing there in Pat’s Place. (Sheppard)

Wilson learned African-American history – in sports, journalism, politics – through personal narrative, and that is how he approached his writing later: telling the stories of African Americans through the decades, character by character.

Newly working on *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* in 1981, and newly focusing on the band members, Wilson discovered that now “Levee, the newest member of the band, emerged as the play’s central character” (Herrington 43). Returning to the blues records themselves and “energized anew by the music,” he wrote rapidly, hoping to submit the play in time for the O’Neill’s summer conference (41). He told his friend, writer Daniel
Gabriel, that “each member of the band was going to speak like his instrument,” and indeed early versions of the play include descriptions of each band member’s personality as reflected by his playing; Toledo, the piano player and the educated, philosophical member of the group is “in control of his instrument” and “understands and recognizes its limitations are an extension of himself,” for example (O’Neill script). At one point, Wilson even considered removing the character Ma Rainey entirely, but his friend Claude Purdy said “no, don’t do that, keep Ma in there. So the challenge from that point became how to blend the earlier parts of the play that I wrote in ’76 with the parts with the four guys in the band room” (Pettengill, “Historical” 223). Wilson found some resolution to this challenge in the play in

this one moment, which for me was a crystallized moment (the audience probably didn’t notice it) when Ma goes into the band room. She entered that space, and for me that was the moment that wedded those two plays together. Up until that point, as long as she stays in the recording studio, it was two different plays but when she walks in that band room it was just like inserting the key in the lock, and the play was joined from that point on.” (Pettengill, “Historical” 223)

Ma’s experience as a successful black recording artist – as well as the severe limits that were put on her success because of her race – framed everything that transpired between the band members, and they, in turn, provided Ma with the only authentic community she had, despite her musical success.

Well into 1981, Wilson’s doubts about the play continued; in a letter to Daniel Gabriel dated September 29 of that year, he said

I haven’t written another word on Ma Rainey since you left. I think I simply talked about it too much without actually doing it, that I’ve talked myself right out of it. It’s like I have already written it and want to move on with my time and
energy to something else. I’m having a really terrible time trying to get back into it. I think in the final analysis I’m simply afraid to write it. More on this later.

Despite his fears and the serious loss of momentum on this project, Wilson found the determination to continue. Though the O’Neill had turned him down more than once already, “I always saw myself as a warrior in life – you suffer wounds and defeats and what not, and you get up and you continue. So I was determined that if it had taken twelve plays, they would have just had to keep sending them back to me because I was not going to stop writing. No matter what” (Sheppard). Wilson saw the O’Neill summer playwrights conference as the one place that could launch his work and his life as a playwright, and so “he wrote for two months, incorporating the scenes he had written five years earlier, which focused on Ma Rainey, into his new play about the band. Then he summoned up his courage to once again submit his work for consideration by the O’Neill committee. Wilson had already two scripts rejected by the committee when he submitted Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” (Herrington 41-42). Wilson strove to understand what his rejected scripts had lacked; the O’Neill had declined Jitney twice, so

I was forced to look at it again and I thought, “Maybe it’s not as good as I think it is. I have to write a better play but how the hell do you do that?” I felt I was writing the best I could. A workshop of Fullerton Street had been very helpful, so I felt confident. Jitney! – okay, it wasn’t quite big enough. Fullerton Street was epic and too unwieldy. I decided to try for something right in the middle. I sat down and wrote Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom and sent that off to the O’Neill and they accepted it. (Savran 290)

Here is the moment when Wilson faced the limits of what he understood to be his writing abilities, and then pushed himself beyond them; opening up to the O’Neill
process and evaluation was one crucial step for him before he even arrived at the conference. Accepting the O’Neill’s standards and goals – which valued strong raw material, not perfected scripts – meant Wilson could follow his instincts about powerful stories, powerful characters, and powerful music, and could finally start his true work.

Perhaps Wilson’s years of experience as a writing technician, combined with his growing process of listening to his intuition and his unconscious, moved his work into the level of what many have called genius. In any case, his selection for the O’Neill – out of more than one thousand submitted plays – meant that he would be working at the ideal place and with the ideal director for his subject, style, and ambitions. In the end, Wilson appreciated the earlier rejections he had received from the center: “About Ma Rainey I felt that I was growing as a playwright and moving toward learning more about the craft and how to articulate my ideas dramatically. I had submitted a couple of other plays to the O’Neill, but I’m glad they weren’t selected. I’m glad my exposure was with Ma Rainey because I think it is a stronger play than the others I had submitted” (Powers). With Ma Rainey, Wilson was able to make a greater initial impact in theater and to attract strongly the attention of Richards. Not everyone at the center was as attracted at first; Michael Feingold, who was dramaturg for Ma Rainey and The Piano Lesson at the O’Neill recalled, “In the selection committee, everyone had been a little tense about Ma Rainey. It was a very odd fish to come up in there and nobody was quite sure that there was a lot happening in it. But the talk seemed interesting and this is obviously, you know, a voice, which Lloyd [Richards] always says the O’Neill is looking for” (Herrington 56). Richards’ son Scott Davenport Richards had just
graduated from college in 1982 and was at the O’Neill conference that summer; when he first read *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, his feeling was “heard it before,” but when he heard it read aloud, the music and language became apparent. Lloyd Richards himself, though, had a background – growing up in Detroit and working with African-American theater in many places – that had prepared him to appreciate immediately this poetry of everyday speech in the black community that Wilson celebrated; now that Wilson had come to appreciate fully this quality of speaking, too, Richards could recognize and support that mission. Richards remembered, “The talent was unmistakable. The characters were alive. They were people I had met in the barbershop on Saturday morning, talking about baseball, philosophy, politics. You’d hear humor, imagery, poetry – the poetry of oppressed people who have to create a sense of freedom in their words, people living more in their vision than their actuality” (Herrington 42). Richards recognized the beauty of the dialogue and its important role in the lives of people living in deprivation; he felt that the characters’ words were “the sounds that made music” (Watlington).

Richards’ strong and established theater background was also vital to this fledging partnership; Daniel Gabriel said, “It was important to August that Lloyd was recognized.” At the O’Neill, moreover, Wilson could work with a renowned director with much less risk than in the traditional theater world. Richards described the O’Neill ethos:

There is no ego here. When you come up here, it is to find the problem, to reveal the problem to the playwright, to help him find an answer to it. If he can’t, if he
doesn’t want to – if he thinks that what he’s got is absolutely right and you don’t think so – you do it his way. Nobody’s at stake. The director’s job, his talent, is not at stake. They are here because they are talented and because they can do this and not be threatened. (Fitzgerald)

At the O’Neill, with Richards, Wilson could both assert his artistic will and learn from an experienced, accomplished director who had a special interest in and connection to Wilson’s material; both could basically set aside commercial concerns, at least for the time being. Wilson and Richards’ partnership could be based on intuition and trust, just as Wilson’s writing style had come to be. Director Tyrone Guthrie believes that this is exactly how the relationship between director and playwright should be: “Directing at its best is psychic evocation and is performed almost entirely unconsciously” (Bartow xvi). In the years to come, both Wilson and Richards would remark on how little discussion their work together actually required. That first summer, Ma Rainey still had problematic areas, but Richards recognized its distinctive power, and saw a connection to the play that had been his own professional breakthrough, A Raisin in the Sun:

Lorraine and August deal with conditions of black people in this society. I have lived in the conditions of blacks in this society. I have been attracted to playwrights because they have also been concerned about this subject. I view theatre as an institution that educates, stimulates, and provokes the audience – it makes them think and feel. Lorraine and August are artists who do that excellently in an artistic as well as in a socially conscious way. (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”)

In both Hansberry and Wilson, Richards found playwrights who could bring together a critical social view with outstanding characters, stories, and language.
Working on *Ma Rainey* at the O’Neill that summer, Wilson had to confront what was less effective in the play at that point; he noted that during the first read-through sessions, “the parts that you don’t want to read are generally where the problems are” (Herrington 52). His assigned director for the summer, William Partlan, who would also direct *Fences* at the O’Neill, recalled his first opportunities to review *Ma Rainey*;

As the band waited in the band room, we heard story after story. The stories were evocative and wonderful, but the storytelling didn’t keep the dramatic action building. So we tried to figure out where stories could be cut whole that would allow action to take over earlier. The first day the whole cast got together and we did the read-through. It was over four hours long. (Sweet 154)

Wilson would write very long plays for the rest of his career; much of his revision work would be weighing what to leave and what to take away. For this first summer at the O’Neill, Partlan and the others discussed potential cuts with the playwright:

We identified where we felt probably cuts were needed. August looked at us, and he said, “I think you’re probably right. But I need to hear it with an audience to know.” And the wonderful thing about the Playwrights Conference is that, as director, I could look August in the eye and say, “Then that’s what we’re going to do.” The only thing I said to August about this was, “You have to promise me that you won’t pace in the back of the theater or anything else. Please promise me that you will sit in the middle of the audience, and notice when they lean forward and notice when they sit back and let it wash over them.” (Sweet 153)

Wilson kept his promise to pay close attention to audience response, and the following day he delivered “huge cuts. Having sat with an audience, he now trusted that he needed to make them. We got an hour and a half out of the play” (Sweet 154). Wilson was willing to stand up for his own point of view, and to listen to the useful recommendations of colleagues and audience. Wilson welcomed recommendations on a smaller scale, too; the O’Neill actor playing the police officer in *Ma Rainey* told the playwright that “his
dialogue was not authentic to a Chicago cop. Wilson challenged him to write a new line. The actor offered, ‘Look, buddy, you want it in a nutshell, we got her charged with assault and battery.’ Wilson later included these words in the play” (Herrington 101). O’Neill veteran Amy Saltz, who directed *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* there, thought Wilson was particularly well suited to the conference’s process:

> I found him to be kind of impervious to the O’Neill process as a whole, in terms of really having a very strong filter for the input that he received, which I think is absolutely valuable for a playwright working in that situation. My concerns about developmental situations like that is that their impact on a playwright can be significant if the playwright doesn’t have that skill. August had that skill, which I think came with a certain life view that he brought with him – even more than his work as a writer. (Herrington 55)

Wilson’s growing confidence in his instincts, which he employed in his writing, also made him able to receive ideas with an open mind, accept the ones that seemed to him to work, and reject the others. He trusted in his own ear for the language and sound that interested him; as Saltz said, “He had to hear it; he had to feel how the audience was sitting in their chairs to decide if something worked” (55).

Other than introducing him to Richards, probably the most important thing the O’Neill gave Wilson was an appreciation and ability for revising and rewriting. Wilson came to see not only its importance, but also its pleasure: “It was at the O’Neill that I actually learned to rewrite a play and that’s part of the process that I enjoy – the rewriting and problem solving, what Borges called the problematic practice of literature” (Gussow). There were quite a number of problems to solve in *Ma Rainey* at the O’Neill, as Wilson recalled; “I first went with *Ma Rainey* when it was a fifty-nine page, ill-organized script – some people say it’s still ill-organized” (Savran 293). Working within
the O’Neill process, “the important thing I learned was to rewrite. Not just patchworking here and fixing there, but exactly what the word means – re-writing. When you write, you know where you want to go – you know what a scene, a particular speech is supposed to accomplish. Then I learned that it’s possible to go back and rewrite this speech, to find another way to say it” (293). Wilson learned quickly that a writer could sustain a vision and also make many changes in pursuit of that vision. He was accustomed to revising his poetry; “in a poem you rewrite six or seven times before you end up with what you want. But I didn’t think of theater as being like that. And I learned to respect the stage and trust that it will carry your ideas.” Expanding his instinctual practice to an intuitive relationship with the format of drama itself, Wilson turned over his words and ideas to the theatrical setting, believing that they would find their best form. He found the particular kind of pressure to be positive, too: “The intensity of the O’Neill process – working in four days, working fast – was also a good experience. It comes down to problem solving. But there’s no one correct solution.” The work required the playwright to face problems specifically and also keep an open mind about different resolutions to those problems. Getting to the fundamentals of drama,

the O’Neill made me more conscious of what theatre is about. There’s nothing like encountering the problems of costume, lighting, set design – What do you mean by this? Where is this? Where is the window – which make you more aware of the totality of what you’re doing. I discovered with Fences, for example, that I had a character exiting upstage and coming back immediately with a different costume. That’s really sloppy, but I was totally unaware. I never thought, “This guy’s got to change his costume.” I’ve become conscious of things like that and it’s made me a better playwright. But I don’t want to lose the impulse, the sense, as with Ma Rainey, that anything goes, that you may do whatever you desire to do. Maybe I wouldn’t have written Ma Rainey as I did, had I been aware of the problems with casting and the music. (Savran 293)
The O’Neill taught Wilson much about the visuals, mechanics, and technical considerations of theater – what was required, and what could be gained by incorporating those areas into his writing. Just as important, though, was his determination to allow his imagination and unconscious to create with complete freedom, to follow the story and characters where they led and then to make it all work for the stage.

As Wilson’s writing life continued, his appreciation for revision increased and broadened in scope. By 1999, his view was, “I’m a strong believer in rewrites. Rewrites are the shaping of the material you have already processed. It is an essential part of the work. The process of shaping may lead to discoveries and it may be necessary to climb back into the heat of the moment” (Lyons and Plimpton). So, for Wilson, rewriting was not just about moving the work forward, but also connecting back to the original spark and ideas: “I often make references to my notes during rewrites. They are a record of the germination of the work; sometimes contained in there is a crucial idea which you have strayed from. In architectural terms, I walk around and test the structure to make sure there is support for the ideas of the play and its validity as a work of art” (Lyons and Plimpton). In revision, he sought to check the smaller details and to review the play’s overall effect and power. Too little rewriting caused him concern: “I’ve always said that if it doesn’t change, you’re not writing deep enough. So it changes and becomes something else” (Pettengill, “Historical” 220). Rewriting did more than simply provide improvements; staying with the work and pushing it to grow caused the playwright to go further with his ideas and to take the work to a new level, as he did when trying to write a better play than he had before been capable. Wilson felt, in fact, that the O’Neill’s way of
working was the essence of his own plays: “I believe its process, in a way, is what my plays are about. It’s people sitting around and talking; and while they’re talking, something is built together out of the talk” (Herrington 59). The O’Neill reflected Wilson’s values, in life and in art, and gave him a forum to pursue them in his work, with like-minded colleagues. The open process did not mean that Wilson handed over control of his material; director Partlan recalled, “In working with August there was always a sort of a gentle resistance to change – without unreasonably resisting. It was always with a sense of his own desire not to shortcut himself, not to move rashly – but to listen, carefully, and to try to fathom for himself what needed to be done” (Herrington 56).

Wilson retained the self-reliance that had been his only option during his solitary education in the library and his years of struggle on the Hill; now he welcomed input, but within the context of his independence. Finally, the O’Neill is where Wilson first looked to the actors’ experiences and effects to find new directions for his work.

Describing the overall process, Wilson said,

I do a major rewrite before the O’Neill Conference and then, after the two-day staged readings, I’ve got a bunch of notes and ideas and I do another major rewrite and that is generally the play that we go into rehearsal with. I don’t mind cutting. I’ll say, “If that’s not working, what do you need? Let’s put something else in here,” because this is theatre. Nobody writes a perfect play by just sitting down and writing. You find out what’s there when the actors begin to move around in the space. (Savran 297)

Wilson soon became comfortable rewriting based on seeing the actors in his roles, and even asking what they felt they needed. The characters he had heard in his mind for so long now had to transfer into living actors and adapt to those actors’ perceptions of the roles and their life in physical space.
Theater critic Frank Rich was at the O’Neill that first summer and saw the staged reading of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Though he was not allowed to review it officially, according to the protective rules of the O’Neill, he wrote later that he had been “electrified” by an author “willing to stake his claim to the stage not with stories or moral platitudes, but with the beauty and meaning of torrents of words” (“Stage View”). Here he echoed Richards’ perception of Wilson as a writer with a passionate social agenda who nevertheless kept his attention on creating powerful characters, language, and stories. Rich was one of the first to sense the effect Wilson would have on American theater; Partlan said that Rich “came to Lloyd Richards afterward – Lloyd told me – and said, in tears, to Lloyd, ‘I have not been so moved in the theater for twenty years’ ” (Herrington 57)
Continuing to operate by the principles of the O’Neill process, Wilson and Richards formed an artistic partnership that would last for the next nearly fifteen years, beginning with staging *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* at Yale Repertory Theatre, then at regional theaters, and finally on Broadway. At the very beginning, though, because of the anti-commercial rules of the O’Neill program, Richards recalled, “I could not tell August that I wanted to do his play at Yale until the conference was over, and by that time, there were other people interested in the play, so I had to get in line” (Fitzgerald). It was far from inevitable that Wilson would choose to work with Richards; Wilson recalled his first Broadway offer for *Ma Rainey* and how working with Richards almost didn’t happen. These producers wanted to do the show on Broadway, and although the Dramatists Guild’s minimum for an option is $2,500 for a play, they were offering me $25,000. At that time I was still making $88 a week cooking for Little Brothers. So I called Lloyd up and said, “Hey, I’m going to talk to these people over here.” And Lloyd said, “Well, I can understand that.” So we went on, and my agent started negotiating this contract with them only to find out six months later that they’re talking about making a musical out of *Ma Rainey*. They sent me a contract – just a terrible contract. They had rights to bring in other writers, and I thought, “What’s going on here?” I called one of the guys up on the phone and said, “Hey, I’m not signing this contract.” He said, “Listen, it doesn’t matter what the contract says. The important thing is for you to sign it and get to work. A lot of things in this business are done on faith.” So I said, “Okay, if it doesn’t matter what the contract says, let’s make it say what I want it to say.” Whereupon I was met with silence. (Shannon, “Blues, History”) Unwilling to give up all creative control over his play, Wilson went back to Richards to ask if he remained interested; he was but said, “I just want to make sure that these other people . . . I don’t want to step into any muddy water. I want to make sure that you are...
through.” Wilson replied, “I am definitely, absolutely through talking to them.” Wilson explained his choice:

I could have gone with some other people, but I don’t know what kind of crew I would have had. They could have ruined my script, turned it into a musical, and I would have been a one-shot playwright. Something told me – and I think it was the force of Lloyd’s personality, his presence and who he was – that I would much rather be associated with this man than be associated with these other people. So I almost made a misstep, but I trusted my heart and went with Lloyd. (Shannon, “Blues, History”)

It would have been easy for Wilson to take the much larger financial offer and to go straight to Broadway, but his belief in himself and his stories, which sustained him during his first summer at the O’Neill, gave him the confidence to believe in someone else, too: Richards. Even in the business of art, Wilson operated on an instinctual level.

In Wilson’s decision about the *Ma Rainey* production, it also made a difference that he was not highly motivated by money; from the beginning, as a writer, he appreciated that “writing is free; it doesn’t cost you anything. There is nowhere where it says that 500 words cost twenty-five cents or a dollar. They’re free” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). As a young man, he would hear his friends who were painters worry about the expense of their supplies, and he “realized how lucky I was because my tools were simple. I saw that I could borrow a pencil or paper, that I could write on napkins or paper bags. I’d walk around with a pen or pencil and paper, and I discovered poems everywhere. I was always prepared to write, and I just continued to do that over the years” (Lyons 15). Wilson found another benefit to this casual approach to writing: “Once when I was writing on a napkin, a waitress asked, ‘Do you write on napkins because it doesn’t count?’ I had never realized that if I’m writing on a napkin I’m not
really writing. I’m telling myself, ‘This is just a napkin, for God’s sake.’ It frees me up. If I pull out my tablet, I’m saying, ‘Now I’m writing,’ and I become much more conscious” (Lyons 15). Writing on napkins in cafes or bars, and walking around as he created, also meant that Wilson could find inspiration in the people around him, talking and living their lives as he wrote in their midst. Even after his success with *Ma Rainey*, Wilson still wanted, as he wrote to Richards in July of 1987, “to work free from any commercial pressures to discover the requirements and possibilities of the play” (Lloyd Richards Papers). Less concerned about financial gain and marketability, Wilson was able to focus on his art and complete his ambitious cycle of plays before his death at a relatively young age.

In terms of *Ma Rainey* offers, Wilson also said that “the Negro Ensemble Company turned down *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and Yale offered me a place” (Sinclair). Richards noted, “It took from September – after the conference, when I first told him of my interest – until February of the next year, when he finally called me and said that he had ruled out all the other possibilities and asked if I was still interested. I was. When the play was selected for Yale, then our working relationship began.” O’Neill director William Partlan remembered that he “naively” mentioned to Richards that he would love to direct the play for Yale; Richards replied, “You have to understand that I don’t get to work on the plays that we do with the O’Neill. I can’t. But this is one I’ve had my eye on and I have to do this work with August” (Sweet 154). Together with his work on *A Raisin in the Sun*, Richards’ collaboration with Wilson would be the highlight and lasting legacy of Richards’ career, and he knew from the beginning that this was a
playwright who offered excellence and meaning, artistically, politically, and personally. Richards and Yale were ideal for Wilson as well. Richards described his mission at Yale to be “to discover the most talented persons in every area of the theater and to provide them with the best training toward their participation in the profession of theater that was possible and to give them some kind of bridge into professional work”; this kind of training and subsequent promotion was exactly what Wilson needed and could fulfill (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 125).

Though Wilson had worked hard on the play during the summer at the O’Neill, most of the rewriting was still to come. At their first meeting, Wilson remembered, “Lloyd said, ‘You’ve got a lot of work to do,’ and I said, ‘I ain’t never been scared of hard work’ ” (Watlington). The self-educated Wilson relied profoundly on found teachers – the library stacks, theater friends Rob Penny and Claude Purdy, and other artists – and he had now met his most important one in Richards. Wilson had revised *Ma Rainey* himself several times before even submitting it to the O’Neill; many of the key lines and interactions of the final version were already in place. Problems remained, however: the two acts read more like separate plays, two of the main characters from the small cast needed further definition, and the ending was not entirely effective. Casting would be a tremendous challenge, as Richards explained:

A part of the playwright’s lack of awareness in *Ma Rainey* is – and I never said this to August – if you’re a smart playwright you do not write six characters in a play who are accomplished musicians who have to play onstage. Okay, you’ve written yourself into a lot of problems. Now those were problems that I had to deal with. I would not say, “August, you don’t do that!” Or “one doesn’t do that.” I didn’t try and teach him playwriting. I would work and dramatize. (Herrington 100-101)
Relying on his imagination and his intuitive relationship with his characters, Wilson had created an original and moving play with little consideration of the technical requirements of his story; the staged reading at the O’Neill had not included any musical performance. Richards felt his role now was to allow Wilson to recognize these challenges and find his own solutions, with the director there to support him. Scott Davenport Richards described his father’s directorial approach and philosophy: “You need to leave space for the people to fill.” Rather than directly articulating his ideas, Richards knew he must allow others to come to those ideas on their own. “He would ask you a question that would force you to think, and the answer wouldn’t be exactly clear.” Scott Richards recalled sitting in the back of the theater with his father, taking notes as he watched the stage; “I would say, ‘Why don’t you just tell him!’ ” His father would reply, “Never tell them ‘don’t’ – send them in a different, positive direction.” The most straightforward course would likely have the weakest result, and helping a playwright or actor see new possibilities would take them much further than simply ruling out existing ones. Scott Richards experienced his father’s directing himself when Wilson chose him from among many auditioners to play Sylvester in the original Broadway production of *Ma Rainey*. Sylvester speaks with a severe stammer, and Scott Richards had to work very hard on the part; the rest of the cast were quite experienced professional actors. His father’s direction on stuttering was, “My action is to not stutter”; he encouraged his son to think about trying to get the words out, to “plant the impediment/obstacle/insecurity/physical discomfort, and from there, work to overcome it.” Scott Richards had to make trying to stutter look like trying not to stutter, and he
earned a favorable mention from Frank Rich in his *New York Times* review of the show.

Richards had had tremendous success with his approach toward both playwrights and actors, an approach that resembles that of a number of noted directors, but departs from still others. Director Mark Lamos has a similar perspective to Richards’, a belief in self-discovery as vital: “Directing has a lot to do with understanding, as quickly as you can, how much of you the actor can take, how to hide what you do and how much you have to lead him toward an idea and let him think he is discovering it for the first time. Only when he discovers it for himself will it be truly his, truly new and fresh” (Bartow 184). Understanding can only fully occur through self-discovery, in this view – but the director’s guidance is an invisible essential. The director Arvin Brown also believes in the importance of leaving some things unsaid when working with playwrights:

> Sometimes, because I was a writer, my ideas can be very strong, very articulate. And yet it doesn’t matter how articulate they are – I’m not the playwright. And sometimes I find, particularly with young writers, that they’re overly anxious to please and far from being resistant or defensive about what I might suggest. They do it too fast, and it doesn’t go through that organic process by which the play was originally written. That to me is an ongoing difficulty. I constantly try to find the tools of communication that will be specific and yet allusive, so that the imagination of the people you are talking to is never constrained. It’s very hard to do. You’re always running the risk of not being specific enough, allowing too great a freedom so that people feel adrift. (Bartow 28)

Turning ideas into words is the job of the playwright, so for a director to supply language for a play – instead of providing new avenues of thought – is perhaps to move the play outside of its nature and the playwright’s sensibility. The playwright’s strength and confidence of vision is critical, too, as Amy Saltz said of Wilson. Director Joanne Akalaitis, however, sees the place for “open collaboration” and says, “I don’t think it’s
helpful to manipulate a situation.” She, too, acknowledges the power imbalance, though, that “there is no such thing as a totally open collaborative situation, and at some point in the directing process you’re in a position where something needs to happen that cannot happen by direct appeal.” It is in these cases when she deploys “subconscious ammunition, “sounding more in line with Richards’ approach. For her, with actors, “it’s very subtle and it’s not about behavior. It’s about what actors need to do. . . . I think there comes a time when the director, in a sense, becomes the natural enemy. It took me a while to understand that actors have to find their own strength and, at some point, separation and independence from the director are necessary” (Bartow 8-9). Here, she addresses the tension between what actors – and sometimes playwrights – need from directors, and what they then need to transcend. Richards’ work was subtle, but it was intense and complete, and one day Wilson would feel the need to work independently of his mentor.

Elia Kazan had quite a different style from Richards’, and also worked in film as well as in theater. A cast member told interviewer Frederic Morton about the giddy atmosphere and Kazan’s strategy on the set of the film *Baby Doll*:

There’s nothing he doesn’t exploit. He left that merry sequence to the end so he can use the end-excitement to milk every drop out of the scene. That animal trainer! Uses their emotions like they were animals. He plays democracy with them like a trainer puts his head into the tiger’s mouth – for the good of the show. It’s all calculated. He lets them pat him on the back – and each time they do, they’re working for him. (Baer 31)

Kazan hid his manipulations as well, but beneath a loud and seemingly invasive style; the goal appears to be not self-discovery on the part of the actors, but achievement of Kazan’s vision at any cost. That does not mean Kazan did not see the value of the illusion
of self-discovery; John Lahr said, “Kazan’s trick was to make his own ideas seem like the actors’ discoveries” (*On Directing* xiii). As Arthur Miller told Lahr, “He let the actors talk themselves into a performance. He allowed the actors to excite themselves with their own discoveries, which they would carry back to him like children offering some found object back to a parent.” This sounds similar to Richards’ approach, though much more self-serving. Kazan also knew when to hold back; Lahr shares Kazan’s account of the “I could have been a contender” scene in *On the Waterfront*:

> Brando and Steiger knew who they were and what the scene was about – they knew all that better than I did – so I didn’t say anything. Sometimes it’s important for a director to withdraw a little. If the characters are going right, to begin to talk about who they are and motivation and so forth may result in the actors’ becoming concerned with satisfying you instead of playing the scene. You can spoil a scene by being too much of a genuine director – call it showing off. (Lahr, *On Directing* xiii)

This sensitive attitude sounds more like Richards’ way of working, seeing the role of others in fulfilling the vision of a work when they are in the position to do so. Like Richards, Kazan created a longtime collaboration with a single playwright, resulting in a profound effect on American theater. Kazan described Tennessee Williams’ “positive genius for dealing with subject matter that is on everyone’s mind and part of everyone’s experience, but which has not been dealt with by other writers. All his characters are felt for. No one is a heavy. All are wrong and right, magnificent and foolish, violent and weak. In other words, Williams deals with real people” (Baer 16). *Ma Rainey’s* protagonist Levee was certainly magnificent and foolish – and as Wilson developed his character, he gave him an ever greater mixture of talent, soulfulness, and misplaced pride;
he did not fit the categories also missing from Williams’ work: “the lily-white hero, the noble protagonist, the self-righteous moralist, and the other absurd stock figures of much of our drama. People recognize people. Audiences instinctively feel Williams is writing about their real problems – personal, social, whatever. There is also no infringement on the area of mystery and confusion that is part of every human soul.” Wilson, too, put character before social agenda – though his social agenda was well developed and important to him. Finally, Williams “doesn’t tend to clean things up, clear them up, straighten them out, oversimplify, or the rest of that kind of dramatic claptrap” (Baer 16).

Kazan and Richards both found – and helped to develop – playwrights who created vital, specific characters and stories that allowed for complexity, familiarity – and thereby works of genius that could engage and teach on a powerful level.

Working together for the first time, revising Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom for the Yale production, Wilson and Richards had to address the question of the two plays within the play, and whether that was even a problem; Richards recalled,

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom started out initially as two plays, which were blended together. One question was “Should they have been separated or blended together?” Other questions had to do with the fact that a play had been written with five major musicians in five major roles, meaning that a smart playwright doesn’t do that. It was hard enough to get five wonderful actors, but to get them to play an instrument well was another problem. So that had to be dealt with. There’s the question ‘How did I deal with that?’ Then the work on the play became the blending of those two plays making them essential to one another rather than just tickets. (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 128)

Wilson’s breakthrough play – which dramatized the music that was essentially his religion, perhaps the only subject that could have inspired him to write “above his
ability,” as he put it – could only have been constructed by an inexperienced playwright, innocent of casting concerns, and perhaps could only have received full attention at the O’Neill, the American institution with the greatest commitment to new and unknown plays. One of the first questions for Wilson and Richards as a team was how to handle _Ma Rainey’s_ need for five musician-actors; in the end, the Yale actors learned to play their characters’ instruments for the roles. Subsequent productions of the play have addressed this area differently; for the recent run at Boston’s Huntington Theater, for example, the actors’ instruments were outfitted with tiny speakers so that the recorded music appeared to be played live. Even as Richards recognized the practical limitations of Wilson’s knowledge of theater, he knew that what Wilson did possess was much more significant; he said, “Wilson, as a poet, had worked with a different kind of imagery, one without a particular sense of the use of space and the conventions of time in the theatre. And I arrived at a point where I did not want to teach him craft. I felt he should pick up whatever he would on his own, because I did not want convention to become a restraint” (Bartow 263). The answer as Richards saw it was not quickly to instruct Wilson about technical aspects of theater, but to allow his imagination freedom to create, and to discover whatever technical elements he might along the way. Elaborating on Wilson’s move from one form of writing to another, Richards observed, “The imagery of a poet is different from the imagery of a playwright, because a playwright sees a play happening in space. In August’s initial work, space was absent, and when I brought space into it, just in terms of the definition of sets, that had not been part of his craft” (Bernstein, “Rescuing”). Even the idea of a set had possibly not occurred to Wilson. Richards
remained devoted to Wilson’s point of view and message, above all: “I face the challenge of discovering what the playwright is trying to say, and my job is to help him say that. Whatever I can do to enhance that statement is what I involve myself in” (Fitzgerald).

Actor Charles Dutton, who met Wilson during that first summer at the O’Neill, and who played *Ma Rainey’s* Levee at Yale and on Broadway for both the original and revival productions, echoed Richards’ perspective: “August basically writes. I mean, he doesn’t concern himself at the outset with a structure and your standard 101 Playwriting technique. August just comes up with the characters and just lets the characters talk. Through the dialogue and through the characters’ exploration of who they are, the structure comes organically” (Herrington 100). Wilson’s characters spoke to him at great length, and Wilson then selected and arranged what they said; every other consideration was secondary for him. Dutton also noted that “most of his original drafts are way too long. I mean some of August’s characters can talk seven, eight pages. And all of his plays take that shape because August doesn’t limit himself. He just lets the play run for as long as they like to. And that’s the beauty of it” (100). The length of Wilson’s speeches and the plays themselves were not just a liability – though they certainly had to be reduced – because the characters were not limited as they developed; nothing was precluded. Perhaps this habit of writing long and then cutting back contributed to or even created the effect of fully-formed characters, caught *in medias res*, in Wilson’s plays. It is also a practice that would have been only further encouraged at the O’Neill, with its great emphasis on rewriting and revision.

Richards’ dedication to enhancing Wilson’s voice and message meant that he did
bring about many changes in other aspects of the plays, though. As Dutton said,

“Anything where you actually talk about moving something structurally, a lot of that
input would come from Lloyd Richards. If it’s one thing that Lloyd is an expert in, it is
the way a play should move. And August listens, intently, to Lloyd’s suggestions”
(Herrington 99). Richards had a strong hand in Wilson’s work, and the playwright took
his input very seriously. As Richards described, “We had a pattern of work. . . . I would
work on it, check it with him, so I included him, but I was the director. . . . August was
very receptive in the early days. He had a lot to learn and knew it. He was a big sponge,
absorbing everything. . . . As he learned structure – playwriting, really – he was also
learning everything else” (Lahr, “Been Here” 63). Richards’ role was experienced
mentor; Wilson’s was new talented writer. This receptivity of Wilson’s would diminish
in later years. Early on, though, Wilson and Richards worked together extensively and
intensively; Richards said,

> When you’re working as closely as we were, the interesting thing is that you can’t
identify all of [the changes]. I mean you can’t identify whether I said it or whether
August said it. Because you’re working together and you come to a conclusion
and the conclusion is the choice. And whether I suggested, “do this” or he said,
“I’m going to do this!” is almost insignificant. You get that close together that
you function, really, two entities as one person – just two entities of the creation
and of the creative act. (Herrington 97).

Wilson’s relationship with Richards went beyond the typical playwright-director
connection; they were creative partners, co-creators, and did not seem even to concern
themselves with attributing lines or creations to one or the other man. Wilson’s vision
became their united and sole purpose. Richards noted, though, that they did not write
initial drafts together; “I don’t go and sit over his shoulder when he sits down to type.
That’s where he does his creative work and I let him do it. And I deal with it later. And I work with the actors, that’s where I do my creative work and he deals with it after” (111). Their functions were separate and clear; Wilson took the lead in creating the original words, and Richards took the lead in the process of revising and in guiding the actors.

Wilson and Richards often commented on the perhaps surprising amount of silence between them in their work together. Richards said, “We don’t have a lot of discussion; we don’t need a lot. I say a few things: he understands what I’m talking about. He says something: I understand what he’s talking about. And we could go around the corner on it. That’s part of what makes up our working relationship. There is an affinity of experience and attitude that we share, and it has been there through all of our work” (Bernstein, “Rescuing”). So, maybe it was a shorthand communication rather than actual silence, a deep mutual understanding based on their similarities in background and in, not coincidentally, their drive to confront racial inequality in America. Richards continued, “The things that August’s characters say, which are articulations of principle, codes of living, attitudes toward their own destiny, visions and images, are things that I understand so that when a character articulates something, I seem to know what is on August’s mind. I seldom have to ask, what do you mean by this?” Despite their difference in ages, the two men shared a perspective on society and their own origins within that society, and a desire to create art that reflected and potentially shaped that society.

Richards also described a more potentially confrontational side to his work with Wilson, seeing his job as “to extend August’s thinking . . . which means to understand it
and even to provoke it” (Shannon, “Subtle Imposition” 185). This did not mean that Richards was introducing new ideas, but as he saw it, “sometimes people think they know things that they don’t consciously articulate. And so my job becomes to get all of that out of him, out of my perceptions of what might be there, and to shape that in a theatrical way . . . I coax him to discover what I want him to discover and reveal it in a manner in which I would like it revealed. You can call it subtle imposition” (Shannon “Subtle Imposition” 185). Here we see Richards’ will at play, and his influence over Wilson – but it is all in the service of what Richards understands Wilson’s core views to be and the most effective way for them to emerge. A major area requiring Richards’ coaxing was the too-long scenes in Wilson’s drafts; Richards said, “August writes wonderful scenes. He must think they’re wonderful, ’cause they go on and on and on. To the point where they advance the play much further than it needs to be advanced at that moment” (Lahr, “Been Here” 63). The problem in these cases was not that the material was tiresome or repetitive, but in fact that too much of the story was being revealed at too early a point. Richards described in detail the overall process of reworking Ma Rainey with Wilson, a process that closely resembled that of each play on which they worked as a team:

August was a fast learner. There was the marvelous, unique storytelling capacity of this writer, and his uncanny ability to perceive characters and to illuminate them through storytelling. But he had to begin to learn to dramatize. Then you learn other old tricks along the way, and one of the reasons that I very seldom talk to August about craft is because you can get locked into craft and stifle his creative impulse. August was not an experienced playwright. . . . He’d written a couple of plays. He hadn’t had a lot of production. And our work became, very much, finding the line, the structure, the spine of the play. And then pulling that spine through the material. The very simple fact is that he is a poet, and a poet does not write a dramatic story line. But we took the problem at hand, to make a dramatic event out of the material. It was a matter of really finding the thing that began to shape the play, that put a spine in the play. I would ask him questions,
and he would dig for the answers and come up with them. And through that process we structured a play out of what were very marvelous characters and wonderful events and great storytelling. We tried to evolve a dramatic structure through that. That’s been true in most of the plays. (Herrington 98)

Richards found the necessary boundary so that he could allow Wilson’s storytelling and characters to flourish, while also giving rise to a play that would most effectively bring those characters and stories to life and give their messages in the most powerful way possible. Richards was the questioner, pointing out what might be getting in the way of the heart of the play, and Wilson continually revisited whatever the director pointed out. The visionary and the one who could realize those visions worked together, “sorting through the mystical material and rearranging it so that it becomes useful” (98).

Comparing the final version of *Ma Rainey* to the script with which Wilson arrived at the O’Neill that summer, key changes during the opening moments frame everything that follows in a dramatically different perspective. Wilson’s addition of an epigraph by bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson – “They tore the railroad down / so the Sunshine Special can’t run / I’m going away baby / build me a railroad of my own” – focuses the audience on the music, with lyrics that foreshadow the destruction (an end to the life-giving sun) and individual struggle (to “build [on] my own”) to come. According to a new stage direction, when the curtain rises at the start of the play, we hear a recorded “female vocal rendition” of the blues standard “See See Rider,” accompanied by a “warm light”; it is probably not Ma Rainey singing, but it evokes the play’s eponymous star, nonetheless, and offers a reminder of her large and celebrated legacy (7). Again, the sound of the music also foregrounds the blues itself – music recorded at some point in a studio, as in the play – which Wilson personally defined as the very heart of African-
American identity and culture.

Moving into the action of the play, Wilson’s rearrangements call for recording studio owner Mel Sturdyvant and Ma Rainey’s business manager Irvin – characters who Richards had suggested were “underdeveloped” – to enter first, and he has added an entire scene during which the two men sigh and bicker as they ready the studio for the day’s recording session (Lloyd Richards Papers). We are seeing the “before” to what we were hearing – a beautiful female-blues record, which is also the planned result or “after” of the day’s upcoming session, and the play itself – but these preliminaries are devoid of magic, art, and even artists; the two business professionals disparage their star, Ma Rainey, and long for it all just to be over. Sturdyvant longs even for the end of this career: “This business is bad for my nerves. . . . I’m gonna get out . . . get into something respectable”; he considers it not a worthy profession or use of his time (10). More specifically and immediately, Sturdyvant is longing not to contend with Ma’s expected “shenanigans . . . Queen of the Blues bullshit,” as he terms it; a wooden stool, on which she will likely sit later in the day, blocks Sturdyvant’s way as he sets up, and feedback on a microphone foreshadows friction to come – and echoes past conflicts (7-8). When microphone testing leads to Sturdyvant complaining about Ma through the speakers, Irvin says in exasperation, “You wanna talk to me . . . okay! I can’t talk to you over the goddamn horn . . . Christ!” (8). Sturdyvant comes on too strong, and refuses to act outside his domain of technician; his wish is for the session to go “like clockwork,” as if humans aren’t involved at all. Irvin has to mediate and translate, but is already proving inadequate to the job – and unable to communicate through microphone and speakers,
though he expects his artists to do so, whatever the circumstances – despite his repeated promises to “handle it” (9). Finally, and ominously for Ma and the band, Sturdyvant rants about the poor sales of her previous record, which he deems “garbage” that is probably not worth the “bother”: “You know how many records we sold in New York, Irv? You wanna see the sheet? And you know what’s in New York, Irv? Harlem. Harlem’s in New York, Irv” (10). Taking these financial records as proof that Ma has lost her audience, the black residents of Harlem, Sturdyvant fails – or refuses – to recognize the financial rewards that come from her true fans in “Memphis . . . Birmingham . . . . Atlanta,” as Irvin points out (10). Before the session has even begun, the producer expects failure, and certainly does not see Ma as a gifted musician or valuable cultural icon. Clearly, even if Ma’s name is on the records, and in the title of the play, the white men open the play, and control the proceedings, in the studio and – by implication, and in light of events in the play to come – well beyond.

The re-envisioned opening also gives the audience more insight into the dynamic between studio head Sturdyvant and aspiring musician Levee, who is currently in Ma’s band – and into the psychological make-up of Levee himself; their interactions, and Levee’s personality, are critical to later events and the climax of the play. In the earlier version of the script, only Levee describes the producer’s interest in his music: “I done give Mr. Sturdyvant some of my songs I wrote and he say he’s gonna let me record them when I get my band together” (4). In the final script, though, Sturdyvant himself voices his interest, asking Irvin, “that hornplayer . . . the one who gave me those songs . . . Is he going to be here? . . . Good. I want to hear more of that sound. Times are changing. This
is a tricky business now. We’ve got to jazz it up . . . put in something different. You know, something wild . . . with a lot of rhythm” (9). Now Sturdyvant sounds like someone concerned with art, passionate about his work.

Soon after this speech, as if summoned by Sturdyvant’s enthusiasm, the musicians, minus Levee, arrive; as they settle into the band room, their non-standard English contrasts sharply with what we’ve been hearing from the recording professionals – an effect made possible by Wilson’s addition of the Sturdyvant/Irvin scene – reflecting the power imbalance between the two groups. Though the musicians have less power in the white-dominated world, their colloquial speech is beautiful and humorous, in striking contrast to the tense, technical conversation that we’ve been overhearing. In a new line, Slow Drag reports, “Levee tried to talk to that gal and got his feelings hurt. She didn’t want no part of him. She told Levee he’d have to turn his money green before he could talk with her” (13). Significantly, “that gal” is Dussie Mae, Ma’s young, unimpressed, and unattainable, though possibly bisexual, lover. In the previous manuscript, she and Levee met for the first time at the day’s recording session; Wilson has now expanded their dangerous relationship, giving Dussie Mae a more prominent role in the story, adding to the pressure – some of it self-inflicted – under which Levee struggles, and foreshadowing the trouble to come. The audience is allowed to hear this and other gossip about Levee before he arrives because Wilson has moved Levee’s entrance to a little later in the scene, and we hear that the band members do not trust him to be on time (“Do he know what time he supposed to be here?” asks Cutler); this also gives Levee a more dramatic entrance – and one that presages the much tardier, flamboyant entrance of Ma
Rainey, whom he tries to emulate in many ways – appropriate for the character who will take the tragic action at the end of the play (12).

Beyond introducing the white professionals Irvin and Sturdyvant earlier in the play, Wilson has made Sturdyvant a fuller character overall, and one who is more openly contemptuous and angry toward Ma; at the same time, the two men are more clearly at fault in their attitudes and actions regarding Ma as they war with her during the session. When Ma and her entourage finally arrive at the studio, quite late, she explains – in her usual proud and assertive fashion – that they were delayed by racist treatment: they were involved in an accident (of ambiguous cause), and first the police officer would not believe that an African-American woman owned such an elegant automobile, and then a white cab driver refused to accept the group as passengers. Despite the abuse she has suffered, the men in charge of the studio continue throughout the day to blame Ma for being late; note an added Sturdyvant line: “Now, just a minute here, Ma. You come in an hour late . . .” (57). Ma, a celebrated singer, has to push for basic amenities, chiding in added dialogue, “Why you all keep it so cold in here? . . . Sturdyvant try and pinch every penny he can. You all wanna make some records you better put some heat on in here or give me back my coat” (37). When the producer berates Ma, in another added line, “Don’t wait so long to come in. Don’t take so long on the intro, huh?” Ma has to defend her realm: “Sturdyvant, don’t you go trying to tell me how to sing” (57). As her longtime custom, Ma has asked for Coca Cola to be in the studio, but somehow Irvin has forgotten this one modest request (imagine what today’s famous performers demand). Incredibly, this is the breaking point for Sturdyvant; in an added speech, after scolding her once
again for being late, he rages, “We’re way behind schedule as it is . . . the band is set up and ready to go . . . I’m burning my lights . . . I’ve turned up the heat . . . we’re ready to make a record and what? You decide you want a coca cola?” (57). As if switching on electric lights and the studio heating system are tremendous luxuries. Ma responds “[coldly] Sturdyvant get out of my face. Irvin . . . I told you keep him away from me,” and Sturdyvant yells to the middle man, “I’m tired of her nonsense, Irv. I’m not gonna put up with this!” (57). Wilson’s revisions show a producer who arrived at the studio that day ready to be outraged, ready to fire their star and money maker, in order to maintain his race-based power.

For the biggest delay in this existential drama about waiting, and disconnection, Wilson changed the details to move the blame more clearly onto the white men’s shoulders. In the earlier version of the script, Slow Drag breaks a string on his instrument at the beginning of a song and does not have a replacement with him. When Irvin asks in ignorance if he can continue without the string, Slow Drag says in disgust, “Cutler, talk to this fool!”: more disconnection (32). In the final version, it is literal disconnection, a broken or unplugged microphone cord, that sidelines the session. Not only must they stop for a lengthy repair, they discover the defunct cord only after Ma’s stammering nephew, Sylvester, has spoken his song introduction fluently (after many frustrating tries); who knows if Sylvester will be able to accomplish this again? Instead of feeling humbled, Sturdyvant acts even more the villain in the revised aftermath of his own mistake. When an exasperated Ma starts to leave, he asks “[furiously] Where’s she going” (68). Wilson deleted Sturdyvant’s more supplicating line, “Don’t let her leave! We’ve got too much
invested in this not to come out of here with something” (33). Ma’s final showdown with the white professionals is a disagreement over Sylvester’s payment for his part in the recording session. After Irvin reports to Ma that Sturdyvant won’t pay Sylvester and can only offer to take some of Ma’s fee and give it to him, Ma is incensed. In the earlier script, she replies, “Where’s he [Sturdyvant] at? I ain’t going for this, Irvin! And you best go and tell him! He used the boy . . . the boy put his voice on the record and he’s gonna get paid for it now. That’s all there is to it!” (48). She is displeased but her language is less firm; “I ain’t going for this” somehow does not sound like an absolute refusal, the word “best” mitigates her demand, and “That’s all there is to it” could be construed as too much protesting. In the revised scene, Ma gives specific and insistent directions to Irvin to “go and talk to him!” (81). With deadly calm, she explains clearly the logic of her position: “If I wanted the boy to have twenty-five dollars of my money, I’d give it to him! He supposed to get his own money. He’s supposed to get paid like everybody else” (81). Finally, Wilson has changed Irvin’s job title from “agent” to “manager,” emphasizing Irvin’s responsibility to manage or handle things, as he constantly claims but fails to do.

Whereas Ma, the established artist, has become fiercer in the final script, the young trumpeter Levee has been transformed from an arrogant opportunist to a (still arrogant) talented and committed musician. In the older script, Wilson describes Levee as a weak musician: “His voice is strident and totally dependent on his manipulation of breath. He plays wrong notes frequently” (2). Now, arriving for the recording session, Levee speaks enthusiastically about his prospective individual work, in an added line: “I just gotta finish the last part of this song. Mr. Sturdyvant want me to write another part to
this song” (16). He feels recognized as both a composer and a performer and shows himself ready to work and create. A little later in the scene, Wilson has changed Levee’s behavior; he goes from producing dice and saying “let’s shoot some crap. Cutler?” to producing sheet music and pencil and saying, “You all go and rehearse then. I got to finish this song for Mr. Sturdyvant” (1982 script 8; 1985 script 19). Though he still resists his more mundane responsibilities – rehearsing for the session with Ma Rainey – he is dedicated to working on his own music. It seems to be both despite and because of his talent that Levee is impatient with his job in Ma’s back-up band; in an added line, Cutler is forced to admonish, “Come on, Levee . . . I don’t want no shit now. You rehearse like everybody else. You in the band like everybody else. Mr. Sturdyvant just gonna have to wait. You got to do that on your own time. This is the band’s time” (19).

Levee is trying to bypass his current duties as Ma’s support to leap prematurely into his own stardom; because he sees Sturdyvant in charge of the studio, Levee thinks he can do the work for him, not recognizing the hierarchy, that this is Ma’s band’s time.

Beyond his expanded musical talent in the final script, Levee’s humanity has also further developed. The other, older musicians see Levee as selfish and naïve, and whether or not he has a musical gift is unimportant to them. At the end of Act I, when the men’s teasing dismissals have pushed Levee to emotional outburst, Wilson has changed his exclamation from (referring to himself initially in the third person) “You don’t know the way his heart beats. What kind of blood I got” to the more eloquent, reverberating “You don’t know nothing about what kind of blood I got! What kind of heart I got beating here!” (1982 23; 1985 51). Moving from third person to first, Levee claims his own heart,
which “I got beating here!” (more active than “beats”) The repetition of “what kind of” increases the passion in Levee’s voice, and the added word “nothing” emphasizes Levee’s sense of alienation within the group. His emotions fully provoked, Levee tells the group the story of his family’s appalling abuse by white neighbors when he was a child. Wilson has added details to Levee’s tale: “We was living in Jefferson County, about eighty miles outside of Natchez. My daddy’s name was Memphis . . . Memphis Lee Green” (51). With this new information, mostly specific names, the story becomes more vivid and more human. We also gain the allusion to Memphis, both the slave-holding city of ancient Egypt and the Southern culture of the Tennessee town that bears the legacy of United States slavery, in which Levee’s nearby family also lives. Perhaps “Lee” even suggests Confederate Colonel Robert E. Lee. When Levee, only eight years old, is left alone with his mother while his father goes to town to on business, a group of white men invade the house and attempt to rape Levee’s mother. He tries to protect her, but they stab him and then flee; later, Levee’s father carries out his revenge on the men, but dies in the process. When Levee describes his father’s murder, Wilson has changed the line about the white attackers; instead of having “killed him,” they have more graphically “hung him and set him afire,” bringing to mind Southern lynchings and Ku Klux Klan cross burnings (1982 23; 1985 52). At this point in his story, a new stage direction says Levee “slowly crosses to the cornet, lifts it and clutches it tightly to his chest, grief-stricken” (52). Levee’s music has the potential to save him, both within his psyche and in the outside world. In the earlier script, when Levee completes his tale, the other men then speak about unimportant matters, seeming to disregard Levee’s story; Cutler says to
Toledo, “Here go this newspaper you was looking for,” which is where, instead of music, Toledo looks for inspiration and hope (24). One comment was fairly supportive: Toledo allows, “Levee’s alright. He’s a little confused about life, but he’s alright” (24). In the final script, though, the men don’t speak at all after Levee’s story; instead, we hear Slow Drag singing about “tear[ing] this old building down”; the power of Levee’s story – which the other men understand intimately and immediately – hovers as Act I ends (53).

Blind Lemon Jefferson’s lines in the epigraph also resonate with the new lyrics sung by Slow Drag at the very end of Act I: “If I had my way / If I had my way / If I had my way / I would tear this old building down” (53). The momentum and the anger build with each repetition of “If I had my way” – with the implication that having that way is unlikely – toward violent destruction, once again; note, too, that it is the building the singer (and we) are in (“this . . . building”) that is threatened, rather than one at a remove. A stage direction tells us that Slow Drag plays musical accompaniment for the first three lines but stops before a chilling a cappella “I would tear this old building down”; Slow Drag and the other band members share Levee’s anger and frustration toward white violence and oppression. At this moment in the earlier manuscript, Slow Drag had sung, “Please Mr. Engineer / let a man ride the line / Ain’t got no ticket / but I sure do got the time”; these milder lines suggest that the band members are unmoved by Levee’s story – because they don’t believe him and/or don’t respect him (24). Another effect of the previous “Please Mr. Engineer” lyrics, though, is a much tamer, less ominous ending to Act I, one that would have felt less connected to the horrifying end of Act II and the play.

Levee story’s is the turning point, a peak of emotional intensity and violence –
though the violence is only described in a memory—matched only by the final moments of the play. Wilson’s work on the character Levee and his story, the most important one, is a large part of what took *Ma Rainey* from acceptable to exceptional. Later in his career, Wilson described his philosophy about his protagonists: “The character has to reexamine his whole body of beliefs. The play has to shake the very foundation of his whole system of beliefs and force him to make a choice. Then I think you as a playwright have accomplished something, because that process also forces the audience to go through the same inner struggle” (Lyons 19-20). In 1983 Wilson was still considering two very different versions of Levee’s story; in a letter to Richards in October, he wrote, “I am still undecided about the two Levee stories. I am sending them both along to you unbound.” He continued, “I rewrote the story about Levee’s mother because . . . it was the least fresh, the most familiar.” The other version Wilson considered was a story of a forty-year-old Levee recently released from prison who had committed a crime involving a dog and was now talking to a girlfriend; “I just got out the penitentiary . . . spent twenty years in the penitentiary and I done forgot about life. I’m trying to work my way back into the world . . . you think you can help me?” This rejected version showed an older Levee who had already spent half of his life in jail, for a cause that could not be considered noble; this Levee would have had much less at stake than a young, talented musician with strong convictions and with a personal history of bravery and suffering.

As Levee has changed in Wilson’s hands to a more serious and capable musician, so too has the conflict between Ma and Levee heightened, as he aggressively pursues his goals; he can succeed only at her expense. In a handwritten note on the script in
September 1983, Richards indicated that “Ma must contribute more to Levee frustration” (Lloyd Richards Papers). Without Ma’s knowledge, Levee and Sturdyvant have planned to use Levee’s new, jazzier version for recording Ma’s classic song, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” In the earlier script, Ma tells Irvin that she has brought her nephew, Sylvester, to the studio so that he can speak the introduction to the song; Irvin responds, with pretended casualness, “Say, listen, Ma . . . Levee wrote a nice intro to that Black Bottom Blues” (25e). In a more dramatic turn in the final script, Ma unexpectedly overhears the band rehearsing Levee’s version; in a handwritten note from September 1983, Richards had suggested “let Ma hear the rehearsal of Levee’s arrangement” (Lloyd Richards Papers). Levee’s part has been upgraded from an introduction to an arrangement of the entire song – which makes her feel even more overlooked and outraged: “Irvin . . . what is that I hear? I know they ain’t rehearsing Levee’s ‘Black Bottom.’ I know I ain’t hearing that” (45). Fighting over Ma’s black bottom versus Levee’s black bottom – it couldn’t be more personal. In Wilson’s previous version, Irvin gives no real reason for his endorsement of Levee’s work, but the final scene sees Irvin explain, “Ma . . . that’s what the people want now. They want something they can dance to. Times are changing. Levee’s arrangement gives the people what they want. It gets them excited . . . makes them forget about their troubles” (45). Threatening everything about Ma’s art, Irvin suggests that hers is not “what the people want now,” and that the blues focus listeners too much on “their troubles.” If Levee and Ma were not enemies before, they certainly are now. Ma insists on her version of the song, of course, and Sylvester is escorted to the band room to rehearse. In the earlier script, Irvin accompanies Sylvester, but in the final it
is Ma herself who walks him into the band room. This is likely the moment Wilson refers to as the one that, for him, brought the two parts of the play – Ma and the band – together; “She entered that space, and for me that was the moment that wedded those two plays together” (Pettengill, “Historical” 223). When Ma announces to the band her plan for Sylvester, she is launching a full attack on Levee, who protests, now to her directly, rather than to Irvin and the other musicians, as he did in the earlier script. After Ma ignores him and leaves the room, Levee says, in an added line, “You just wait till I get my band. I’m gonna record that song and show you how it supposed to go!” (49). A serious artist now, Levee trusts his vision and its superiority, and looks to music to take him where he wants to be.

Symbolic of his aspirations as well as his misguided approach to attaining them, Levee’s new shoes take a prominent place in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* – even more so after Wilson’s revisions. In the earlier script, Levee is wearing his newly purchased Florsheims when he enters, and no one mentions them for many pages afterward; even then it is Cutler who speaks of them first, not Levee. In his final incarnation, the more driven Levee is more ostentatiously focused on his shoes from the start. The moment when the men first discuss Levee’s shoes in the 1982 script is as follows:

(Levee takes out a rag and starts to shine his shoes.)
SLOW DRAG You can shine these when you get done, Levee.
CUTLER If I had them shoes Levee got, I could buy me a whole suit of clothes.
LEVEE What kind of difference it make what kind of shoes I got? Ain’t nothing wrong with having nice shoes. I ain’t said nothing about your shoes. Why you wanna talk about me and my Florsheims?
CUTLER Any man . . . who takes a whole week’s pay . . . and puts it on some shoes – you understand what I mean, what you walk on the ground with – is a fool! And I don’t mind telling him.
Levee does not want to call attention to his new shoes, and is even “irritated” that Cutler notices and comments on them. Cutler admires the shoes but calls Levee a “fool” for paying so much for them. By the time the play has reached its final incarnation, though, the initial discussion of Levee’s shoes comes earlier in the play and is quite different:

(LEVEE opens the Bandroom door, abruptly and slams it shut behind him. He crosses to the piano and drops the horn case on top of it.)

Cutler. Levee . . . where Mr. Irvin go?
Levee. Hell, I ain’t none of his keeper. He gone on down the hall.
Slow Drag. What you got there, Levee?
Levee. (takes a pair of shiny new shoes from the shoe box and holds them up; mockingly:) Look here, Cutler . . . I got me some shoes!
Cutler. Nigger, I ain’t studying you. (LEVEE crosses R. to above the U.C. Bench, drops the empty shoebox on top of the lockers, then crosses to below the bench and sits.)
Toledo. How much you pay for something like that, Levee?
Levee. (taking off his old shoes) Eleven dollars. Four dollars of it belong to Cutler. (putting on his new shoes)
Slow Drag. Levee say if it wasn’t for Cutler . . . he would have no new shoes!
Cutler. I ain’t thinking about Levee or his shoes. Come on . . . let’s get ready to rehearse.
Slow Drag. (crosses to behind the piano, picks up the bass and begins to remove the casing) I’m with you on that score, Cutler. I wanna get out of here. I don’t want to be around here all night. When it comes time to go up there and record them songs . . . I just wanna go up there and do it. Last time it took us all day and half the night.
Toledo. Ain’t but four songs on the list. Last time we recorded six songs.
Slow Drag. It felt like it was sixteen!
Levee. (rises and struts around, admiring the new shoes) Yeah! Now I’m ready! I can play me some good music now! (glances up from the shoes, stops and looks around the room) Dammit! They done changed things around.
Don’t never leave well enough alone. (He picks up the old shoes, crosses R. around the bench and puts the old shoes in the shoebox on the lockers. CUTLER opens the trombone case.) (13-14)

Levee, with relish, “takes a pair of shiny new shoes from the shoe box and holds them up,
mockingly,” then “struts around, admiring the new shoes” (14). “Yeah! Now I’m ready,” he crows. “I can play me some good music now”; Levee invests his footwear with seemingly mystical powers, and he uses them to try to establish superiority over the other men (14). A critical addition to the play appears soon afterward, when Slow Drag inadvertently steps on one of Levee’s new shoes; “Damn, Slow Drag!” Levee cries. “Watch them big-ass shoes you got” (26). A seemingly innocuous moment, it both foreshadows the violence to come at the end of the play, and contrasts with it, since here Levee takes the shoe-stepping in stride, so to speak. Wilson has also deleted a line of Levee’s: “You got to have good shoes to have a good time” (13). Perhaps the removal of this more frivolous sentiment allows us to see Levee’s care for his shoes as a more profound symbol of his aspirations for beauty – a sense that will be borne out in the shocking last moments of the play.

The changes Wilson made concerning the character Toledo – Levee’s nemesis, ultimately, and the one who falls victim to Levee’s misplaced aggression – are small when taken individually, but as a whole sharpen his effect and enhance our understanding of why he is the one victimized in the tragic action of the ending. At the beginning of the play, when the band members discuss the controversial song list for the session, Wilson takes away Slow Drag’s line, “Well, she [Ma]’ll get it straight. I wouldn’t worry about it if I were you” and gives it to Toledo: “I wouldn’t worry about it. Let them straighten it up” (1982 2; 1985 12). Toledo has become more prominent in making group decisions, and in his role as the wise one, he has put more emphasis on the authority of the recording professionals (“them”); he makes it clear that the band members, and even Ma,
do not hold the power here. In the funny and sad scene when the band members bet on how to spell “music,” we learn not only that Levee does not know how to spell the word – he thinks it ends in a “k” – but also that the other band members cannot even confirm that Toledo’s way (m-u-s-i-c) is correct. In an added line, Toledo’s bravado over Levee fades, and he asks sadly, “How am I gonna prove it to you?” (17). The poignancy and resonance of this question emerges in the final version because Wilson has ended Toledo’s speech with this line; in the earlier script, Toledo had gone on to explain his frustration: “That’s what you call a double cross. Not the kind where you do somebody dirty. What I’m talking about is where two lines cross and you can’t see where one stop and the other one begin. That’s a double cross” (6). Later, Wilson deletes a line of Levee’s: “He [Toledo] think he is a white man” (14). Even coming from the disparaged Levee, this is a damning line, and one that contradicts much of what we come to see in Toledo, whose message is that black culture and history are to be studied, cherished, and lived for. Wilson deleted the end of another line, spoken by Toledo himself this time: “other than how to make a good piece of pussy better” (20). More vulgar than anything else Toledo says in the play (though not the case for other characters), the removal of this line allows him to maintain his gravitas. Later still, Toledo tells his friends about his marriage and its end – a tale Wilson is said to have based on his first marriage, to Brenda Burton. In the final version, Toledo explains that his wife became more and more involved with their church and was unhappy that he did not share her passion for it. Wilson’s extensive revision of the scene involved mostly deletions of small details and Toledo’s feelings of resentment: “Reverend Tolliver had a church in them parts called,
the Abundant Life Church of God In Christ. . . when you start to replacing me with Jesus [then] something’s wrong. . . She betrayed me. She went back on her promise she said when we got married” (36). In the end, Toledo’s story is simple, universal, and not bitter, an almost Biblical parable, ironically, contributing to our sense of him as a prophet and messenger within the play.

Another character who grows emotionally in Wilson’s revision is Ma; her battles with the white studio men have escalated, but her sense of self and purpose – the reason for the battles – has also become heightened. For one basic thing, she has joined Act I; in the original we do not meet her until the curtain rises for Act II. Ma has become both more forceful and more formal, as we see in her initial entrance: “The door buzzer begins to ring incessantly . . . Shouting and scuffling is heard . . . [Ma Rainey] rushes furiously through the double doors” (33). The buzzer is purposeful and relentless, like Ma herself, and she enters quickly and angrily; it takes two doors to accommodate her physical bulk and her healthy self-respect. The stage direction in the earlier version, “There is a flurry of commotion as Ma Rainey enters followed closely by the policeman,” is shorter and more vague, and Ma does not get her own entrance but rather has to be escorted by a white figure of authority (25). Once the recording session has begun, Irvin advises Ma to use Levee’s arrangement of her signature song, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom”; Wilson has changed her response to Irvin from “what you look like telling me what song to sing?” to “what you look like telling me how to sing my song?” (1982 25f; 1985 46). There is quite a difference here; she is preemptively protecting her entire musical style and genre – not just her choice of song – from her manager. As a final defensive
maneuver, when Irvin says “we’ll be ready to go in fifteen minutes,” Ma icily corrects him in a line that is subtly revised from “We’ll be ready when Madame Rainey gets ready! That’s the way it work around here!” to “We’ll be ready to go when Madame says we’re ready. That’s the way it goes around here” (1982 25f; 1985 47). Now Ma is more formal – the emphasis is on what Ma “says,” as a command to be obeyed; her grammar is more exact (“the way it goes” rather than “the way it work”); and the exclamation marks are replaced by calm, deliberate periods.

In his revisions after the May 1982 manuscript, Wilson added the lines about the blues, spoken by Ma, that are the heart of the play; Wilson might have said that they are the heart of all his work; he called the blues his “primary influence” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). In the 1982 script, during a lull in the studio, Ma speaks with Cutler about her music:

MA RAINEY It sure done got quiet in here. I never could stand no silence. I always got to have some music going on in my head somewhere. To keep things balanced. Music will do that. It fills things up. Makes the world fuller. The more music you got in the world the fuller it is.

CUTLER I can agree with that. I gots to have my music too.

MA RAINEY Even when I was a little girl I felt the need to have the music in my head. Almost like its a curse. I said, Gertrude, all this music you got in your head is nice, but it don’t quite fit the circumstances of things. That’s what I said to myself. And then I started putting my own music together. Little bits and snatches of things I done heard the grown ups talking about when their man would leave them or whatever. That feeling of emptiness you get. White women go see the doctor. The black women sing the blues. You hear me Cutler? You hears what I’m talking about?

CUTLER I hears you. You’s telling it. Lord, it’s the truth!

MA RAINEY I’d take that emptiness and try and fill it up with something. So it wouldn’t be so empty. That’s how I got to singing the blues. I got on it so hard, the folks would just go crazy to hear me sing. They’d say, ‘Child, that girl is sure enough singing!’ But I didn’t start the blues way of singing. The blues always been here. In the church sometimes, you’d hear that way of singing . . . what folks call the blues. They say I started it . . . but I didn’t. I just helped it out.
Filled up the empty space a little bit. That’s all. But if they want to call me the Mother of the Blues, that’s alright with me. It don’t hurt none. (31)

Here Ma describes her childhood experience of essentially inventing the blues; we see an inspired child taking the art, the “nice” music, and life around her and transforming them into something new. As she tells us, the response to this new music was profound; “I got on it so hard, the folks would just go crazy to hear me sing. They’d say, ‘Child, that girl is sure enough singing!’ ” She had created a resonant art form that made her listeners “crazy to hear” her. In the final version of the play, Ma’s words have changed, and Toledo joins the conversation:

Ma Rainey. It sure done got quiet in here. I never could stand no silence. I always got to have some music going on in my head somewhere. It keeps things balanced. Music will do that. It fills things up. The more music you got in the world, the fuller it is.

Cutler. I can agree with that. I got to have my music too.

Ma Rainey. White folks don’t understand about the blues. 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.

Cutler. That’s right. You get that understanding and you done got a grip on life to where you can hold your head up and go on to see what else life got to offer.

Ma Rainey. The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone. (crosses l. a step) There’s something else in the world. Something’s been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something.

Toledo. (rises and crosses to the l. folding chair) You fill it up with something the people can’t be without, Ma. That’s why they call you the Mother of the Blues. (picks up MA’s purse and sits on the l. folding chair) You fill up that emptiness in a way ain’t nobody ever thought of doing before. And now they can’t be without it.

Ma Rainey. I ain’t started the blues way of singing. The blues always been here.

Cutler. In the church sometimes you find that way of singing. They got blues in the church.

Ma Rainey. They say I started it . . . but I didn’t. I just helped it out. Filled up that empty space a little bit. That’s all. But if they wanna call me the Mother of the Blues, that’s alright with me. It don’t hurt none. (62-63)
Ma notes first that “white folks” cannot fully experience the blues; they “don’t understand about the blues . . . They hear it come out but they don’t know how it got there” (62). Then she muses to her longtime fellow musician Cutler that the blues are “life’s way of talking. You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ’cause that’s a way of understanding life”; he agrees: “You get that understanding and you done got a grip on life to where you can hold your head up and go on to see what else life got to offer” (63). Beyond entertainment and comfort, the blues are a language, a “way of talking,” and a philosophy, “a way of understanding” – a sustaining and connecting force in the world. “Understanding” is the key; even if the blues don’t change the circumscribed lives of 1920s African Americans, the recognition and voice they offer confer the strength to continue, to “see what else life got to offer.” Elaborating, Ma says, “The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone. There’s something else in the world. Something’s been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues” (63). So, the blues offer a different kind of companion, a “something” rather than a someone, something that fills an empty space and deepens and enlarges the life of the audience. Joining the conversation and adding to Ma’s definition, Toledo says, “You fill it up with something the people can’t be without, Ma. That’s why they call you Mother of the Blues. You fill up that emptiness in a way ain’t nobody ever thought of doing before. And now they can’t be without it” (63). Rather than the inventor-mother of the blues, Ma seems to be seen by Toledo as a kind of mother within the blues; she offers her African-American listeners, most of whom have so little in material terms, an
essential and enriching fullness that – despite the reputation of the blues as depressing and hopeless – actually restores them to hope and possibility. By removing the biographical slant from Ma’s speech, Wilson has made her message more poetic and more universal, more tied to the overall African-American experience; it is ennobling to both Ma herself and to the blues as an art form.

While Ma is defining herself, her art, and her people, Levee is busy seducing her lover, Dussie Mae – who is most likely heterosexual, but enjoying the perks of a relationship with celebrity Ma Rainey– in a scene to which Wilson made many changes. In the final version of their encounter, Levee is more earnest and more focused on his music – though he is still aggressively pursuing his boss’s woman. It is a further sign that he mistakenly sees Sturdyvant, not Ma, as the one in charge of the recording session and by extension Levee’s career. Now with Dussie Mae, Levee impresses her with his knowledge of his craft; “I didn’t know you could really write music,” she says (61). Their conversation begins differently, too; in the older version, the two talk first about New Orleans and names, but the revised scene opens with Levee, unaware that Dussie Mae has entered, singing and then saying to himself, “Wait until Mr. Sturdyvant hear me play that. I’m talking about some real music here” (61). Clearly, his devotion to his music is not just for show; he practices and dreams even when alone. A portentous new stage direction tells us that Levee is polishing one of his new shoes. Continuing the theme of naming, particularly names connected to Levee, we learn that his last name is Green, and that his future band will be “Levee Green and the Footstompers” (61). A macabre irony in retrospect, given that Toledo’s unintentional tread on Levee’s foot will lead to his
death. And Levee is a green one, newer to the music world than his older band mates and naïve about his chances for being recognized as an artist. His youth and increased talent and ambition make Dussie Mae’s attraction to Levee more understandable – as well as the fact that Wilson decided against making him an ex-convict.

In a revised, heightened dialogue, the two young people flirt and negotiate their potential relationship. Levee tells the lovely Dussie Mae, “A man what’s gonna get his own band need to have a woman like you”; again, he seeks to be like Ma even as he rebels against her (61). In calculating fashion, Dussie Mae replies that “a woman like me wants somebody to bring it and put it in my hand. I don’t need nobody wanna get something for nothing and leave me standing in my door” (61). She does not hide her goals and strategy, and Levee claims to qualify, saying, “That ain’t Levee’s style, sugar. I got more style than that. I knows how to treat a woman. Buy her presents and things . . . treat her like she want to be treated” (61). The young woman, however, knows “that’s what they all say...till it come time to be buying the presents,” but Levee continues his campaign: “When we get down to Memphis, I’m gonna show you what I’m talking about. I’m gonna take you out and show you a good time. Show you Levee know how to treat a woman” (61). Here, the audience recognizes raised stakes, because moments ago, Ma told Cutler she plans to fire Levee when they arrive in Memphis, because he “ain’t nothing but trouble” (59). Back in the band room, Levee tries to kiss Dussie Mae, who shrewdly and unsentimentally refuses: “I don’t go for all that pawing and stuff. When you get your own band maybe we can see about this stuff you talking” (62). Levee persists: “I just want to show you I know what the women like”; he is trying to establish
himself in this world, to attain all that Ma seems to have (62). Eventually, Levee tries a direct, vulgar approach to the object of his desire: “Look here . . . what I wanna know is . . . can I introduce my red rooster to your brown hen?” (62). In the earlier script, Dussie Mae doesn’t speak but “doesn’t resist” when Levee now embraces her; in the final version, Dussie Mae maintains her cool, calculating stance: “You get your band then we’ll see if your rooster know how to crow” – though she still does not pull away from him physically (1982 30a; 1985 62). In the end, Dussie Mae relents at least somewhat to Levee’s advances; in his arms, she asks affectionately, “How’d you get so crazy?” (62). Wilson changed Levee’s response to this question from the more mundane “I might be crazy . . . but I sure ain’t dumb!” to a passionate “It’s women like you . . . drives me that way” (1982 30a; 1985 62).

In further sign of Wilson’s growth as a dramatist, the stage directions following the last line of dialogue between Levee and Dussie Mae are quite expanded in the final script. Instead of the simple “Levee moves to kiss her,” Wilson has choreographed a wordless continuation of their negotiation: “He pulls her tighter to him and kisses her. Dussie Mae jerks away. . . . Levee grabs her wrist and stops her. He slowly sits on the bench, staring at her, then releases her wrist. She crosses hesitantly toward him. The band room dims as the studio lights come up. Dussie Mae kisses Levee and sinks onto his lap as Ma [oblivious], in the studio, looks around and sighs” (1982 30a; 1985 62). We see the complex push and pull between the young people, and then suddenly we see older Ma, so nearby but unaware that she is being betrayed by Levee in romance as well as in professional life, and that Dussie Mae is also deceiving her.
In the reworked final script, Wilson has changed what happens next, when Levee and Ma must come together to begin the recording session. A blatant, uncomplicated confrontation happens in the earlier script: Slow Drag enters the band room and finds Levee and Dussie Mae in a clinch; interrupted, they walk together into the studio. Observing them angrily, Ma says petulantly, “See what I’m talking about, Cutler? You better school him. That nigger’s fixing to get his dick-string broke!” (32). It is not a terribly subtle moment. In the final version, Dussie Mae breaks away from Levee and leaves the band room first: “No . . . come on! I got to go. You gonna get me in trouble”; she, at least, understands that they are both endangering their livelihoods and peace of mind (64). After she leaves, Levee says “Good God! Happy Birthday to the lady with the cakes” (64). Probably the one moment in the play when Levee says something positive about God (even if it is in slang), it also shows Levee exultant and playful; perhaps the birth he refers to is actually his own, as he feels himself to be starting a new life as a recording star and seducer of what had seemed an unattainable woman. Entering the studio, Dussie Mae “kisses Ma Rainey lightly on the cheek,” sending a quiet assurance of her devotion to her protector (64). The clandestine couple has not fully escaped detection, though; when there is a setback during recording, Cutler has a new line: “[reprovingly] If Levee had his mind on his work we wouldn’t be in this fix. We’d be up there finishing up” (70). When Levee denies this distraction – “Hey, Levee ain’t done nothing!” – Slow Drag insists, “Levee up there got one eye on the gal and the other on his trumpet” (70). Levee has further angered the other men by risking Ma’s wrath – and with it, further delays and annoyances to the day.
As the recording session comes to an end, so do, as it happens, Levee’s chances for success and fulfillment. In the final script, Wilson has added a denouement between Levee and Ma, which increases tremendously the pressure on the young man as he then moves on to his final confrontation; the scene also highlights both the similarities and the conflicting roles between these two driven performers. As the group celebrates the completion of their work, Ma compliments some of the musicians, and a stage direction tells us, poignantly, that “Levee looks expectantly at Ma”; despite his defiance of her, he still looks to her as mentor if not hero (79). Instead of praising him, she admonishes: “Levee . . . what is that you was doing? Why you playing all them notes? You play ten notes for every one you supposed to play. It don’t call for that”; Levee responds defensively, “You supposed to improvise on the theme. That’s what I was doing” (79).

Not only is Levee’s playing out of step with Ma and the band (he hits “ten notes for every one” he is assigned), but also he is telling the boss – and, in effect, mother of the group and their very type of music – that his way is the superior way, what a musician is “supposed” to do. Continuing to criticize his rebellion, Ma says, “You supposed to play the song the way I sing it. The way everybody else play it. You ain’t supposed to go off by yourself and play what you want” (79). Ma is not interested in the quality or vision of Levee’s music; as his boss and the guardian of the blues, she is interested solely in maintaining order and consistency within her group – the worst crime is not poor playing, but to “go off by yourself,” selfishly to “play what you want.” Acknowledging that he was not “playing the song the way you [Ma] sing it,” Levee contends, “I was playing it the way I felt it” (79). Here, he unwittingly uses her own language; speaking of herself in
the third person, Ma told Irvin earlier that in her music, she “listens to her heart. . . . to the voice inside her” – both she and Levee are instinctual, passionate musicians who are true to their personal visions (46). Unfortunately – especially for Levee – their visions cannot co-exist; Ma is irate: “I couldn’t keep up with what was going on. I’m trying to sing the song and you up there messing up my ear. That’s what you was doing. Call yourself playing music” (80). His music is literally blocking her own. Just as adamant, Levee “crosses right and turns his back to Ma” and says dismissively, “Hey . . . I know what I’m doing. I know what I’m doing, alright. I know how to play music. You all back up and leave me alone about my music” (80). His back to Ma and his mind closed, Levee refuses to consider her or anyone else’s point of view; we hear that he feels threatened in his words “you all back up.” Now Cutler intervenes: “I done told you . . . it ain’t about your music. It’s about Ma’s music”; whatever they believe privately, the other musicians recognize the hierarchy, that Ma is in power and therefore is automatically the winner of any argument about music (80). She replies ominously to her colleague, “That’s alright, Cutler. I done told you what to do,” but Levee is no longer holding back: “I don’t care what you do. You supposed to improvise on the theme. Not play note for note, the same thing over and over again” (80). Levee’s vision is more important to him than his position with Ma’s band; he feels the cultural swing toward jazz, a form that in its nature involves varying approaches – and wants only to be a part of it. Now that Levee is refusing to back down, Ma is forced to take extreme action. Though she warns him repeatedly: “You just better watch yourself. You hear me?” and “You gonna find out what it means” and “You keep messing with me,” Levee persists with irrational confidence (80). He continues to
Ma has defeated Levee, though it is only temporary, in a sense, because we know her style of music will give way to his eventually; she then goes on to win – again, if only in the immediate – against Sturdyvant and Irvin as they negotiate terms at the end of the session. When the time arrives for the performers to be paid, Irvin tells Ma that
Sturdyvant refuses to pay Sylvester, her nephew who stammered out the introduction to the song “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” Furious, she sends Irvin back to convey her absolute insistence that he be paid. In the earlier script, Sturdyvant invisibly agrees to pay Sylvester and Irvin hands out the money. In the final script, Wilson’s changes show Sturdyvant coming down from the booth to address Ma’s concern and reassure her himself: “Ma, is there something wrong? Is there a problem?” (83). Ma demands, “Sturdyvant, I want you to pay that boy his money” and Sturdyvant replies soothingly, “Sure, Ma. I got it right here. Two hundred for you and twenty-five for the kid, right?” (83). Denying his earlier refusal, Sturdyvant claims, “Irvin misunderstood me. It was all a mistake. Irv made a mistake” (83). Shrewdly, Ma corrects him: “The only mistake was when you found out I hadn’t signed the release forms. That was the mistake!” and then starts to leave without signing them; “Come on, Dussie Mae,” she calls (83). Maintaining an outward calm, Sturdyvant entreats, “Hey, Ma . . . come on, sign the forms, huh?” (83). Now it is Irvin who finally begins to manage his star; he has to urge Ma over and over: “Ma . . . come on now” and “[your car is] right out front, Ma. Here . . . I got the keys right here. Come on, sign the forms, huh?” and “Ma . . . just sign the forms, huh?” and finally “Come on, Ma . . . I took care of everything, right? I straightened everything out” (83). Whether or not this last is an exaggeration, Ma finally concedes, saying, “Give me the pen, Irvin. You tell Sturdyvant . . . one more mistake like that and I can make my records someplace else” (83-84). The first to leave the studio as she was the last to arrive, Ma has maintained her values and her refusal to compromise throughout; she has abandoned her would-be pupil, Levee, but she has defended somewhat her music from
the exploitation of the white recording professionals.

Ma may have won, more or less, but in the end her musicians definitively do not. In the earlier script, Sturdyvant rejects Levee as a potential recording artist, but in the final version, Wilson has revised the scene to make it a more painful and more absolute rejection – and this on top of the added rejection of Levee by Ma. After initially showing great interest in recording Levee, Sturdyvant tells him he has changed his mind. Incredulous, Levee asks why; in the earlier script, Sturdyvant answers, “See it’s my job to stay on top of what’s happening in the recording business, and well . . . there just isn’t that kind of interest in that type of music anymore” (51). In the revised final, Sturdyvant’s answer is more abrupt: “I’ve thought about it and I just don’t think the people will buy them . . . they’re not the type of songs we’re looking for” (85). Gone is the kindly (if condescending) explanation of his role in the music industry and the hesitant, or regretful “well . . .” and “just.” Furthermore, Sturdyvant owns the decision: “I’ve thought about it” and “I . . . don’t think” and “we” are not interested. Wilson has deleted Sturdyvant’s concession to Levee, “I’ll have you under contract and maybe you will bring something that we can record”; in the final script, Sturdyvant even claims to be “doing you a favor” by paying him a pittance for his songs (1982 51; 1985 87). He tells – or warns – Levee that “the price [for future songs] is five dollars a piece. Just like now,” leaving Levee no hope that the situation will change or improve (87). In added dialogue, Levee persists, just as his did in his confrontation with Ma: “That music is what the peoples is looking for. They’re tired of jug band music. They want something that excites them. Something with some fire to it” (86). Again, the shoe-obsessed Levee is stepping
on toes, telling Sturdyvant that he, Levee, better understands music sales, that people are yearning for “excit[ement]” and “fire.” As for the paltry offer of money, Levee replies in a new line, “[querulously] I don’t want no five dollars, Mr. Sturdyvant. I wants to record them songs like you say” (86). Passionate about his music and its significance, Levee is not looking for money; he wants to make music and distribute it to the world. And he does not understand what happened to change the studio head’s mind; in the final script, he asks “[restrained] Mr. Sturdyvant, you asked me to write them songs. Now, why didn’t you tell me that before when I first give them to you? . . . What’s the difference between then and now?” (86). Maintaining his dignity – in contrast to his petulance with Ma – Levee voices the big question, why Sturdyvant’s change of tune, so to speak? Richards had raised this question in notes on the early script: “Why does producer all of a sudden not record Levee’s songs – because Ma told him not to? Or he got wind of and fears Ma’s reaction?” (Lloyd Richards Papers). Levee repeats his question “[insistently] What’s the difference, Mr. Sturdyvant? That’s what I wanna know” (86). Here, Levee has changed his approach to the white man. Earlier he explained to the other band members that his father had taught him to “smile in [the white man]’s face. . . all the while he’s planning how he’s gonna get him and what he’s gonna do to him” (52). Now that this strategy appears to have failed, Levee is taking a more direct route. In the revised script, Sturdyvant responds, “I had my fellows play your songs . . . and when I heard them . . . They just didn’t sound like the kind of songs I’m looking for right now”; his answer sounds direct, too, but it can’t be true, since earlier that same day he was asking Levee about his music with genuine interest (86). Because of Sturdyvant’s earlier enthusiasm
for Levee’s songs – expressed only to Irv, though – our disorientation is heightened. Levee says adamantly, desperately, “You got to hear me play them, Mr. Sturdyvant. You ain’t heard me play them. That’s what’s gonna make them sound right,” and Sturdyvant responds, “Well, Levee, I don’t doubt that really. It’s just that . . . well, I don’t think they’d sell like Ma’s records. But I’ll take them off your hands for you”; now Levee’s precious music is being described as trash to unload (86). As in his conversation with Ma, Levee will not let go: “Mr. Sturdyvant, sir. I don’t know what fellows you had playing them songs . . . but if I could play them! I’d set them down in the peoples lap! [this line appeared in a different place in the earlier script] Now, you told me I could record them songs!” (86). Beyond just being persistent, Levee is giving a passionate, intimate (his music connects him to the “laps” of his listeners) defense of his music and its worth, and he is speaking honestly to his employer, even as that employer rejects him and his work utterly – and this after Levee has provoked Ma into firing him from his day job. In reality, though, Sturdyvant has not truly rejected Levee’s work; he has still purchased the songs, pretending not to care about them, but asking for any future songs. The white executive can profit from Levee’s music without the obligation of rewarding or including its creator.

A lengthy new stage direction tells us that, in ending the conversation with Levee, Sturdyvant “stuffs the money [for the songs] in Levee’s breast pocket,” departs, and “closes the door,” unaware that “Levee springs toward the door,” at the same time, causing the door to close in his face (87). Of course, Levee’s opportunities for a music career have closed in his face as well, and he has to place some of the blame on himself,
for alienating Ma. Instead of reaching for the money in his front pocket, Levee “puts his hand on his back pocket,” where he had stashed his pocketknife earlier – uninterested in the financial potential of his music, he is thinking of violence, perhaps of stabbing Sturdyvant, now that his strategies have not worked (87). Turning away from his studio aspirations, Levee “turns toward the band room door,” where the back-up musicians belong, and then collides with Toledo, who is, fatefully, nearby (87). Levee is incensed, claiming that Toledo has ruined his new shoes, and he rages at Toledo over and over. Both scripts end with Levee stabbing Toledo to death – the symbolic levee finally gives way to the flooding water – but Wilson’s elegant changes to the stage directions in the final version create a much more dramatic and moving conclusion. Early on, Richards had been concerned that this event itself “pushes it into melodrama and when you desire tragedy – end with upset over shoe – that’s enough and possibly something like his confrontation with God – scene – when he stabbed God instead” (Lloyd Richards Papers). The earlier script tells us that after the shoe-stepping conflict with Toledo,

Levee is in a near rage, breathing hard. He is trying to get a grip on himself as even he senses or perhaps only he senses he is about to lose control. He looks around uncertain of what to do. [The other men] purposely avoid looking at Levee in hopes he’ll calm down if he doesn’t have an audience. All the weight in the world suddenly falls on Levee and he rushes at Toledo with his knife in his hand. . . . He plunges the knife into Toledo’s back, up to the hilt. Toledo lets out a sound of surprise and agony. Cutler and Slow Drag freeze. Toledo falls backward with Levee, his hand still on the knife, holding him up. Levee is suddenly faced with the realization of what he has done. He shoves Toledo forward and takes a step back. Toledo slumps to the floor. (53)

Here, Wilson spells out Levee’s thoughts, as well as his actions; Levee is fighting for self-control, “trying to get a grip on himself” but is “uncertain,” and then abruptly
nothing less than “all the weight of the world” oppresses him. He then “rushes” and
“plunges”; there are ghastly images of the knife in “up to the hilt” and then “holding
[Toledo] up.” We are told that Levee is “faced with the realization of what he has done”
(53). These lines sound more like a novel than a play, and a didactic one at that. In the
final script, the moment of the stabbing has been dramatically curtailed to simply: After
he “crumples [Sturdyvant’s] money in his hand” and tosses away this consolation prize,
Levee “reaches into his back pocket, takes out the pocketknife, opens it, lunges toward
Toledo and stabs him in the back”; now the actors, rather than the stage directions, can
create and convey the emotions of the climax (88). The simple, starker language makes
the stabbing stand out in relief against the minimal background. Continuing in the script,
Toledo’s “sound of surprise and agony” has become a “groan,” and he “falls backwards
into Levee’s arms,” the promoter of black culture defeated, allegorically, by the young
man who knows nothing of his heritage (88). Levee is now described as “shocked” and
then instead of the earlier script’s note “Levee gets mad at [Toledo],” there is a more
sophisticated one, that he “stands and glares down at the body” (1982 53; 1985 88).
Other, more maudlin details have been cut: “Levee has grabbed Toledo in the collar and
is shouting in his face”; Levee “fall[s] on top of [Toledo’s body]” (54). The murder has
become a simpler, yet more horrifying event.

Similarly, Wilson greatly increased the power of the end of the play by
rearranging and removing many lines. In the earlier script, the ending is rather
anticlimactic; all the African-American characters are assembled and react to what Levee
has done. Ma – long gone in the final script by this point – here says, “I told you
something was wrong with Levee. Levee wasn’t no good,” and the stammerer Sylvester agrees: “I know s-something was g-g-gonna happen with him. That’s the kind of n-n-nigger make somebody kill him quick” (54). When Ma reminds Cutler that “I was gonna get rid of him when we got back to Memphis, he responds, “I don’t know . . . that boy had too much life in him. Didn’t know what to do with hit . . . how to channel it. He was always wrestling with it. Always willing to challenge it . . . to see how far he could go”; this perhaps too earnest speech cuts into the audience’s processing of the murder they have just witnessed (54). Continuing to speak out loud what the audience might otherwise think through themselves, Cutler says,

The only thing that cause Levee to fall down on himself . . . was that he could still be wounded by life . . . because he had himself so tied up in it. And I don’t know if that’s good or bad . . . to take chances with life. The only thing I’m sure of . . . is whatever chance he had at life . . . he done missed it. He took his life and set it up on a shelf for dust to collect on it. (55)

After more conversation among the group, Slow Drag and Cutler end up alone in the band room, and Cutler asks, “Slow Drag . . . you know that part in the Bible say . . . in First Corinthians say . . . ‘If the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who can prepare himself for battle’?” (55). Slow Drag replies, “The trumpet blew, Cutler. We just didn’t hear it” (55). This does not sound as much like the down-to-earth Cutler and Slow Drag; they are carrying the unnatural burden of explaining the play to the audience. The two friends continue to talk heatedly, and Cutler ends the play crying, “I’m a soldier in the army of the Lord. . . . I’m getting ready for Satan! Sound out Gabriel! Sound out loud and clear! Sound you sonofabitch! And may a mighty sound you trumpet make!” (55). The ending in the final script has been drastically reduced by Wilson, to powerful effect. After
Toledo falls to Levee’s knife, Levee calls remorsefully to Toledo and pleads with Cutler, with a few exclamations, such as “Toledo, get up!” and “Tell him to close his eyes, Cutler” (88). No one else speaks and then Cutler says quietly, “Slow Drag . . . get Mr. Irvin down here”; even in tragedy, the white man is in charge (88). The moment of Toledo’s death is now sudden and swift and unexpected, just as the audience is meant to experience it, a greatly misguided shift for Levee from a real enemy to an imagined one; there are many fewer words to detract from the power of the actions witnessed, and the effect is profound.

The quantity and quality of revisions applied to the play between the spring of 1982 and the Broadway opening in 1984 took this work into a new realm: Wilson humanized and defined legend Ma Rainey, added a tragic component to Levee’s character with the elevation of his musical talent and the desperate circumstances he encountered, and structured the narrative to reflect the murderous white power of 1920s America. For a crystallization of these ingenious changes, we can turn to the refined stage directions throughout the play; Wilson deleted many, added more sophisticated ones, and employed them over and over to enhance actors’ understanding without forcing them into a narrow role. Comparing Wilson’s stage directions to those of another great American dramatist, Tennessee Williams, we see in both poetry, a profound sense of place, and similar states and emotions. At the opening of his play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams describes the setting:

> It is first dark of an evening early in May. The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost a turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river
warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee. A corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a barroom around the corner. In this part of New Orleans you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This “Blue Piano” expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here. (Williams 13)

In Williams’ New Orleans – set in the same decade as Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, and also written at a remove in time, though not as long a remove as for Wilson – colors are complex, critical, and feeling; the sky’s blue is “peculiarly tender . . . almost [but not quite!] a turquoise. Coming at the end of the day, the blue represents decline and will soon be gone, dead, but it is if anything more significant than the blue in the prime of the day. The personified river breathes intimately, and the music – also blue, like the sky and like Ma Rainey’s music – is essential to its makers and listeners; it “expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here.” In Wilson’s opening stage directions for Ma Rainey, he, too, describes a beloved but endangered place that centers around music:

Winter has broken but the wind coming off the lake does not carry the promise of spring. The people of the city are bundled and brisk in their defense against such misfortunes as the weather. . . . Somewhere a man is wrestling with the taste of a woman in his cheek. Somewhere a dog is barking. Somewhere the moon has fallen through a window and broken into thirty pieces of silver. . . . It is with [the city’s] negroes that our concern lies most heavily. Their values, their attitudes, and particularly, their music. It is hard to define this music. Suffice it to say that it is music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being separate and distinct from any other. This music is called blues.

In Wilson’s city, winter is ending but without even a “promise” or hint of the warmth that Williams’ New Orleans offers most of the year; the moon brings beauty and wealth, but of a relatively meager amount, “thirty pieces of silver.” Here, it is the music itself that is personified, that “breathes and touches”; beyond even that, it is life itself, “a way of
being” like the music that “expresses the spirit of the life” of Blanche and Stanley’s city. Both sets of opening notes frame every detail of the dramas to come.

Comparing these two scripts does not reveal precisely how Lloyd Richards’ guidance shaped *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, but he was certainly Wilson’s primary and frequent colleague and mentor as the newly recognized playwright transformed his drama into a work of excellence and transcendence. Wilson’s evolving stage directions, in particular, show his growth in understanding the workings of a play, the simple but crucial mechanics – moving characters on, off, and around the stage, for example – but also more complex elements. Early on, for instance, after Levee says to Toledo, “You been reading too many goddamn books,” an added direction notes that Levee looks at himself in the mirror (15). His words are dismissive, but his actions suggest the concern Levee feels – or should feel – about his identity and priorities. More prominent still is a stage direction change at the end of Act I; instead of “The lights go down slow to black,” Wilson’s revision calls for the opposite: “The stage fades quickly to black.” Wilson has stripped away the extraneous dialogue at this moment, after Levee’s shattering story, and the swift lighting change adds to the stark, dramatic conclusion of the act (1982 24; 1985 53). Wilson, furthermore, added notes about the music to play at intermission, “a few moments” after the lights go down: “female vocalist renditions of blues songs”; he has taken control of the audience’s experience even between acts (53). Finally and most powerfully, Wilson ends his first brilliant script with a new specific, arresting stage direction: “A trumpet [Levee’s instrument, not the murder victim Toledo’s] begins to play a low, wailing solo. The stage begins to fade slowly. . . . The trumpet builds in
intensity and pitch and hits a high final note as the stage fades to black” (88-89). We hear the symbolic Levee weeping (“wailing”) alone (“solo”), and we see how he hit his peak – his “high final note” – just as everything is lost: “the stage fades to black.” As bleak as this ending is, Levee’s spirit is re-created, and though the exploitative white men remain in control, the music has the last word.

With the script finalized, Richards and Wilson mounted its premiere production, at Yale Repertory Theatre. For Wilson, the experience was completely new; “I remember the first audition for ‘Ma Rainey.’ I was ready to hire anybody who could read. Lloyd said, ‘No, I don’t think he’s right.’ I learned how to pick a good actor, to discern what’s there beyond the way they read” (Backalenick). Wilson also had to learn about his mentor in the theater, rather than the writing room:

When I got off the train in New Haven to go to the rehearsal of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, I didn’t know Lloyd as a director, and I didn’t know how things were going to turn out. We went into rehearsal and read through the script, and the actors started asking questions. I’m all prepared to answer all these questions, and they ask a question about Toledo, and Lloyd speaks up. Not only was his answer correct, but it gave me some insight. I said, “I didn’t know that about Toledo.” This went on, but from that moment I visibly relaxed. I said, “Everything’s going to be all right. Pop knows what he’s doing.” It’s been that way ever since.” (Shannon, “Blues, History”)

Wilson was pleasantly surprised to discover how well Richards understood his material – better than he himself did, in some aspects, perhaps. At this early point, the playwright was relieved to play child to “Pop.” He felt he could “trust Lloyd’s understanding of these characters” (Herrington 96). Richards recalled a similar experience on the opening day of rehearsal for A Raisin in the Sun in 1959:

I was talking to the cast about the play after the first read-through. I delineated a
history for every character in the family and how they arrived at where they were. It was the first time I’d said it aloud. Afterward, Lorraine came to me and said, “Well, you know, that’s very interesting. I hadn’t thought of it that way, but it’s true.” We never discussed how her history of the characters differed from mine, but the consequence was that my description worked for the actors, it was a right place for us to begin the play and it encompassed the elements that we wanted to affect the characters as they moved through the play. (Bartow 263-64)

Richards had an almost mystical connection with at least these two playwrights, able to articulate the details and meanings behind their characters and stories just as well – if not better – than they would themselves. He did not wish for his playwrights to remain uninvolved, however; Wilson recalled that Lloyd would say, “‘They are building the set over there in the shop. Did you stop by and see what they are doing?’ I said no. He said, ‘Why don’t you stop by?’ He wanted me to know how it happened, that it didn’t just come from nowhere” (Watlington). At Yale, Wilson had the opportunity to learn stage craft by watching his play take shape before his eyes. Richards’ intense connection extended to the actors as well, with his ability to lead them toward discoveries he desired them to make; Wilson remembered, “When I would want a particular actor to do a certain thing, I would tell Lloyd, and two weeks later the guy would say, ‘Lloyd, would it be O.K. if I do this?’ ” (Backalenick). Without speaking directly, Richards was able to create even better outcomes for the work.

After the success of the Yale production, Richards and Wilson took the play to a number of regional theaters; more than once, the cast and crew experienced some eerie real-life parallels to the event of the play: When they were playing in Philadelphia, Theresa Merritt and other cast members were staying in a nearby hotel. The hotel wanted Merritt to pay by the day, even though she was there for awhile; she refused, and they
locked her out of her room. She called Wilson and the others, and they came in saying, “Theresa, what did you do?” and then moved her to the Hilton where they gave her flowers and fruit (Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 219-20). When the cast recorded an album of the entire play, they arrived at the studio, and the producer said, “You boys come on in. I’ve got some sandwiches for you,” speaking Irvin’s words from the play almost verbatim. Then Theresa Merritt, who played Ma Rainey, arrived late and came in complaining about how cold the studio was. The recording label executives also tried to block Wilson from writing the liner notes for the album, a role he ultimately insisted on for himself.

*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* opened on Broadway on October 11, 1984. Wilson’s friend and colleague Joan Herrington remembers when Wilson called to invite her to attend the premiere with him; he said he had no one else with whom to go (personal interview). Wilson recalled a sobering aspect along with the thrill of reaching Broadway:

> It felt good. But we were in a theater on 48th Street on the left side of Broadway. So you had to go out of your way to get to that theater. There are theaters on both sides of 44th and 45th Streets, but they will not put black plays in some of those theaters. People have to rub elbows during intermission, when they come out and stand on the sidewalk. And at the end of a black play, there’s a whole bunch of black folks standing there rubbing elbows. Go up to 48th Street, go up to 47th Street or 46th Street, but you don’t get 44th and 45th. (Shannon, “Blues, History”)

Many parts of the theater world were new to Wilson, but he recognized some of the painful divisions that existed for African Americans, and that even his success was tempered by them, to an extent. He also noticed that the theater on Broadway
didn’t have my name on the marquee. They said, “Well, you’ve got to wait. It’s your first time and all that.” But I think any playwright – first play, last play, or whatever – should have his or her name on the marquee, identifying him as the person who wrote this play. If you have no name value, they don’t put your name up on the marquee; they put the actors’ names up there in big letters because it’s a business, and that’s what it’s about. It doesn’t matter who wrote the play. It doesn’t matter whether the play is any good or not. If you can get a star in there to do the role, you’re going to have people come to see it. Jason Robards is doing a play right now that has gotten terrible reviews. Here’s one of America’s premier actors – can’t find anything for him to do, nothing worth his talent – so he’s in this. I mean, the play got some really bad reviews. But people don’t care. They go to the theater to see Jason Robards. So I had a lot of problems with the way the matter was handled. They didn’t put my name on the marquee; we were on the wrong street. (Shannon, “Blues, History”)

Beyond racial disparity, Wilson saw commercial priorities coming before artistic recognition in the theater world – nevertheless, “it was tremendously exciting to be there.” The play Wilson had labored over on his own and then at the O’Neill, and then with Richards at Yale and beyond, ran on Broadway for 276 performances; it won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best play and was nominated for three Tony awards, including best play. Wilson reflected,

What I tried to do in Ma Rainey, and in all my work, is to reveal the richness of the lives of the people who show that the largest ideas are contained by their lives, and that there is a nobility to their lives. Blacks in America have so little to make life with compared to whites, yet they do so with a certain zest, a certain energy that is fascinating because they make life out of nothing – yet it is charged and luminous and has all the qualities of anyone else’s life. I think a lot of this is hidden by the glancing manner in which white America looks at blacks, and the way blacks look at themselves. Which is why I work a lot with stereotypes, with the idea of stripping away layer by layer the surface to reveal what is underneath – the real person, the whole person. (Powers)
Wilson wanted to present African-American life – which he celebrated and admired – in a realistic, highly detailed way, and by doing so to reach past stereotypes to universal characters and stories; he wanted people to see each other as each truly was. He also gave credit to Ma Rainey and the other makers of the blues, who had given him so much comfort, knowledge, and inspiration; he wrote in a letter to Lloyd Richards early in 1984 that he was thinking of that day eleven years ago when I first heard Ma Rainey sing and understood for the first time how rich and full my grandmother’s life and how behind the song there stood a long line of singers whose song was the fuel that carried countless men and women up from the rocks and hammers of the chaingangs in Alabama, through the canebrake and smell of Georgia pine, from Trinidad and Jamaica, across the oceans of green foam up through the marshlands of Florida and the Badman country of Tennessee. That song hung over the pots in the kitchens at Baton Rouge, driving spike for the Union Pacific at Salt Lake, that song on the riverboats of New Orleans, in Mississippi moonlight, that song in the stockyards of Chicago, picking fruit under a Texas sun, sitting on front porches in Durham, North Carolina, that song the whiskey of Harlem Winters, that song echoed down the long field of History, and I wanted to take it and fling it straight out as the women of African Villages must have done, looking up at an unfathomable moon, their children scattered across the oceans, knowing only something was pushing out, breaking through the bone and muscle, the sinewy flesh, a spirit unbound, turning itself into a song past any reason for singing.

With an echo of the conclusion of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech (“Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. . . . Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi”), Wilson finds the links from the character Ma Rainey and her music that he portrayed back to the African families decimated by slavery and forcibly dispersed in the United States. The blues have connected him back to his ancestors, through improbable song that has withstood much suffering. The suffering of his community and their forbears would be his constant subject as he continued on with his Century Cycle.
Plume published the first edition of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* in 1985, the year after the play’s Broadway premiere; in comparing that modest paperback edition to the sleek hardcover *Ma Rainey* published by Theatre Communications Group in 2008, the intervening ascendance of both play and playwright becomes quite apparent. The Plume edition emphasizes the title of the play, with little attention given to the playwright, reflecting what Wilson experienced with the marquee for his Broadway debut; though in the case of the book his name does appear on the cover, it is in a smaller font size than the play’s title. The book’s cover features a drawing based on a photograph of Theresa Merritt as Ma Rainey, in off-white relief against a dark-red background; she stands behind a microphone in a fringed dress with arms outstretched, semi-Christlike, her face uplifted with an ardent, close-eyed expression. Her right hand is palm up, and her left hand is palm out toward the viewer. Though the central story of Wilson’s play concerns the four members of Ma’s band, this cover displays only Ma, perhaps in an attempt to use the real Ma Rainey’s fame to draw readers to the book. The cover also includes a quotation from Frank Rich in the *New York Times*: “Extraordinary . . . a major find for the American theatre”; the illustrious critic and newspaper both establish the play’s credibility. The TCG edition, in contrast, puts much more emphasis on the playwright, who had died three years earlier after rising to great fame and acclaim in the theater; indeed the volume is only one of the ten included in the series “The August Wilson Century Cycle,” and the playwright’s name appears in both the series title and as the
author of the individual play. The artwork and design of the cover are more sophisticated
and elegant than those of the Plume edition; the entire front of the jacket is a black-and-
white picture of the real Ma Rainey with band members around her. She wears a long
beaded dress and fringed headband around her forehead and holds what looks like a
feathered fan; her other hand is raised back over her head as if she is in mid-clap. To her
right is a trumpet player, bringing Levee to mind, with a trombone player next to him.
Across the bottom of the image, three light-blue graduated boxes (small to large) read
“1927,” “MA RAINEY’S BLACK BOTTOM,” and “AUGUST WILSON”; the font size
is now the biggest for his name.

The back cover of the Plume edition of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom gives a teaser
of sorts about the play’s story—it concludes “What goes down in the session to come is
more than music. It is a riveting portrayal of black rage . . . of racism, of the self-hate that
racism breeds, and of racial exploitation. . .”—followed by three excerpts from reviews
by Frank Rich again, Jack Kroll in Newsweek, and William A. Raidy of Newhouse
Newspapers. The emphasis, even in the teaser, continues to be on the play, not the author;
in fact, only Frank Rich even mentions Wilson. The TCG edition also includes a
quotation from Frank Rich on the back cover, but this one compares Wilson to Eugene
O’Neill, connects Wilson’s messages to the American dream, and is excerpted from the
foreword that Rich, who saw the play in its first production at the O’Neill, wrote for this
dition of Ma Rainey. The book itself, in tribute to its illustrious author, has decorative
endpapers and Wilson’s signature stamped in gold on the front cover, underneath the
jacket. The flaps of the jacket refer to the full series of Wilson volumes, with an excerpt
from John Lahr’s introduction to the series on the front flap and a list of the ten plays on the back flap.

Moving into the interior of the Plume edition, the advertising continues with an excerpt from the play—Ma’s lines including, “You don’t sing to feel better. You sing cause that’s a way of understanding life”—and another teaser, this one with the unintentional wordplay that must be carefully avoided with this title: “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom sounds forth its own kind of blues. . .” as well as two more quotations from reviews. A brief biographical note describes Wilson’s theatrical debut with Ma Rainey. Additional front matter includes title page, copyright page, and the dedication “For my mother.” Also here are notes on the Yale and Broadway productions of Ma Rainey, including cast, crew, and dates; the play’s epigraph; a note about “The Setting,” describing the split stage of recording studio/band room”; and a note called “The Play,” Wilson’s fairly lengthy, poetic description of Chicago in 1927, the people, and the music. Within the script itself, the pages are fairly unadorned, but are clearly laid out and spaced for a reader of the play as opposed to an actor learning lines; the last page is more advertising: an order form for “Exciting contemporary plays” by authors including David Henry Hwang and Neil Simon. The interior of the TCG edition of Ma Rainey is more lavish, with two half-title pages, including a special logo for the Wilson series, decorative lines, and the year of the play’s setting, 1927; the title page repeats the contents of the half-title pages with the addition of the author and publisher’s names, the year of publication, and the note “Foreword by Frank Rich.” Added to the play’s stage history is the now historic O’Neill production: “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom was initially presented
as a staged reading at The Eugene O’Neill Theater Center’s 1982 National Playwrights Conference.” The script within follows the same elegant design and is comfortable reading for someone experiencing Ma Rainey alone rather than at the theater. At the end comes a biographical piece about Wilson; this time it is over a page in length. This edition is meant to be collected and displayed, and celebrates Wilson’s achievement and stature.

From the beginning of Wilson’s theatrical career, he sensed the danger of finishing one work and failing to begin another; his strategy was, “When I finish a play, after I type ‘The End,’ I immediately begin work on the next play. I force myself to sit there until I come up with something, an idea, a title, a character, a line of dialogue, etcetera. That way I’m always working on something. So if you ask me ten minutes after I finish a play what I’m working on, I’ll be able to tell you I’m working on a new play” (Lyons and Plimpton). Even a few words made the difference and launched a new play; that did not mean that the play then followed quickly or easily; rather, “that begins the gestation period. It can be anywhere from two months to two years. It is difficult sometimes, given the responsibility of public life, to find a block of time in which to do the work. The gestation period has become increasingly longer, which I think is ultimately good for the work” (Lyons and Plimpton). Though Wilson found it more difficult to make time for writing, he did not seem to get off track, and in fact felt that being forced to give a play a longer process actually worked to its benefit. The film world was another area of danger and temptation, and Wilson felt that he must “stay away from Hollywood, because I was determined not to be a one-play playwright” (Shannon,
“Blues, History”).

After _Ma Rainey_, Wilson and Richards staged five more plays together; the annual O’Neill conference served as a launch pad for all but one of those, and the O’Neill process provided the seeds for all of the Wilson-Richards collaborations. Wilson began writing _Fences_ very early, returning to the O’Neill conference in the summer of 1983 to work on _Fences_ before _Ma Rainey_ had even opened at Yale. “By the time Lloyd and I had agreed that we were going to do _Ma Rainey_, I was already on my way up to the O’Neill to do _Fences_. And so after thirty days – you had to wait thirty days after the conference – Lloyd said, “I want to do that one, too.” If I didn’t have a second play, I’d be still sitting around resting on my laurels, so to speak” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). Wilson and Richards were on their second project together before any theater critics or audiences experienced the first; “No matter what happened, no matter how _Ma Rainey_ went, we were going to do _Fences_” (Shannon, “Blues, History”).

With _Fences_, Wilson moved in a more traditional direction; Richards commented on the play’s connection to classical theater:

_Fences_ had a classic style in the sense that the Greek plays took place in front of temple columns and that’s really the same as the back porch setting for _Fences_. It was a series of platforms for the presentation of the material. That whole porch could have been turned off at a different angle rather than facing straight out, but the nature of the play is classical and we had to connect with the totality of theatre history as well as the history of the people involved. (Bartow 264)

Richards saw Wilson’s work – in form and content – as connected not just to African-American history and art, but to all history and art. With his next work, Wilson again worked in ancient and archetypal realms; Richards continued,
Then, in August’s next play, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, we went inside. That play was really a classical “way station.” It’s the inn where Christ was born, the inn that exists historically in so many cultures and places that dealt with “wanderers,” the nomads, a society in motion, that reaction of the freed slave who’s out searching for his life and past, for himself and his family. What are the essential elements needed for the house in Pittsburgh, an inn, a way station? A conception of that as a set starts from its immortality. It’s a place where the light shines with sustenance, a hearth with warmth and food and companionship – the nourishing things that we need in order to take the next step in the journey. It also has the table of the Last Supper, that big table that existed from the beginning where people passing through encounter one another. In a house, you’re dealing with all kinds of history, the factual and emotional history of a space and a time that no longer exist juxtaposed against people who are living in it now. It’s like looking at the markings on caves, the totality of a texture of a time, present and past. (Bartow 264)

In *Joe Turner*, the play probably closest to Wilson’s heart, Richards notes that the connections are to religion, personal freedom, tribal history, the idea of home; they also seem to extend to death and the afterlife – the “light” and the “next step in the journey.” Wilson consciously aimed to write in this classical tradition, though in his own contemporary voice: “I aspire to write tragedies. I don’t know if I have or not, but that is what I sit down to write. Tragedy is the greatest form of dramatic literature. Why settle for anything less than that? My sense of what a tragedy is includes the fall of the flawed character; that is certainly a part of what is in my head when I write” (Sheppard).

Whether or not Wilson’s work follows the classical elements of tragedy, his characters, with both tremendous strengths and undeniable shortcomings, fulfill their parts.

Though *Fences* was Wilson’s most successful play – setting a box office record for non-musicals and earning a Pulitzer Prize and four Tony awards – it was also his most conventional in structure and storyline. He acknowledged that, “Of the plays that I have written, it is my least favorite” (Shannon and Williams). As Wilson wrote to Richards in
June of 1985, he was resigned that “I have done everything I knew how with Fences and [I am] satisfied that the play worked. It is not a perfect play. It is not as original as Ma Rainey but as an evening of theater it engages the audience and provides them with a moving experience that is well worth the time and effort and money it took to get them into their seats” (Lloyd Richard Papers). As for those, including producer Bob Rose, who had pushed for changes to the play, Wilson’s response was, “If I knew how to improve it I would have done so when we were working on it” (Lloyd Richards Papers). With his second Broadway show, Wilson had tried to prove that he could write a more traditional play, centered around one protagonist – and he succeeded in critical terms, beyond what he ever would again – but he knew that it was not his personal ideal. Moving on, “After Fences, I went back to what I wanted to write, which was Joe Turner” (Watlington).

In June 1985, almost a year after the success of Ma Rainey, Wilson wrote in a letter to Richards that “I discovered the other day that I haven’t written anything since I finished the first draft of Joe Turner in November of 1983. I see now how easy it is to get caught up in the moment and lose sight of the most important thing which is the continuing of the work.” Because of his belief in never being between plays, “my first impulse was to jump immediately, with both feet, into the writing of The Piano Lesson.” With his growing experience and awareness of himself as an artist, though, his goals had broadened: “Then I realized career-stage wise it is probably the most important play I will write, so I thought I would approach it carefully, wanting it to be highly organized and rendered with a style and form that makes use of the things I have learned about theater over the past three years. So I am tip-toeing around the edges of it, working
carefully and confidently with a December 1 deadline in mind.” Though still working at a
pace many writers would envy, Wilson had tempered his speed in favor of a new focus
on structure and the medium of theater. In many ways, The Piano Lesson, which won
Wilson’s second Pulitzer Prize, would be his finest work, bringing together passionate,
engaging characters, an intra-family conflict with roots in American slavery, and a
transcendent conclusion. Writing to Richards again in July of 1987, the year that Fences
opened on Broadway and The Piano Lesson opened at Yale – Joe Turner’s Come and
Gone had opened at Yale the previous year – Wilson reflected on his career so far:

I was struck by the fact that you marked [the Pulitzer] as another step in my
development. That’s certainly the way I see it. I don’t think I’ve reached my
fullest expression (certainly not with Fences) and remain always pointed toward
that. . . . I want to put all of this awards business behind me. They look great
hanging on my wall, but they belong to another time. . . . I want . . . to work free
from any commercial pressures to discover the requirements and possibilities of
the play. I certainly recognize that I have had, and in such a short time, what has
turned out to be a remarkably rewarding career. I’ve enjoyed a great response to
my work and been embraced by all facets of the theatre community. At times it all
seems like a bit much and I don’t want it to affect me to where it stops my
development. I plan to continue writing plays for a long time and I think if I keep
my head right, and keep everything in perspective, there is no reason my work
shouldn’t continue to grow. I haven’t reached my zenith as a playwright, though
The Piano Lesson is the best I am capable of at the moment. I think I can do
better. I plan to do better. I find all the attention liberating. . . . Best always,
August (Lloyd Richards Papers)

Wilson strove to turn his attention from awards and recognition, and money, to appreciate
the opportunities he had had to see his work on stage and to keep focused on creating
new and finer plays. Before the O’Neill he had felt he was doing his best work but had to
do better; now that he could succeed by just maintaining the same level, he remained
driven to do better, to push forward what his best could be. He was determined not to
allow awards to distract or soften him: “All those awards, that stuff, I take them and I hang them on my wall. But then I turn around and my typewriter’s sitting there, and it doesn’t know from awards” (Rothstein). In fact, despite the adulation and success he had enjoyed,

I always tell people I’m a struggling playwright. I’m struggling to get the next play down on paper. You start at the beginning each time you sit down. Nothing you’ve written before has any bearing on what you’re going to write now. It’s like a heavyweight fighter. You’ve gotta go and knock the guy out. It doesn’t matter if you’re undefeated. There’s another guy standing there, and you have to go out again, and you have to duck his punches and do all the rest of whatever it is you do. (Rothstein)

Looking at the creative process as a battle, against himself if no one else, Wilson tried to approach each new work as a new, untested playwright, not taking for granted what reception he would find this next time.

Tennessee Williams, who also experienced sudden fame in theater, with The Glass Menagerie, wrote about the “catastrophe of success” and the challenges it could present to the artist: He felt his success had “terminated one part of my life and began another about as different in all external circumstances as could be well imagined. I was snatched out of virtual oblivion and thrust into sudden prominence.” The cold, almost violent language – “terminated” “snatched,” “thrust” – reveals how this new world felt to the playwright. He, too, uses the word “struggle,” as Wilson did – noting that when he no longer had to struggle to live, he missed the “vital energy” that had been an automatic part of his life and was aghast at the “vacuity” left behind. Months after this shock of success, turning from the “little vanities and conceits and laxities that Success is heir to,” Williams found comfort and purpose again in writing, just as Wilson knew to do.
Williams called it an “act of restoration,” the only possible source of “reality and satisfaction” for a writer. Wilson instinctively protected himself from the temptations of those vanities and laxities; several years into his fame, he claimed, “Success has not changed me. I still have the same wife, the same car – a 1979 MG – and the same apartment in St. Paul, which I moved to about ten years ago, after I divorced my first wife. I still buy my clothes at the Goodwill. All I ever needed was a few dollars for cigarettes and beer” (Henry). Wilson did divorce that second wife two years later, but he also lived in relative modesty for the rest of his life. Wilson continued to be conscious of the need to stay focused on new writing and the inner rewards of producing material that seemed to himself to be true and important. For him, the peak experience was always “the very first time the play ever plays before an audience. There is nothing quite like that. That’s the most honest collaboration between actor and audience that you’re ever going to get. It’s before the review, before the word of mouth; it’s that moment of actuality when no one, actors or audience, knows what is going to happen next.” Before the awards and before even the first review, the actors and audience encounter each other and create an authentic outcome, person to person.

At the same time that Wilson tried to remain impervious to his commercial and critical success, he also accepted the duty that came to him as a part of that success. He said, “When you know your play will be produced, you have a greater responsibility, because someone will get up on stage and say what you’ve written; so you’ve got to be sure you are communicating what you want to say. You have a responsibility to be honest” (Sinclair). Wilson felt the weight of knowing that nothing for him was just for
practice; casts and crews would build his plays, and his words had to be worthy. He continued, “I always have a sense that I’m standing in my grandfather’s shoes, I’m standing in a long line of people; so standing there, I have to speak not only for myself, but the ideas have to make that connection with the line of people. In other words, I have some very valuable antecedents” (Sinclair). His responsibility to pass along this connection also included trying to speak for his fellow African Americans and the slaves from whom they descended, a community for which Wilson cared deeply. Unlike Ma Rainey’s Levee, who wanted to wear new shoes and look only toward the future as he imagined it, Wilson was aware of walking in those of his ancestors. Wilson did not claim to be the voice for all black Americans, though, but “to speak for myself and those who think like I do. That’s all I can speak for – all the Africans who are receiving me on the planet and on the shores of North America” (Sinclair). Wilson tried to tell stories for and about the other black Americans who were receptive to his vision, as he shared and celebrated their stories, and tried to tie them in to people’s lives everywhere.

Throughout his career as a playwright, Wilson continued to write in his instinctual fashion; in fact, he moved further in this direction as time went by. Describing a conversation with his character Aunt Esther, who is hundreds of years old and figures in several of his plays, Wilson recalled, “I said, ‘O.K., Aunt Esther, talk to me.’ And she says, ‘There’s a lot of things I don’t talk about.’ And that threw me, because I didn’t have anything to write then” (Lahr, “Been Here” 65). At first, this moment sounds similar to Wilson’s first, more conscious attempt to channel characters, when he literally got “nothing” from them. Here, Aunt Esther’s point is not that she lacks subjects to discuss,
though, and Wilson thinks to ask her

O.K., what *don’t* you talk about?” “I don’t talk about the trees. The trees didn’t have spirits. What does that mean? What that means is that none of your world is present here. You’re looking at this landscape that’s totally foreign to you.” So I started writing that. Then she started talking about the water, and I find she’s talking about the Atlantic Ocean. And she starts talking about a city, a half mile by a half mile, down in there. She has a map to the city. I think the map is important, so I have to pick the right time to approach that idea about the map. If I do it this afternoon, I get something entirely different than if I do it next week. It’s intuition. You have to keep your eyes and ears open for clues. There’s no compass. (Lahr, “Been Here” 65)

With a much more nuanced relationship with his character, Wilson recognizes that he must help coax Aunt Esther to speak, that her words are not pre-set, but will be different each time, depending on the moment when he comes to her. He also must take care about his timing and approach when asking her about a sensitive subject, such as the under-ocean city’s map. Wilson and his character’s connection is intense but delicate. At other times, Wilson could go to his characters to ask for help, when he was not sure what subject to pursue; speaking of *Two Trains Running*, he said: “I discovered in the process of writing the play that whenever you get stuck and you don’t know where you’re going, you just ask that character a question” (Pettengill, “Historical” 209).

Most often, it seems, Wilson’s characters were the ones to start the conversation. As Wilson described the process, “I usually start with a line of dialogue, which contains elements of the plot, character, and the thematic idea” (Lyons and Plimpton 99). As an example, he gives the first line that came to him when he started work on *Two Trains Running*: “When I left out of Jackson I said I was gonna buy me a V-8 Ford and drive by Mr. Henry Ford’s house and honk the horn. If anybody come to the window I was gonna
wave. Then I was going out and buy me a 30.06, come on back to Jackson and drive up to Mr. Stovall’s house and honk the horn. Only this time I wasn’t waving.” Though Wilson did not know who was speaking or anything about the story, he found many clues to follow; the line “contains the attitude of the character, his approach to the world, and contributes to what became an important element of the play.” The next step for Wilson: So I ask myself, Who is talking? Who is he talking to? Who is Stovall? Why does he want to get a gun and go see him, etcetera. In answering the questions the play begins to emerge.” Wilson explores out from what the characters reveal to him; only much later in the process come the organizational decisions and details – including character names – with which a playwright might be expected to begin: “Eventually I name the character, decide on a setting, and begin to construct the play in earnest” (Lyons and Plimpton 99). Elaborating on the development of *Two Trains*, Wilson said, “I more or less ask the character, ‘Who is Stovall?’ And he says, “Well, I had this old farm down there . . .” and he starts to explain the whole story about Stovall” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). After the character talks about himself and Stovall, he then “ends up talking about this woman who left him after nine years, and she wouldn’t even shake his hand.” Wilson thinks, “Now I have a woman character, and I have to decide whether I am going to go to her and get some dialogue or whether I want her to be a character.” Just speaking up does not guarantee a character a spot in a Wilson play; in this woman’s case, he said, “I decided that I didn’t want her to be a character and that I would just use Risa as a character, and you could see through his relationship with Risa some possibility as to why his wife may have left. Risa has to carry all of the women’s stories in the play and somehow make
sense of certain things, you know” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). Wilson remained in control of shaping his play, its narrative, and the characters, even if he delayed many of the decisions about shaping until later in the writing process.

Expanding on his instinctive process, Wilson said, “The more the characters talk the more you know about them. It generally starts there. And then I say, ‘Okay, so where are they?’ and then I’ll come up with a setting or something. Once you get the set and one or two characters, then it begins to take on a life of its own. Other characters walk in, and I’m not sure how it happens from there, but it’s a process” (Heard). Wilson surrendered a remarkable amount of control and even knowledge of his projects for much of his original creation of his plays. He noted, “I don’t, for instance, start at the beginning of the play and say, ‘Here’s what’s going to happen,’ and go from beginning to end. Very often I don’t know what the ending is or what the events of the play are going to be.” He had learned that his strongest work would emerge only from this process; the key was trust, “that these characters will tell me or that the story will develop naturally out of the dialogue of the characters” (Heard). Giving autonomy to his characters allowed them to become full and seemingly alive, with the conviction that they could possess the stories they told. There were exceptions to Wilson’s usual method; for example, “Sterling I decided upon because he’s a sterling man. I knew what his name was before I ever wrote a line of dialogue for him, which is unusual. Most of the time I don’t know who they are. If I’m writing and I don’t know the name, I just put a little dash and keep on going” (Shannon, “Blues, History”).

A mutually understood code seemed to develop between Wilson and his creations,
governing how he worked with what they told him. “I don’t question it when the
character says it,” said Wilson; he never felt that a character intentionally lied or misled
him (Shannon, “Blues, History”). The characters’ stories were purposeful, as well:

I’ve learned that if I just write down what I hear the characters say I have a
premise: Everything that they say is true. I don’t have to use everything that they
say, however, to tell the story. But the more I know, the more they talk, the more I
learn about the characters. I have the right to censor that, to take parts. I know it’s
true, but I don’t want to use that part. I’m going to use this part. So I just write
down whatever they say without thinking. (Shannon, “Blues, History”)

Everything the characters say could fit into the story – but after listening to all they have
to say, Wilson chose what to include, what to pursue, and what to leave behind. He trusts
that the work will have all that he needs to pull it together; “I always say whatever the
material dictates, that’s what I will follow” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). While writing
Seven Guitars, for example, Wilson discovered a controversy among his characters in
what he had expected to be an all-male play:

I looked up one day and this woman had come on stage and sat down in a chair.
The guys in the play said, “What the hell is she doing here? I thought you told us
that this was an all-male play. What’s she doing?” Then they started shouting,
“Get out of here!” They said, “Get on away from here. Man, what’s she doing?” I
said, “Hold up a minute. Let’s go find out.” So I went over and I asked this
woman what she was doing, and she said, “I want my own scene.” She just sat
there, and they’re shouting at her. These are crude men who were working. At
first when she came in, she said, “Mr. Wilson said that I could come in.” That’s
when they came and got me. And I said, “You want your own scene?” She said,
“Yes, I want my own scene.” Okay, I closed my tablet up, and I’m thinking about
this. In the process of writing this all-male play, this woman emerges into the
play. Now I’ve got to figure out what to do with her – not only that, but she wants
her own scene. . . . it was the voice of this woman saying, “How are you going to
write this play about these guys and not include me in it? I’m a part of it. They
didn’t get to be who they are without me, etc. You can’t ignore me.” . . . this was
unconscious. How could I write a play without a woman in there? That’s what I
was trying to do. She said, “I got a part in this story. You gonna write a play about
blacks in America in the 1940s and ain’t going to have no women in it? How
ridiculous can you get?” I said, “Well, you’re right.” So I opened up my pad and said, “Okay, you got your own scene.” Then this guy knocks on the door. He has a radio under one arm and a chicken under the other. She knows his name and invites him in, so I close up my tablet. Now I’ve got to figure out how I’m going to use this. What’s happening is that it is emerging as my woman play, which is something that I have, at some point, included in all of the plays, but I have never really focused on black man-black woman relationships. It was a big thing but it’s just not something that I chose. Maybe it’s just something that I had been wanting to write for a long time. It’s not that I’m crazy; it’s just me telling myself, “Okay, you’re ready to do this now.” I think that I’ve acquired a certain maturity. So I think that all of that is possible.” (Shannon, “Blues, History”)

Here Wilson shares not only a conversation, in great detail, among his group of characters and himself, but also his own understanding of what might underlie such conversations, in terms of his own development as a playwright. A single female character braves a group of hostile men and confronts her author about his misguided, as she sees it, attempt to dramatize the 1940s for African Americans without including a woman’s point of view – and he sees that she is right. Sometimes criticized for a lack of strong female characters, Wilson had felt confident that such characters as his Ma Rainey and Berniece in The Piano Lesson were well drawn and developed, but with Seven Guitars, he for the first time gave his focus to a romantic relationship, between Floyd and Vera. Listening to his characters helped him explore this potential subject and his own readiness for it. Wilson found that starting with specific characters and bits of their stories led him into the larger ideas and concerns for which he aimed. He saw that “once you put in the daily rituals of black life, the play starts to get richer and bigger. You’re creating a whole world in the process of telling your story, of writing this character. Once you place him down in his environment, you have to write about his whole philosophical approach to life” (Savran 294). One character’s experience and outlook then connected to
life in the African-American community more broadly, and from there to all human life
and concerns: “You can uncover, from a black perspective, the universalities of life.
Some questions will emerge that man has been asking himself ever since he’s been on the
planet” (294).

As passive as Wilson’s instinctual process of writing might sound, it was in fact
far from an effortless process. He explained, “When you become engaged in that process,
you have to open yourself up and be willing to accept whatever it is and be welcoming to
it. Actually, you’re calling up this thing from deep down inside . . . this landscape of the
self . . . you have to be willing to face whatever you uncover” (Rosen). In opening up to
characters’ voices, he had to allow them into his most private mental realms and then be
prepared for whatever subject or idea might emerge. To invite his characters in, he said,
“You set it up so it happens. It’s not easy, so what you have to do is, you have to
assemble all your strength and all your courage and get all that together, and it’s going to
be a battle. It’s going to be painful. It’s going to be a war. You say, ‘Okay, I’m ready to
do this now.’ ” These meetings with characters felt aggressive and invasive to the point of
becoming a virtual battlefield, something that took all the strength and bravery Wilson
could summon; therefore, he said, laughing, “you put if off until you’re ready, until
you’re spiritually strong. Then you say, ‘Okay,’ and then you turn on the typewriter or
take your tablet, and say, ‘I’m off on this journey now, and I don’t know where the hell
it’s going, but I’ve got to do this.’ ” Convening with characters was something Wilson
felt he must do; he compared his calling to Bynum’s in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,
who said, “I don’t do it lightly. . . . It costs me a piece of myself every time I do it.”
Wilson continued, “And sometimes I feel like that: It costs you a piece of yourself. You just have to be willing to pay that price: to get this guy to talk with me, and to try to understand someone who would kill another human being, try to understand someone who so casually would slice him – what, where, how, who, why?” Channeling characters and imagining their lives and viewpoints was destructive to Wilson personally, in some ways, because of the great effort and stretch of imagination required. He believed that this writing process “has something to do with my own personal spirituality, I guess, my own personal trek, my own personal odyssey through American society over the past soon to be fifty-one years. And it has to do with my embrace of the stimuli that are all around us, my embrace of the world, of the blues, my continual mining of that, discovering gems in there that people just overlook in my estimation.” Understanding his character’s life started with paying attention to his own, and to the art and life he saw that inspired him. Despite the sensation of battle, “it’s the joy also. Working as an artist is a joyful process. I don’t create my art out of pain and suffering. I create it out of the zestful, joyous part of life. Pain and suffering are parts of death, which is a part of life. But the joyful part is the ground on which I stand” (Rosen). Wilson’s characters experience death, violence, tragedy, but as part of the complete spectrum of life; the author found the opportunity to know and dramatize those lives to be ultimately one of joy.

Opening up to characters was not successful for Wilson every time he tried it; he explained, that “writing a play is for me like walking down the landscape of the self, unattended, unadorned” (*Three Plays* vii). He was alone and unprotected for the battle, and sometimes “what you encounter there are your demons. . . . false trails, roads closed
for repairs, impregnable fortresses, scouts, armies of memory, and impossible cartography.” Going “deep down inside,” as he described it, sometimes led only to silence or paths he could not navigate, that were perhaps impossible to navigate – all because of his own personal pain and limitations. What kept Wilson going were the people and tales that he had the potential to reach: “Occasionally, if you are willing to negotiate the perils, you arrive strong, brighter of spirit, to a place that sprouts yams and bolls of cotton at your footfall” (Three Plays vii). Again, Wilson compared his experience to that of a character in the play that probably meant the most to him; “I’m like Bynum in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone: walking down a road in this strange landscape. What you confront is part of yourself, your willingness to deal with the small imperial truths you have accumulated over your life. That’s your baggage” (Powers). For Wilson, listening to his characters’ stories and ideas meant facing his own fears, memories, and powerful emotions, which emerged from his unconscious. “It can be very terrifying. You’re either wrestling with the devil or Jacob’s angel, the whole purpose being that when you walk through that landscape you arrive at something larger than you had when you started. And this larger something should be illuminating and as close to the truth as you can understand.” Enduring this battle and facing himself through his characters could lead to that larger outcome, truth and perspective that anyone in his audience could access. And whether or not he reached that best outcome, “whether the play works or not, you’ve been true to yourself and in that sense you’re successful. So I write from the center, the core, of myself. You’ve got that landscape and you’ve got to enter it, walk down that road and whatever happens, happens. And that’s the best you’re
capable of coming to. The characters do it, and in them, I confront myself” (Powers).

Wilson’s characters go deep down inside themselves, too, both reflecting and creating the personal excavation the playwright is performing.

It was not only lines of dialogue that sparked ideas or even new works for Wilson; as with Joe Turner, “it can be a line of a blues lyric” or “a painting, an image. Fences actually started with Troy standing in the yard with the baby in his arms, and the first line I wrote was ‘I’m standing out here in the yard with my daughter in my arms. She’s just a wee bitty little ole thing. She don’t understand about grownups’ business, and she ain’t got no mama’ ” (Livingston). The image of the man and baby came to Wilson, and then the lines, but “I didn’t know who he was talking to. I said, ‘O.K., he’s talking to his wife.’ O.K., why is he telling her this? So then I had to invent a series of circumstances that would allow him to stand in the yard with a baby in his arms and say those words to her” (Livingston). Compelled by an image and a fragment of a story, Wilson worked to build a narrative worthy of them and ultimately connected to the broader human experience. Finally, though, it was all about Wilson’s characters, who “tell me the whole thing”; in fact, “sometimes I have trouble shutting them up” (Moyers). Wilson embraced their words, though; “I crawl up inside material, and I get so immersed in it that as I’m inventing this world, I’m also becoming a part of it.” The characters’ world came from him and then created something new into which he then followed. Though the process could be debilitating along the way, strength could follow: “If you’re willing to wrestle with your demons, you’ll find that your spirit gets larger. And when your spirit gets larger, your demons get smaller. For me, this is the process of art. The process of writing
the plays is a very liberating thing.” The instinctual process that cost him pieces of himself also expanded and freed him. He felt gratitude for his characters, “my partners, my friends” and recognized that all of them “are part of me. People ask me, ‘Which one do you identify the most with?’ And I say, ‘Well, I probably make the strongest identification with the male protagonist – but they’re all me.’ Gabriel is me. Rose is a part of myself. Cory, Troy, Loomis, Levee, and Toledo – they’re all different aspects of the self.” As much as they seemed separate and distinct from Wilson and from each other, ultimately the playwright knew they were all inside himself somewhere. He continued, “People used to say, ‘You can only write what you know.’ I didn’t quite understand that. But it’s so true. All this is made up out of myself” (Moyers). Just as Wilson listened to his characters before he knew who they were or what their story would be, he wrote instinctually long before he understood how and why the process worked. When asked by new playwrights for advice on approaching a new work, Wilson said he told them, “Begin anywhere, and that beginning will lead them, whether backward or forward, to the place they want to go. That the place where they arrive may be a place they have wanted to go to unknowingly or perhaps even unwillingly is the crucible in which many a work of art is fired” (Three Plays vii). Perhaps Wilson saw his instinctual process not as idiosyncratic, but allowing for unconscious contributions from which every artist could benefit – contributions that might not be possible through any other process.

Wilson’s instinctual writing method seemed to lead naturally to a particular interest in the body and its many roles in the dramas of our lives. Describing his experience while writing the climax of Joe Turner, when the protagonist, Loomis, cuts
himself across his chest, Wilson said, “I had no idea where it was going. When Loomis cut himself it was a surprise to me. I looked down at the page and said, ‘Where did that come from?’ I was drained. I was limp. But I felt good. I knew I had something” (Kroll). Wilson’s own body was wrung out, as he channeled Loomis’s experience of drawing his own blood; the mystery was not frightening to Wilson, but promising. Elaborating on this moment, Wilson said, “When Loomis cut his chest, I didn’t question it. I just wrote, ‘Loomis slashes his chest.’ I didn’t say, ‘Well I know what I’m going to do. I’ll have him cut his chest and . . . .’ ” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). In fact, Wilson felt even less in control than usual of the work because it was “the last scene of that play I had not written, and it was December first, and I had to have this thing postmarked by midnight. At about three o’clock in the afternoon, I had still not written the last part of this play. So I took my tablet, and I went to a bar, and I sat down. A half-hour later I had written the scene.” He wrote quickly, but it was not easy on his body: “I will always recall this scene because I was sweating so. When I came out of that scene, I was drenched, soaked with sweat. I said, ‘I got it!’ ” The exhaustion was worth it because he knew he had a scene worthy of Loomis and the end of his story (Shannon, “Blues, History”).

Physical scars are common in Wilson’s work; “I think in almost every play most of my male characters have scars. Levee has a thick scar. Troy has a scar where he was shot. Loomis inflicts scars upon himself. Lyman in The Piano Lesson has lost half of his stomach” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). This was not an intentional practice; “People ask me, ‘Man, have you got a scar on your chest or something?’ It’s just unconscious. It’s unconscious, whatever it is. Or, rather, I recognize it, although I don’t purposefully
decide. It just emerges.” Wilson saw the frequency of scars on his characters, and perhaps even came to expect them, but never made an outward decision to include them. Asked about Risa’s scars in *Two Trains Running*, he said – acknowledging that his characters began as mysteries and sometimes stayed that way, to whatever extent – “I wish that I could talk more about her than I can.” His theory: “For me the scarring of her legs was an attempt to define herself in her own terms rather than being defined by men. Holloway says, ‘She makes her legs ugly. That forces you to look at her and see what kind of personality she has.’ That may be, but basically for me it was her standing up and refusing to accept those definitions and making her self-definition.” Just as he did not deliberately plant scars on his characters, Wilson also did not determine ahead of time which characters would live or die; “I didn’t decide that death was going to be part of the play. Once you get in there and you’re working, you’re not even thinking. You’re working from another place. It’s sort of like this stuff is given to you if you open yourself up for it, and half the time I just accept what I hear” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). From the description, it sounds like Wilson’s ideas and words did not seem even to come from his brain, but from other parts of his body, perhaps his guts; he felt himself to receive these stories and characters. To Wilson, the scars were “symbolic of being marked. It’s a willingness to do battle. It doesn’t matter if you win or lose, it’s the willingness” (Lyons 10). Wilson and his characters shared the experience of calls to battle and the drive to respond – physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Sweat, blood, and tears all appear in Wilson’s work and in his descriptions of his writing process. He talked about the role of “the blood’s memory” in his writing, the
“deepest part of yourself where the ancestors are talking” (Lahr, “Been Here” 53).

Though he told stories of African Americans only in the years after slavery had ended in the United States, the stories are defined by Wilson’s sense of his ancestors and their suffering. Actor and director Roscoe Lee Browne acknowledged that sense and how it manifested in the plays: “He knows how to summon up race memories that make you whole” (Herrington 9). Wilson described often sweating and crying while writing key scenes. In his early play *Fullerton Street*, when Moses’s mother dies, for example, “that was the first person I killed off in any of my plays. I remember her name was Mozelle, and I remember when I wrote the scene of Mozelle dying, I was crying, and the tears were falling on the page, and I was trying to write, and the ink was getting all screwed up. . . . It was like, ‘Mozelle is dead!’ And I had lived with her for so long” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). Wilson’s emotions had a dramatic effect on his body as he experienced the first death of one of his “partners,” the characters who spoke to him and revealed the stories he had to tell. Actor Anthony Chisholm felt Wilson’s work as a physical force: “His writing is so vivid it’s so – it runs so deep in your veins when you read his work. It conjures up images; it takes you on a journey instantly into his world and through his story. You see the image of your character in your mind’s eye and it just takes you over. It’s wonderful” (“Remembering August Wilson”). Wilson’s words were like life blood for the actor, running through him, sustaining and strengthening him. Also speaking of blood, actor James Earl Jones noted, “August says that when he writes he leaves some blood on the page. You can’t get that stuff out of yourself without hurt. It’s not therapy; it’s more like revelation.” The cost of the revelation for Wilson had a physical sense to it,
something opened up but apparently only through great effort and with the consequence of some sort of damage to himself.

For the characters in *Two Trains Running*, blood represents courage and independence; Wilson said, “Without Hambone, you don’t have a Sterling. And also it’s the demonstration of his willingness to shed blood in order to get the ham. So when he comes back inside, it’s very important that there is blood on his face where he cut his face, where he cut his hands. So it’s the willingness to bleed” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). In *Joe Turner*, too, it is “Loomis’s willingness to bleed, the willingness to shed blood. . . . ‘I don’t need anybody to bleed for me. I can bleed for myself’ ” (“Blues, History”). The characters use their bodies to demonstrate viscerally their inner qualities. In fact, for Loomis, blood is his release and his savior; “He was willing to bleed to redeem himself, because redemption does not come outside yourself. ‘You want blood? Blood make you clean? You clean with blood?’ That one moment in which he becomes luminous, there’s certainly not a moment like it in any of the other plays” (Pettengill, “Historical” 223). The luminous Loomis turns a moment of sabotage and sacrifice into one of triumph. Explaining why *Joe Turner* was his favorite of the plays he had written, Wilson talked about one other element of the body:

The bones rising out of that ocean – when I wrote that I thought, okay that’s it, if I die tomorrow I’ll be satisfied and fulfilled as an artist that I wrote that scene. I think you can go a lifetime and not arrive at that scene which for me crystallized everything, because it was a symbolic resurrection of those Africans who were lost, tossed overboard during the Middle Passage, and whose bones right now still rest at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. It was like resurrecting them and marching them up on the ground and walking them around in Chicago right now. I’m not sure that anything I’ve written since then has crystallized as clearly what I wanted to say. (Pettengill, “Historical” 223)
Here Wilson moved beyond one character’s body to many thousands of bodies bared to their final form after terrible suffering, from which many other thousands emerged only to experience yet more pain. Wilson wrote his way to the real physical bodies of those he sought to honor and understand, and he found a literal connection to them in his own physical world.

Wilson continued to be inspired by artist Romare Bearden throughout his career; he often quoted him: “I try to explore, in terms of the life I know best, those things which are common to all cultures,” expressing, among other things, his objection to the view of black American life as a subcategory (Three Plays x). Wilson said, “I have . . . “sought, and still aspire, to make my plays the equal of his canvasses”; his goal was to translate Bearden’s approach as a visual artist to words for the stage with a similarly powerful effect (Lyons and Plimpton). He continued, “Being an admirer of Romare Bearden’s collages, I try to make my plays the equal of his canvasses. In creating plays I often use the image of a stewing pot in which I toss various things that I’m going to make use of—a black cat, a garden, a bicycle, a man with a scar on his face, a pregnant woman, a man with a gun.” Wilson collected images and types, as he did scraps of dialogue; “then I assemble the pieces into a cohesive whole guided by history and anthropology and architecture and my own sense of aesthetic statement” (Lyons and Plimpton). What began as unconscious or sensory creation was followed by a very deliberate process, bringing together different arenas and perspectives. Wilson took the name for his play The Piano Lesson from Bearden’s 1983 collage; its image of a young black girl playing
piano under the eye of an attentive woman who points over her shoulder inspired some of the ideas of the play as well.

Wilson described his own work as “pasting and putting things together, collage” (Herrington 7). *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* was originally titled *Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket*, after a Bearden painting, which Wilson described: “It was a painting of a boarding-house scene and it had a figure of an abject man with a coat and a hat, and there was another man reaching for his lunch bucket, and a woman preparing to go out, and a child sitting at the table drinking a glass of milk. On the wall was a picture of a woman in a white dress” (Bernstein, “August Wilson’s”).
Just as he listened to his characters and tried to piece together the stories they gradually uncovered, Wilson looked at the people in the painting and “began to wonder, who was this figure of the abject man sitting in a posture of defeat? It occurred to me that all the people in the painting were going out, and they were going to leave this man alone just when what he needed most was human contact. And I decided to write a boarding-house play” (“August Wilson’s”). With a similar sensibility to Wilson’s, Bearden created images that triggered characters and possibilities for narrative that the playwright pursued and that led to some of the most powerful work of his career.

Describing his affinity, Wilson said, “From Romare Bearden I learned that the fullness and richness of everyday ritual life can be rendered without compromise or sentimentality” (Lyons and Plimpton). Bearden helped Wilson see that writing about ordinary black Americans did not limit him as a storyteller but instead offered him
specific, vivid, and meaningful lives to portray and explore. As Bearden articulated his own mission, “It is not my aim to paint about the Negro in America in terms of propaganda,” but to “paint the life of my people as I know it – as passionately and dispassionately as Brueghel painted the life of the Flemish people of his day.” He wished “to reveal through pictorial complexities the richness of a life I know.” Like Bearden, Wilson sought to reach the universal through the particular; today, decades after they were written, his plays feel fresh and alive, though also intimately connected to their moment in time. Wilson also cited as an influence Jorge Luis Borges and his “wonderful gaucho stories from which I learned that you can be specific as to a time and place and culture and still have the work resonate with the universal themes of love, honor, duty, betrayal, etcetera (Lyons and Plimpton). Wilson’s philosophy about character also echoes that of Nadine Gordimer, who said, “It is the significance of detail wherein the truth lies” (Verongos). Though Bearden’s work in particular was so important to Wilson, he said in 1993,

I’ve been more and more influenced by art, whether it is Bearden or any artist. It’s the idea of the visual artist and how visual artists think and how they approach a particular subject – what they want to paint. I’m not sure that a writer can use the same approach as a painter. The painter’s tools are different – he’s working with form and shadow and mass and color and lines – although I think that there are some corresponding things in the tools of the playwright. In some of my characterizations, I use color. So I have become more and more fascinated with painters, and Bearden has become more of an influence from art. (Shannon, “Blues, History”)

Working with Richards, Wilson moved further and further from his orientation as a poet to that of a playwright, with a concern for physical space, structure, and movement; Bearden and other visual artists helped him expand his focus from sound to encompass
After the success of *Ma Rainey*, Wilson and Richards followed the same pattern for each of the other five plays on which they collaborated: an original staging at the O’Neill, then a production at Yale, then a tour of regional theaters around the country, and, finally, a Broadway run. For Richards, this process was not simply a strategy to make it to Broadway; “We have a number of theaters throughout the country now that are very interested in our work, and so to continually work, we may do the production at various of those theaters throughout the country. Broadway is never the goal; it never has been” (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 127). There was a demand for Wilson’s work at smaller theaters, and Richards identified the original goal: “The first audience that sits in the theater right here at Yale – that’s who I create for. Then once having surfaced and corrected any problems there, we may take it to places.” Yale gets pride of place; it also hosts the play while it is still a work in progress. As for Broadway, “New York is just another venue.” In fact, it is a riskier and more daunting arena; “it is much more difficult to take a play into New York than it is to take it to any of the centers throughout the country. . . Because of finance and because you’re going for a limited run.” He explains, “You go to Los Angeles, for example, for so many weeks. There’s a subscription. So it works. We don’t have to worry about whether we’ve got to get smash reviews today in order for the show to run tomorrow. That’s what happens in New York. And you go to New York and don’t have a subscription.” Like any other playwright, Wilson’s new work could fail on Broadway despite his fame and awards; “With most of August’s work, we have very small advanced sales. We’ve never gone for stars that sell so many weeks
ahead. And so, what you have to know when you go to New York is that if there isn’t a line at the box office the day after you open, you’re in trouble. A lot of money has gone to waste” (127-28). For each new play, therefore, Wilson and Richards staged it around the country, improving it during the run and building an audience. As a result, the regional theaters become receptive homes for Wilson’s work; Richards said, “To get it around, to reach out to let it be experienced throughout the nation . . . has been a more compelling goal than, say, New York. . . . What has been so valuable is to go around the country a few times and see how it has changed – how now when one of our works is coming to some place, there’s an anticipation of it rather than having to find the people for it” (134). Even though Wilson had to prove himself anew each time he went to Broadway, he could count on a national audience whose numbers and acclaim were growing constantly.

The long touring for each new play also provided the opportunity for script rewriting throughout the run; early on in his career, Wilson began to revise while attending rehearsals, as Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams sometimes had as well. Joan Herrington saw that “in revision, he has instinct for how the story should go. He could move a scene around in a way that other playwrights can’t” (personal interview). He had an unusual ability to redraw a script, and a willingness to do so – perhaps arising from both his natural confidence in his work and his training at the O’Neill, with its emphasis on constant revision. Wilson described his approach to rearranging within his work; the first consideration is effective communication: “With most plays I have a good idea of what it is that I want to do and so then I try to determine: if I’m saying it this way
is the audience hearing it and understanding it and, if not, what can be done to clarify it. The whole thing is about clarity. If you have good material but the audience doesn’t understand it then you’re defeating your own purpose. It should be clear to the audience” (Herrington 99). Often, the play’s ability to communicate has to do with placement; “a lot of time making it clear is simply that you have something in the wrong place. Putting it in another place makes them say, ‘Oh, I can see that now.’ It focuses things and removes things blocking your way” (99). Wilson’s talent was not just for language but also for structure and perspective on that language. Recalling a staged reading and panel discussion of *Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket* (later to be renamed *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*) at the New Dramatists in 1984, Wilson said, “It was an opportunity to test what worked and what didn’t work. There are a lot of things you can’t evaluate until you see it staged. You could read it over and over again and still not tell. You can write a short story on your own but not a play” (Herrington 16). For Wilson, a play could never be finished until he saw it put to life on stage; the collaborative nature of theater is one element that led him away from his life as a poet. Discussing *King Hedley II*, John Lahr noted the distinctive nature of Wilson’s working process:

A Wilson play has a gestation like no other in the history of American theatre, and no other major playwright – not Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O’Neill, or David Mamet – has negotiated the latitude to work so freely. Before a play arrives on Broadway, Wilson refines his story through a series of separate productions. . . . He sits beside the director for almost every hour of every production. . . . By the time *King Hedley II* reaches New York, the play . . . will have been seen, digested, reconceived, and rewritten after productions in Seattle, Boston, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington.” (Lahr, “Been Here” 52-53)

Wilson had both unique access to – and perhaps stamina for – continuous revision; he
had unparalleled opportunity to perfect his work.

Early on, Wilson did less extensive revision during rehearsals, worked more in the background, and communicated through Richards; as he described, he would sit down with Richards “an hour before rehearsal and talk about what happened yesterday and what we’re going to do today. I don’t talk to actors in rehearsal. I talk to Lloyd and he understands and communicates my concerns to the actors. Other than that, I just look at the way things are going and I listen. Some things might strike my ear wrong. I might find a certain scene doesn’t build the way I thought it did” (Savran 297). Wilson watched and listened to how his script was translating on stage; at night, he said, “I make changes when necessary and come back the next day with new pages,” but at this point in his career, “usually the changes are minor. For example, in *Ma Rainey* Levee had to put his shoes on and there weren’t lines to cover that action” (Savran 297). Wilson and Richards had many months to work on the *Ma Rainey* script, so perhaps this first play needed less improvement during rehearsals. Soon, though, Wilson came to the point of listening to the actors on stage in his plays as he listened to the characters when he, alone, first wrote down their stories. Charles Dutton enjoyed the constant reworking and the results:

> It’s always great to see what August’s rewrites will be the next day. You know, what he comes up with next, to heighten or enhance the character or the character’s situation. It was a wonderful process for an actor to be involved in. Because one day you’re doing one thing and the next day it’s cut; and the next day you’re doing a transplant of something else, the next week you’re going back to what was cut a week before and it is placed somewhere else. So it’s a roller coaster ride, but you don’t panic. Because everything you’ve been given or had changed or renewed, it’s still delicious language. Delicious storytelling, you know. You want the words to sing out of your mouth. (Herrington 8)

Wilson began drawing actors into his creative process, and the characters grew and
changed as the playwright watched the stage and as the actors read the evolving words on the page. During the *Fences* production, for example, James Earl Jones argued that a line needed to be added to indicate that his character, Troy, could not read; Wilson’s feeling was that “Troy would never admit that to nobody” (Herrington 105). Jones convinced the playwright to let him try it one night in performance; Wilson recalled,

> It worked. I heard it. I was up in the balcony somewhere, and I heard it. And it was the first time in my life I heard those words. And he’s big and he says, “Aw hell, you know I can’t read.” And it was like, wow. And I think it suddenly became clear. And I ran to him and I said, “Keep it. Keep it. Keep it. Say it just like that.” “Aw hell, you know I can’t read.” See, he made it real. (Herrington 105)

Wilson had been confident of his decision against the line, but he was willing to learn from his actor and the performance: “I didn’t go over and say I’m not gonna put that in there because I didn’t write it and whatever I write is set in stone” (105). It took a different kind of confidence for Wilson to take that chance and pursue the best possible outcome for his work.

The collateral damage of this free-flowing revision were the lines and speeches that were cut completely from the plays; Dutton recalled being with fellow Wilson actors when they would “simply recite lines that were cut out of *Piano Lesson* that were great lines and passages and pages that didn’t make it into the play. And I’d say, ‘Do you remember that one?’ And I’d recite him some stuff, and he’d say, ‘Oh, I forgot that one. Do you remember this one?’ ” (Herrington 109). The rationale for cuts to the script often did not have to do with the quality of the writing, and many powerful words were left behind – but far enough into rehearsals that the actors had already memorized them. As a
director, Douglas Turner Ward knew the value of witnessing a mature staging of a play before judging a work – and the danger of making cuts and changes based on initial play readings: “The play is usually read badly because it sometimes takes four weeks for the actors to understand it. So the reading is not for interpretation and, therefore, the writer hears something that he thinks is off. Well, it may not be the text that’s off, but the reading. So the writer goes back to his play and changes what was right in the first place” (Bartow 305). Leaving pieces of the script intact can be crucial; “the classic comment from people at readings is ‘That wasn’t clear to me.’ When I hear that, a red flag goes up. Because that’s probably the best thing in the play” (305). Many cuts did need to be made in Wilson’s plays, nevertheless, and he acknowledged, “I miss things. I take them out because they impede the flow of the play at the time when we just need it to get where it was going. A character says, ‘I have a story to tell.’ And I have to say, ‘That’s great, man. But, I don’t want to hear no story right now’ ” (Herrington 58). Even in their finished form, Wilson’s plays were long and many of his characters’ speeches were long. Wilson said of these speeches, “I just hope the audience listens. There is a black person talking and he is talking a lot, and I think that we have not heard black people talk. Society views black life in a glancing manner, and no one ever stops to ask them, What is on your mind? These are common, ordinary characters who have long speeches, and I want the audience to listen to them” (Sheppard). Attention must be paid to these men and women who speak for the African-American community, but also for themselves, and who represent all of those whose stories have remained untold or unheard. Wilson’s theory about his own motive was that “the long speeches are an unconscious rebellion against
the notion that blacks do not have anything important to say” (Sheppard).

Richards was involved in any and all changes made to the scripts along the way. Even with Wilson’s second script, for *Fences*, there were logistical problems due to Wilson’s inexperience with theater. Richards described “some monumental problems because of the sense of time. The same person who left the stage at the end of one scene would begin the next scene, though it might be two weeks or six months later. We needed to fill out the character of Lyons, played by George Brown, so we gave him a little extra scene talking to Rose, who was upstage where she couldn’t be seen, doing a fast change” (Bartow 263). Richards did not believe, however, that Wilson should take steps to correct his technical knowledge: “I’m not particularly convinced that August should learn that. When we have a question or a problem, then we can go out and find the answer” (263). Wilson’s focus needed to be on creating language and characters, and the technical aspects could be adjusted afterward. Richards knew that for actors, these problems went beyond logistics:

> If you end a scene with one person and you’re starting the next scene six months later with the same person – and the first one has a very dramatic conclusion – and the next scene is a very different emotional attitude, then what you’ve got in that time – and you have less than ten seconds to do it – or you want less than ten seconds to do it – is you have to change the scene, you have to change the costumes, and the actor has to make that leap, that emotional leap. Now, an experienced playwright would know better than to do that. He’d bring him in a page later, or you find a way. So in *Fences* we even had to find the ways to do those things, because that wasn’t a part of the playwright’s awareness. (Herrington 102)

Building in breathing room for an actor making a transition from one dramatic moment to a very different kind of moment, perhaps much later in time, was crucial; Wilson created
the people and their words, while Richards helped him not only perfect them but also make them possible for human actors on a live stage. Richards helped also with the creative part of Wilson’s work; for example, he told Wilson that he found Troy’s rant to God less effective because Troy did not seem like a person who would believe in God.Thinking it over, Wilson felt that Troy’s concern was actually with death, and he rewrote the speech accordingly; for Richards, the change “made it possible for us to then take that and develop the core of the play. That was the key to *Fences*” (Herrington 102). Richards raised the questions that took Wilson’s work to a higher level. Richards’ did not always voice his concerns so specifically; while working on *Joe Turner*, he told Wilson “You know, there’s one scene too many” (108). After spending an evening reviewing the script, Wilson said, “I couldn’t find anything to cut.” When Richards suggested he reconsider, Wilson “just picked the one that I thought that I could live without, and cut it.” Richards said, “He doesn’t know to this day whether he eliminated the same scene that I was speaking of” (108). Inside their close working relationship were many things left unsaid, with the focus kept on the outcome for the play.

Wilson faced controversy on set over the endings to both *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. Producer Carol Shorenstein Hays – and possibly leading man James Earl Jones – disliked *Fences*’ last line, Gabriel saying, “That’s how that go”; the concern was that the line was too mild, and might even draw a laugh from the audience, mitigating the power of the weighty events (Herrington 106). When she could not convince Wilson and Richards of her point of view, Hays fired Richards; Wilson fought back through lawyers but ultimately agreed to give Hays’ ending one trial run in performance. In the end, he
did not have to do any more convincing – Hays recognized on her own that her ending was inferior. In the case of *The Piano Lesson*, it was Wilson himself who was not happy with the ending, well into the tour. Finally, Richards “suggested to Wilson that the battle between the brother and sister was missing a third party: the spirit of the white family who also had claims on the piano” (Lahr, “Been Here” 63). Sparked by this concept, Richards recalled, “August wrote a wonderful speech describing how the piano came into the family and how they had stolen it from this white family.” Again, it was Richards’ idea that “brought the piece together” (63). Bringing in an aspect that probably would not have occurred to Wilson, yet resolved the gap that troubled him, was something Richards could do because of his lengthy experience in the theater, but also because of their professional connection, the strength of which originated in their similar personal backgrounds.

Describing that connection, and its endurance, Wilson spoke of delineated roles: “One of the things that has made the relationship successful is that I don’t direct for Lloyd and he doesn’t write for me” (Drake). As closely as they worked, they did not lose track of the territory that each naturally held. Remarkably harmonious together within the intensity of high-stakes theater, Wilson noted, “We never have an argument. I don’t even recall a disagreement” (Backalenick). This harmony required patience and respect for the pace and path of each emerging play: Looking at an early draft of *The Piano Lesson*, Richards said to Wilson, “We’re starting where we always start. There are a lot of wonderful stories here. But which one do we want to tell?” (Freedman, “Leaving”). Wilson replied, “I don’t know”; Richards responded, “The usual answer”; and the two
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laughed (“Leaving”). Director and playwright trusted that the right story would emerge, given time and given their careful process of revision, starting with the O’Neill conference. Wilson credited Richards with essentially inspiring and assuring his career as a playwright: “Lloyd is unquestionably the major influence in my life. His abilities have enabled me to write. And the faith he had in me made everything fall into place” (Nesmith, “Stage Champion”). It was the confidence Richards felt in Wilson, as much as Richards’ professional skill, that made the difference. Richards’ regard for Wilson was just as high, as dramaturg Gita Honegger perceived. She described the positive atmosphere of productions: “It was such a generous atmosphere in the rehearsal hall. We all had a really jovial, joking, wonderful open relationship, so that there was just an interaction” (Herrington 111). The rules and boundaries were clear, however; “Lloyd was the one who discussed the text and there was never a question about that, that was clear – it was Lloyd and August. As much as I say it was a very generous atmosphere, Lloyd was very protective in his relationship with August, and Lloyd knew, very clearly, what he wanted. And there was no question but that [what Lloyd wanted] was what was going to be done” (111). Richards was calm and soft-spoken, but absolutely tenacious in pursuing his shared vision with Wilson and enabling the playwright to do the work to realize it.

In 1987, five years after they met, Wilson spoke about Richards, their relationship, and what he had learned so far about theater: “Lloyd’s a wonderful person, of high integrity – an excellent director. I don’t know what more anyone could ask for” (Livingston). Delighted by his mentor, Wilson also found that “Yale Rep is a great place to work” because “we do the work that is necessary for the play to realize its potential
without any regard to what may happen to it after we finish working on it. We don’t work with Broadway in mind. If you start off working with the idea that you are going to prepare this play for the commercial theater, then you are not serving the play; you’re serving what you project to be the market.” Just as with the O’Neill conference, Wilson and Richards were able to use the Yale productions as learning experiences, virtually free of financial concerns, their only duty to the text and how it could be transformed into live theater. Wilson continued, “I’ve learned from Lloyd to trust the space that we call the stage. I’ve learned to respect it and realize that what you put there is important, and that you have a responsibility for what you put up there, and that every one of those words on the page are going to get said, and they’d better be the words that you want said.” His work with Richards reinforced Wilson’s commitment to getting his words right, to pushing beyond his best to something better, and validated his conviction that theater was the right medium for his vision and message. Giving an example of Richards’ type of guidance, Wilson said, “I just had a meeting with him. I took the rewrite of The Piano Lesson. And I discovered that I have a tendency to say the same things two or three times. These are things I want to be sure that the audience gets. So Lloyd says, ‘Once is sufficient. You’d be surprised at how much the audience picks up. You don’t have to beat ‘em over the head.’ ” Richards encouraged Wilson to have faith in his audience and their perception, and so to give his message more impact by avoiding redundancy. Wilson noted, “Having worked with me, he knows that whatever the problems of the play . . . tell me, I can handle ’em” (Livingston). The trust between them means that Richards can be candid about any problems he sees in Wilson’s writing, and that Wilson can accept and
Several years later, Richards described a more subtle, well-seasoned connection with Wilson: “In a sense, we’re probably more knowledgeable about each other now, so the shortcuts are even shorter, which makes for less essential conversation. Therefore, our collaboration has grown, in some respects, smaller. . . . We talk in shorthand all the time” (Bartow 263). Wilson concurred: “Now we have gotten to the point where there is not a lot of talk about the plays. It is an intuitive, almost nonverbal kind of communication” (Sheppard). He credits his director with going well beyond his official role; “Lloyd has been important not only as director of the plays, but important to my whole career, and important to my understanding of theatre. I have learned a lot about theatre over the past six years in working with him. He is a very generous man and a very giving mentor in that regard” (Sheppard). Richards acted as coach, father – “Lloyd was a great teacher,” said Wilson – treating Wilson’s career as his own (Boyd). Wilson dedicated the published *Fences* to “Lloyd Richards, who adds to whatever he touches.” Describing the effect on his work of this collaboration, Wilson said, “The fact that we have done these four plays together makes them all seamless – having the same two artistic sensibilities at work on the play” (Sheppard). The Wilson-Richards team is almost a symbiotic one, and their connection sounds instinctual, similar to the one Wilson had with his characters. Richards felt a similar, deep tie to Wilson and a joining of sensibilities: “I only met August a few years ago, but I’ve known him all my life. I know everything he knows” (Bartow 257). In claiming to know Wilson completely, Richards sounded like a father, and Wilson, too, viewed their relationship in that light, and also that of a “trainer-boxer”: “He’s my trainer
– ‘My boy August will get them’ ” (Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 217). Elaborating on this feeling of being coached and cheered, Wilson said, “I’m a great boxing fan, and boxing is like writing. I look at Lloyd like he’s my trainer” (Watlington). He continued, acknowledging Richards’ paternal role in his life, “Now, Lloyd is old enough to be my father. Having grown up without a father, that has a lot to do with my relationship with him. I always view him in a fatherly way. You know, you want to please Pop. You want Pop to be proud of you. I want to score a knockout. See, I came to learn about theater, but I learned a lot about life” (Watlington). Their relationship went beyond theater and work; Wilson wanted to do his best work to succeed in the theater, but also to make proud the man who acted as father to him.

Over the years, the son grew more sure of himself, as O’Neill director Amy Saltz noticed:

> The most wonderful thing about just watching August – I mean just knowing him through this whole period – has been seeing the flowering of this man. He was so shy when he first came. And he found his own strength and became this extraordinary man. It was all underneath before but as he got more and more confident, he never has lost sight of who he is and what he believes. He’s a wonderful man. And really unique. (Herrington 62)

Wilson’s confidence and vision were always there, but his years at the O’Neill and in the theater world allowed them to emerge and flourish, and allowed him to find his voice and himself as a successful artist. Through it all, though, he saw Richards as an essential part of his life and work: “Because of [Richards], I found a home . . . I will follow Lloyd wherever he goes” (DeVries, “Drama Lesson”). In fact, “Because we have a commonality of experience, I think we share a commonality of vision. I wouldn’t have to
be at rehearsal and Lloyd, knowing me and knowing the overall arc of my work, would know how I would want a scene to play or what the values of that scene would be” (Shannon, “Subtle Imposition” 194). Wilson felt so close and unified with Richards that he could imagine his director stepping into his shoes with perfect results; this sense unity would not be permanent, however.
Chapter 6: “A Fine and Illuminating Spirit”

After many years as a struggling poet, Wilson had chosen theater and made a bold move to playwriting – and it was Richards and the O’Neill Playwrights Conference who celebrated and grew his authentic voice, and who wedded him to revision and a fluidity in regards to performance that published poetry cannot offer. Speaking of the ultimate result, John Lahr said that Wilson’s Century Cycle of plays form a kind of fever chart of the trauma of slavery. Their historical trajectory takes African Americans through their transitions from property to personhood (“Joe Turner’s Come and Gone”); their struggle for power in urban life (“Ma Rainey”); their dilemma over whether to embrace or deny their slave past (“The Piano Lesson”); the broken promise of first-class citizenship after the Second World War (“Seven Guitars”); their fraught adaptation to bourgeois values (“Fences”); stagnancy in the midst of black power militancy (“Two Trains Running”); and their historical and financial disenfranchisement during the economic boom (“Jitney” and “King Hedley II”). (“Been Here” 52)

Lahr’s descriptions sum up black Americans’ struggles decade by decade, as seen by Wilson, moving from soon after the end of American slavery through to the end of the first century afterward; Wilson wrote last the plays depicting the opening of that century – *Gem of the Ocean*, in which the ancient Aunt Esther offers guidance to newly freed slaves – and the closing of it – *Radio Golf*, the story of a Pittsburgh real estate developer and would-be politician who must determine how best to move his community forward. Wilson’s other most notable admirer, Frank Rich, who first experienced Wilson’s work at the O’Neill during that first *Ma Rainey* summer, called Wilson’s career “a remarkable two-decade burst of creativity that has few parallels in the history of the American theater and that only his premature death could bring to a close” (“Singing”). Richards described
the effects of this long creative burst:

His plays have centered themselves in a decade and have illuminated the life of an oppressed people during that time. He has not approached the plays as historical chronologies of the events of a time, or even as dialogues on the problems of a time. He has approached everything through characters, characters who any of us may have encountered or avoided encountering on the street. He has put them in a position where we can get to know them through their attempts to deal with the issues of their time as they affect their everyday lives. And in their struggle to live, to survive, to thrive, to respect themselves, one begins to perceive these people in their time; you see the history flowing to the time and flowing from it as it affects the lives and the decisions of those characters.” (Pettengill, “Alternatives” 202-203)

By listening to his characters and then putting his writing in service of their stories – with historical context only a secondary effect – Wilson created what seem to be real people on stage, their specific plights living illustrations of the history that holds them. Critic David Ansen called Wilson’s work “a form of oral history, in which we’re invited to eavesdrop on the timeless continuum of the African-American experience.”

Late in his career, Wilson spoke of this continuum as reflected in his plays, and noted of his creations, “I like all my characters, and I always say I’d like to put them all in the same play” (Lyons 9). Perhaps the closest he came was when “I once wrote this short story called ‘The Best Blues Singer in the World,’ and it went like this: ‘The streets that Balboa walked was his own private ocean, and Balboa was drowning.’ End of story. That says it all. Nothing else to say. Since then, I’ve been rewriting that same story over and over again. All my plays are rewriting that same story. I’m not sure what it means other than life is hard” (Lyons 9). Here Wilson echoed both Jean Renoir, who said “a director always makes the same film,” and Frederick Wiseman, who says his documentaries are “always the same film, by and large” (Grant 4-5). Errol Morris agreed:
“Every Wiseman scene recalls other Wiseman scenes. . . . Wiseman proves that redundancy is the spice of life. Everything recalls everything, but, more to the point, everything repeats everything.” Wilson followed his instincts to write over and over the story of the legacy of American slavery, through the lives of imperfect but enduring individuals, who face the pain and powerlessness of that legacy.

Despite this pain that he took as his subject, Wilson claimed, “I don’t write from a wellspring of bitterness” (Livingston). Instead, he saw his motivation as a positive one: “What I want to do is place the culture of black America on stage, to demonstrate that it has the ability to offer sustenance, so that when you leave your parents’ house, you are not in the world alone. You have something that is yours, you have a ground to stand on, and you have a way of proceeding in the world that has been developed by your ancestors” (Sheppard). The community and spirit of this culture was the inheritance of all African Americans, and an intangible foundation for people who had little in the way of a material one. Wilson continued, “It was James Baldwin who called for a ‘profound articulation of the black tradition,’ which he defined as that field of manners and rituals that sustains a man once he has left his father’s house. And I said, Ah-hah! I am going to answer that call. I am going to show that this culture exists and that it is capable of offering sustenance.” Wilson’s goal was to depict those manners and rituals that could sustain and nourish his people, a gift that meant also a necessity to “explore the sufferings of black America” because “that is also part of who we are. And I don’t think you can ignore that because our culture was fired in the kiln of slavery and survival.” Despite the brutal past and the ongoing brutality, though, “no matter what, we are still here, the
culture is still alive, it is vital, and it is as vibrant and zestful as ever.” Wilson felt the power of heritage, even painful heritage: “I am standing in my grandfather’s shoes. I want to place myself in that long continuum that goes all the way back to the first African who set foot on the continent. The African who arrived chained and malnourished in the hold of a 350-ton Portuguese vessel – he has not vanished from the face of the earth; he is here, in whatever manifestation, alive in the 30 million black people who are in this country now” (Sheppard). For Wilson the cultural and even physical connection to his ancestors was real and a part of the everyday world; he felt not just connected but united with the original, tortured African Americans.

Because of this unity and deep connection to his ancestors, Wilson claimed, “I’ve got a 400-year autobiography” (Shannon, “Blues, History”). To tell that story, “I take the entire black experience in America, from the first black in 1619 until now, and claim that as my material. That’s my story, my life story, and that’s a lot to write about” (Lyons 8). Wilson might have had just one story to tell, but it was a vast and intensely painful one, and to Wilson the story was his life. He did not look for pity or for excuses, though; “I try not to portray any of my characters as victims.” For example, “there was a line in Two Trains Running when they’re tearing down the building and Memphis is talking about what his business used to be and how he used to sell four cases of chicken a week, but now he’s down to one case. “But that’s all right,” he said. “I ain’t greedy. I’ll take that. Only they don’t want me to have that.” Later Wilson reconsidered and removed the line “They don’t want me to have that” because “it makes him a victim of someone else. They are not doing anything to him personally. It’s not like they don’t want him to have the
business. They’re just tearing down the building” (“Blues, History”). With this change, Wilson kept the moment from being about one man’s persecution; instead, there was a larger system at work that kept economic power out of the hands of black Americans like Memphis. Wilson believed strongly that “if you don’t connect to the past, then you don’t know who you are in the present. You may prove to be unworthy of the past” (Lahr, “Black and Blues” 101). Contemporary black Americans could not move forward without understanding that “the odyssey of the African-American throughout the twentieth century has been one of loss and reclamation. It’s about reclaiming those things which were lost during slavery.” There had been terrible oppression, but survival depended on seeing some power and possibility, and taking responsibility for pursuing them, no matter how difficult and dangerous that pursuit might be: “I always say that if the African who arrived chained and malnourished in the hold of a three-hundred-and-fifty-foot slave ship is still, after four hundred years, chained and malnourished, then it can’t be anybody’s fault but his” (101).

Despite their shared belief in their community and history, the seemingly unshakeable bond between Wilson and Richards eventually began to weaken. As early as 1987, five years after they had met, Wilson in a letter to his mentor referred to some prior conflict: “Thinking of Joe Turner, Boston was the low point in our relationship. I’m not sure anymore what happened. It is something we haven’t talked about, and I think we should” (Lloyd Richards papers). They were far from the only close collaborators to have trouble, of course, and success could be the biggest threat of all; Thomas Wolfe wrote to his editor, Maxwell Perkins – though he never mailed the letter – “The editorial relation
between us, which began – it seems to me – so hopefully, and for me so wonderfully, has now lost its initial substance. It has become a myth – and what is worse than that, an untrue myth – and it seems to me that both of us are victims of that myth” (Bruccoli and Bucker xv). The pain potentially could be felt on both sides of the relationship. Lasting concerns did not arise between Wilson and Richards until 1996, however, when the playwright’s characterization of their relationship began to shift; discussing Richards’ role in his work, Wilson said, “For many years, Lloyd was a producer of these plays as well as at the Yale Rep Theatre. And the play needs a director. Lloyd directed *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. He also produced *Fences*. I guess he hired himself as a director when we did *Fences*. It’s made the plays have a seamlessness in that there are the same two artistic sensibilities at work” (Rosen). It sounds almost as if Wilson objected to Richards serving as director for *Fences*, and he comments on their combined sensibility in neutral terms, no longer presenting it as a strength of the work. Asked about Richards’ style as a director and how it complemented his work, Wilson responded, “I would say the fact that he’s black and we share that sensibility and the culture. I don’t know much else beyond that” (Rosen). In his description, Wilson drastically reduced Richards’ contributions and level of involvement in the six plays on which they had worked together.

Boston’s Huntington Theatre became a home for Wilson’s plays early on, and managing director Michael Maso noticed a dramatic change in Wilson’s personality at one point; “he was a different person in 1986 than he was six or seven years later” (Hartigan). Early on, Maso saw, Wilson “was quiet in groups, and he always deferred to
Lloyd,” staying in the background himself. “When you got him in a smaller setting,” however, “you saw this great, funny storyteller, which made sense,” given his work. Then, when *Seven Guitars* was staged at the Huntington in 1995, the playwright-director dynamic was very different: Wilson had taken control of the production. Maso felt that “August came into his power over the course of some years and found his voice as someone who had something to say to the world and the community” (Hartigan). With this play, the last of the six Wilson-Richards collaborations, Richards seemed to be the one in the background. Until this point, as actor Ebony Jo-Ann put it, “August Wilson and Lloyd Richards were a package deal. They were like glue, during the mentorship period” (Miller, “August Wilson’s”). After *Seven Guitars*, though, the two did not work together again; Richards’ explanation was, “What happened is simply a play came that he did not invite me to direct. That’s all. We didn’t have a fistfight or draw guns or anything” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”). Richards did not share details of the split, but his son Scott Davenport Richards believes it may have had to do with Wilson’s fear after Lloyd Richards underwent surgery; Wilson might have found the experience so frightening that he hesitated to let himself depend on Richards again (Dorsey). Wilson’s widow, Constanza Romero, saw it as a natural process of separation from a mentor: “Every person who starts under the auspices of somebody, when you gain your wings, you have to try out how you’re going to be going on your own. August felt he needed to experience the work more on his own” (Dorsey).

For the actors who had worked closely with the Wilson-Richards team, the break between them was difficult to experience. Ruben Santiago-Hudson said it was “hard on
the kids” and that he himself “expressed my dismay” to both of them; he, like Romero, thought the cause was that Wilson “wanted to see how he stood on his own” (personal interview). He recalled that at one point Richards said, “I will not work for August Wilson” (personal interview). Elaborating on the loss to himself as an actor, due to this split, Santiago-Hudson said,

Lloyd was the final say. He was the consummate leader, so we feared nothing. He offered us insulation so we could do our art. And you didn’t want to disappoint him. Even August was under his leadership. It was a great marriage, and it hurt me because I was there when they had the divorce in Seven Guitars, on that journey. August had to outgrow the father. I understand that. But after Lloyd was gone it became a free-for-all. (Miller, “August Wilson’s”)

Richards had protected and nurtured not just Wilson, but also the other members of each production; as in the O’Neill experience – which Richards shaped – artists could work free of commercial concerns. In any case, it was impossible for Wilson to erase what Richards had done for him. According to John Lahr,

The debt that August owed Lloyd was beyond repayment. When you think of the odds of August succeeding as a writer, let alone a playwright, it’s mind blowing. I mean you can’t even imagine it. Because he left school at fifteen, and how he found his way toward his vision. It was just an amazing story. Unique. And I think, at least six of those plays are great pieces of theater. No writer ever had the chance to sustain the growth of a piece in a systematic way more than August. That never existed. He is sui generis. (Sweet 169)

Wilson had tried for years to succeed as a playwright before Richards discovered him at the O’Neill, and then created space for Wilson to develop his talents in a safe and structured fashion, at the O’Neill, at Yale, at regional theaters. It was an opportunity unlike any experienced by an American playwright before or since. After Seven Guitars, Wilson stopped attending the O’Neill conference as well, which was likely an equal loss
to his work. O'Neill director Amy Saltz thought his later plays “suffered by not going through the O’Neill process” (Sweet 168). She recalled that at first, with *Seven Guitars*, “there was no play there.” Working with his O’Neill team, Wilson was able to “find out who Floyd was and why he went to heaven and what the story was.” Saltz also pushed him to further develop the character Vera; “one day he came in shaking, and he gave me a speech and he said, ‘Here, what do you think?’ It was that ‘Floyd touched me here, Floyd touched me there’ – that incredible speech of hers. And I was shaking by the time I finished it.” To Saltz, it was clear that “he found the play during that process at the O’Neill. There was something about the focus and the intensity and the pressure of those four days that helped him enormously in the writing” (Sweet 168). Working on his own, Wilson was not able to recreate those conditions that had propelled him to success so many times.

With his new freedom, Wilson could choose with whom he wanted to work, and actor Stephen McKinley Henderson recalled that he “got directors for a time that would do what he wanted done” (Miller, “August Wilson’s). Actor Anthony Chisolm replied that “the most horrible production of *Jitney* I was ever in was in Atlanta.” Henderson agreed, saying it “was embraced by the audience, but it was a buffoonery, chitlin-circuit way of performing it from our director. We did other versions of it with Marion McClinton that were done the right way” (“August Wilson’s). In the later years, Wilson worked closely with McClinton, who called Wilson a “champion” – continuing the boxing metaphor; Wilson inscribed a book to McClinton with “the struggle continues” (Lahr, “Been Here” 64). There was no longer a seamless sensibility running through
Wilson’s body of work, though, and Henderson noted, too, that through it all, Wilson “still revered Lloyd. When he was writing *King Hedley*, with its classical structure and even that name with King in it, he said to us, ‘I think I got one the old man is going to like.’ As Ebony Jo-Ann saw it, though, “When it got out of Lloyd’s hands the whole empire started to crumble.” It was clear that Richards had been an essential part of the long-standing process of Williams’ plays, from inception to Broadway stage, and extending to the experiences of all involved. For example, said Anthony Chisolm, “During Lloyd’s reign there were very few people that were fired, but as time went on, they bumped off a lot of people in plays like *King Hedley*” (Miller, “August Wilson’s”). For Richards’ part, he was not interested in seeing revivals of the plays he and Wilson had built together: “It is very difficult for me to go back and look at a work that I helped to create. I know every line in the play. I know why it got there and why it stayed there. It is difficult to listen to a line and not necessarily hear another line that I associate with it. I don’t think it is essential to put myself through that. I have never seen the movie of *A Raisin in the Sun*” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”). After having shaped a work almost as distinctively as the playwright – as Wilson himself had attested – Richards could not view it as a finished whole on stage; he was too aware of the many changes made and the decisions behind those changes, the framework.

Working with director Kenny Leon, Wilson brought the penultimate play of his Century Cycle, *Gem of the Ocean*, to Broadway in 2004, despite great financial obstacles; to make this historic production possible, “a single investor ponied up a million dollars to make sure that it could go forward; she didn’t necessarily expect to earn back her
investment, but she thought Wilson’s play deserved a Broadway audience” (Weiss). *Jitney* still had not appeared on Broadway, but Marion McClinton had staged it at the Pittsburgh Public Theater in 1996; it won an Obie. Wilson turned to the play that would complete the cycle, *Radio Golf*; during its tour, Anthony Chisolm remembered, “He always showed up for rehearsals. He was always like that, if we did a show in six cities he’d do rewrites in every city. But then in L.A., at the Mark Taper, he wasn’t there. . . . it was announced that he was sick. He still faxed in rewrites for every scene” (Miller, “August Wilson’s”). In August 2005, Wilson received a diagnosis of cancer, but he continued working, even forgoing some treatments in order to keep his mind sharp for writing. His illness moved quickly, but he had time to reconnect with Richards; Stephen McKinley Henderson said, “When they were doing *Radio Golf*, Anthony called and told me, ‘It’s close to the end.’ So I called Lloyd and said what I heard. Then he called the house and he and August finally had a talk. He called me back and said, ‘Thank you Mr. Henderson.’ And I heard August was excited, saying, ‘The old man called’” (“August Wilson’s”). The power of what they shared was still present. Wilson died on October 2; the epitaph on his Pittsburgh grave reads,

PLAYWRIGHT
POET
LOVING HUSBAND, FATHER
BROTHER, FRIEND
‘WHEREVER YOU ARE
YOU ARE
I’M HERE’

Responding to his death, Richards said,

We have lost an important voice. August had a lot to say, and has said some
things that he did not even know he was saying. I was in the theatre one evening after one of his plays I had directed was over. I was giving notes to my secretary when an elderly white couple approached us. They stopped and waited. He said, ‘We want to thank you and Mr. Wilson because you have permitted us something we have not otherwise been permitted to experience. You have taken us into a black experience. You have taken us into the kitchen.’ We had permitted them into the kitchen life of a black family – something in the totality of their lives they had not experienced. Now, that to me was a very important moment because they were saying, ‘We hear you’; they were hearing our intent. That is the essence of what the theatre is losing. (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”)

Richards saw that Wilson, in aiming to portray black American life as naturally and powerfully as possible, and to show its universality, had made the additional and related achievement of reaching across the racial divide to speak kitchen-to-kitchen with American whites – who, after all, made up the majority of Wilson’s audience. It was an achievement Wilson might not have even wanted to claim, but one that could have profound effect. Director Zelda Fichandler talked about this goal for the theater, “to make a shape for the interior life – objectify its form. The more the audience is able to empathize with this life, the more they can open up places within themselves that have been closed. They come to ‘think feelingly’ about experiences that they recognized on the stage to be their very own. Theatre is a way of describing in space, time, and motion our collective memories” (Bartow 117). Theater can change minds and change emotional make-ups, mitigate boundaries. Fichandler continued, “I know that going to the moon was a technological miracle, but to me the greatest mystery of the world is knowing about oneself and the heart of a person sitting at a foot’s distance. That distance is enormous. The theatre aims to know that heart, to cross that space” (Bartow 117). What Wilson
accomplished, in a country with a painful past and present in terms of race, was to alter and free some of that space.

While working on *King Hedley II*, his first project away from Richards, Wilson said he looked continuously to three quotations: “I hope to take it to the moon” by Frank Gehry (speaking about his plans for an addition to the Corcoran Gallery), “Don’t be afraid. Just play the music” by Charlie Parker, and “You have the right to the work but not the reward” from the *Bhagavad Gita* (Lyons and Plimpton). Taking charge of his theater life, his goals included the gamut of high ambition, freedom from fear, and humility. He began to have more awareness of himself as a member of the larger artistic community: “You create the work to add to the artistic storehouse of the world, to exalt and celebrate a common humanity. I don’t think Picasso thought too much about whether the viewers of his paintings were French or American or Asian or German. I think the primary concern is to do the work to the best of your ability and to fulfill its aesthetic requirements.” Wilson saw himself in partnership with artists of all kinds, well beyond the theater, portraying and finding the beauty in us all. He had come to feel kinship with other playwrights, from whom he distanced himself early on: “My audience, if I thought of one, would be Ibsen, O’Neill, Miller, Williams, Baraka, and Bullins—my fellow playwrights who have wrestled with the problems of the form and have contributed to my understanding of it.” He had learned from these writers, and they had become relations, too, like his ancestors; “When I sit down to write, I am sitting in the same chair that Ibsen sat in, that Brecht, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller sat in. I am confronted with the same problems of how to get a character on stage, how to shape the scenes to get
maximum impact. I feel empowered by the chair.” He explained how he had moved into this feeling of both empowerment and kinship, even with his perceived competitors:

For years I sat in that chair and tried to best my predecessors, to write the best play that’s ever been written. That was my goal until I ran across a quote by Frank Lloyd Wright, who said he didn’t want to be the best architect who ever lived. He wanted to be the best architect who was ever going to live. That added fuel to the fire and raised the stakes, so to speak. Now you’re not only doing battle with your predecessors but with your successors as well. It drives you to write above your talent. And I know that’s possible to do because you can write beneath it. (Lyons and Plimpton)

Wright’s words emboldened Wilson not just to create art better than that of which he was capable, but also to set higher goals that what he had realized existed. Wilson took even failure – the moments when his writing had been unworthy of his potential – and turned it into proof that he could advance beyond what seemed possible. This had been his first and perhaps greatest challenge, with *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

Ultimately, and working apart from his mentor, he felt, “I write, like any artist, for an audience of one, basically, to satisfy myself” (Whitaker). At the same time, “I’m also trying to make an aesthetic statement. What I am trying to do is put Black culture on stage and demonstrate to the world – not to White folks, not to Black folks, but to the world – that it exists and that it is capable of sustaining you. I want to show the world that there is no idea or concept in the human experience that cannot be examined through Black life and culture” (Whitaker). By zeroing in on African-American lives and individuals, Wilson sought to remove the limits to those lives, in the minds of anyone – black, white, or other – who placed them there. Richards, too, overcame limits, though with perhaps a different motivation; he said,
There were many moments, or incidents, in my career when I was discovered to be the first black person to do whatever. I never did anything that I did in order to receive that designation – it happened because I was attempting to do the things I wanted to do, and someone gave me an opportunity. And I don’t question if that person was doing it because I was black or got some distinction for himself. I knew it was done because he or she thought I could handle it. Their future was at stake, as was mine. There were very few people that generous as to put themselves on the line for failure or for bucking standard practice. (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”)

Rather than setting out to break through racial barriers, Richards believed in himself and his talents and that he was worthy of opportunities others would have withheld from him because of his race; he could even express appreciation for those who extended the opportunities and thereby faced risks that, though unfair, did exist. Even close to the end of a highly distinguished life, though, Richards acknowledged that he was still enveloped by racism:

The first obstacle is getting up in the morning, washing my face, looking in the mirror, and seeing a black face. I know as attractive as I feel that face is, there is a world of people that that face is going to antagonize. I am going to dress up my body and take this face out into the world, out into the world where the negative attitude towards the color of my face could permit anything to happen, at any time. And I take that face out into the world every day. I go into the street knowing that I’m somebody’s enemy. (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards”)

All of the recognition and accomplishments of a lifetime at the height of the theatrical world – including the National Medal of Arts – could not spare Richards this external burden of perceived enemy. It added an extra layer of deep challenge to everything that he attempted.

Experiencing life and work as members of a targeted group, both Wilson and Richards addressed political causes through theatrical work – though usually indirectly.
Richards identified these causes as his primary motivation: “I’m compelled [to direct] from necessity for change, social change” (Bartow 260). At the same time, they could not be his only priority; he also required “order around me. Maybe that’s what I’m trying to do as a director: put the world in order, make it meaningful. Chaos can be part of the process, but, ultimately, that chaos has to be brought into a form that has its own point to make.” Without control and form, no political message could be accomplished. He continued,

   I do consider myself political. Being born a black person in a white society, you are immediately political whether you want to be or not. Even the denial of that is political. Certainly, it has affected what I’ve chosen to do and not to do, and, in many respects, how I’ve chosen to do it. I don’t feel that I’ve had to repress my political feelings, but when I express them, I’m liable to get hit for them. I’ve been denied work for political reasons but I have always found a way to say what I want to say.” (Bartow 260-261)

Richards saw his political agenda as essential, even when it carried the risk of criticism or loss of opportunity; it was a point of view into which he was born. Wilson, too, felt that “it is difficult to dissociate my concerns with theater from the concerns of my life as a black man. I have strived to live it all seamless . . . art and life together” (“Ground”). He addressed politics through the way he lived his life – devoted to art and to his fellow black Americans and their concerns – and the lives and stories his characters displayed on stage; politics for him was not a separate realm, but revealed through people. Indeed, he gave himself, literally including his body, to his art; for him, writing “is a remaking of the self in which all of the parts have been realigned, redistributed, and reassembled into a new being of sense and harmony. . . . what you have learned is always pointed toward moving the harborless parts of your being closer to home” (Three Plays viii). The more
he discovered within his characters – who were in the end himself – the closer he was to
social and political truth for those like him. Richards, less visibly political than Wilson,
nevertheless said, “There is a social and political conscience to everything I do”
(DeVries, “Theater’s Godfather”). Director Zelda Fichandler, too, believes in the
importance of politics for directors: “They should very much want to say or show
something from a particular point of view. That means they have to have a strong social
and political perspective. They have to want to put their imaginative ability into the
service of ideas” (Bartow 109). For her, a political motivation is essential for fine theater,
a deeper base for the content of the play.

Even with his preschooler daughter, Azula, Wilson declared his social mission;
when she asked him, “Daddy, why you a writer?” he replied, “To tell the story” (Lahr,
“Been Here” 65). Not different stories, but one pressing story. Richards was practical and
nonconfrontational – “I have never considered myself an idealist” – but he was focused
on social justice: “I am concerned about human beings, about the human condition –
about the bettering of it, and the revelation of it, and the challenge of it” (Fitzgerald). His
power to make a positive impact came through theater; he believed, “What the future will
understand about your time and your culture and what you’ve contributed to it will be
influenced by art. That is much more valuable than warships. The rest of the world may
be affected by a bomb we drop on them, but their perception of our society will come
through the arts” (“Lloyd Richards”). Art was not only an avenue of impact, but one with
more potential than even military might, because it could open, expand, change minds.
Wilson, too, did not see himself as an activist writer: “I don’t write particularly to effect
social change. I believe writing can do that, but that’s not why I write. I work as an artist. All art is political in the sense that it serves someone’s politics. Here in America whites have a particular view of blacks. I think my plays offer them a different way to look at black Americans” (Lyons and Plimpton). He addressed politics indirectly, through specific detail and character. “For instance, in Fences they see a garbage man, a person they don’t really look at, although they see a garbage man every day. By looking at Troy’s life, white people find out that the content of this black garbage man’s life is affected by the same things—love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty. Recognizing that these things are as much part of his life as theirs can affect how they think about and deal with black people in their lives.” Transformation could come for white audience members when they looked anew at everyday black Americans and their struggles – and their common humanity. At the same time, “blacks see the content of their lives being elevated into art. They don’t always know that is possible, and it’s important to know that” (Lyons and Plimpton). In Wilson’s work, African-American life is held up to be celebrated and understood, by blacks and whites alike. Wilson and Richards shared a political agenda, and as his son Scott Davenport Richards said, “My father had the ability to ask questions that connected what a playwright was working on to societal context and what was important at that moment.” Richards had the knowledge, skill, and theatrical connections to serve that agenda on stage.

Wilson and Richards have left behind an enduring legacy that is very personal for many people in the theater. Actress Ebony Jo-Ann recalled an inspiring leader: “Lloyd spoke very quietly, he was never bombastic. He was like Buddha” (Miller, “August
Wilson’s”). Lee Blessing, who brought his plays many times to the O’Neill, has called Richards one of the two most important mentors of his life (Kennedy). Actor Mary Alice – who studied with Richards early on and who won a Tony for her role in *Fences* – said, “He is the one, the most important person outside of myself in my career. He is the constant. There are other important people, like Joseph Papp, Douglas Turner Ward, Ellen Stewart. But if I have to say who was the most important, he would be the one.”

Richards himself heard once from a cleaning woman at the theater where *A Raisin in the Sun* was playing that she was saving money to buy a ticket to the show because she had been told that “the play has something to say about us” (“Lloyd Richards”). Actor and director Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who currently carries the torch for Wilson and Richards, said he is “fighting like hell for August Wilson now,” to keep his work alive and in production, and also that “I’ve never done anything that isn’t influenced by Lloyd” (personal interview). “My source and my fountain of knowledge was Lloyd or George Wolf” (Wilson, Gemma.). When directing, he said, he frequently shares what he calls Lloydisms; for example, considering the idea of time on stage: “A minute is a measure of time, and a moment is a measure of meaning” (personal interview). He emulates Richards’ style, which was “to continue to ask questions and prod you along the path; he led you to discovery.” He recalled playing Canewell in *Seven Guitars*, and a moment when Floyd and Vera – with whom Canewell is in love – have an argument, and Santiago-Hudson would go stand to the side. Richards would say “okay” sort of uncertainly. Santiago-Hudson decided to stay there with the couple instead – “two people in love” – and recalled that a critic praised that particular moment. When another actor
cried ostentatiously, over and over, during rehearsal, Richards questioned him about the crying in a neutral but relentless way, linking the moment somehow to the earlier death of the actor’s father: “When did your father die? How did you feel? Did you cry?” Finally, the actor moved away from the weeping (personal interview).

In addition to his unusual ability with actors, Richards’ talents were perhaps even greater when working with playwrights. The O’Neill Center founder George C. White felt that “Lloyd was a consummate teacher, but when it really comes down to it, when you look at his legacy, it’s new playwrights. I can’t think of anybody who has been more of a force for developing playwrights since the 1960’s.” (Robertson, “Lloyd Richards”). Asked where he “draws the line” between his role and the playwright’s, Richards responded, “I don’t draw the line. I consider my responsibility to be to fulfill the intent of the playwright in his work, which does not mean necessarily that I literally do that because sometimes the playwright is not totally conscious of everything that exists in his work. . . . My contributions are in both discovering what he has to say, illuminating that and enhancing that” (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 125). It was the play itself, not the playwright’s stated intent, that Richards saw as his responsibility; he acted as teacher, editor, and coach, to facilitate the best possible form of that work, and the author’s own understanding of it. George C. White credited Richards with the great success of the O’Neill’s National Playwrights Conference:

What is known as the O’Neill Process should rightfully be known as the Richards Process. Lloyd instituted the practice of dramaturgs who work as go-betweens between director and playwright. Now there are dramaturg programs at various schools. The script-in-hand stage readings were not done much; Lloyd instituted those to allow playwrights to rewrite up until the last minute. Lloyd has also emphasized post-performance critiques, where all those at the conference can
express opinions while Lloyd moderates.” (Nesmith “Stage Champion’s”)

The elements of the O’Neill experience that allowed Wilson to realize his voice and his full potential as a playwright – extensive revision, freedom from financial considerations, conversation and critique from all corners in the theater world – were pioneered, if not invented, by Richards, and were enjoyed by so many other playwrights as well.

Discussing his practices with playwrights, Richards said, “If I am reading a play, it affects me. I begin to visualize it as I read it. It sparks many things – rhythms, tempos, images, a sense of movement. They function together – all stemming from the fact, the idea on the page. My first responsibility is to really understand not only what the playwright is saying but the stimulus for his creation” (Bartow 258). In addition to taking in the playwright’s ideas, Richards was responding to its sound and rhythm and the changing physical space it described. Still further, he went beyond the play’s message to the play’s origin in the playwright; “even if I diverge from the playwright’s intent, I know what I’m diverging from and what I’m eliminating or illuminating.” Richards’ saw his role as distinct from the author’s, however; “the text provokes my vision or imagination and I have great reverence for it, but I’m not a writer. As a director, I must be like a painter – taking somebody else’s thoughts and ideas and words, in black and white, and giving them color and form in a physically and emotionally moving or intellectually provocative manner.” Richards used his expertise and experience – and his remove, not being the creator of the work – to help guide, shape, and enrich the text.” Throughout the process, he felt he must “retain that experience” of “the first reading of the play,” which was “the only time when one encounters the work as a life experience, sees the work
fresh and is impressed by it”; he felt it was crucial also “to understand why I was affected by it.” An audience would be experiencing the play as fresh and new, and Richards took care to keep that initial sense of discovery intact, but “all the while reading and reading the play, finding out about every character, projecting the life of the characters beyond that play, getting further and further into it and expanding its totality, finding those related things that may have affected the author and that might affect me in the same way.” He pushed the material and the playwright deeper, working to enhance the strengths already present on the page. As the work continued, “I begin to have an understanding of other influences that were affecting the playwright, that were aspects of his time. As an example, I always knew the work of Edvard Munch, but I looked at it very differently when I learned that he had influenced Ibsen. It’s important to understand the totality of the life of the play and its inspiration.” Richards looked not only beyond the boundaries within the play, but also past the boundaries beyond the play, how it linked to other plays and playwrights, personally, and artistically. Richards described what for him was the height of his work: “The plays that I become attracted to are the ones for which, in some respects, I’ve been preparing myself for a long time before even encountering the work. So there’s a lot of self-preparation that’s gone on without my ever knowing it, until I suddenly discover, ‘Oh, this is what that’s about!’ I can have a short time with the text, but have spent a long time preparing to do the work” (Bartow 258-59). Richards’ whole life prepared him to work with August Wilson; the ingredients for their powerful connection began long before the two men ever met.

In exploring the work of a new playwright, Richards said, “I look, I listen, and I
sense what compels me about an individual. If there is a quality in an individual that compels my attention, my involvement, then I call that quality talent” (Nesmith, “Lloyd Richards” 296). What drew him first to Wilson and others was a natural fascination with their work; Richards trusted his senses and his instincts. He also respected both the audacity of and the demands on a playwright: “A playwright is a person who goes down the street and taps a stranger on the shoulder and says, ‘Whatever you are scheduled to do tonight at 8 o’clock, don’t do it. Come over to what-you-call-it-street. Pay your $15 or $18. Go in. Sit down for two and a half hours. I have something to say to you that is more important than anything else you could be doing’ ” (Nesmith, “Stage Champion’s”). Maintaining confidence and passion about one’s work is the required “challenge” for a playwright; “that’s what we expect of a playwright. I don’t think everyone who writes a sentence well can be a playwright” (“Stage Champion’s”). Writing well was only one part of what was required. In addition to selecting new playwrights with whom to work, Richards also had to choose his medium, though it was rarely a difficult decision: “I never started working in television out of choice. People in television, who became interested in me through my stage work, said, ‘Hey, why don’t you come and do this?’ And I said, ‘Hey, why not?’ And then you start playing with the big toys, trying to do what you want through that maze of technology. I’m challenged by it. It fascinates me” (Bartow 260). He noted the appeal and the difference in television work, and, too, “there was a point when I could have made the decision to go into film as such – sign away two years of my life and they’d teach me the trade, and I’d make a lot of money in the process. And I’d stand around and watch great, great cameramen working. But then it
always came down to ‘Would you give us two, four, six years of your life?’” He knew “I
could never spare that. I have to do what I have to do, when I have to do it.” Giving up
years of his life to someone else’s agenda was not something he was willing to consider.
He believed, “The most important personal right, which I’ve always fought and lived for,
is the right to say no. Somehow, it’s terribly important for anyone who wants to work in
this business and get satisfaction to earn the right to say no. That right always turns out to
be economically influenced” (260). Richards’ success had allowed him to seek out the
work that mattered to him, and to turn away from the projects about which he did not
care; his hard work had purchased this intellectual and creative luxury.

Charles Dutton remembered the similar luxury of being directed by Richards:
“Lloyd was just a reservoir of wisdom” (Robertson, “Lloyd Richards”). Dutton said he
would point out to Wilson, “You’ve got a man who’s lived almost every decade of your
10 plays.” Despite all of this – or because of it – Richards kept to his subtle style with
actors; Dutton recalled, “He’d say one word or one sentence, and it would just open the
door to a whole world in approaching the character. His nuances had nuances” (“Lloyd
Richards”). No matter what Richards might know about a character or a line, he knew
what mattered was that the actors find and feel those truths for themselves. And he had a
powerful belief in the stage and those truths it could produce, the life it could hold;
Ruben Santiago-Hudson said Richards “pointed to the stage and said ‘What happens to
those people up there, happens right there,’ and he was saying, don’t make what we do on
stage for the people in the audience. It’s for us, and they get an opportunity to witness
intimate moments in a very public arena” (Wilson, Gemma). Richards worked with his
writers and actors to create and bring to life ideas and people that they could share with
audiences but also possess for themselves. Richards said that to be effective, a director
must “see the unusual, hear the unspoken” (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 127). He spent his
professional life listening to playwrights and actors, but also looking and listening past
them to the larger ideas and possibilities that they could not reach on their own.

Wilson has been widely celebrated since his death – with the first honor coming
in 2005 even before he died, when Broadway’s Virginia Theatre at 245 West 52nd Street
in New York was renamed the August Wilson Theatre. The United States Department of
Labor included Wilson’s Century Cycle on its list of the top one hundred “Books that
Shaped Work in America.” Composer Wadada Leo Smith created Ten Freedom
Summers, a musical history and tribute to the Civil Rights Movement, inspired in part by
Wilson’s plays. Wilson scholar Sandra Shannon founded the August Wilson Society at
Howard University, a program that takes a multidisciplinary approach to studying
Wilson’s works and the related social and cultural realms. Probably most important is
that Wilson’s plays continue to be staged constantly around the country and around the
world, including his last work, a one-man autobiographical show entitled How I Learned
What I Learned. Film and stage actor Denzel Washington said, “I’ve been fortunate to
interpret two of the greatest playwrights in American history, August Wilson and
Lorraine Hansberry” (“Denzel Washington”). Playwright Suzan Lori-Parks told Wilson,
“You are our king.” Wilsonian actor Stephen McKinley Henderson reveres the
playwright’s writing: “The difference between dialogue and text is poetry” (S. Miller,
“August Wilson’s”).
James Earl Jones, too, remarked on the lyricism of Wilson’s work;

His poetic plays about African-American life offer plainspoken truths that transcend race. It’s hard for an actor to go wrong if he’s true to the words August Wilson has written. When I played Troy Maxson in Fences on Broadway in 1987, the speeches simply guided themselves, they’re so well constructed. August was a poet before he became a playwright, and poetry is still part of the language his characters speak. You don’t always hear people talk like that in real life, but you wish you could.

Like Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, August didn’t just write a great play, he has written volumes of good, better and best plays. Fences was the third in his series about blacks in each decade of the 20th century. But August’s plays transcend race. When Carole Shorenstein Hays, who produced Fences, saw the play for the first time, she said she was watching a “universal play, and when push comes to shove, families are alike.”

Those family confrontations – when the mighty forces that August gathers on the stage clash, either with words or with action – are the scenes that are hard to shake. Just look at Troy. The way he bashes his soul against other souls is illuminating. I always felt he was one of those characters I wish I had really known.

Jones seemed to feel personally acquainted with Wilson’s characters, who – thanks to Wilson’s poetic dialogue – were both natural and singular. Connecting Wilson to the other great and prolific American playwrights, Jones notes that his work both honors African Americans and breaks through race to explore universal ideas and truths. Charles Dutton, too, noticed the paradox that Wilson’s lines were utterly familiar and yet not unique: “We kid each other about August’s writing. We’ll say, ‘I’ve never heard anything in my life like that, have you?’ whether it be slang or folklore or whatever” (Brantley).

Brandon J. Dirden acted as a child in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone and aspires to one day play the old patriarch of that play; “I can’t wait to get old to play Bynum” (Piepenburg). For Dirden, Wilson’s voice is powerfully on target: “August writes a really specific rhythm. His cadences are so much like my grandparents’ or my aunts’ and uncles’ of the South, people who are hardworking and colorful with their language and
stories.” Dirden said this voice and rhythm mean that “Wilsonian actors can embrace all
the beauty of the language and know it’s in the language and not outside. Every true
Wilsonian actor would agree: This is not me doing something to the language, this is the
language doing something to me” (Piepenburg). Actors internalize Wilson’s words and
are shaped and guided by them.

Phylicia Rashad, who acted in Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean* while he was alive,
and has directed other Wilson plays since, recalled that working with him in *Gem* was
“an incredible and uplifting experience” (Reich). She saw that “he believed in letting
everybody do the job they were assigned,” even though “he really was in the seat of
control. At any time, if he had expressed displeasure with anything, it would have
changed or been eliminated out of respect for him alone, but he didn’t behave in that
way.” Rashad gained a further appreciation for Wilson’s body of work recently; “I think
one of the experiences that has put me in the greatest state of awe was the archival
recording of his plays. When you can receive a playwright’s intention through sound
alone, that’s a very powerful experience. That says and shows that the playwright was
connected in very real ways to his subjects, he was deeply connected to his subjects.”

Taking away the visuals of actors, lighting, sets highlighted Wilson’s words, the primary
force of the plays, and the intensity of his creations. “We access the characters through
their speech,” Rashad noted. “I marvel at his work” (Reich). In fact, she feels, “This is
what it must have been like to have a chance to work with Shakespeare” (Meyers).

Speaking about the same archival recording project at the Greene Space theater in New
York, actor Anthony Chisolm made a similar connection: “Great writers like Shakespeare
were kept alive by the culture of their time. The only way for August to grow for our grandchildren and beyond is through something like this, so it’s our responsibility” (Miller, “August Wilson’s”). Keeping Wilson’s work alive for future generations is the goal of actor Stephen McKinley Henderson, too, who said, “We’re passing the plays on to young people to inspire them, not just to be actors, but to be doctors and lawyers” (“August Wilson’s”). Wilson’s message of hope and possibility can inspire young people in all aspects of their lives and opportunities.

Ruben Santiago-Hudson makes the distinction that the content of Wilson’s stories is not the playwright’s true achievement: “As African-Americans, we have had to negotiate our place in America in a unique way, and people don’t even know what we’ve gone through. This is not unique to August. What’s unique is that he wrote it, he documented it. He fulfilled his responsibility. We have to honor that. That’s why we’re here” (Miller, “August Wilson’s”). Bearing witness and retelling what he witnessed, honestly and faithfully, was Wilson’s real service and triumph. For Santiago-Hudson, who grew up as an actor mostly through Wilson’s plays, honoring and continuing that work is a public but also a very personal mission. He said, “I just want to say: ‘Are you happy? Did I make you proud? Was I what you thought I was going to be?’” (Robertson, “Directing”). At this point in his career, “I have done more than 100 plays, and no one loves me the way August Wilson does. He allows me to celebrate my wholeness, the humanity in me. That is what glues me to his plays. I am cemented to his plays and I will be until I die” (Abruzzese). Henderson said he had felt a similarly permanent attachment to Wilson’s works since he first saw Joe Turner’s Come and Gone in the late 1980s: “I
was a Wilsonian actor from the moment I saw that play” (Abruzzese). Indeed, Wilson’s body of work has transformed the careers of black actors everywhere, by offering them an abundance of excellent roles and works. John Lahr believes that “his audience appeal almost single-handedly broke down the wall for other black artists, many of whom would not otherwise be working in the mainstream” (“Been Here” 50). British playwright Roy Williams said,

Imagine a world without Wilson’s ten cycle plays. Black actors over here, as well as black actors in America, would never have had their moments to shine as brightly, perhaps at all. Many African-American actors owe their careers, houses, cars and a dignified place in history to Wilson. He gave them material to sink their teeth into. He gave an entire community material to build their lives upon, for generations to come. He gave us work for a lifetime.” (Lahr, “Write, stop”)

Wilson created unprecedented opportunities for black actors, with not only a high volume of roles, but of a caliber that allowed them to do their best work, and to support themselves artistically as well as materially. Wilsonian actor Charles Weldon agrees, asserting, “August Wilson bought my house” (Hartigan). Brandon J. Dirden, remembered the actor Alex Morris telling him early on “to remember who August Wilson is because he’s going to feed your family one day”; Dirden came to feel, “One writer has given me enough work to look forward to for the rest of my life” (Piepenburg). Actor Carl Gordon said, “August’s plays open doors. Not just for more roles, but for challenging roles. You work with characters that have substance, that get you to stretch” (Freedman, “Theater”). It is not just the amount of opportunity, but the nature of that opportunity.

In terms of playwriting, too, Richards said that Wilson had
had a wonderful effect on the American theater. I think he has stimulated playwrights to write. He has stimulated black playwrights to write. Always when one looks at achievement, there is a stimulus in that. Someone will say ‘Let me try that.’ And that is very important. That is very, very important because it brought black people into the theater in various areas of the country – all over the country. People want to go to the theater and go places where they can see themselves reflected or their concerns reflected. And if they find that in the theater, that’s the place that they will go. And so people are coming into the theater.” (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 130)

The success Wilson achieved after many years of hard work – and after meeting Richards and adopting the O’Neill process – has inspired others, black and white, to write, to act, to direct, to attend theater – but it has been especially significant for African Americans in theater. Discussing this stimulus further, Richards said, “It’s a fortification. The consequence of August’s success, just as Lorraine’s or anyone who is a success, is that there is a wave that follows that success – a wave of people who have received stimulus and confidence” (Nesmith, “Stage Champion’s”). Wilson’s legacy goes well beyond the life of his own plays and colleagues. Director Kenny Leon said that Wilson’s most important contribution is not individual characters or plays, but his subject matter, the fact that he “took the burden of chronicling African-American history. He put it on his shoulders.” For Leon, Wilson took that pain and revealed it, but also shone a light on the truth that “however you got here, America is a country that lets you realize your dream” (Abruzzese). For all the suffering they address, the plays give hope and a sense of true possibility. As important as Wilson’s messages are for African Americans, Richards believed Wilson to be “a major playwright – not for the black theater or the green theater or the blue theater but for the American theater” (Mitgang).
Everything in Wilson’s work comes back to the O’Neill and its crucial role; Richards said with each new work, “We begin to work on the play on the basis of what we learned at the O’Neill and what is added to that in terms of questions” (Shannon, “From Lorraine” 127). Wilson took his fresh ideas and language to the O’Neill, and with Richards and others brought them together into finished works that spoke to an entire generation. By the end of that first performance of *Ma Rainey* at the O’Neill, critic Samuel Freedman said,

> American theater had changed forever. The point is not simply that the staged reading of “Ma Rainey” led to the acclaimed 1984 production that marked Mr. Wilson’s Broadway debut. It is not that “Ma Rainey” announced Mr. Dutton to the theatergoing world and that it proclaimed Mr. Richards’s re-emergence as a discoverer and shaper of dramatic talent. With the benefit of 20 years of hindsight, one can posit that the maiden performance of “Ma Rainey” inaugurated the August Wilson era. As both an individual playwright and a hub of theatrical activity, he has defined his time in the way Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, Neil Simon and Edward Albee defined the three preceding generations. (“Theater”)

Of his extraordinary connection with Richards and its roots, Wilson said, “Our visions are the same. We come from the same place” (Herrington 96). Echoing Wilson’s word, Richards said, “We were guided by the text, our own visions, and occasionally by the seat of our pants, to a port that was worthy of the cause” (Fitzgerald). In a letter to Richards in March 1984, just before the opening of their first production, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* at Yale Repertory Theatre, Wilson wrote,

> Thinking now how I have come, having followed a road burnished with art and small irrevocable tragedies, to stand on the ground you’ve tilled and made ready for the planting, and how linked by your vision I can stand and sing and fight for the seriousness of my grandmother’s life, the connective tissues of my heart honed and rallying in its memory. I thank you for that, for giving me a place to stand, for having plowed the ground, and lending your weight to the song, that we
might give it back, and give back double. Best always, August (Lloyd Richards Papers)

Wilson, ready to use his body and mind for his art, saw a continuum between his
grandparents and their grandparents, and Richards and himself; his and Richards’
ancestors gave him the stories and the legacy of a past of pain but also hope, and
Richards, coming from the same legacy, gave Wilson a future and a rich avenue for his
art. Richards had been preparing the way for Wilson long before they met and welcomed
him as a comrade in vision and quest. Only about a year later, after Ma Rainey’s
Broadway run, Wilson wrote again to Richards, enclosing the New York Drama Critics
Circle award of best play as a gift for Yale Repertory Theatre:

I am proud of Ma Rainey too. That we have made something exciting and
important happen in American theater, that we have added something to its life,
its history and is future. No small accomplishment that, and I thank you again. I
count it well and continue to put one foot in front of the other to go on and see
what else life has to offer.

Wilson, Richards, and the summer at the O’Neill had recreated Ma Rainey’s Black
Bottom, achieving a deeply meaningful and successful moment in theater – but they had
also together recreated the playwright himself, and set in motion an ever-evolving author
whose work would change American theater and enrich the lives of so many who
responded to it and continue to respond to this foundational American story that Wilson’s
work comprises.


---. Personal interview. 30 October 2013.


YES


Richards, Scott Davenport. Personal interview. 23 December 2013.


EXPERIENCE

English Teacher, Belmont Hill School, Belmont, MA (beginning fall 2014)
As a full-time English teacher, I teach four courses each semester, advise the debate team and the middle-school newspaper The Bell, and serve as academic advisor to several students. For the 2014-2015 school year, I teach English 3 (for ninth graders), American Literature, Creative Writing (elective), and The Literature of Social Reflection (elective).

Independent Editor and Literature and Writing Tutor (2000-2014)
Working with individuals – and sometimes small groups – of all ages, but particularly high school and middle school students, I provide coaching for literary analysis and creative, narrative, and analytical writing. Services offered include homework and curriculum support, college essay development, English Language Learner coaching, SAT preparation, manuscript editing and advising, and customized coaching in any aspect of the language arts. I have also edited and critiqued professional literary works, particularly fiction and narrative non-fiction, for various writers, literary agents, book publishers, and Internet companies.

English Department Chair and English Teacher, Chapel Hill-Chauncy Hall School, Waltham, MA (2006-2011)
As department chair, I supported and evaluated teachers, developed the English curriculum, participated in hiring teachers, and served on the school’s curriculum committee. In the classroom, I taught Advanced Placement Literature and senior seminars, creating three different courses for twelfth-grade students. In my A.P. Literature course, Race/Class: Definitions and Transformations, we explored the intersections and impacts of these categories in such works as Shakespeare’s Othello, Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, and the short stories of Junot Diaz. Other course work included an extensive Living Poet Project, an acting workshop, and directed student teaching. In my seminar Literature of the American South, students investigated this distinctive region through authors ranging from Faulkner to Walker Percy to Alice Walker. With a U.S. History teacher, I offered an inter-disciplinary course, Social Responsibility in the Twenty-first Century, in which we tested the belief that literature and historical study can guide us as we develop our own views of the world and respond to its rapidly changing needs; readings included historical articles, primary sources, journalism, social media, memoir, fiction, plays, and poetry. The co-teaching approach mirrored the content of the course, which focused on connections, new perspectives, and
shared purpose. I also taught American Literature to eleventh-grade students; authors ranged chronologically from Anne Bradstreet to Nathaniel Hawthorne to F. Scott Fitzgerald to August Wilson. With an emphasis on revision, students wrote intensively in forms including analytical essays, short stories, personal essays, and poetry. Close-reading skills for prose and poetry were another central concern of the course. Student work also included a Thoreau-inspired nature project, an independent reading project, and acting workshops. I worked extensively with English Language Learners – individually and within the larger classroom – to help them grow in ability and comfort with their English reading, writing, and speaking.

I also served as the Weekend Activities Coordinator, planning and managing on-campus and off-campus events, which ranged from cultural outings (theater, concerts, museums) to community service undertakings to campus parties and workshops.

**English Teacher, Falmouth Academy, Falmouth, MA (2004-2006)**

I taught a seminar-style American Literature survey course to eleventh graders, starting with Native American storytelling and ending with *The Great Gatsby*; students took on increasing responsibility, making presentations, critiquing each other’s written work, and teaching from their own lesson plans. Studying a range of texts, also including Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Harlem Renaissance poetry, students completed challenging and varied writing assignments, such as Puritan sermons, formal poetry explications, personal essays, and character studies.

I also taught a discussion-based World Literature course for ninth graders, in which students immersed themselves in such classical stories as *The Odyssey* of Homer and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, investigating what makes these works endure, as well as how they connect to students’ own life experiences and current global events. Working in stages from generating ideas to outlines to finished essays, students worked intensively on their writing skills. Such assignments as art projects (*Antigone*-inspired Greek masks, for example), epic poetry composition, and personal response writing added a strong creative element to the course. I also edited and managed the literary magazine and the student newspaper.

**Teaching Fellow, Boston University, Boston, MA (2002-2004)**

Awarded Outstanding Teaching Fellow Award, 2003

I assisted Professor Christopher Ricks in his course on Shakespeare; I led two discussion sections, graded writing assignments and exams, and gave occasional lectures. As an independent instructor, I taught introductory composition to first-year students, designing a course that focused on the literature of the American South.

**Assistant Editor, Literary Imagination, Boston MA (2003-2004)**

I edited fiction, poetry, translations, and literary essays for publication. I worked closely with the editor, the contributors, and the production manager to produce three issues per year.
Teaching Fellow, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (2000-2002)
Awarded Certificate of Distinction in Teaching, 2001
As part of Robert Coles’ course “The Literature of Social Reflection,” I led a discussion section, graded writing assignments, and assigned final grades for the course.

I edited literary fiction and nonfiction works, wrote promotional copy, presented titles to the company, and worked extensively with authors and literary agents. I worked with the online magazine, @Random, writing and editing content, and helped with ongoing website design.

I acquired the novel Layover by Lisa Zeidner; published Letters from the Editor: The New Yorker’s Harold Ross; and created, edited, and produced the Modern Library Humor series, with guest editor Steve Martin. As assistant to Senior Literary Editor Daniel Menaker, I worked with authors including Pulitzer Prize-winner Elizabeth Strout, George Saunders, Richard Dooling, A. S. Byatt, and illustrator Lane Smith.

EDUCATION
Boston University, Boston, MA; Doctor of Philosophy, Editorial Studies, Anticipated May 2015

Boston University, Boston, MA; Master of Arts, Editorial Studies, May 2004
My thesis introduces and analyzes the previously unpublished papers (selected) of early Civil Rights leader and Bostonian Julian Steele.

Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY; Bachelor of Arts, May 1990; major: English; minor: Women’s Studies