Understanding August Wilson as an African American Playwright

On April 27, 1945, August Wilson, the fourth of six children, was born Frederick August Kittel on “the Hill” in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His father was Frederick Kittel, a German baker, and his mother was Daisy Wilson, a cleaning woman. Wilson’s white father never lived with the family, and they relied on welfare for partial support. The estrangement persisted throughout Kittel’s life until he died in 1965. Years later Wilson’s mother married an ex-convict, David Bedford, who became Wilson’s stepfather. The relationship between Wilson and Bedford was a conflicted one and became a source for Wilson’s drama. Denied the emotional and financial support of his biological father, Wilson embraced the culture of the mother he admired and loved, adopting his middle name, August, and his mother’s maiden name, Wilson, as his chosen name.

David Bedford is a model for Troy Maxson in Fences, and the tense relationship between Wilson and his stepfather is revisited onstage in the characters Troy and his son Cory. Bedford, a poor but promising high school football star in the 1930s, hoped for a career in medicine but was never offered a scholarship from any Pittsburgh college, which he believed was because of his race. He eventually turned to crime. While robbing a store, Bedford killed a man and spent twenty-three years in prison for the crime. After his release the only job available to Bedford was one in the city’s Sewer Department. Like the fictional Troy Maxson in Fences, Bedford never realized his athletic aspirations, which he then hoped his stepson would achieve. Wilson failed to meet his stepfather’s expectations, though, when he quit the high school football team. Wilson wanted to be a writer, not an athlete.
In 1960 Wilson dropped out of high school after his ninth-grade teacher falsely accused him of plagiarizing a twenty-page paper on Napoleon Bonaparte. Waiting for an apology from his teacher and principal that never came, Wilson hid his decision to leave school from his mother, anticipating her disappointment. In 1999, though, Wilson was awarded the first high school diploma by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh while being honored during the one hundredth anniversary of the Hill District branch of the library. Earlier, in 1992, he had received an honorary degree from the University of Pittsburgh.

At age sixteen Wilson began working at menial jobs that exposed him to a wide variety of people, some of whom Wilson based his characters on, for example Sam, in *The Janitor* (1985). Assuming responsibility for his own education, Wilson routinely went to the Pittsburgh Public Library, where he located the “Negro Section” and read the works of such prominent black writers as Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin: “These books were a comfort. Just the idea black people would write books. I wanted my book up there, too. I used to dream about being part of the Harlem Renaissance.”

Wilson knew he wanted to become a writer. In 1965 he bought his first typewriter and moved into a rooming house, a basement apartment in Pittsburgh’s Hill District. Outside his mother’s home, Wilson drew material for his plays from his immediate environment, a neighborhood whose inhabitants included ex-convicts and drug addicts. He closely listened to their language, speech patterns, and vernacular and studied their personalities. During that time Wilson was making the transition from poet, his initial artistic vocation, to dramatist. From these stories of the street, Wilson discovered a larger narrative landscape. That landscape expanded when he first heard the recordings of blues legend Bessie Smith. The blues, in its narrative capacity, had a profound influence on the young Wilson; it was a cultural medium that defined himself and his race. The blues eventually became a recurring motif for Wilson to voice the African American experience in many of his plays:
The craft I knew was the craft of poetry and fiction. To my mind, they had to connect and intercept with the craft of playwrighting at some point. Fiction was a story told through character and dialogue, and a poem was a distillation of language and images designed to reveal an emotive response to phenomena that brought it into harmony with one’s knowledge and experience. Why couldn’t a play be both? I thought in order to accomplish that I had to look at black life with an anthropological eye, use language, character, and image to reveal its cultural flashpoints and in the process tell the story that further illuminated them. That is what the blues did.²

Learning to become a writer was uppermost in Wilson’s mind, and experiences and influences of the late 1960s and early 1970s helped shape Wilson’s dramatic vision. In 1965 he helped form Pittsburgh’s Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop, and three years later, in 1968, along with Rob Penney, Wilson cofounded Pittsburgh’s Black Horizon Theater Company, a volunteer troupe that staged the plays of Amiri Baraka, specifically *Four Black Revolutionary Plays.* Influenced by the Black Power movement and the Black Arts movement, Wilson saw Baraka’s incendiary works as addressing the experiences and anger of many black Americans. In Baraka, Wilson found a playwright philosophically like himself. Although Wilson acknowledged Baraka’s impact on him as a writer, he nonetheless realized that imitation would not allow him to discover his own voice. But certain early artistic influences played a key role in Wilson’s development as a writer: “In terms of influence on my work, I have what I call my four B’s: Romare Bearden [the painter]; Imamu Amiri Baraka, the writer; Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine short-story writer; and the biggest B of all: the blues.”³

In 1973 Wilson wrote *Recycle,* a play about a troubled marriage, which mirrored his marriage to Brenda Burton, a Muslim, that had begun in 1969 and ended in 1972. In 1970 Wilson and Burton had had a daughter, Sakina Ansari. Wilson said his marriage to Burton ultimately failed because he could not in good
conscience accept many of her Muslim beliefs. Another marriage also did not last, Wilson’s 1981 marriage to Judy Oliver, a social worker. In 1994 Wilson married for the third time, to Constanza Romero, who was the costume designer for the Piano Lesson, and they had a daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson. Throughout this time of successive marriages, Wilson’s desire to write plays grew, and he continued to develop his craft with the financial support of such fellowships and awards as the Jerome (1980), Bush (1982), Rockefeller (1984), McKnight (1985), Guggenheim (1986), and Heinz (2003). In 1999 Wilson was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President William Jefferson Clinton.

Wilson saw Athol Fugard’s Sizwe Bansi Is Dead in 1976. The play is about the South African pass laws—legislation that prohibited blacks without documentation from freely traveling within or out of the country. Wilson was inspired by the play and his confidence in his own ability to write drama grew. In plays such as Fugard’s and Baraka’s, Wilson discovered that playwrights could address political issues in an artistic medium. That year Wilson wrote The Homecoming, a play that examines the mystery surrounding its protagonist’s death, a character named Blind Willie Johnson, who is based on blues legend Blind Lemon Jefferson. The Homecoming was staged for Kuntu Theater, an amateur troupe in Pittsburgh, and was the precursor to Wilson’s play Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom. Two years later Wilson was invited by Claude Purdy to St. Paul, Minnesota, and began to write plays for the director and fellow Pittsburgh native, which were to be staged at Lou Bellamy’s Penumbra Theatre. Among these were Black Bart and the Sacred Hills, a tribute in verse, based on Aristophanes’ Lysistrata, to the infamous stagecoach robber Black Bart. In need of money, Wilson also became a scriptwriter for the Science Museum of Minnesota.

In the early 1980s Wilson wrote Jitney (1982; revised in 2000) and Fullerton Street (1980). Jitney is about a Pittsburgh cab station and its drivers and is set in 1977. Fullerton Street is set in the 1940s and concerns a marriage doomed by alcoholism and unemployment after the couple relocates from the South to
the North.\textsuperscript{4} When an early draft of his play \textit{Ma Rainey's Black Bottom} was accepted for production at the O'Neill Workshop in Waterford, Connecticut, in 1982, Wilson’s life as an unknown playwright ended. At the O'Neill, Wilson met Lloyd Richards, dean of the Yale School of Drama, whose professional reputation as a black actor and foremost as a director impressed Wilson. Wilson knew of Richards’s direction of the 1959 production of Lorraine Hansberry’s \textit{A Raisin in the Sun} on Broadway. Richards guided the young playwright and became Wilson’s mentor, honing his dramaturgical skills. Along with the late Benjamin Mordecai—Broadway producer of most of Wilson’s plays, coexecutive with the playwright of Sageworks, and at the time associate dean of the Yale School of Drama—the Yale Repertory Theatre became integral to the development of Wilson’s plays. Wilson benefited as an artist under Richards’s and Mordecai’s tenure at Yale, for they developed a model for professional production. Later Wilson would be a mentor to other future playwrights too, teaching at Dartmouth College in 1998. That same year he assembles a conference on African American theater that established the African Grove Institute of the Arts, whose name was attributed to a theater in New York City founded in 1821 by an African American: West Indies–born William Henry Brown.

In his plays August Wilson gives voice to the disenfranchised and marginalized African Americans who have been promised a place and a stake in the American Dream only to find that access to rights and freedoms promised to all Americans is in fact guarded and exclusive. But the problem is greater than simply portraying African Americans and the predicaments of American life, for Wilson also wants to explore the African roots, the atavistic connection, that African Americans have to their ancestors. Wilson simultaneously perpetuates and subverts the tradition of American drama in order to explore the distinct differences between the white American and the African American experience: “There are and have always been two distinct and parallel traditions in black art: that is, art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society, and the art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America. . . . The second
tradition occurred when the African in the confines of the slave quarters sought to invest his spirit with the strength of his ancestors by conceiving his art, in his song and dance, a world in which he was the spiritual center.”

Wilson knows all too well that white society in America has tended to open the door to opportunity, status, and success to a select few minorities who can in turn offer something that society values. And certainly August Wilson can be counted among their number, having in a very short time garnered much commercial success on Broadway and critical acclaim from literary and theater critics through the New York Drama Critics Circle Awards, the Drama Desk Awards, the Tony Awards, and two Pulitzer Prizes. In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984), *Fences* (1987), *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1988), *The Piano Lesson* (1990), *Two Trains Running* (1992), and *Seven Guitars* (1996), *Jitney* (2000), *King Hedley II* (2001), *Gem of the Ocean* (2004), and *Radio Golf* (2005), Wilson presents a decade-by-decade portrait of African American life, capturing both the spirit and voice of African Americans. All these plays, with the exception of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, are set in Pittsburgh.

Wilson has been criticized by some—among them Robert Brustein, long-time drama critic for the *New Republic* and artistic director of the American Repertory Theater—for both his dramatic topics and themes as well as his defiant stance regarding the tradition of white American drama: “Presumably Wilson is prepared to cover . . . more theatrical decades of white culpability and black martyrdom. This single-minded documentation of American racism is a worthy if familiar social agenda, and no enlightened person would deny its premise, but as an ongoing artistic program it is monotonous, limited, locked in a perception of victimization.” Wilson believes that the American theater has not provided enough room on stage for the voices of his race, and he publicly presented his position—what many considered a diatribe—in June 1996 before members of the Theater Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University. In his address, titled “The Ground on Which I Stand,” Wilson expressed his serious concerns about the U.S. theater’s
lack of creative and financial support for black artists. According to Wilson, many unknown African American artists are not afforded the opportunity to demonstrate their talent as playwrights, directors, and actors. Unlike Wilson and his dramatic predecessors Ed Bullins and Amiri Baraka, such African American artists have no venue specifically oriented toward the experiences and voices of African Americans. To prove his case, Wilson cited only one theater company, the Crossroads Theater Company in New Brunswick, New Jersey, which is solely operated by African Americans amid the sixty-six theaters that the League of Resident Theaters comprises.

If Wilson’s strong convictions are redolent of the militant rhetoric of Malcolm X and black nationalism, Robert Brustein, who has taken issue with Wilson’s views, said that Wilson himself was the first to admit the philosophical environment of the 1960s is “the kiln in which I was fired” and that “I am what is known, at least among the followers and supporters of Marcus Garvey, as a ‘race man.’” Wilson desired to dispel the myth of racial equality and acculturation on the American stage. As a prominent black playwright, Wilson embraced a defiant stance against the status quo. The status quo in this circumstance is not the white audience that appreciates his plays, but those who subsidize and those who select which playwright and which play is worthy of recognition.

Lloyd Richards, the director who premiered many of Wilson’s plays and the playwright’s artistic collaborator and father-figure, perceived controversies such as Wilson’s polemic against the American theater as pertinent in U.S. theater history: “As a black person growing up and preparing oneself for the theater, with such a paucity of black material to work with and having to utilize the literature of the world to find myself in, with every succeeding generation in which this subject comes up, you get a little tired of going around that circle. . . . But the good thing is that each time we go around it, for each generation, some progress is made.” Although Richards was commenting on color-blind casting and specifically on black actors playing traditionally white roles—all of which Wilson disdains—the remark
regarding the paucity of black material stresses Wilson’s point of the need for more black theater. Since there are not enough works by black playwrights for black actors to perform and not enough stages on which to perform these works, the African American voice is rarely heard.

Wilson does not accept, in Richard’s words, “minuscule progress”; rather his convictions demand revolutionary rhetoric and zeal to effect a change on the American stage: “Largely through my plays, what the theaters have found out is that they had this white audience that was starving to get a little understanding of what was happening to the black population, because they very seldom come into contact with them, so they’re curious.” Wilson’s strategy of writing a play for each decade of the twentieth century focused attention on the long journey that so many African Americans have taken with little progress and change. Wilson is thus skeptical about assertions of progress and sensitive toward existing definitions and assumptions about African Americans. And ultimately Wilson was committed to a drama exploring and exposing the past: “Blacks in America want to forget about slavery—the stigma, the shame. That’s the wrong move. If you can’t be who you are, who can you be? How can you know what to do? We have our history. We have our book, which is the blues. And we forget it all.”

Skeptical of the tradition handed down to him in American drama written by white dramatists about their experiences, Wilson hearkens to the African oral tradition in his plays. This oral history, as dramatized in Wilson’s plays, involves a wide variety of stories of spiritual reconciliation. These stories diverge from an objective historical account in order to incorporate a mystical dimension and expressions of personal will. The characters’ stories become a means of self-authentication in which each character draws on a broader cultural identity as an African for spiritual solace. For example, in Fences, when Troy Maxson tells Jim Bono the “story” of the furniture he purchased, Troy adds his own variation on the topic, embellishing events to suit his own will and desires, and it is up to his wife, Rose, to intrude with the facts of the case. The oral tradition that Wilson elevates
often creates identity rather than recording history in any “factual” sense. The stories Wilson’s characters convey create an environment in which they can locate themselves and convey their experiences, even when the dominant social, economic, and political environment offers little or no room for them.\textsuperscript{12}

Wilson’s use of the African oral tradition comes from his insistence on a distinctive African American drama—arguing in the process that white society does not share certain important, even unique, qualities that African Americans do share. As Michael Awkward remarks, Wilson’s points about race “demonstrate the continuing impact of a belief that the cultural manifestations of ‘race’ or its performative dimensions remain ideally the province—the possession, if you will—of the group who has produced them.”\textsuperscript{13} But Wilson seems by implication to take this belief a step further when his characters employ an oral tradition for existential purposes. For example, Troy in part builds up his own identity and his own philosophy of life through the stories he relates to Bono, who in turn finds them valuable and influential. What really happened does not matter so much as the self-definition, confidence, and connection these characters experience from the act of telling their stories.

Despite his skepticism regarding the dominant tradition in American drama, Wilson has undoubtedly borrowed from or tapped into the tradition of realistic drama at times while retaining the freedom to deviate from it at others. Such decisions to amend tradition do not simply represent Wilson’s attempt to “make it new,” to use Ezra Pound’s phrase, but in fact question the assumptions on which the tradition is founded. Harry J. Elam, Jr., discussing \textit{Fences}, argues that the “unexpected, non-realistic conclusion to [Wilson’s] plays suggests that realism itself is problematic and inadequate to accommodate certain cultural experiences or expressions of the current postmodern condition.”\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, if Wilson can be traced back to the tradition of American drama that leads to Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Eugene O’Neill, he can also be distinguished from that tradition despite his variations on its techniques and his skepticism of its tenets.
One of the techniques Wilson deftly employs is what Charles Lyons calls a “retrospective structure,” in which the audience learns about the life and experiences of the characters during the seemingly linear development of the play. In order to examine a present in which African American characters struggle within the socio-economic climate of the twentieth century, Wilson revisited the past. Wilson believed that “you should start making connections to your parents and to your grandparents and [start] working backwards.” Through the retrospective structure, Wilson dramatized the forces and factors that influence or determine a character’s actions in the present—thereby exploring a prevalent theme in modern literature, the impact of the past on the present. Moreover this form of developmental structure allowed Wilson to express the various influences on a character, including those that are distinctively American and those that are distinctively African. How and where these two decidedly different influences occur in the play often reveals Wilson’s attempt to disrupt the traditional realistic development of American drama and present in his plays an atavistic element that links the African American to his or her African heritage.

For example, in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, set in a 1920s recording studio, Wilson reexamines the cultural repercussions of the past in blues musician Toledo’s reference to the black man as a “left over” from white American history. Through allusions to the institution of slavery and the U.S. industrial age, Toledo perceives the black man as no longer of use to white people. In *Fences*, set in the 1950s, Troy Maxson’s conflict with his son Cory over Cory’s football scholarship echoes Troy’s inner conflict with his own sharecropper father. Troy, a garbage collector, tries to negate the legacy of Cory’s ancestors in his recollection of a bestial, broken sharecropper, surviving during the Reconstruction Era. Set in a 1911 boarding house, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* focuses on the atavistic ghost within Herald Loomis. This ghost is Loomis’s legacy as a post–Emancipation Proclamation black man. In the play Loomis’s personal experience with peonage becomes a horrific legacy connecting him to a long line of African ancestors, from their transport on slave ships, the
Middle Passage, through their enslavement in the antebellum South. It is a sense of imprisonment that still lingers in 1911 in the consciousness of African Americans.

In the *Piano Lesson*, set in the Depression Era of the 1930s, Wilson uses the piano as a source of conflict between Berniece and her brother Boy Willie. This piano is their legacy, signifying their ancestors’ servitude during the time of slavery. Through the apparitions of various spirits—Sutter’s ghost, whose ancestor was a white plantation owner named Robert Sutter, and the ghosts of the Yellow Dog train, one of whom is Berniece and Boy Willie’s father, Boy Charles, who perished in a in a boxcar that was set on fire—Wilson presents the continued effects of the black man’s enslavement to the will of white people. In *Two Trains Running*, Wilson revisited Great Migration, the exodus of African Americans from the South to the North in search of their Promised Land and dramatized the consequences of this shift in population in the life of Memphis Lee and the patrons of his restaurant in the late 1960s. Memphis owns and manages a restaurant that soon will become a casualty of the city’s renovation plans. During the course of the play, several characters discover the importance of perseverance, despite past hardships and injustices that plague their present lives. In *Seven Guitars*, Wilson explored the theme of retribution within the context of 1940s America through Old Man Hedley’s dream of owning a plantation. The plantation becomes Hedley’s way to seek retribution for his late father, a black man whom he recalls fondly but nonetheless ashamedly. Hedley’s father was, as always, under the “boot” of the white man.

In an interview with Herb Boyd, Wilson explained how his next play, *King Hedley II*, reveals a protagonist who must receive his parenting from others in a 1980s Pittsburgh community, a haven beset by economic and political disenfranchisement in lieu of natural parental figures: “If a kid’s father is in jail, it didn’t mean he didn’t get parenting. He gets parenting by the community. So a community under assault begins to take care of itself. It’s not so much a breakdown of the family in the play, but a break with the tradition of the extended family.”17
play, set in 1985, King, the supposed son of deceased King Hedley from *Seven Guitars*, challenges all that is around him—for example, his mother, Ruby, who he believes abandoned him as a small child for a career in music, and the law, as King is an ex-con, in his quest for human dignity in his Pittsburgh neighborhood, where poverty and drive-by shootings are commonplace.

Yet, to complete the decade-by-decade chronology of the African American experience in the twentieth century, Wilson had to write *Gem of the Ocean*, set in 1904, and the bookend play, *Radio Golf*, set in 1997. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson introduced Aunt Ester Tyler, a former slave who, either in body or spirit, inhabits *Two Trains Running* and *Radio Golf*. Ester, along with Solly Two Kings, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, aids a troubled fugitive named Citizen Barlow on his spiritual journey to the City of Bones, despite one of the obstacles impeding that journey, a black constable named Caesar Wilks. In *Radio Golf*, Harmon Wilks, an educated, upwardly mobile real estate developer who is running for mayor of Pittsburgh, experiences problems with two elder locals, Old Joe Barlow and Sterling Johnson from *Two Trains Running*, when he tries to have an old home demolished, a home that once belonged to Aunt Ester. Wilks also happens to be the grandson of *Gem of the Ocean*’s black constable Caesar Wilks.

In an interview conducted by Sandra Shannon in 1991, Wilson said that he also had considered writing a novel and had reflected on the future of African American literature. Wilson hoped for future African American writers to produce a prolific body of literature: “This is our culture. How can we develop it?” Historically enriched by African culture, African Americans come from an oral tradition, but, historically disadvantaged within American culture, they were prohibited from learning to read and write. Since African Americans had not been writing as long, in contrast to those writers from European cultures, Wilson hoped that African American writers would continue to invest time in the written word and as a result produce works that contribute to the development of the African American culture.
Todd Kreidler, whom Wilson designated as his dramaturge, can attest to Wilson’s setting the bar high for himself as well as other African American writers. Then twenty-five years old, Kreidler met August Wilson, fifty-four, at the Pittsburgh’s Public Theater in 1999 during the production of *King Hedley II*. Their meeting would develop into a lasting professional and personal relationship. Both being shy men, Kreidler said Wilson quipped that “he wanted to be a preacher, but didn’t like to talk in front of people.” Kreidler spent a great deal of time with Wilson at various coffee shops near the playwright’s production venues and lived with him and his wife, Constanza Romero, at their home in Seattle during the last months of Wilson’s life. Wilson’s was a life cut short because of inoperable liver cancer in 2005, and his death was followed a year later by the death of Wilson’s first artistic mentor, legendary director and educator Lloyd Richards in 2006. Constanza Romero spoke about the depth of Wilson and Kreidler’s relationship this way: “August thought of him as a protégé, and toward the end really thought of him as a son.” Kreidler said those close to the two described their relationship as that of “a married couple at times.” It was Kreidler at the behest of Wilson and Romero who was left in charge of sorting through the playwright’s papers: early poems, unfinished novels, early plays such as *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, *Home*, *Janitor*, *St. Louis Blues*, *Fullerton Street* and *Recycle*, and personal correspondence. He was to determine whether they would remain private, be destroyed, or made part of Wilson’s definitive literary collection, and Kreidler described those five or six months of sorting papers as a miserable experience.

Among Wilson’s papers were a draft of *Seven Guitars II*, which began with all the suspects in the Floyd Barton’s murder gathered together at a police lineup; two unfinished novels that remained untitled with a character named Elder Green; an earlier play titled *The Underworld of Memphis Jones*; and a comedic play about a coffin maker. Kreidler also discovered a piece of paper on which Wilson recorded his impression of Bearden’s collage titled “Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket.” On this paper
Wilson wrote in the voice of an art critic who was reviewing the Bearden collage and on its margins were jottings about Pittsburgh to establish the historical context that became his preface, with these finals words, “in the shadows we see a man, that man’s name is Harold Loomis.” Wilson said this was the beginning of what was to be Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, formerly titled the same as Bearden’s collage.

According to Kreidler, “dioramas intrigued August” as did the collages by Bearden. Likewise Wilson wanted the book covers of his plays to evoke a pictorial entrée into the cityscape world of his Pittsburgh and its history, a world that he re-created within in his plays. Further, “August did not clearly state how he wanted the box set packaged and done, but when he was diagnosed with cancer, he already had the box set up [The August Wilson Century Cycle] with the Theatre Communications Group, and it was up to Constanza to make the decisions.” Romero selected new cover art for the plays—black-and-white archival photographic images of black America—and added intros to his plays that were penned by novelist Toni Morrison, playwright Tony Kushner, and actors Phylicia Rashad and Lawrence Fishburne among others.

Kreidler also found the screenplay for Fences among Wilson’s papers. Despite Wilson’s extensive work on the project, the film of Fences was never made. In the late 1990s, Kreidler has pointed out, Wilson put of rewriting the screenplay for Fences until King Hedley II had opened on Broadway. Initially actor Eddie Murphy secured the rights and planned to produce it for Paramount Pictures, and later it was to be produced by Scott Rudin. Earlier Wilson had collaborated with Lloyd Richards to bring his 1990 Pulitzer Prize–winning play The Piano Lesson to television for the Hallmark Hall of Fame in 1995. But this project was to be something different. In a conversation with Kreidler, Wilson said, “I’m in a new medium,” and stressed that he would now be working with the conventions of the screen, not the stage; he did not want to sit a camera in front of a play. Unlike Neil LaButes’s replication of his play The Shape of Things for the screen, Wilson insisted, according to Kreidler, that he
would cinematically enhance the story and its characters. Kreidler has revealed the content of the Wilson’s screenplay and commented on it: he would not simply focus on establishing shots but instead expand his canvas to include the fabric and the lifeblood of the community. “August wanted the filmgoers to see a thriving Hill District in 1955, not a derelict ghetto; enter Taylor’s Bar and meet Alberta, Troy’s lover; see Cory at work at the A&P grocery store and encounter Troy’s boss Mr. Rand. Of course, August would preserve Troy’s speeches, especially his monologue on death, but he would also show a deceived Rose, after she proclaims to Troy that he a womanless man stressing the impact of his infidelity, working in a soup kitchen, and finding solace in her life at the church.” The screenplay remains in the possession of the late playwright’s estate, and to this date it has not been made into a film.

As a playwright, Kreidler has stated, Wilson was “spoiled by the six or seven stabs at a show before its Broadway production debut. All the plays were cut from the same cloth as August stated, but all his plays were allowed to evolve during the production process, and that is a testament to the power of regional theatre to set free the intelligence of designers, actors and others, ‘to allow the play to be found.’ August brought me up as a professional, both artistically and personally.” On one occasion, Wilson said to Kreidler, “Can you write below your talent? If you can write below your talent, you can write above it. That’s where you want to go, Todd. Sit down to write a play like Tennessee Williams’s Streetcar or Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman. And in a self-effacing way would say many times to me, genius tells on itself.” Wilson took pride in crafting his plays, openly acknowledging that writing them was rewarding but painfully laborious because of his insistence that they reveal what he intended in their making: “August said that he never worked harder on a play than King Hedley II, and when he was asked to assess his own work, it was between Joe Turner or Gem as his favorite.”

Although some of his critics, friends, and family describe in their varied portraits of Wilson a quiet observer who was jotting