

KENNY LEON'S

true colors

THEATRE COMPANY

*The August Wilson  
American Century Cycle  
Compendium  
(Play Synopsis and Characters)*

*Courtesy of: Derrick Sanders, Center Theatre Group, Marion Friedman-Young and  
True Colors Theatre Company*

## GEM OF THE OCEAN

### Synopsis

August Wilson's *Century Cycle* begins in 1904, where we meet Citizen Barlow, a bewildered newcomer to Pittsburgh from the agrarian deep South. Citizen Barlow arrives at Aunt Ester's house seeking her help and a safe place from Caesar, the local constable. Aunt Ester, now 285 years old, takes him on a journey of self-discovery to the City of Bones, a city in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Here he makes startling discoveries and his sense of duty leads to his redemption.

### Characters

**AUNT ESTER:** Her name sounds like the word "ancestor" and she is the connector between the African past and the African American present. Her name suggests both Easter, the holiest day of the Christian calendar, and the biblical character Esther, Ahasureus' queen and the heroine of Purim, a Jewish holiday, which celebrates the saving of the Hebrew people. She is both the physical and the mystical link between present and past. Her home is a sanctuary where troubled people come to be cleansed of guilt and sorrow. Aunt Ester's birth, approximately 285 years prior to when the play takes place, coincided with the arrival of the first shipment of African slaves in the English colonies. She is both the keeper and the transmitter of African-American memory.

**CAESAR WILKS:** Black Mary's brother, a policeman, baker and land-owner. He is the villainous constable and venal slumlord in the play. His name means dictator or autocrat, which originated from the original Roman emperor, Julius Caesar. He is reminiscent of the plantation overseers of slavery times and represents the black-face authority who acts and speaks for the white world.

**BLACK MARY:** The protégée of Aunt Ester, she is trying to learn the wisdom and ways of the old woman. While supervising Ester's house, she serves her and washes her feet in a ritual reminiscent of the self-abasement of Mary, sister of Martha, at Bethany during the last days of Christ.

**CITIZEN BARLOW:** The seeker and confessor in the play. A migrant from Alabama, his intent is to work in a factory, but he steals a bucket of nails which results in an innocent man drowning to avoid false arrest. He insists on seeing Aunt Ester to confess his sin of black-upon-black violence. His mother named him Citizen "after freedom came," but Solly Two Kings reminds him that to truly be a Citizen, he'll have to fight to uphold freedom when it becomes a heavy load.

**ELI:** Aunt Ester's companion, bears the name of an Old Testament priest and mentor to young Samuel. As such, he is steady, reliable and maintains peace and security in Aunt Ester's house. He was Solly's comrade in his efforts on the Underground Railroad and for The Union Army.

**SOLLY TWO KINGS:** A sixty-seven year old former slave and conductor on the Underground Railroad whose earlier name was Uncle Alfred. After slavery he changed his name to David and Solomon, two Biblical kings. A friend and suitor to Aunt Ester, he makes a career of gathering up dog excrement, which he calls "pure", for manure.

## JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

### Synopsis

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, set in 1917, is the story of Harold Loomis who returns to a Pittsburgh in search of his wife. He is haunted by the memory of bounty hunter Joe Turner, the man who had illegally enslaved him. Loomis is unable to fully embrace or release the past. His search brings him to Seth and Bertha's boarding house with his young daughter, Zonia, where "conjure man" Bynum shows him that he really is searching for himself.

### Characters

**BERTHA HOLLY:** Seth's wife of 25 years and 5 years his junior. She knows her place in the hierarchy of the boardinghouse, yet still has some say in the decision making and will often voice her opinion. A very loving mother to the boardinghouse family. In the end, she tells Mattie that the only two things you need in your life are love and laughter; the things that she has had faith in and have helped her get by.

**HERALD LOOMIS:** A resident of the boardinghouse. Having been enslaved by Joe Turner for seven years, Loomis has completely lost his way in life. An odd man that dons an overcoat and hat in mid-August, Loomis is 32 years old and a displaced slave searching for his wife. In the end he finds his song, an independent, self-sufficient song that he can sing proudly.

**MARTHA LOOMIS PENTECOST:** Herald Loomis's wife. She is about 28, very religious and a member of the Evangelical church. She left the South and her daughter behind. She does what it takes to ensure her self-preservation and remains a strong, self-sufficient woman until the end.

**RUTHERFORD SELIG:** A peddler. Known as the "People Finder," he is the only white character in the play. Selig is from a family that first brought Africans across the Atlantic to become slaves, but now he unites people by recording the names and places of all the people he peddles to.

**JEREMY FURLOW:** A resident of the boardinghouse, he is 25 years old. He represents a younger generation seeking to find its identity as the first liberated slaves. Jeremy's "blues playing" character is classified as a suave, artist young man looking to make a quick buck and travel the nation. He is constantly seeking the attention of the women in his vicinity and tries to find the perfect girl for himself.

**SETH HOLLY:** Owner of the boardinghouse in his early fifties. Born of free African-American parents in the North, he is set in his ways; never losing his composure and always running a respectable house. He even condemns other African-Americans that do not follow this kind of lifestyle. He is economically very capitalistic and does whatever is necessary to stay afloat; including working night shifts and odd craftsman jobs he can pick up from Selig. He understands his world on a very literal level, and doesn't aspire to become more than he is.

**BYNUM WALKER:** A rootworker in his late sixties. A "conjure" man staying with the Holly's at the boardinghouse, Bynum is one of few characters that understands his own identity. Convinced of the fact that everyone has their own song, Bynum perpetuates the theme of identity and our constant search for it.

**REUBEN MERCER:** A boy who lives next door. Reuben represents the repetitiveness of history. Even as an adolescent, Reuben is aware of his place in society, notices the spiritual differences of people around him, and decides at a very early age that he needs a woman to settle down with and marry. Many of the ideals that are seen in the adult characters of this play are instilled in Reuben and will repeat, the good and the bad, as he grows into adulthood.

**MOLLY CUNNINGHAM:** A resident. She is a good looking young woman of 26 who is strong and independent. Unwilling to let herself be told what to do by anyone, Molly is convinced that she will never return to the South and refuses to be associated with anything that her old life entailed.

## **MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM**

### Synopsis

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is set in a Chicago recording studio in early March 1927. Female blues singer Ma Rainey lives and works under the pressure of a music business that abuses and victimizes its black artists.

### Characters

**CUTLER:** Guitar and Trombone player in Ma Rainey's band, Cutler is also the leader of all the other instrumentalists. A loner type in his mid fifties, he plays his music without embellishment—the same can be said for how he feels about life: he believes in getting things done quickly.

**MA RAINEY:** Based on a real life Ma Rainey with a career in Blues Music in the 1920's, Wilson's character is praised as "Mother of the Blues." She has the final word in everything regarding the band, making all the decisions. Not one to be disillusioned, Ma Rainey was always aware that her manager and producer were set on simply making money off of her.

**SLOW DRAG:** As the slow-moving, yet talented bass player in Ma's band, Slow Drag is a professional in his mid-fifties who is focused on his music. His name is the result of an incident in which he slow-danced with women for hours in order to make some money. Critics have referred to the music that Slow Drag plays as being reminiscent of African music.

**LEVEE:** The talented and temperamental trumpet player, Levee is the youngest member of the band, being in his thirties. He is a man who is confident with his appearance, especially when it comes to the expensive shoes he owns. Perhaps it's because of his age that Levee is also the band member who wants to go off on his own and will begrudgingly play Ma Rainey's music until he's got his own band to do with what he pleases. He is frustrated, bitter, and is usually picking a fight with someone in the band. When he was only eight years old, he saw his mother raped by a gang of white men.

**TOLEDO:** Toledo, in addition to being the piano player for Ma Rainey, also acts as the band philosopher. Literate and reflective, he discusses abstract concepts like racial memory and the plight of the black man throughout the play despite his band-mates' misunderstanding of much of what he says. He believes that style and musicianship are important to a performance. Having been married with children, Toledo lost his family in a divorce.

**STURDYVANT:** Overworked, penny-pinching, and obsessed with making money, he is the white owner of the Southside recording studio where Ma Rainey makes her music. Because he is uncomfortable dealing with black performers, he communicated mainly with Ma Rainey's white manager, Irvin. Because of these reasons, he represents white exploitation of black music.

## THE PIANO LESSON

### Synopsis

*The Piano Lesson* is set in Pittsburgh in 1936. Boy Willie has come to his uncle's house to retrieve a piano that holds significant historical and sentimental value to the family. A battle ensues over the possession of the piano, which carries the legacy and opportunities of the characters and determines the choices they must make.

### Characters

**AVERY:** Thirty-eight years old, Avery is a preacher who is trying to build up his congregation. He is honest and ambitious, finding himself opportunities in the city that were unavailable to him in rural areas of the South. While fervently religious, he manages to find the time to court Bernice after her husband's death.

**BOY WILLIE:** Brother to Bernice, Boy Willie is a thirty year old brash, impulsive, and fast-talking man. He has an infectious grin and a boyishness that is apt for his name. His story provides the central conflict for the play in that he plans to sell the family piano in order to buy land that his family worked on as slaves. He feels it's important he does this in order to avenge his father, who grew up property-less—but not everyone in the family agrees.

**LYMON:** Boy Willie's long time friend is a twenty-nine year old who speaks little, but when he does with a disarming straight-forwardness. As he flees the law, he makes a plan to begin anew in the North. Eliciting stories from the families past, Lymon proves a vehicle by which we learn about the family. He is also a big fan of women, and plays a part in helping Bernice move on from her husband's death.

**BERNIECE:** Bernice, Boy Willie's older sister, is a thirty-five year old widow who blames the death of her husband three years prior, on her brother. She resents her brother's bravado and chides him for his rebellious ways. She doesn't want to sell the piano, but also has no intention of playing it. She has an eleven-year-old daughter, Maretha.

**DOAKER:** Doaker is the tall, thin, forty-seven year old uncle to Bernice and Boy Willie. He has worked for the railroad his whole life—first laying rail and then as a cook. He functions as the family patriarch and the play's oral historian, recounting stories, many about the piano's history. The play takes place in the house that Doaker owns, and while he won't take a side on whether to sell the piano, he does step in when things begin to get out of hand.

**WINING BOY:** Doaker's wily, carefree brother who shows up in town and stays with the family whenever he is a bit down on his luck. He used to play the piano and made his livelihood making music, but quit that life when he decided he no longer wanted to be an entertainer. Despite this, he is protective of the piano.

## SEVEN GUITARS

### Synopsis

*Seven Guitars* brings a post-war Pittsburgh and us into the world of the 1940s. We sort through the plight of the Black American men who fought and died in World War II, who now return home to find they must confront the same inequities they'd faced before they left. Blues singer Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton returns from a 90-day stretch in the county jail with a recording contract in his pocket and a plan to take his woman and his band to Chicago. Buoyed by the heroics of the great black boxer Joe Louis, Floyd is sure the world is finally ripe for black heroes. But the backyard that serves as his office, social club and romantic getaway seems haunted; and his eccentric neighbor, Hedley, who teeters between wisdom and madness, is destined to bring Floyd's dreams of success to an end.

### Characters

**CANEWELL:** He and Red Carter are Floyd's closest friends. He's an edgy, quick-tempered harmonica player, who's tired of playing back-up in life for Floyd. He made the trip with Floyd to Chicago the first time and regrets it. He loves Vera.

**FLOYD:** Blues singer Floyd "Schoolboy" returns to Pittsburgh at thirty-five years old with a hit song and an opportunity to record a record back in Chicago. In the time since he recorded the initial song, Floyd has squandered the flat fee he received for recording, left his girlfriend (Vera) for another woman, was then left by the other woman, pawned his guitar, and spent ninety days in jail after being arrested while walking home from his mother's funeral. After a year of trials and tribulations, Floyd wants to return to Chicago with Vera, his guitar, and a new sense of self. He is ready to "live with" not "live without" Unfortunately, the lengths he's willing to go to, to make his dreams happen, become his undoing

**RED CARTER:** He and Canewell are Floyd's closest friends. He's a drummer by profession, an expansive, laid-back fellow who can identify a rooster's birthplace by the sound of his crow

**VERA:** Floyd's ex-girlfriend and eight years his junior. She loves Floyd, but after he left her for another woman she is slow to trust him again. She may have had a relationship with Canewell in Floyd's absence. She is good friends with Louise.

**LOUISE:** Is a hearty, buxom woman who, years earlier, allowed her man to walk out peacefully in exchange for his pistol. Louise describes herself as, "forty-eight going on sixty." Although she claims to have no interest in love, she has an attachment to Hedley

**HEDLEY:** an old man, not altogether right in the head, who has turned his back on the white world he loathes. He's a believer in saints, spirits, prophets and the ghost of Charles (Buddy) Bolden, the legendary New Orleans trumpeter who died in an insane asylum. More than anything else, Hedley would like to sire a messiah.

## FENCES

### Synopsis

Troy Maxson is a garbage collector who prides himself on his ability to provide for his family and keep it together. He is the patriarch and central character in *Fences*, (1950-1965), he continually places barriers between himself and the very people he loves the most. Troy's rebellion and frustration set the tone for this play as he struggles for a sense of fairness in a society that offers none. He and his son clash over their conflicting views of what it means to be a black man in mid-century America.

### Characters

**TROY MAXON:** The protagonist of *Fences*, Troy is a working class African-American man who lives with his wife Rose and their son Corey and. He works for the Sanitation Department as a trash collector. He is devoted to providing for his family and guaranteeing that his sons have better lives than he did. Having been a great player baseball play in the Negro leagues, Troy was too old to join the Major leagues when they were finally integrated. It's this experience, and several others from his past that color his outlook on life and his relationship with his sons.

**ROSE:** Rose is Troy's second wife who he married upon his release from prison. She is the mother of his youngest son, Corey. She is a 43-year-old housewife who makes time for her Church regularly. The compassionate matriarch of the play, Rose is a fair judge of character who hopes for a better future for herself, her husband, and her son. She has high hopes for Corey, and keeps on looking forward instead of romantically clinging to the past like her husband. She personifies the qualities of love, patience, and forgiveness—and has plenty of opportunities to exhibit all three.

**BONO:** Having served time together in prison, Troy and Bono became very close and remain best friends well out of their time spent in jail. Having seen Troy through thick and thin, Bono often serves as the voice of reason and perspective for Troy—especially when it comes to Rose Maxon. Despite having been friends with him for over thirty years, Bono's concern for Troy's marriage trumps his loyalty to the friendship. Bono himself is a devoted husband to his wife Lucille.

**GABRIEL:** Gabriel is Troy's brother who suffered a head injury during World War II. Part of the effect is his nonsensical ramblings that actually touch on quite a bit of truth. He is sometimes convinced that he is the Angel Gabriel waiting for St. Peter to open the gates of Heaven. He is the wise fool, often knowing more about those people surrounding him than they know about themselves. Gabriel receives money from the government because of his injury, some of which Troy used to pay for the house where the Play takes place.

## TWO TRAINS RUNNING

### Synopsis

*Two Trains Running* examines the possibilities of securing the American dream in a 1960s northern urban ghetto. Memphis Lee, his neighbors and his restaurant's patrons stand on the precipice of urban renewal. They consider the prospects for surviving this change with their history and cultural identity in tact as the existence of their community is in jeopardy. Sterling, a young, politicized ex-con, has just been released from prison and insists on righting an injustice committed years earlier; a man not rewarded with what was promised him after completing a job.

### Characters

**MEMPHIS:** Memphis Lee is a self-made man whose values of hard work, diligence, persistence and honesty have been consistently challenged by the circumstances of his life. His greatest asset is his impeccable logic. He owns a restaurant that the city intends to demolish. He is determined to negotiate a fair price out of the demolition. He is confident in playing the White man's game as long as he knows the rules. With little patience for those who preach the "black is beautiful" mantra—he claims it sounds as if those black people are trying to convince themselves.

**STERLING:** A young man of thirty, he appears at times to be unbalanced, but it is a combination of his unorthodox logic and straightforward manner that makes him appear so. Only recently released from the penitentiary after serving some time for robbing a bank, Sterling is new to the scene of *Two Trains Running*. He is in search of work, and when he finds Memphis Lee's restaurant and the group that hangs there it gives him the chance to seek advice from a colorful group of characters.

**WOLF:** He is a Numbers Runner—someone who carries the money and betting slips between the betting parlors and the headquarters or "Numbers Bank." He enjoys the notoriety and popularity that comes with this work. While he manages to keep money in his pocket and a decent pair of shoes on his feet, his inability to find secure female companionship is the single failure that marks his life.

**HOLLOWAY:** A retired house-painter, who, in his retirement, has become a self-made philosopher of sorts. He is a man who all his life has voiced his outrage at injustice with little effect. His belief in the supernatural has enabled him to accept his inability to effect change and continue to pursue life with zest and vigor. He is equally enraged by white men who exploit black men, and any black men who try to fight back. If anyone happens to come to him with a problem, he will send them on over to the oldest woman in town—an Aunt Esther—to sort it out.

**WEST:** A widower in his early sixties, he is the owner of the wealthiest business on the block. West runs the funeral parlor across the street from the restaurant. His wife's death has allowed his love of money to overshadow the other possibilities of life. It is his practical view of death that has earned him the title of perhaps the sharpest social observer in the play.

## JITNEY

### Synopsis

The 1970s are the background for *Jitney*. In this story, Pittsburgh's gypsy cab drivers fight to save their business and retain their livelihood and are pitted again against a world that wants to tear down the inner city for redevelopment. Becker, a well-respected man in his sixties is reunited with his son Booster, after Booster's release from jail. A difficult relationship between father and son again points out how each generation confronts the world in his own way rather than building on the struggles of those who came before him.

### Characters

**BECKER:** A well-respected man who runs the jitney station. Sixties.

**DOUB:** A longtime jitney driver and Korean War veteran.

**RENA:** Youngblood's girlfriend and mother of their young son.

**TURNBO:** A jitney driver who is always interested in the business of others.

**BOOSTER:** Becker's son, recently released from prison. Early forties.

**SHEALY:** A numbers taker who often uses the jitney station as his base.

**YOUNGBLOOD:** A jitney driver and Vietnam veteran in his mid to late twenties.

## KING HEDLEY II

### Synopsis

*King Hedley II* takes place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1985. In the backyard of a neighborhood now completely blasted by decay and urban blight, King Hedley II, with a warrior spirit but no education or prospects, daydreams with his friend Mister about opening a Kung Fu video rental store using the money they make selling stolen refrigerators. Aunt Ester has died, the Hill District is without commercial or spiritual resources, and King's dreams are doomed to a violent end in Wilson's darkest and most symbolic play.

### Characters

**KING HEDLEY II:** thirty-six years old, he is the spiritual son of King Hedley from *Seven Guitars*. He is engaged in life and death struggles with a scar to prove it. The slash down the left side of his face has left him with a glass eye. He looks like a bogeyman at the crossroads. He spent seven years in prison and strives to live by his own moral code.

**RUBY:** King's mother and blues singer, sixty-one.

**TONYA:** King's girlfriend who is pregnant and wants to have an abortion because she does not want to bring a baby into this corrupt, crazy world, thirty-five.

**ELMORE:** Sixty-six years old and an old hustler who has been carrying a torch for Ruby for more than 30 years. He exudes an air of elegance and confidence born of his many years wrestling with life. He knows the secret of King's true patrimony.

**STOOL PIGEON:** A sixty-five year old harmonica player also seen in *Seven Guitars*. He is now a newspaper-collecting history carrier.

## **RADIO GOLF**

### Synopsis

*Radio Golf*, August Wilson's last play, is also the last play chronologically in his famous Pittsburgh Cycle. In the play we find Harmond Wilks, a man who discovers both himself and the place that birthed him at a crossroads. On the verge of an almost-guaranteed win as a mayoral candidate, Wilks finds his identity shaken when his morals and ideals are questioned by those around him. Ultimately, he must recognize what the price of his success is and decide whether he is willing to pay it.

### Characters

**ELDER JOSEPH "OLD JOE" BARLOW:** Recently returned to the Hill District where he was born in 1918. Although ostensibly as harmless as he is homespun, his temperament belies a life checkered by run-ins with the law and a series of wives. He sees and calls things plainly, requires little and seeks only harmony.

**HARMOND WILKS:** Real-estate developer seeking mayoral candidacy. He grew up a privileged and responsible son of the Hill District and intends to bring the neighborhood back from urban blight through gentrification, while making a fortune in the process. He cares about the city of Pittsburgh, the neighborhood and its people, but is caught between what is politically expedient and what is morally and ethically just.

**ROOSEVELT HICKS:** Bank vice president and avid golfer, as well as Harmond's business partner and college roommate. Roosevelt is preoccupied with his financial status and getting green time. He values the end result of a transaction more than the practical or spiritual virtues of a job well done. Had he any time for self-reflection, he might describe himself favorably as a consummate materialist and conspicuous consumer.

**MAME WILKS:** Harmond's wife of more than twenty years and a professional public relations representative. She is focused on Harmond's success, as well as her own, and confident that she has the proper plan to achieve both. Firm, independent and ambitious, her love of and belief in her husband are tested by his struggle to stay focused and on message.

**STERLING JOHNSON:** Self-employed contractor and neighborhood handyman who robbed a bank thirty years ago. Sterling and Harmond attended the same parochial school as boys, but the economically disadvantaged Sterling chose in youthful recklessness to rob a bank rather than build one. Now an older, reformed pragmatist, Sterling finds pride in his work and in his independence.