August Wilson Monologue Competition
Suggested Extension Activities

Educational Dramaturgy in the Classroom

• **Dramaturg** – a person who illuminates the world of the play and the intentions of the playwright. In production, the dramaturg supplies information to the director and actors to help them make clear, informed artistic choices. The dramaturg also provides information to the general audience to help them understand and appreciate the artistic work.

• **Educational Dramaturg** – a person who illuminates the world of the play and the intentions of the playwright by supplying information to a student audience to help them understand and appreciate the artistic work.

The primary goal of Educational Dramaturgy is to help students feel like “insiders” — that the play is something they understand and can connect to. Educational dramaturgy provides an opportunity for students to be scholars, critics, and fans of theatre, all at the same time.

• Through their theatre experience, students will:
  o Develop their understanding of a play’s influences and context (scholars)
  o Analyze a play’s literary merits and/or a production’s artistic merits (scholars/critics)
  o Express intellectual and emotional responses to the play and/or production (critics/fans)
  o Cultivate their artistic tastes and sense of aesthetics (fans)

Dramaturgy is a great opportunity to explore cross-curricular connections or deepen students’ understanding of a particular work, period, playwright, or style, both in the classroom and in the process of mounting a school production. The research and analytic skills used in dramaturgy are applicable to all areas of theatre including playwriting, acting, and design. Dramaturgs also do extensive writing and presenting, so projects in dramaturgy are also useful for building students’ written and oral communication.

As facilitators of the Boston Regional August Wilson Monologue Competition, the Huntington Theatre Company’s Education Department assumes that participating classes will study one or more plays by August Wilson. Below are some ideas for using dramaturgy in your classroom to help make the August Wilson Monologue Competition a meaningful part of your course’s curriculum. There is significant overlap, as all of these assignments flow quite naturally from one to the next.

• **Dramaturgy Teams**
  When studying a specific play, divide students into teams that will each research one of the following: the playwright, the world of the play, and the production history. If you have a larger class and want to have more than three groups, consider assigning multiple groups to the “world of the play” category, as there is frequently more ground to cover. Each team should compile their research into a packet that can be distributed to the class and shared in an oral presentation.

• **Dramaturgical Notebooks**
  For a more long-term project in which the class is studying a particular time period or genre, assign students to each choose a different play from that period or genre and create a dramaturgical notebook for their selection. For the August Wilson Monologue
Competition, students could complete this project for the play from which they chose their monologue. The notebook should be a 3-ring binder that includes:

- Photocopies or printouts of research (articles, pictures, reviews, book chapters) for each of the three research categories: playwright, world of the play, production history.
- Three short articles written by the student dramaturg (one for each category) summing up what he or she learned from their research on the topic.
- An essay titled “From the Dramaturg’s Notebook” that represents what the student would write as a program note if they were the dramaturg on an actual production of the play.
- Students could also be assigned to each make a short oral presentation about information they found interesting or surprising as they researched their play.

**Dramaturgy Displays**
Creating a visual display is a frequent task assigned to dramaturgs — many creative teams like to keep reference images posted in the rehearsal room and some theatres ask dramaturgs to create lobby displays to immerse the audience in the world of the play before the performance begins. Assign students to create a visual display based around a play that they have been researching in class, as part of a team, or individually. Ask students to consider:

- Artwork from the play’s historical context
- Images of historical figures who appear as characters in the play or who are referenced in the play
- Images of the play’s setting
- Images of clothes from the play’s setting
- Images of events similar to those in the play or that are referenced in the text
- Colors, fabrics, textures, lighting effects, and visual art works that evoke the setting and mood of the play
- Images of past productions of the play

**Other Suggested Activities**

**Chalk Talk with Themes**

- This activity serves as an opportunity for students to generate a lot of material in a short amount of time, while making connections to the text by considering how the themes relate to them personally.
- Choose 5-6 themes present in the play(s) being studied and write each one on a big piece of chart paper. Hang the papers around the room.
- Give each student a marker and instruct them to go around the room to each piece of paper to read what is already written there and write new thoughts, questions, comments, etc. that come to their minds. Ask: What does the theme make you think of or wonder? How do you respond to others’ comments?
  - Draw lines connecting new comments to related comments on the chart paper, creating an idea web.
- Take time to make sure that the students visit all theme papers. Encourage them to do this activity silently. Put all responses on paper.
- When time is up, divide students into small groups and give each group a theme paper. Give them a few minutes to discuss the class’s responses and see what they can learn about the group from the theme paper. How do we as a class understand and connect to this theme? Each group should report on their findings.
- Keep these papers and use them to inform and inspire other work, such as writing or tableaus that apply the themes, conflicts, and choices made in the play.
to real life situations from students' lives, or compare and contrast with other texts.

- **Timeline of Character’s Life** — Make a chart of all events that happen to a particular character in the course of the play and then extend it to their life before the play. Focus on what happened both before and during the play that contributes to the content or perspective expressed in the monologue. If needed, students should create their own details for the character’s back story, supported by the text.
  - Extend this activity by writing a **Character Biography**.

- **Journal Entry** — In order to discover more details specific to how your character feels during the monologue (or what they think on the matter they are discussing), create a journal entry from your character’s perspective. Students may need to create information supported by the text for this exercise.

- **Language and Meaning** — As a class, read the attached quote and article by August Wilson (preface to *King Hedley II*). Then ask students to look to their monologues and choose what they feel are the most important lines — the core of the story the monologue tells. Discuss them in terms of language choices (how do the words used reveal time, place, and character?) as well as truthfulness within the context of the play.
“I believe that whatever a character says is true. So I write down everything the character says—
pages and pages. Then, the trick is weeding through all that and finding the story that is really
buried in there. And sometimes you really have to dig. You have to discover the connection of all
the characters to the story that you’re writing, to the play. That’s the fun part.”
—August Wilson

Aunt Ester's Children: A Century on Stage
by August Wilson

This essay, which serves as the preface to King Hedley II (TCG Books), was written in the
spring of 2000, before the playwright had begun the final two plays in his 20th-century cycle.

In 1975 I wrote a short story titled "The Greatest Blues Singer in the World." As it turned
out, the text of the story was very short. I began, "The streets that Balboa walked were his own
private ocean, and Balboa was drowning." That seemed to communicate the idea with more
clarity than I could hope to gain by adding to it, so I stopped and typed "The End."

I had conceived a much longer story that spoke to the social context of the artist and how
one's private ocean is inextricably linked to the tributary streams that gave rise to, and
occasioned, the impulse to song.

Before one can become an artist one must first be. It is being in all facets, its many definitions,
that endows the artist with an immutable sense of himself that is necessary for the
accomplishment of his task. Simply put, art is beholden to the kiln in which the artist was fired.

Before I am anything, a man or a playwright, I am an African American. The tributary
streams of culture, history and experience have provided me with the materials out of which I
make my art. As an African-American playwright, I have many forebears who have pioneered
and hacked out of the underbrush an aesthetic that embraced and elevated the cultural values of
black Americans to a level equal to those of their European counterparts.

Out of their experiences, the sacred and the profane, was made a record of their traverse
and the many points of epiphany and redemption. They have hallowed the ground and provided
a tradition gained by will and daring. I count it a privilege to stand at the edge of the art, with
the gift of their triumphs and failures, as well as the playwrights down through the ages who
found within the turbulent history of human thought and action an ennobling conduct worthy of
art. The culture of black America, forged in the cotton fields of the South and tested by the hard
pavements of the industrial North, has been the ladder by which we have climbed into the New
World. The field of manners and rituals of social intercourse—the music, speech, rhythms,
eating habits, religious beliefs, gestures, notions of common sense, attitudes toward sex,
concepts of beauty and justice, and the responses to pleasure and pain—have enabled us to
survive the loss of our political will and the disruption of our history. The culture's moral codes
and sanction of conduct offer clear instructions as to the value of community, and make clear
that the preservation and promotion, the propagation and rehearsal of the value of one's
ancestors is the surest way to a full and productive life.
The cycle of plays I have been writing since 1979 is my attempt to represent that culture in dramatic art. From the beginning, I decided not to write about historical events or the pathologies of the black community. The details of our struggle to survive and prosper, in what has been a difficult and sometimes bitter relationship with a system of laws and practices that deny us access to the tools necessary for productive and industrious life, are available to any serious student of history or sociology.

Instead, I wanted to present the unique particulars of black American culture as the transformation of impulse and sensibility into codes of conduct and response, into cultural rituals that defined and celebrated ourselves as men and women of high purpose. I wanted to place this culture on stage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us in all areas of human life and endeavor and through profound moments of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves. From *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (which is set in 1911) to *King Hedley II* (set in 1985), the cycle covers almost 80 years of American history. The plays are peopled with characters whose ancestors have been in the United States since the early 17th century.

They were brought across an ocean, chained in the hulls of 350-ton vessels. In the southern part of the United States, they were made to labor in the vast agricultural plantations. They made do without surnames and lived in dirt-floor cabins. They labored without pay. They were bought and sold and traded for money and gold and diamonds and molasses and horses and cows. They were fed the barest of subsistence diets. When they tried to escape, they were tracked down by dogs and men on horseback. They existed as an appendage to the body of society. They had no moral personality and no moral status in civic or church law.

After 200-odd years, as a political expediency, they were granted freedom from being the property of other men. During the next hundred years they were disenfranchised, their houses were burned, they were hung from trees, forced into separate and inferior houses, schools and public facilities. They were granted status in law and denied it in practice.

Yet the characters in the plays still place their faith in America’s willingness to live up to the meaning of her creed so as not to make a mockery of her ideals. It is this belief in America’s honor that allows them to pursue the American Dream even as it remains elusive. The conflicts with the larger society are cultural conflicts. Conflicts over ways of being and doing things. The characters are all continually negotiating for a position, the high ground of the battlefield, from where they might best shout an affirmation of the value and worth of their being in the face of a many-million-voice chorus that seeks to deafen and obliterate it.

They shout, they argue, they wrestle with love, honor, duty, betrayal; they have loud voices and big hearts; they demand justice, they love, they laugh, they cry, they murder, and they embrace life with zest and vigor. Despite the fact that the material conditions of their lives are meager. Despite the fact that they have no relationship with banking capital and their communities lack the twin pillars of commerce and industry. Despite the fact that their relationship to the larger society is one of servitude and marked neglect. In all the plays, the characters remain pointed toward the future, their pockets lined with fresh hope and an abiding faith in their own abilities and their own heroics.

From Herald Loomis’s vision of the bones rising out of the Atlantic Ocean (the largest unmarked graveyard in the world) in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, to the pantheon of vengeful gods (“The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog”) in *The Piano Lesson*, to Aunt Ester, the then 349-year-old conjure woman who first surfaced in *Two Trains Running*—the metaphysical presence of a spirit world has become increasingly important to my work. It is the world that the characters turn to when they are most in need.

Aunt Ester has emerged for me as the most significant persona of the cycle. The characters, after all, are her children. The wisdom and tradition she embodies are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personality and for dealing with a society in which the
contradictions, over the decades, have grown more fierce, and for exposing all the places it is lacking in virtue.

Theatre, as a powerful conveyer of human values, has often led us through the impossible landscape of American class, regional and racial conflicts, providing fresh insights and fragile but enduring bridges of fruitful dialogue. It has provided us with a mirror that forces us to face personal truths and enables us to discover within ourselves an indomitable spirit that recognizes, sometimes across wide social barriers, those common concerns that make possible genuine cultural fusion.

With the completion of my latest play, King Hedley II, I have only the "bookends," the first and last decades of the twentieth century, remaining. As I approach the cycle's end, I find myself a different person than when I started. The experience of writing plays has altered me in ways I cannot yet fully articulate.

As with any journey, the only real question is: "Is the port worthy of the cruise?" The answer is a resounding "Yes." I often remark that I am a struggling playwright. I'm struggling to get the next play on the page. Eight down and counting. The struggle continues.