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## Preserving the Spirit of African Storytelling in the Pittsburgh Cycle

Elizabeth L. Reeves

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**PRESERVING THE SPIRIT OF AFRICAN STORYTELLING  
IN THE PITTSBURGH CYCLE**

Elizabeth L. Reeves



COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

PRESERVING THE SPIRIT OF AFRICAN STORYTELLING  
IN THE PITTSBURGH CYCLE

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THIS THESIS IS SUBMITTED TO  
THE COLLEGE OF ARTS  
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BY ELIZABETH L. REEVES  
COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

2017

PRESERVING THE SPIRIT OF AFRICAN STORYTELLING

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Columbia State University

August 2017



Abstract

PRESERVING THE SPIRIT OF AFRICAN STORYTELLING  
IN THE PITTSBURGH CYCLE

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MAJOR WORKS: August Wilson, *African Storytelling, Pittsburgh Cycle*

Columbus State University

August 2017



## Abstract

This thesis will investigate and examine how August Wilson incorporated African storytelling ceremonials inside of *Gem of the Ocean* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. By studying the mannerisms and characteristics of Aunt Ester (*Gem of the Ocean*) and Bynum Walker (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*), this paper will help educators to understand that Wilson created these characters to preserve African griots inside his Pittsburgh Cycle. This paper will link how theatre educators in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can capture the spirit of the African griots. The socially responsible theatre practice is a teaching method that theatre teachers can incorporate into their classroom that replicates the early objective of African storytelling. This thesis will demonstrate that the ritual of African storytelling and social responsible theatre practice aim to heal the individual.

INDEX WORDS: August Wilson, African Storytelling, Pittsburgh Cycle



## Dedication

To August Wilson...thank you for being my mentor, guide, comforter, and teacher. I have now been granted the responsibility to preserve African-American theatre by always acknowledging my African heritage. I have the responsibility as an educator to encourage students and teachers to maintain a communal, sacred, extraordinary place inside their theatre community. It is my promise to pass along healing. Thank you for inspiring me to discover the African queen that has always been within. Thank you for helping me to find my song and for being my African griot.

Finally, to Rearcouc Smith....thank you for introducing me to August Wilson. You were an

African griot right in front of me and I never realized it...until now.



I: Introduction: Background of August Wilson and the Pittsburgh Cycle

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August Wilson (1945-2005) was one of America's most eminent playwrights. Known for the Pittsburgh Cycle, each of the ten plays represent a decade that exemplifies African-Americans living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (except for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*).

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Wilson once stated in an interview, "In African storytelling, how long you can keep the story going is a mark of a good personality. And I discovered if you sit around, and you hear one guy tell a story five times, he'll tell it five different ways. It's a conscious thing." (Feingold 18)



## 1: Introduction: Background of August Wilson and the Pittsburgh Cycle

August Wilson (1945-2005) was one of America's most eminent playwrights. Known for the Pittsburgh Cycle, each of the ten plays represent a decade that exemplifies African-Americans living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (except *Ma 'Rainey's Black Bottom* which is set in Chicago). Subjects such as love, betrayal, loyalty, racism and preserving heritage are recurring themes that stand out in the cycle. Wilson encapsulates black history through these plays. The Pittsburgh native eloquently, yet subconsciously, inscribes how people of African descent essentially need to remember the importance of telling a story. "Tied to the mythic sense is August's love of storytelling, which...has stronger roots in the African than in the Western past" (Feingold 17). Wilson uses origins of African storytelling on the American stage to represent the African-American experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "By transforming select moments in black history into dramatic reenactments, he attempts to forge new attitudes among black Americans about their past" (Shannon, *Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* 3). The plays of the Pittsburgh Cycle that will heavily support this thesis are *Gem of the Ocean* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

August Wilson was a storyteller and historian, and his characters are orators who speak with a rhythm of authority, passion, and power. Wilson's characters captivate the listeners not by how articulate they sound or what they achieve, but how well they express themselves through storytelling. Wilson once stated in an interview, "In African storytelling, how long you can keep the story going is a mark of a good personality. And I discovered if you sit around, and you hear one guy tell a story five times, he'll tell it five different ways...It's a conscious thing." (Feingold 18).



African storytelling was very imperative to Wilson as he stated, "If you are going to tell someone a story, and you wanted to keep the information alive, you have to make it memorable so that the person hearing it will go tell someone" (Moyers 63).

Music was essential during African storytelling, as were the songs heard throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle. The blues and Negro Spirituals are heard in Wilson's collection of stories. These songs have a common denominator: storytelling. "A descendent of the griot...the blues man's role was to voice the truths, ironies, joys, heartbreak, and suppressed anger of the community" (Herrington 27). What astonished the playwright was through the turmoil of slavery and racism, blacks still had a song to sing and a story to tell. In Africa, there was an important connection to music and songs in everyday life.

As Wilson used music heard in the Pittsburgh Cycle as support for his stories, Africans used songs for life support. "It was inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, songs, the artifact, and a man's life..." (Jones 29). Music was viewed as life and not an art form, and it is the music, specifically, that gave Wilson the inspiration for his characters and their stories. If the sound of the blues were never created, Wilson likely would have not been encouraged to write plays. Carol Rosen spoke with Wilson in 1996, "[the blues] is certainly at the bedrock of everything I do...the music comes out of black life as created by black people" (198).

The expected outcome of this thesis is that educators will use the history of African storytelling in a student-centered classroom, in order to create leaders and healers in the community. By teachers creating leaders, students can use theatre as a canvas to help make their school, community and society better through the art form of storytelling. The thesis will also help teachers understand who August Wilson was and the influence that African ideologies had



### **Purpose of Study**

This thesis will examine how August Wilson intended to preserve the original intention of African storytelling on the American stage; to preserve history and pass it along to the next generation. The questions that this thesis will answer are: Who or what was August Wilson inspired by? What are African oral traditions? Why were songs imperative in African storytelling? Who are griots and what are their responsibilities to the community in African culture? What characters in the Pittsburgh Cycle exemplify African griots? What is the socially responsible theatre practice? How do African storytelling and the socially responsible theatre practice coincide or what do they have in common? How can the history of African storytelling assist theatre teachers to become more effective in their classroom and community?

### **Statement of Problem**

This thesis is endeavoring to solve how theatre educators can use the art of theatre and storytelling to encourage a form of healing to students who have been hurt by outside influences. This thesis will investigate what happens in the classroom when instructors create a safe teaching environment that models West African culture. Overall, this thesis is attempting to solve how theatre educators can capture the quintessence of African griots inside their classrooms.

### **Assumption of the Study/Expected Outcome**

The expected outcome of this thesis is that educators will use the history of African storytelling in a student-centered classroom, in order to create leaders and healers in the community. By teachers creating leaders, students can use theatre as a canvas to help make their school, community and society better through the art form of storytelling. The thesis will also help teachers understand who August Wilson was and the influence that African ideologies had



on him. Furthermore, it will aid educators to describe who African griots were, what characters in the Pittsburgh Cycle represented the characteristics, and how socially responsible theatre practice is linked to the original intention of African storytelling.

### **Significance of Study**

The significance of this study is to preserve the original intention of storytelling: to tell an important message with a moral, pass it along to the next generation, and promote a method of healing.

### **Method of Study**

This is a qualitative research that will study *Gem of the Ocean* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* of Pittsburgh Cycle. There will be comparative studies on the history of African oral traditions and how Wilson incorporates it in the Pittsburgh Cycle. The study will include reading and listening to interviews, watching productions, researching African spirituality, oral traditions, roles of griots in the community, and reading biographies about August Wilson. Lastly, thorough research will be investigated on socially responsible theatre practice, and academic journal and articles will be used to determine how storytelling can benefit the whole child.



## Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this thesis, the following terms have been defined:

**Black Nationalist:** “the sense of a psychological and philosophical return to Africa and things African” (Pinkney 27). The ideology stands on the principles of self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense in the black community. It is belief that blacks have their own culture, mythology, history, and creative motif. In many ways, the ideology believes in being separate from European culture and beliefs. The belief system surfaced strongly during the 1960’s during the Black Panther Movement.

**Blues:** a folk style of music that was originated in the 1890’s by African-Americans. The origins of this music is from work songs. “The musical style evolved from a variety of songs that African-Americans had created while in slavery” (Ruth). The emotion heard in the singer’s voice is one of indescribable pain or heartache evoked through song. According to Ruth, “it was identified by its often repetitive guitar chords and lyrical themes of lost love, injustice, poverty, and loneliness” (*Salem Press Encyclopedia*). The blues were also a main source of entertainment right after the Civil War. W.C. Handy is considered the “Father of Blues” music, composing the first song ever written, “Memphis Blues” that was described as “blues” music. “The Father of the Blues earned that title in 1912 by writing and publishing the first commercially blues song” (Nager). Famous musicians who are considered blues musicians are Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Blind Willie Johnson. Blues singers would sing with harmonicas, banjo, guitars, and violins.



**Griot:** a storyteller and oral historian that comes from the West African culture. She or he is the memory of the community. The griot is the keeper of important events, and is responsible of passing knowledge to the future generation, usually through storytelling.

**Methexis:** “a group sharing. It emphasizes audience participation, group creativity, and improvisation. As a result, whereas European theatre is meant to affect the audience-to entertain or teach- the purpose of the African tradition is to embody or to be. African ceremonies offer opportunities for improvisation, and not only the leader or priest but everyone participates, entering into the action and also into transformations of body and spirit” (Goldfarb and Wilson 7).

**Pittsburgh Cycle:** Represents the ten plays by August Wilson that were set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, except for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* which is set in Chicago. The plays include: *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, *Fences*, *Two Trains Running*, *Jitney*, *King Hedley II*, and *Radio Golf*.

**Socially Responsible Theatre Education:** “Specific challenge that students or communities face and how they have responded or want to respond. They talk with conviction as individual theatre teachers, as artists, and as member of a larger community of educators and citizens” (Lazarus 122). This form of teaching creates an atmosphere of awareness and action with a variety of theatre topics such as: race and privilege, ability and disability, and language and culture. “Some teacher-artists respond by producing plays relevant to their particular students or by developing social justice classes, or projects where issues like bullying, school violence...are considered” (Lazarus 124).



**Negro Spirituals:** songs that mixed African music and European hymns to create Negro spirituals in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. These songs were produced when Africans put into slavery converted to Christianity. African-Americans reinterpreted the music to sing it as Africans (moans, hollers, shouts, cries, etc.). Slaves also used these songs to communicate ways to freedom during the Underground Railroad. Songs include, "We are Climbin' Jacob's Ladder", "Soon I Will Be Done with the Trouble of the World", "Swing Low, Swing Chariot", "Follow the Drinking Gourd", "Go Down Moses", and "Steal Away".

## Conclusion August Wilson's Influential Linkage to Africa

August Wilson created the Pittsburgh Cycle to preserve African storytelling through his characters. With that stated, this paper will guide teachers on how to create a generation of storytellers and leaders for the community, as demonstrated by African griots found in the Pittsburgh Cycle. This thesis will reveal how storytelling can aid students to enhance their imagination and to use their creativity to solve problems in society. Lastly, this thesis is attempting to help educators capture the essence of African griots inside their classroom, becoming more so healers of a community.

"Instruction in youth is like engraving in stone" - Moroccan Proverb

### Pittsburgh Background

Fredrick August Kittie (Wilson) was born April 27, 1945 at 1727 Bedford Avenue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His family relocated to the Hill District in the neighborhood known as Hazelwood. Growing up in poor circumstances, he was born to a black mother, Daisy Wilson, and a white father, August Kittie. His father was absent for most of his life and drank heavily. "I grew up in my mother's household in a cultural environment which was black" (Rawson 7). The neighborhood, who referred to him as "Youngblood", defined, instilled, and cultivated a strong artistic warrior. He once indicated, "Hanging out in the neighborhood was like sitting around the fire, while the tribal elders talked" (Rawson 10). Wilson was immersed in black values by stating, "I learned the language, the eating habits... the gestures... concepts of beauty and justice... that my mother had learned from her mother, and which you could trace back to the first African who set foot on the continent" (Wilson *The Ground on Which I Stand* 16).



## Chapter 2: August Wilson's Influential Linkage to Africa

### Introduction

This chapter will focus on the influences of August Wilson's writing. It will explore his upbringing in the city of Pittsburgh, his musical influence through the blues, his views on politics, and the painter who inspired his playwriting. Therefore, the three areas that had a profound influence on Wilson's writing were the blues, Romare Bearden's paintings (See Appendices A-D), and the Black Power Movement. This chapter will also reveal how his influences were connected to the foundation of African principles.

“Instruction in youth is like engraving in stone”~ Moroccan Proverb

### Pittsburgh Background

Fredrick August Kittle (Wilson) was born April 27, 1945 at 1727 Bedford Avenue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His family relocated to the Hill District in the neighborhood known as Hazelwood. Growing up in poor circumstances, he was born to a black mother, Daisy Wilson, and a white father, August Kittle. His father was absent for most of his life and drank heavily. “I grew up in my mother's household in a cultural environment which was black” (Rawson 7). The neighborhood, who referred to him as “Youngblood”, defined, instilled, and cultivated a young artistic warrior. He once indicated, “Hanging out in the barbershop was like sitting around the fire, while the tribal elders talked” (Rawson 10). Wilson was immersed in black values by stating, “I learned the language, the eating habits...the gestures...concepts of beauty and justice...that my mother had learned from her mother, and which you could trace back to the first African who set foot on the continent” (Wilson *The Ground on Which I Stand* 16).



His mother was the person who encouraged him to constantly read stories. "She stressed the idea that if you can read, you can do anything..." (Moyers 66). Falsely accused of plagiarism by Mr. Biggs, who happened to be an African-American teacher in a predominately white school, Wilson continued to use the library as a source of therapy and discovery. While he stopped going to school, he continued his education at Carnegie Library. Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and W.E.B. DuBois served as his elders in the world of literature. Wilson never physically met them; however, he was highly inspired by their work. In the 1960's, Wilson began to take up poetry because writing was free, literally and figuratively. Wilson reminisced, "That's one of the things about writing-the tools are so simple...a lot of my friends were painters, and they were always trying to get money for paint, for canvases. But a pencil and paper were cheaper" (Rawson 10).

After purchasing his first typewriter, Wilson decided to partake in his own rites of passage. On April 1, 1965, he formally changed his name to August Wilson. "He had completely purged his white father from his life and had chosen to affirm his mother's African heritage" (Shannon *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* 20). And so, he became immersed in African culture. It is evident that writing became very cathartic, and there was a connection that he felt in his work. He could fulfill two of his passions: writing and expressing social consciousness within the black community. "I was interested in art and literature, and I felt that I could alter the relationship between blacks and society through the arts" (Savran *August Wilson* 21).



## Influence of the Blues

“Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll like Mine” by Bessie Smith was the song that instantly changed Wilson’s perception of the way he listened to music. He listened to it twenty-two times straight because he felt the way that Bessie Smith sang was identifiable. The sound was called the blues. Wilson noted that “the blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation” (Rawson 12). He appreciated the aesthetic of the music, as he told Bill Moyers, “I had never heard anything like it. I was literally stunned by its beauty...this spoke to something in myself. It said it’s yours...” (63).

As Africans sang in West Africa, one could hear moans and shouts that expressed one’s spirit. Wilson was not a musician and was not trained to explain musical terminology or formal terms. However, he knew pain, anger, joy, frustration, racism, and what it was like to be black in America during racial segregation. More importantly, he knew his culture and their passion for expressing themselves through story and song. He heard, metaphorically, the rhythm of a dialogue. Wilson told Carol Rosen in a 1996 interview, “I know that contained in the blues is an entire philosophical system; contained in there is a cultural response of black America to the world in which they found themselves” (199). Wilson felt that the music was a source that had directed him as a person of African descent and definitely in his writing. “The blues are life-affirming music that guides you throughout life; the blues teaches you the morality of the culture” (Sheppard 111).

The blues were created by the Africans brought to America who were enslaved. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) says that “it is certainly one of the strongest survivals in American music” (Jones 27). The blues would not be as prominent in America if it were not for the Africans who



were put into slavery. Jones states that the “blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives” (17). The ancestors of the blues were African-American work songs, and they originated their musical origins in the West Africa. The history behind the blues is important because, as in Africa, it “used folk tales in songs, lyrics, riddles, proverbs, etc..... (and) lyrics of work songs” (Jones 28). Therefore, it can be assumed that what Wilson was listening to twenty-two times straight was the sound that was linked to Africa in Bessie Smith’s voice. Wilson incorporated the blues, specifically, when his characters felt that they needed to express themselves transparently, just as Africans did before slavery. An example would be when Bynum Walker (*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*) sings because he knows Herald’s identity has been erased. “Bynum sings it because he recognizes that Loomis [Herald] is lost...unable to acknowledge the slavery of his own past” (Herrington 29).

They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone, Ohh Lordy  
 Come with forty links of chain, Ohh Lordy, Come with  
 Forty links of chain, Ohh Lordy, got my man and gone...  
 (*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* 461).

The sound of the music expresses what Wilson could not inscribe for characters to articulate. Sharon Shannon expounds, “To understand his character, one must go to the music” (*The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* 101).

### **Visual Art Influence**

Wilson was stimulated by art, and there was something familiar that he noticed when he viewed particular paintings by Romare Bearden (1911-1988). Bearden was influential in the writings of Wilson’s plays, and the playwright was thirty-two years old when he came across Bearden’s work. The painting that he saw reminded him of the sensation that he experienced



hearing Bessie Smith: it was a visual representation of the blues. Like Wilson, Bearden lived in Pittsburgh with his grandmother. She ran a boardinghouse for blacks in the 1920's who were migrating to the North. This inspired Bearden to create the painting *Mill Hand's Bucket* (See Appendix A) which inspired Wilson to write *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Bearden used collages to create his artwork, as he was highly inspired by African art with masks, sculpture, and textiles. "Bearden combines African masks with African-American faces cut out from modern magazines" (Herrington 23). To Wilson, this symbolized African-Americans trying to fit into white America. The playwright strongly contended that Africa must continue to speak to African-Americans, and he was convinced that Bearden's work did this, visually. Wilson and Bearden both represented their African ancestors through the creation of their work. Fishman notes that both used "the incorporation into their art of the elements that define traditional African performance forms" (133).

"Bearden's use of the collage is the visual equivalent of blues-music...that you sort of have to piece together as it jumps from one thing to the next" (Herrington 25). Herrington argues that the predominant factor that drew Wilson's interest to Bearden's work was the African factor. "He was particularly interested in Bearden's incorporation of traditional African elements into contemporary art...the process of African-Americans trying to meld past and future, to find their place in time, their identity" (Herrington 23). Wilson considered Bearden as a mentor and wanted to make his plays equivalent to his artwork. To this day, his "mentor's" potent artwork graces the cover to many of his plays that are cited in this thesis: "Prevalence of Ritual: Conjure Woman" on the cover of *Gem of the Ocean* (See Appendix C), "Spring Way" on the cover of *Radio Golf* (See Appendix E), and "Pittsburgh Memory" on the cover of *King Hedley II* (See Appendix B).



## Political Influences

Wilson was also an activist in his younger years. Rob Penny, a personal friend to Wilson, helped him discover tapes by Malcolm X, and Wilson went by his African name "Mbulu", which meant "strength". He continued to study the works of Malcolm X and the Muslim religion, as he became a strong and loyal member of the Black Power Movement. The cornerstone for the Black Power Movement was the Black Panther Party, a movement that was birthed right after the shock of the mistreatment of blacks during the Civil Rights Movement. The main goal was to improve the standings of black people in America.

August Wilson, Rob Penny, and Sala Udin created Black Horizons Theatre in 1968. The group was heavily influenced by the Black Arts Movement that was birthed out of the Black Power Movement. The most prolific time for black theatre was during the Black Arts Movement era in the mid-1960s. "During this era the ideology of black awareness, black nationalism, and black empowerment fostered a huge number of black playwrights and theatre groups throughout the nation" (Pinkney 23). This movement was heavily involved in protests, sit-ins, boycotts, speeches and riots. Udin recalls "the arts were integrated into our political meetings...once we began emphasizing our African heritage, we added African drums and singers to the art that was integrated into the politics" (*August Wilson: Pittsburgh in His Life and Plays*, xix).

The Black Arts Movement's, as was the Black Nationalism's, motive was to not assimilate into white society. This era included "the aesthetics of African-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, novelists, and visual artists. It was essentially a new version of the New Negro Renaissance, now renamed the New Black Renaissance" (Pinkney 26). Imamu Amiri Baraka, also known as LeRoi Jones, greatly influenced Wilson at the time. He was a leader in this particular movement. "It was his prescriptive theory on the nature of black theatre



as a revolutionary tool and weapon for positive propaganda and consciousness raising that reinforced the New Negro Renaissance ideology of DuBois (W.E.B.) in a radically political nature” (Pinkney 23).

Wilson always considered himself a Black Nationalist and a Cultural Nationalist. The ideology of Black Nationalism was rooted in the philosophies of Afrocentrism. It was “the sense of a psychological and philosophical return to Africa and things African” (Pinkney 27). In 1967, the poet and his friends created Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop. It was considered an expression of black cultural nationalism and by the 1970’s, Wilson had more of an incentive to try playwriting. While absorbed in the ideology of the Black Power Movement, he wrote a poem to Muhammad Ali: Wilson stated that the meaning of the poem “is modeled after an African praise song in which you give praises of any kind” (Shannon *Conversations with August Wilson* 119).

Muhammad Ali is a lion. He is a lion that breaks the back of wind  
Who climbs to the end of the rainbow three steps and devours the gold  
Muhammad Ali with a stomach of gold... Whose head is iron (Shannon  
*Conversations with August Wilson* 118).

Stanthmore  
PURE COTTON

## Chapter Two Conclusion of the Pittsburgh Cycle

Wilson approached his writing based off of music, art, and political justice. With that stated, all of his substantial influences had a common denominator: African linkage. The playwright had a vision while approaching his writing: to accurately display African-American culture on stage and maintain the linkage to Africa in the plays. Because he knew where he came from and valued African heritage, he was now ready to tell the *story* of Africans living in America by preserving African storytelling.

### History of African Oral Tradition

African oral traditions passed along important information and stories to the next generation without being transcribed. This included songs, proverbs and cultural sayings that had not been recorded. Storytellers have always been able to captivate the listener's ear and guide their imagination. While their stories were fascinating and entertaining, the original intention of storytelling was to preserve history and heal the community. The chief or storyteller wanted to keep the story alive and vibrant, never losing its intention. Specifically, storytelling in Africa was sacred because of the way that Africans viewed themselves with the world.

As their aesthetic and artistic perception was dissimilar from the European perspective, one of the main traditions that Africans valued was *mathesis*, a group sharing, everyone participating. "African ceremonies offer opportunities for improvisation... everyone participates, entering into the action and also into transformations of body and spirit" (Wilson and Goldfarb 4). Africans believed that everything was connected, and that "human beings were responsible for maintaining a balance with nature" (Wilson, Goldfarb 4). The overall ritual of African



### Chapter 3: African Griots of the Pittsburgh Cycle

#### Introduction

August Wilson created paradigms of African griots in the Pittsburgh Cycle. He breathed life into two specific characters who will forever preserve the spirit of African storytelling: Aunt Ester (*Gem of the Ocean*) and Bynum Walker (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*). As Wilson was deeply engrained in African culture and ideology, the foundation of African oral traditions will display how these specific characters exemplify African griots, and it will also reveal that August Wilson was the ultimate griot.

#### History of African Oral Tradition

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As their aesthetic and artistic perception was dissimilar from the European perspective, one of the main traditions that Africans valued was methexis: a group sharing; everyone participating. "African ceremonies offer opportunities for improvisation...everyone participates, entering into the action and also into transformations of body and spirit" (Wilson and Goldfarb 4). Africans believed that everything was connected, and that "human beings were responsible for maintaining a balance with nature" (Wilson Goldfarb 4). The overall ritual of African



storytelling was to be or exist. This ushered in a mystic atmosphere that was almost magical. There was power behind the words that “contained elements of realism and magic in situations...infused dramatic power that appealed to the emotions” (Hamlet 27). Storytellers were able to create a vision, inspiring others to visually see what they were describing during the story:

Just as ‘listening’ is an episodic mode of communication that helps create a ‘mythic’ world, so does ‘seeing’...the oral elaboration of a story told by an excellent teller makes the story a ‘spectacle’ in that it is visible through the storyteller’s dramatization, and the spectator visualizes it further in his mind’s eye (Zarrilli, McConachie, and Sorgenfrei 19).

Formally, the storyteller’s name was a griot. Griots, in West Africa, upheld the community’s distinctiveness. The griot was also a historian, healer, guide, teacher, and the memory of the community. Peace-maker, musician, warrior, diplomat, interpreter, and translator were names that were frequently associated with them. They served in their community to enlighten, edify, connect to ancestors, and spiritually guide others in spiritual distress. There was a rich tradition of storytelling in Africa, and it is important that the experience was shared with people, participating on accounts of past beliefs and traditions.

Songs were companions to the griots in West Africa. Griots used songs to support their storytelling and were heavily known to have instruments with them while they spoke. “African music can certainly be traced to the fact that Africans also used drums for communication...by using the drums in a kind of Morse code” (Jones 26). Songs were present in all moments in life. Griots who used music, especially the drums, were often viewed as poets. “Just as the poet uses



his voice to entertain people, so the drummer uses the drum to entertain...he is an artist in his own right" (Olupona 7). As stated previously, Wilson began his career as a poet and approached his playwriting as poetry. He once told David Savran,

Blacks do not have a history of writing...things in Africa were passed orally, your entire philosophy, your ideas about life. You have to make the philosophy interesting musically, so that someone will want to repeat it...

(26).

One could assume that if a griot passed away it was the equivalent to an archive erasing. The griot was a living library and link to the past; someone who held the memory of Africa. Their storytelling instructed listeners to take responsibility and continue the story.

### **African Griots of the Pittsburgh Cycle**

Aunt Esther (*Gem of the Ocean*) and Bynum Walker (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*) are the epitome of African griots in the Pittsburgh Cycle. They hold the essence of life and of the kindred spirit of their ancestors who came before. They have the power to transform lives effortlessly, as they embrace family, community, and Africa in their soul. They are spiritual advisors and healers who manifest characteristics of African griots by preserving history through the art form of storytelling. Aunt Esther and Bynum Walker are African griots in the Pittsburgh Cycle who are able to usher in a mystical, spiritual ceremony that influences a constructive change on an individual.

To begin, Aunt Esther, in *Gem of the Ocean*, is the personification of an African griot. A spiritual advisor for the community, she holds the essence of Africa in her inner self. This is



displayed through her knowledge, specifically, about stories that she tells about Africans during the African slave trade. Maureen Dezell states, "Aunt Ester resembles the embodiment of African wisdom and tradition..." (255). Born in 1619, the same year that Africans were brought to America, in the play she is 285 years old. While no one could live to be this age, Wilson used this number as a metaphor to show that in African culture it is important to keep history alive. She preserves the history of Africans who did not make it across the Mid-Atlantic through the folktale "City of Bones".

Aunt Ester is the only character in the Pittsburgh Cycle to have the map of the city and several in the community gather at her home to remember their ancestors. Wilson stated in an interview, "There are hundreds of millions of bones of slaves in chains, entangled in ships. The city is part of all of our history, our experience" (Dezell 255). In the play, Citizen Barlow has come to Aunt Ester because he has committed a crime. He needs her assistance on how to become right with himself, spiritually and emotionally. She adamantly reminds him that he must remember his ancestors. The way that she does this is through vividly illustrating the "City of Bones":

Take a look at this map, Mr. Citizen...that's a city.

It's a made of bones. Pearly white bones. All the buildings

and everything is made of bones. I seen it. I been there,

Mr. Citizen. My mother live there....They were people who

didn't make it across the water...Everything I had ever

known was gone to me...I can take you there if you want

to go...that's the center of the world.... (*Gem of the Ocean* 52).



Aunt Ester sets up a ceremony for Citizen to connect with his ancestors in the “City of Bones”. Solly, Black Mary, and Eli, who are all close friends of Aunt Ester, help reenact the events of Africans and their journey across the Mid-Atlantic. “African oral narratives are delivered by storytellers with the capacity to dramatize the story” (Chilala 160). She begins to narrate and act out what is felt or seen on the boat, as though they are there during slavery: the wind, the sky, the rocking, being at the bottom on the boat, and the people moaning. Citizen is able to vividly see the illustration that Aunt Ester creates, which Africans griots were able to do as mentioned previously. In his imagination, Citizen sees the person who was falsely accused of the crime that he actually committed.

Citizen has now become part of the reenactment. Aunt Ester tells Citizen that he will never have peace if he does not admit the crime he has committed. “You got to tell him, Mr. Citizen. Otherwise you’ll never be right with yourself” (*Gem of the Ocean* 69). Once Citizen sees the bones come to life, the stage directions notes that “Citizen is terror-stricken to the point where he cannot breathe” (*Gem of the Ocean* 66). Aunt Ester never leaves his side as he is under the mystic influence. She speaks the words: “The truth has to stand in the light. You got to get your soul washed. You got to tell him, Mr. Citizen...Peter denied Christ three times. You might not get lucky like Peter to have three chances” (*Gem of the Ocean* 69).

Likewise, Bynum Walker in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is the shaman and ultimately the African griot of the boardinghouse. Bynum is the only one in the cast who is the “African healer and root worker” (Shannon *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* 13). *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is set in 1911. During this time African-Americans gathered to the North, while escaping from extreme racism of the South. People in the community would receive advice and spiritual direction from Bynum. Herald Loomis is in search of his African identity, after



working for a chain gang for seven years and is in need of a transformation. Bynum recalls, through storytelling, the day that his spiritual transformation took place, as he encountered the mystical character the Shiny Man:

I wandered around there looking for that road, trying to find my way back from that big place...and I looked over and seen my daddy standing there. He was the same size he always was, except for his hands and his mouth... My daddy called me to him. Said he had been thinking about me and it grieved him to see me in the world carrying other people's songs and not having my own. Told me he was gonna show me how to find my song (*Joe Turner's* 441)

Bynum uses the story as an illustration for Herald Loomis to remember his African identity. He tells him, "Mr. Loomis, you a man who forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it...a fellow forget that and he forget who he is...when a man forgets his song he goes off in search of it...till he find out he's got it with him all the time (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* 462). Wilson has noted that 'song' represents identity. "...in *Joe Turner* the song was the African identity...connecting yourself to that and understanding that this is who you are" (Moyers 68).

During the storytelling ceremony, which resembles the "City of Bones", the characters of the boardinghouse perform the "juba dance" which "...itself is West African for 'ancestor' " (Herrington 24). This is a replica of the shouts and call-response dances that Africans used to partake in during slavery: humming, swaying, almost seen as a religious practice. As Bynum encourages African songs, narration, and dance into the atmosphere with everyone participating, Herald begins to feel a spiritual transformation. The stage direction notes, "Loomis [Herald] begins to speak in tongues and dance around the kitchen" (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* 456).



Bynum immediately attends to Herald, never leaving his side as he is also under a strong supernatural power. Bynum asks Herald what he sees, as he tells Bynum he sees bones coming out of the water. Herald is in a state of shock, as he physically loses his capability to stand. As Citizen Barlow in *Gem of the Ocean* was not able to breathe, Herald is unable to rise up and walk. *Ocean 70*). Aunt Ester helps Citizen find his responsibility to help blacks fight for

### **Transformation through the Spirit of Storytelling**

Both Citizen Barlow and Herald Loomis enter into vulnerable states during the storytelling ceremonies, even becoming physically affected. This represents the metaphor that society has affected them, literally and figuratively, and they ultimately need a healing. Aunt Ester and Bynum Walker share a common theme: bones coming back to life. Citizen and Herald describe to their African griots what is seen as they see the pictures of the bones in their imagination. Both also have an out of body experience. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen tells Aunt Ester, "There it is! It's made of bones! All the buildings and everything. Head bones and leg bones..." (*Gem of the Ocean* 68). Herald Loomis tells Bynum Walker, "I done seen bones rise up out of the water....rise up and walk across the water. Bones walking on top of the water.... (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* 456). Aunt Ester and Bynum are the only individuals who can talk to both Citizen and Herald while they visualize, vividly, the bones coming from the water.

It is imperative to note that the ceremonies represent a ritual experience. "Although works of spiritual realism might at times seem like magical realism, these expressions are rooted in the cultural connection to Africa..." (Young 134). Both griots in the Pittsburgh Cycle influenced a metamorphosis to occur with both of their pupils. First of all the griotte (a female griot), Aunt Ester, used her storytelling technique to inspire Citizen Barlow to experience the journey that his ancestors had to endure across the Mid-Atlantic. He had to do this in order to



take responsibility for the next generation. She is more than a storyteller and more of a spiritual guide. Citizen Barlow leaves Aunt Ester's home a changed man than he came, solely based off of the power behind her words. Once Citizen admits that he has stolen the nails to his ancestors, he becomes a new man. The stage directions notes that he is "...reborn a man of the people..." (*Gem of the Ocean* 70). Aunt Ester helps Citizen find his responsibility to help blacks fight for freedom.

Similarly, Bynum, as a griot, is able to help Herald find his identity, as a man no longer bound to chains. Bynum is in more way like a father figure to Herald. He takes time with him as he enters the boardinghouse, he tells Herald that he lost his identity while working for Joe Turner, and was there with him during the storytelling ceremony. Bynum uses his storytelling method as a canvas to aid Loomis to find his voice, family, and ultimately his identity. He is free from Joe Turner and free from his old self. The stage direction states at the end of the play "Having found his song, the song of self-sufficiency...he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions" (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* 470).

### **Communal Space/Methexis**

Everyone partakes in the storytelling ceremony in both plays. This proves methexis: a group sharing, as it was a communal, participatory experience. The storytelling ceremony was sacred, a ritual and shared experience, as it states "...instead of the story being told by one person, the storyteller, others are involved..." (Chilala 160). In *Gem of the Ocean*, the characters Eli, Solly and Black Mary, sing a song that resembles a Negro Spiritual, "Twelve Gates to the City". They accompany Aunt Ester during her storytelling ceremony, as they pretend to be many characters. Specifically, Solly and Eli put on European masks, whipping Citizen. Aunt Ester has



created a communal, safe environment to re-enact the story. Citizen, because he is in a vulnerable state, has to be able to trust those surrounding him during this sacred ceremony of storytelling of his ancestors. "Citizen Barlow sits and begins to cry....Black Mary comes over and wipes Citizen's brow" (*Gem of the Ocean* 70).

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, it gives specific instructions that, "Bynum sits at the table and drums...it should be as African as possible..." (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* 455). Every character invests in the storytelling ceremony: Jeremy drums on the table, Seth pulls out a harmonica, and other characters shuffle, clap their hands, and stomp around the table, which mimics West African culture. August Wilson purposefully made sure that all the characters were just as much a part of the ceremony as Bynum was. It is a communal, mystic, shared and safe environment. Because of this, lives were effectively transformed.

### **August Wilson-The African Griot**

Because Wilson is the ultimate African griot who gave Aunt Ester and Bynum the words to tell, it is fair to investigate why he decided to use the theme of bones to illustrate the tale. He used mysticism to stay true to African storytelling. He put the theme of bones in the stories for African-Americans to remember four hundred years of slavery. Wilson told Kim Powers "... to witness bones rising up out of the ocean, taking on flesh and walking up on the land is the connection with the ancestors, the Africans who were lost during the Middle Passage...this is who we are" (9). Wilson wanted African-Americans to reconnect and reassemble as a community. Whether one has committed a crime or erased African heritage, through the power of storytelling, Wilson reminds those of African descent to remember their past in order to progress towards the future. He was a teacher, historian, and musician (with his knowledge of the blues that he incorporated into his stories).



### Chapter 3 Conclusion

Citizen Barlow and Herald Loomis learned from their griots, just as the community in West Africa learned from their griots. Aunt Ester taught Citizen Barlow to accept responsibility, and Bynum Walker guided Herald Loomis in finding his identity. Both griots were guides in their own right. "The African narrative tale...is one of the most significant traditional art forms whose effectiveness as a tool for educating children" (Chilala 159). Subconsciously, as one reads through the Pittsburgh Cycle, elements of African storytelling unveils itself. Through the songs, storytelling, and ancestral connection, August Wilson carefully crafted a masterpiece of preserving African culture. The words on the page speak of the African-American experience in the twentieth century; however, the *way* that the stories are told mimics African storytelling.



## Chapter 4 –Socially Responsible Theatre Practice inside the Classroom

This chapter will examine how socially responsible theatre practice and the original intention of African storytelling offer the power to heal and transform those hurt or damaged specifically by society. Those in leadership roles are viewed as healers, and the pupils of both practices aim to solve their problems through storytelling. August Wilson created Aunt Ester and Bynum Walker as paradigms for theatre teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Socially Responsible Theatre Practice

As Aunt Ester and Bynum Walker transformed the lives of Citizen Barlow and Herald Loomis through the sacred ceremony of storytelling in a nurturing atmosphere, theatre educators can create the same environment. Theatre educators have the opportunity to uphold the spirit of Aunt Ester and Bynum Walker by making society better through art. One way to do this is to create a communal, shared, and sacred atmosphere. As a result, students will realize they are in the classroom to serve others, that they can be transparent about their problems, can be transformed through the art of theatre, and that their classroom is a community. The socially responsible theatre practice is a teaching method that allows theatre educators to capture the spirit of Aunt Ester and Bynum Walker of August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle.

Socially responsible theatre practice covers critical issues and conversations that expound beyond the classroom that students often deal with in everyday life. This method helps students to strategize how to help the community through art of theatre. Subjects such as race, culture, poverty, social class, disability, bullying, religion, etc. are examples of subjects that are discussed. This teaching method encourages dialogue, debate, and for one to discover their own voice in the process. Joan Lazarus noticed a pattern when she asked teachers about socially



responsible practice. "These teacher-artists recognized there is a need of some kind in their school or community, to acknowledge that theatre could be...a powerful tool...that they are in a unique position to address this need, identify strategies to address the need...to take action to effect positive change" (Lazarus 123). This practice is an aid to teach students to empathize with an individual or a group of people, as Citizen Barlow and Herald Loomis were able to do through the "City of Bones". Interestingly, as Citizen and Herald viewed the bones, Aunt Ester and Bynum never doubted what they saw in their mind. It was not until Citizen and Herald dared to see what was in their imagination that they were able to discover themselves and their purpose.

### **Curing Through Theatre**

African griots and socially responsible theatre teachers share a common denominator: both believe that art has the power and spiritual essence to heal an individual. Jo Beth Gonzalez expresses how theatre education can be viewed as spiritual. "Our work as theatre teachers is inherently spiritual because theatre exists to examine the human condition" (Gonzalez 182). Gonzalez agrees that, unlike traditional educators, theatre educators have the opportunity to awaken students, spiritually. The definition of spirituality, according to The American Counseling Association, is defined as "a capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons. It moves the individual towards knowledge, love, meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness, and compassion" (Hancock 165). The classroom can be regarded as a location to be transparent about problems in society and experience an atmosphere of connectedness in a methexis classroom community.

August Wilson would have agreed with the previous statement, as he spoke at Princeton University in 1996 on how the theatre has the power to restore an individual. "I believe in the American theatre. I believe in its power to inform about the human condition, I believe in its



power to heal” (Wilson *The Ground on Which I Stand* 46). Socially responsible theatre practice needs to be in a student-centered environment. Because the teacher’s objective is not about the performance but the process by which students are learning, students are coached to lead conversations with the guidance of the teacher. Michael Rohd also agrees that “theatre allows us to converse with our souls...to discover ways of living with ourselves and others...to learn about each other, to heal, and to grow” (xix). This is the same model that Africans believed in regarding storytelling; to be and to exist with ourselves, as previously stated. Learning about each other’s pain, trials, or anger creates a family atmosphere that is trusting, caring, and compassionate. It is spiritual.

### **Communal/Sacred Environment**

A learning community has the chance to allow students to feel welcomed. “One overarching aspect of socially responsible theatre education is the sense of belonging...being noticed and valued...students in these programs often speak of their secondary theatre program as ‘community’, ‘home’, ‘family’ and a place ‘where I feel I belong’” (Lazarus 157). At the beginning of *Gem of the Ocean*, Eli states that Aunt Ester’s house is a “peaceful house” (p.7). In African culture, the belief of methexis is extremely significant. Everyone is a part during the ceremony or performance; it takes a village to heal, perform, and to support. Similarly, participatory theatre stresses the importance of breaking down the wall between performer and spectator, as everyone is invited. Theatre educators can have the same atmosphere in their classroom in order to captivate the spirit of an African griot. Aunt Ester and Bynum Walker used African traditions: offered improvisation, everyone participated in the ceremonies, and while they participated transformations of body and spirit began to take place for Citizen Barlow and Herald Loomis. The connection between the teacher and student has the ability to be



transparent, trustworthy, and caring. As the griots of the Pittsburgh Cycle and African culture, those of the community listened to their healers. They did not necessarily come looking for the answer; they were searching for a healing. Healing is a progression. The healing does not always come instantly; however, the griot helps the individual find the path that leads to a healing.

The relationship between the student and teacher is very important when building trust. Joan Lazarus agrees by stating that it helps when teachers are “consistent in showing compassion and encouraging reflection, inquiry, and ownership in their classrooms...and all other interactions with their students” (Lazarus 163). While there does need to be a professional line that is set, boundaries developed, theatre teachers can display leadership to their students. Rebecca Jallings agrees that when a community is created, it all goes back to the mystic experience that one will experience while inside a theatre classroom. “What happens in a classroom between the kids in the class and the teacher...that community of people, is mystical and sacred...you can’t expect people to have a mystical and spiritual and sacred experience in a group of people whose names they don’t even know” (Jallings 163).



## Conclusion Lesson Plans

Theatre educators in today's classroom hold the power to transform lives through the art of storytelling. Storytelling is powerful, magical, mystical, and influential. Students' lives are very impressionable after they have been hurt by outside influences or society. The theatre classroom has the opportunity to be viewed as safe, trustworthy and communal. It is powerful when those in leadership create the conversation of solving problems to be reflected on the stage, school, and in the community. By modeling the spirit of African griots (Aunt Ester and Bynum Walker) storytellers and leaders will be created; those who teach, inspire, tell stories, and use art as a platform to preserve and serve. August Wilson was a genius to preserve African storytelling, and he knew the importance of honoring his past. African griots did not just tell stories, they transformed lives.

### 1. Form a family (ritual) atmosphere

First of all, creating a family atmosphere is very important, one that feels communal and sacred. As opposed to creating classroom rules, create family promises. Each family member is responsible for each member and for themselves to uphold promises for the community. Secondly, the classroom has the option to be a community. As August Wilson kept the majority of his plays inside the city of Pittsburgh, theatre teachers can show students how important their community is to each other. Emphasize that in this community you can be yourself, that you are safe and that you are a family. Teachers will then become advisors, leaders, mentors, rather than just teachers. Creating a ritual that is done before or after class (a movement piece, song, or any creative effort to instill a family/tribal atmosphere) will foster in a family setting. For example, a strong movement piece is an excellent example for students to model. If a pair of students stand in front of another, student A mirrors what student B is doing. Students A and B will switch,



## Chapter 5: Lesson Plans

The theatre classroom can be an atmosphere that not only preserves storytelling but that creates dialogue. Educators have the opportunity to implement lessons that heal and create social change not only on the stage but outside of the theatre. This chapter includes lesson plans that can be applied into the theatre classroom. Teachers are encouraged to use these lessons to promote August Wilson's legacy, storytelling, preserving heritage, healing and ultimately becoming a community leader. The objective of this unit is to create an environment where students can grow as performers but more so as individuals. There are two important elements that theatre teachers can include in their classroom that mimics the atmosphere of Aunt Ester and Bynum's sanctuary.

### 1. Form a family (ritual) atmosphere

First of all, creating a family atmosphere is very important, one that feels communal and sacred. As opposed to creating classroom rules, create family promises. Each family member is responsible for each member and for themselves to uphold promises for the community. Secondly, the classroom has the option to be a community. As August Wilson kept the majority of his plays inside the city of Pittsburgh, theatre teachers can show students how important *their* community is to each other. Emphasize that in this community you can be yourself, that you are safe and that you are a family. Teachers will then become advisors, leaders, mentors, rather than just teachers. Creating a ritual that is done before or after class (a movement piece, song, or any creative effort to instill a family/tribal atmosphere) will foster in a family setting. For example, a strong movement piece is an excellent example for students to model. If a pair of students stand in front of another, student A mirrors what student B is doing. Students A and B will switch,



giving student B the opportunity to lead. The leader will give a specific calling without speaking (clapping their hands, whistling, etc.). Next, the class will face the leader and will mimic what movement she or he does. Finally, everyone is doing the same movement with the leader. This represents a community coming together, keeping the story going, and encouraging creativity. This is an excellent example because students will not feel put on the spot, it allows everyone to lead, and it ends with everyone on the same accord. Each time this is done it would be great to see different students paired with each other.

## 2. Methexis environment

The community or classroom has the opportunity to create an environment where everyone participates. Whether they are discussing what is currently happening in society or being a part of storytelling experience, everyone can be involved. By doing this, leaders reveal how to use art as a way to express their pain, frustration, or anger *together*. It tells students that anything that is difficult to go through, with proper guidance, may create a beautiful art piece. Moreover, it demonstrates that a person can feel supported by their community when faced with trials; that different forms of art can inspire someone to create something lovely. As Aunt Ester and Bynum encouraged Citizen and Herald to imagine during the “City of Bones”, they also heartened the whole house to be a part of experience; it took a village. Lastly, too many rehearsals may affect the methexis environment. The goal is for students to create and express themselves through storytelling with the community for a *healing*, not for a production. By creating a family community and creating a methexis environment, students will be inspired to accept responsibility, generate a group dialogue, and use the art form of theatre to make society better.



“It is here that process drama and traditional African narrative tales meet-the need to develop the personality of the child...to enrich the child’s knowledge and abilities” (Chilala 161). Bynum Walker can be used as a paradigm who exemplified an African griot: one who was a leader. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* preserves African storytelling principles for the next generation, as they will become healers and griots themselves. The lessons are geared towards high school students (10<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> grade) in an Advanced Drama class. These lessons follow the guidelines of Georgia Theatre Performing Art Standards. Topics such as storytelling, creative movement, tableau (picture) work, ensemble games, drawing inspiration from other art forms and social responsible theatre practice are covered. At the end of each lesson, there is a brief description on how to create a communal atmosphere for your classroom, one that mimics West African culture.

“He who learns, teaches” ~Ethiopian Proverb



Unit: August Wilson

Grade: 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

Class: Advanced Drama I

### Prerequisites

#### Background of African Storytelling

[http://teachers.yale.edu/curriculum/viewer/initiative\\_09.01.08\\_u](http://teachers.yale.edu/curriculum/viewer/initiative_09.01.08_u)

Georgia Performing Arts Standards:

TAHSADLE: Analyzing and evaluating literature, and electronic media

#### Background of August Wilson:

[http://www.augustwilson.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/The\\_Life\\_and\\_Work\\_of\\_August\\_Wilson\\_Slide\\_Show.pdf](http://www.augustwilson.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/The_Life_and_Work_of_August_Wilson_Slide_Show.pdf)

TAHSADLE: Examining the roles of theater as a reflection of past and present conditions

c. Researches and defends the role of theater in society

#### Text Required:

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* by August Wilson

#### Teaching Aids (not required)

<http://www.blackstorytellers.com> via

<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/books/anansi-the-spider-by-gerald-mcdermott/>

**Objective:** The students will identify where African oral traditions are found throughout *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the various characters of the novel, or to tell a story and have it strong.

**Introduction/Game:** Students gather in a circle and share. The teacher chooses a quote or sentence to one student. The goal of the activity is for the student to repeat the quote to get back to the teacher or leader. After one student has spoken, each person can create a different phrase that represents the quote. This should happen each person in turn a different quote that they create. (The first round quote can be as direct or as indirect as the teacher wants. "I think I just saw a spider on the floor"). The second round, students should be given a more abstract quote within the message: "In order to make things better, I must make a positive change today." The purpose is for the students that with the bold faced message of the quote, students respond to what they know what was being told. Encourage each student to say a new quote after each round has passed.

**Individual Activity:** Each student will choose a 20-30-sec. by Bynum. Students will decide what words, phrases, or gestures are to be repeated. They will create a rhythm for the part of the monologue. Audience participation is vital in African storytelling, therefore, this must also be incorporated into the informal performance (ex. having the audience repeat what words or participate in a particular movement once they hear a particular word). An informal presentation will be performed by each student. The student can decide what the moral of the monologue is for Bynum and for themselves. They will present this to the class. (Students may choose the same monologue).



**Unit:** August Wilson

**Grade:** 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

**Class:** Advanced Drama I

**Lesson 1: Joe Turner's Come and Gone and Storytelling**

**Georgia Performing Arts Standards:**

**TAHSADI.1 Analyzing and constructing meaning from theatrical experiences, dramatic literature, and electronic media**

c. Constructs arguments that relate the themes of a theatre production to the enhancement of the human experience.

**TAHSADI.8 Examining the roles of theatre as a reflection of past and present civilizations**

c. Researches and defends the role of theatre as an educational tool.

**Teaching Aids (not required)**

<http://www.blackstorytellers.com/videos.html>

<https://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/multimedia/VideoStories/power-of-theater/august-wilson>

**Objective:** The students will identify where African oral traditions are found throughout *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*; the overall objective of this lesson is to tell a story and pass it along.

**Introduction/Game:** Students gather in a standing circle. The teacher whispers a quote or sentence to one student. The goal of the activity is for the same sentence or quote to get back to the teacher or leader. After one whispers the quote, each person can create a different pose that represents the quote. This should inspire each person to have a different pose that they create. (The first round quote can be as trivial or amusing as the teacher intends: "I think I just saw a spider on the floor!". The second round, however, needs to have a moral awareness within the message: "In order to make society better, I must make a positive change today..."). Explain to the students that with the bold facial expressions/different postures stimulates others to want to know what was being told. Encourage each student to say a new quote after one round has passed.

**Individual Activity:** Each student will choose a monologue by Bynum. Students will decide what words, phrases, or gestures are to be repeated. They will create a rhythm for the pace of the monologue. Audience participation is vital in African storytelling; therefore, this must also be incorporated into the informal performance (ex: having the audience repeat what words or participate in a particular movement once they hear a particular word). An informal presentation will be performed by each student. The student can decide what the moral of the monologue is for Bynum and for themselves. They will present this to the class. (Students may choose the same monologue).



**Debrief:**

In a sitting circle: What is a story? Why is it important today? How important was preserving history in story and passing it along? How important is it to tell a story with bold movements/and strong vocals? After reading *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, what is the story? What is the moral of the story? (10 minutes)

**Homework:** What are some of the principles that we should preserve as a class so that the next class will know what we value as a theatre family? Teachers should encourage the following principles: respect, loyalty, honesty, perseverance, teamwork, community outreach, helping others, etc. The students should write a list of five principles and pick which one they think is the most important for the class. End with the information that leaders never keep important information just for them; they always passed it along. Also, inform the students that the class is now officially a community.

**Community Closing Ritual:** Teachers can encourage their "community" to come up with their own ceremony to close each class: singing a song, performing a dance or movement; something special and unique.

**Main Activity:**

The teacher will ask students what are the characteristics of a well-rounded leader? Students will be asked to describe characteristics of Bynum in the story. How would you describe his storytelling? Remind students what the traits characteristics were of African griots.

In a group, students will discuss what they think it means "to find one's song", as Bynum helped Herald to do. His "song" was binding people together, connecting relationships. Each group will come up with an acronym for "S.O.N.G" based off of what they think it can represent as a leader and storyteller. They will present it to the class. How can their "S.O.N.G." help heal society to make it better?



**Unit:** August Wilson

**Grade:** 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

**Class:** Advanced Drama I

**Lesson 2:** The Griot in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

**Georgia Performing Arts Standards:**

**TAHSADI.1 Analyzing and constructing meaning from theatrical experiences, dramatic literature, and electronic media**

c. Constructs arguments that relate the themes of a theatre production to the enhancement of the human experience.

**TAHSADI.3 Acting by developing, communicating, and sustaining roles within a variety of situations and environments**

c. Creates characters using the tools and resources of acting to a variety of formal and informal performances.

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**Objective:** To demonstrate how Bynum Walker exemplified traits of a griot through *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

**Introduction/Game:** Each student walks around the room. They will each be given a name that is of nature (sun, tree, bird, etc.). Explain that Africans believed that everything was connected, including nature. Individually, they can come up with their own call for the community to come to hear a story that is associated with their nature name. As students begin walking around the room, the teacher calls out a name. If it is their name that they have been assigned, the students will do their specific calling that they have created. As the other students gather to them, the storyteller will present their principles that they feel should be preserved for the class and the community. They demonstrate through strong facial expression, body movement, and audience participation why they feel strongly about the principle. The point of this game is to teach students that griots gathered the community to tell something important, to make society better.

**Main Activity:**

The teacher will ask students what are the characteristics of a well-rounded leader? Students will be asked to describe characteristics of Bynum in the story. How would you describe his storytelling? Remind students what the traits characteristics were of African griots.

In a group, students will discuss what they think it means "to find one's song", as Bynum helped Herald to do. His "song" was binding people together; connecting relationships. Each group will come up with an acronym for "S.O.N.G" based off of what they think it can represent as a leader and storyteller. They will present it to the class. How can their "S.O.N.G." help heal society to make it better?



**Debrief:** Explain to the students that their principles that they spoke about at the beginning of class are now their “songs” or responsibility; which means it is what they represent in the classroom and in the community. How are griots leaders? How did Bynum display leadership in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*? Why it is important to have responsibility? How can a story be used to pass along responsibility? Do you know where responsibility can be improved in the classroom, school, or community?

**Homework:** Students will type out a one-page fictional story (folktale) that exemplifies Bynum’s folktale of the “City of Bones”. The story will be based off of their principle to preserve for the class. The students will also have to incorporate an animal or trickster into the story, such as *Anansi the Spider*. A rubric should be discussed so that the students will know how to adequately prepare for the presentation.

### Community Closing Ritual

#### Teaching Aid (not required)

<https://historymatters.com.edu/d/3753>

<http://www.ohs.org/theblues/s/learning/askvblues.html>

**Objective:** Students will understand the influence and importance of having songs during storytelling.

**Introduction:** Students will listen to a work song (using one of the links in the Teaching Aid). They will show through tableaux what feeling, emotion, or picture that comes to mind. The student will create a movement, all with feelings what they do. Each student in the group can take the lead with movement. Each group should try to be charged to create at least three different pictures based off of the song.

**Lecture:** The teacher will discuss how griots use metaphors and songs were to griots to African storytelling. Students will understand why it was to be responsible in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. The teacher can talk about how the work song is the origin to the blues, which August Wilson was inspired by.

**Main Activity:** The blues are found throughout *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*.

Students will be assigned to groups (3-6). The group will collectively consider what adolescents have to deal with in today’s society: peer pressure, school, bullying, cyberbullying, being late, etc. They must create a scene (with no dialogue). Students should, however, have a leader who begins a call and response. A leader will call and the others will respond/repeat the call. (For example: “Don’t bully her?” “It’s not right” can be repeated. A leader will begin the call, as others repeat the way it is called). The call and response can be as



**Unit:** August Wilson

**Grade:** 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

**Class:** Advanced Drama I

**Lesson Title 3:** Songs in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

**Georgia Performing Arts Standards:**

**TAHSADI.4 Designing and executing artistic and technical elements of theatre**

c. Collaborates with other members of a creative team to create and execute formal and informal theatrical performance.

**TAHSADI.7 Integrating various art forms, other content areas, and life experiences to create theatre**

a. Examines how theatre incorporates all art forms via a collaborative process.

**Teaching Aid (not required)**

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5758>

<http://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/essaysblues.html>

**Objective:** Students will understand the influence and importance of having songs during storytelling.

**Introduction:** Students will listen to a work song (using one of the links in the Teaching Aid). They will show through tableau what feeling, emotion, or picture that comes to mind. One student will create a movement, all will follow what they do. Each student in the group can take the lead with movement. Each group should be encouraged to create at least three different pictures based off of the song.

**Lecture** The teacher will discuss how important instruments and songs were to griots in African storytelling. Students will understand why music is so imperative in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The teacher can talk about how the work song is the father to the blues, which August Wilson was inspired by.

**Main Activity:** The blues are found throughout *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Students will be assigned to groups (3-4). The group will collectively consider what adolescents have to deal with in today's society: peer pressure, school, bullying, cyberbullying, home life, etc. They must create a scene (with no dialogue). Students should; however, have a leader who begins a call and response. A leader will call and the others will respond/repeat their call. (For example: "Don't bully her"/ "It's not right" can be repeated. A leader will begin the call, as others repeat the way it is called). The call and response can be as



**Date:** August rhythmic (slow, fast, mellow or poetic) as they would like for it to be. However, it must create the mood of the scene.

**Grade:** 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

**Class:** Advanced Drama I

**Debrief:** How do songs tell stories? Why do you think August Wilson put songs into this play? What type of mood did it create? As a community during the call and response scene, how was the call and response helping to tell the story? How does that scene fall into having responsibility? This was very important in African culture and oral tradition.

**Georgia Performing Arts Standards:**

### Community Closing Ritual

**Notes:** During the main activity, teachers should encourage students that one person needs a send out a call, as the group responds. This can be one leader calling the entire scene or it can be a different person each time. Motivate students to create movement along with call and response. Remember to tell students that call and response songs birthed the blues, which are found throughout *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

### Teaching Aid (not required)

<http://www.beardenfoundation.org/>

<http://africainal.com/the-best-72-african-wise-proverbs/>

See Appendix A

**Objective:** The students will create collages based off of their principles.

**Introduction:** Students will be paired into groups of two or three. The teacher will show the students the picture of Bearden's "Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket" (See Appendix A). Students will be asked what they see in the picture. There will be a list of African proverbs placed in front of the classroom. Groups will come up and decide which proverb they feel goes with the picture. At that moment, they must base a scene around "Mill Hand's Bucket". The group must begin the top of the scene with the actual pose of the picture. Each group should have a strong beginning, middle, and end. This activity will teach students that visual arts can inspire a play or scene. The proverb should represent the moral of the scene.

**Lecture:** The teacher will discuss Romare Bearden, his artwork and how he influenced August Wilson. "Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket" influenced Wilson to write *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

**Main Activity:** Students will create a collage that represents their folktales that they have created to tell the class for their folktale that they will present. Their collages will fit into the space of the continent of Africa. Each student will explain the collage and how it represents their story and the difference that they want to make in the classroom and community.



**Unit:** August Wilson

**Grade:** 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

**Class:** Advanced Drama I

**Lesson 4:** The influence of Romare Bearden in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

**Georgia Performing Arts Standards:**

**TAHSADI.4 Designing and executing artistic and technical elements of theatre**

c. Collaborates with other members of a creative team to create and execute formal and informal theatrical performance.

**TAHSADI.7 Integrating various art forms, other content areas, and life experiences to create theatre**

a. Examines how theatre incorporates all art forms via a collaborative process.

**Teaching Aid (not required)**

<http://www.beardenfoundation.org/>

<http://afritorial.com/the-best-72-african-wise-proverbs/>

See Appendix A

**Objective:** The students will create collages based off of their principles.

**Introduction:** Students will be paired into groups of two or three. The teacher will show the students the picture of Bearden's "Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket" (See Appendix A). Students will be asked what they see in the picture. There will be a list of African proverbs placed in front of the classroom. Groups will come up and decide which proverb they feel goes with the picture. At that moment, they must base a scene around "Mill Hand's Bucket". The group must begin the top of the scene with the actual pose of the picture. Each group should have a strong beginning, middle, and end. This activity will teach students that visual arts can inspire a play or scene. The proverb should represent the moral of the scene.

**Lecture:** The teacher will discuss Romare Bearden, his artwork and how he influenced August Wilson. "Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket" influenced Wilson to write *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

**Main Activity:** Students will create a collage that represents their folktales that they have created to tell the class for their folktale that they will present. Their collages will fit into the space of the continent of Africa. Each student will explain the collage and how it represents their story and the difference that they want to make in the classroom and community.



**Debrief:** Does a story have to be long in order to have a strong impact? How does a collage tell stories? What message do you think inspired Wilson to write about *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*?

Class: Advanced Drama I

## Community Closing Ritual

### Lesson 5: Storytelling Presentation

**Notes:** Teachers should have supplies for the students to make collages. Newspaper, magazines, pictures printed off of the internet, etc. are great to work with. Encourage students not to draw but to create their pictures based off of collages that they create. The teacher should already have an outline of Africa for students to put their collages in. See outline of Africa.

human experience.

TAHNSADL3 Acting by developing, communicating, and sustaining roles within a variety of situations and environments.

c) Creates character using the tools and resources of acting in a variety of formal and informal performances.

**Objective:** Students will present a formal storytelling presentation to the class and apply the classroom principles and responsibility to become a griot.

**Circle of Proverbs:** The entire class should gather in a circle. Remind students that one of the most important elements to storytelling was the rhythm of the drum. The leader will produce a drum beat (as creative/rhythmic as they choose) as students take turns saying positive words or statements. If they want to say their statement, they must stand in the center of the circle. Teachers should make this as fun and rhythmic as possible.

**Preparation for presentation:** Students will answer the following questions: why is it important to preserve stories? How do you intend to make your story memorable with your presentation? (uniformity, vocal inflection, body movement, strong facial expression, etc.)

**Main Activity:** Students will recite the rituals that they created that represents the principles of the class. They will also have creative input incorporated into their story (including pre-recorded). Students should have the story memorized. Students must encourage some form of audience participation and should gather the audience to them, as they did in Lesson 2.

### Debrief:

Students will sit in a circle and the teacher should gather their folktales/stories. The teacher should have a ceremony to signify that the student's folktales will now be preserved for the rest of the class (generation). The new class (generation) will know their stories and apply their principles to the classroom and community. Their collages that were created will also hang on the Wall of Wisdom. (Debriefers can note which they keep the folktales/what they choose.)



**Unit:** August Wilson

**Grade:** 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

**Class:** Advanced Drama I

### Lesson 5: Storytelling Presentation

#### Georgia Performing Arts Standards:

#### TAHSADI.1 Analyzing and constructing meaning from theatrical experiences, dramatic literature, and electronic media

c. Constructs arguments that relate the themes of a theatre production to the enhancement of the human experience.

#### TAHSADI.3 Acting by developing, communicating, and sustaining roles within a variety of situations and environments

c. Creates characters using the tools and resources of acting to a variety of formal and informal performances.

**Objective:** Students will present a formal storytelling presentation to the class and apply the classroom principles and responsibility to become a griot.

**Circle of Proverbs:** The entire class should gather in a circle. Remind students that one of the most important elements to storytelling was the rhythm of the drum. The leader will produce a drum beat (as creative/rhythmic as they choose) as students take turns saying positive words or statements. If they want to say their statement, they must stand in the center of the circle. Teachers should make this as fun and rhythmic as possible.

**Preparation for presentation:** Students will answer the following questions: why is it important to preserve stories? How do you intend to make your story memorable with your presentation (*instruments, vocal inflation, body movement, strong facial expression, etc.*)?

**Main Activity:** Students will recite the folktale that they created that represents the principles of the class. They will also have creative sound incorporated into their story (nothing pre-recorded). Students should have the story memorized. Students must encourage some form of audience participation and should gather the audience to them, as they did in Lesson 2.

#### Debrief:

Students will sit in a circle and the teacher should gather their folktales/stories. The teacher should have a ceremony to signify that the student's folktales will now be preserved for the next class (generation). The new class (generation) will know their stories and apply their principles to the classroom and community. Their collages that were created will also hang on the Wall of Wisdom. (Educators can name where they keep the folktales what they choose).



How do you intend to practice the principle that you spoke about today? How do you intend to use this principle in society? How does *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* mirror African storytelling? What do you think August Wilson wanted people to know about African-Americans and their struggle in 1911? How does it feel to be a griot? How do you think theatre can help communities heal? Explain to students that being a griot means you use your technique as a storyteller to make difference in society or people, as Bynum did in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

### Community Closing Ritual



## Conclusion

Because of August Wilson, teachers and their students are able to preserve the original meaning of acting: to tell an important story (message) and to pass it along to others. The lesson plans that are included in this chapter are equipped to guide students to critically think, to emphasize, strategize how to make their community better through theatre, collaborate with others, effectively tell a story without spectacles, discover their voice, and to accept responsibility to pass to the next generation. We, as educators, have the opportunity to create a generation of griots. Griots were students who became teachers, leaders, healers, storytellers, advisors, historians, peacemakers, spokespersons, and the list goes on. More importantly, the role of a griot was not given to anyone; it was inherited. Rhetorically speaking, what responsibility will students accept to pass along to the next generation? How will you, as an educator, inspire them to become a community leader and a griot in their own right, while telling stories along the way?



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## Appendix B

## Appendix A



**Romare Bearden, *Mill Hands lunch bucket*, 1978**  
collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on paper

[http://mainstreet.lib.unc.edu/projects/bearden\\_charlotte/index.php/images/view/78](http://mainstreet.lib.unc.edu/projects/bearden_charlotte/index.php/images/view/78)



## Appendix B



**Romare Bearden, *Pittsburgh Memory*, 1964**  
collage of printed papers with graphite on cardboard

<https://www.nga.gov/feature/bearden/170-025.htm>

Romare Bearden, *Prevalence of Ritual: Conjur Woman*, 1964  
collage of various papers with foil, ink, and graphite on cardboard

<https://www.nga.gov/feature/bearden/170-020.htm>



## Appendix C



**Romare Bearden, *Prevalence of Ritual: Conjur Woman*, 1964**  
collage of various papers with foil, ink, and graphite on cardboard

<https://www.nga.gov/feature/bearden/170-020.htm>



## Appendix D



**Romare Bearden, *Piano Lesson*, 1983**

collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on paper

<https://www.nga.gov/feature/bearden/170-130.htm>



PRESERVING THE SPIRIT OF AFRICAN STORYTELLING  
IN THE PITTSBURGH CYCLE

A thesis submitted to the College of Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

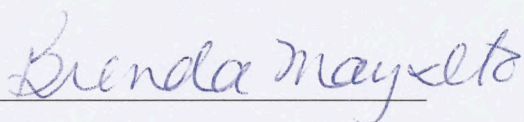
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DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE

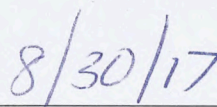
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Elizabeth L. Reeves

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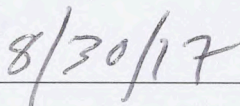
Professor Brenda May Ito, Chair



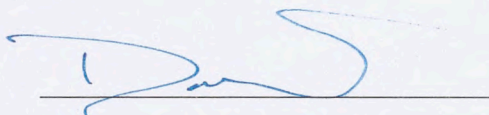
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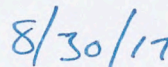
Dr. Larry Dooley, Member



Date



Professor David Turner, Member



Date



