

The 2008-2009 Season is proudly presented by Star Tribune and Minnesota Monthly

Fences

By August Wilson
Directed by Lou Bellamy
Presented by Cargill

August 21 through September 21, 2008
Previews August 19 & 20

THE 20TH CENTURY CYCLE – AUGUST WILSON, AN AMERICAN LEGEND

August Wilson dedicated his life to presenting authentic representations of black American life and culture for the stage. Over the next five years, Penumbra will produce the entire cycle, giving audiences an opportunity to witness his work as interpreted by the artists who brought these plays to life in a way that he had not experienced before.

Wilson said that Penumbra's production of *The Piano Lesson* (1993) "would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work." That work became a decade-by-decade depiction of the dreams, disappointments and determination of African Americans over the past hundred years. What he saw at Penumbra emboldened him to broaden his own expectations:

"We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of Penumbra Theatre enlarged that possibility."

Wilson's profound project, the 20th Century Cycle, is a candid album depicting American history at its most tender, tough and triumphant.

1900s	Gem of the Ocean
1910s	Joe Turner's Come and Gone
1920s	Ma Rainey's Black Bottom
1930s	The Piano Lesson*
1940s	Seven Guitars
1950s	Fences*
1960s	Two Trains Running
1970s	Jitney
1980s	King Hedley II
1990s	Radio Golf

* denotes a Pulitzer Prize



August Wilson (April 27, 1945—October 2, 2005)

August Wilson grew up in the Hill district of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His childhood experiences in this predominately African American community informed his dramatic writing. Wilson's singular achievement and literary legacy is a cycle of ten plays dubbed "The Pittsburgh Cycle." Each is set in a different decade, depicting the comedy and tragedy of the African-American experience in the 20th century, "a device," Charles Whittaker (*Ebony*) wrote, "that has enabled Wilson to explore, often in very subtle ways, the myriad and mutating forms of the legacy of slavery." Wilson's project became more than ten poetic plays. The cycle is a metronome of American culture, reflecting

the buried heartbeat of an experience parallel to the mainstream. These are snapshots of life in a country that has both celebrated and scorned black people. The entire album is the story of our nation. "This cycle," notes *the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's* theater critic Christopher Rawson, "is unprecedented in American theater for its concept, size, and cohesion."

Called "one of the most important voices in the American theater today" by Mervyn Rothstein in the *New York Times*, August Wilson's authentic sounding characters have brought a new understanding of the black experience to audiences around the country. For example, *Fences*, tells the story of a black baseball player who broke national records by leaps and bounds but was prevented from playing outside of the Negro Leagues. *Fences* opened on Broadway in the spring of 1987 to enormous critical acclaim and earned Wilson his first Pulitzer Prize. Wilson's work gives audiences the opportunity to go back and reexamine American history through characters that are epic, poignant and defiantly struggling against the institutionalized legacy of racism in this country.

Gem of the Ocean

Regional Premiere, Spring 2008

Gem of the Ocean begins the century-long cycle chronicling black American life. Bewildered by the collapse of the old slave regime, the first generation of black Americans recently freed from slavery are unprepared for the backlash against their newly acquired freedom by whites. Many venture north and find themselves at Aunt Ester's door, seeking solace, advice, or a place to heal. Aunt Ester makes room in the world for those cast aside. She examines and treats wounded souls. Her wisdom is ancient, timeless, connected to the source from which black Americans had been taken. *Gem of the Ocean* introduces audiences to Aunt Ester, keeper of the flame.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone

Produced by Penumbra in 1991 and 2002

Set in a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911, this play was inspired by **Romare Bearden's** painting **Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket**. Harold Loomis was modeled after the brooding, ominous figure in the center. Recently freed from bondage, Loomis has traveled north to Pittsburgh with his young daughter in tow. They are looking for his wife, estranged from him when Joe Turner arrested him for gambling. For seven years Joe Turner held Loomis hostage on his illegal plantation. The experience recreated the nightmare of slavery and Loomis lost his "song." *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is the haunting tale of a community of transient people who band together to heal one man and ultimately heal one another.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

Produced by Penumbra in 1987 and 1996

The only play in the cycle that takes place outside of Pittsburgh, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* delves into the sultry and dangerous 1920s blues scene in Chicago. Ma Rainey was a renowned vocalist, famous for her deep and forthright interpretation of the blues. Though undeniably talented, she was still subject to the racism pervasive in the American music industry. Held in check by white producers, she continually defied their limits to her talent, potential and authority. When Levee, a man deeply scarred from the harassment and dismissal of his worth by white society, strays from the group to reach for a solo career the magic of the band is broken. Levee's once golden trumpeting emerges from the pain and rage of his own personal anguish in a tragic, misguided cry for help.

The Piano Lesson*

Produced by Penumbra in 1993 and 2008

The piano that sits in the salon of the Charles home is very valuable. For Bernice, it holds the spirit of her grandparents, sold away in exchange for it during slavery. For her brother, Boy Willie, it holds the key to his freedom from the burden of sharecropping for a meager wage. The struggle between the siblings over the symbolic and literal value of the piano escalates into a conflict that threatens to tear the family apart. Penumbra's production of *The Piano Lesson* represents Wilson's work at its definitive best, the playwright himself called it his "favorite staging [and] a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work." A Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *The Piano Lesson* is the story of a family haunted by the living legacy of American slavery.

Seven Guitars

Produced by Penumbra in 1993 and 2003

The story of Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton, a blues guitarist on the cusp of stardom, unravels in flashback after his untimely death. We meet Floyd as he's talking his way back into Vera's heart, a woman who has given him everything until finally, she has given up. But Floyd won't be discouraged. His eye is focused on a clear light, a light that promises to bathe him in real success if he can carry his talent, his drive and his love toward a record deal waiting for him in Chicago. Floyd's charm and enthusiasm stirs up the hope in everyone. As Floyd's success beckons, it is with reservation that one by one they begin to believe in the possibility of dreams coming true. Finally, in a full chorus, while mourning the loss of their friend, each of these seven souls has a song to sing, its hope tinged with the kind of sadness only a blues guitar can cry.

Fences*

Produced by Penumbra in 1990 and 1997

Baseball makes sense to Troy Maxon; a man gets three strikes and he's out. In this most American of pastimes, Troy has found an opportunity to play by the rules and win. When his rapid rise through the Negro leagues hits the ceiling of racial prejudice, however, Troy is forced to let go of his dream of major league success. Set in 1957, *Fences* is the story of a baseball player whose prime came before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier. A Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Fences* is the heartbreaking story of a man who by all rights should have been an American legend.

Two Trains Running

Produced by Penumbra in 1994 and 2003

Two Trains Running is set in a modest diner frequented by the same group of folks. Memphis is hardly making a large profit with his small café, in fact, he's probably barely scraping by. But the place has sustained a small community of folks in Pittsburgh's Hill District, and it is his. It is 1969. The country is rapidly changing. The Civil Rights Movement has folks floored, reeling from its fervor and insistence. The Hill District, too, is seeing change as developers buy historic buildings with plans to tear them down to make way for new developments. They have come for Memphis' diner. He has vowed to make the city give him a fair price for his place and is willing to go through fire to get it. No one knows quite what Memphis has been through, but all soon realize that this is his most important stand. *Two Trains Running* illuminates the simple poetry in justice, that in trade one should be given what one is due. Too many times the people of the diner have been duped or shortchanged, and in the name of one man whose simple logic of fair trade has driven him literally to madness, this group of disenfranchised, depressed few finds the integrity on which they make a final stand.

Jitney

Produced by Penumbra in 1985 and 2000

Revisiting themes of urban renewal, *Jitney* is set in 1970 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Eager to gentrify the neighborhood, the city threatens to level a makeshift taxi dispatch office where neighbors gather that has served the community for years. As he tries to stave off the city, the owner of the cab company faces his own inner struggle. After a twenty-year stint in prison for murder, his son is returning home. Regarded as a lyrically symphonic play, *Jitney* tells the story of a generation recognizing its mortality while the next must face its responsibility.

King Hedley II

Produced by Penumbra in 2003

It was Hedley that young Ruby chose in *Seven Guitars* and she named their child King. We meet King as a grown man, fighting to survive a life that seems never to look bright. King carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. At times, he even seems strapped with a curse. Yet King imagines that he is crowned instead, adorned with a halo whose meaning he does not yet know. *King Hedley II* is a riveting play about the past revisiting a man struggling to free himself from the grip of his family's legacy while desperate to hold on to his loved ones.

Radio Golf

Penumbra Theatre Company has not yet produced this play.

Radio Golf is the story of a man whose path through life has been decreed by his father. Following in the footsteps of a well-respected but feared man, Harmon Wilks struggles to evade his shadow. He does what is expected of him in order to help his community, but it is ultimately his own journey and rejection of the grandeur which awaits him that brings him back to the people of Pittsburgh's Hill District.