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The Professional Theatre in Residence at Boston University
PRESENTS
The Yale Repertory Theatre Production of
Joe Turner's Come and Gone
by August Wilson

DIRECTED BY
LLOYD RICHARDS

"Hypnotic... a teeming canvas of black America..."
New York Times

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A Study Guide to the Huntington Theatre Company's Production of

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

by August Wilson

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Introduction

"A free man is he that, in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do that what he has a will to do."

Thomas Hobbes

Although American slaves were legally freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, that date marks only the beginning of a long struggle by black Americans to establish a place for themselves in American society, and to claim their full rights of citizenship in a land that had declared them equal participants but continued to deny them equal participation.

In Joe Turner's Come and Gone, playwright August Wilson examines the effect that the false promise of emancipation had on the generation of blacks who came after the Civil War. The play centers around the experiences of Herald Loomis, a Tennessee farmer who was the victim of the kind of brutal repression and persecution of blacks that was widely practiced in the South during the many years of Jim Crow. Separated from his wife and child when he is arrested on false charges, Loomis is made to work off his "fine" in seven years of hard labor. He emerges from his experience a bitter, angry man. Joe Turner's Come and Gone is the story of the healing of Loomis's shattered spirit, as he searches for his lost wife and seeks the opportunity to begin his life again. The journey he makes to the "center of his spiritual and physical blackness" is shared by the other rootless blacks at a boarding house in Pittsburgh where Loomis has come to stay in the course of his journey, each of them searching in his or her own way to find out who they are and bring some measure of success and dignity to their lives.

Wilson presents the story of Herald Loomis with the same deep feeling and compassion that infuse his other plays about being black in America. "I think the black Americans have the most dramatic story of all mankind to tell," says Wilson. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, winner of the New York Critics Circle award for best play in 1985, explored the exploitation of black musicians in the recording industry in the 1920s. Fences, which will open on Broadway this
spring with James Earl Jones in the leading role, is the story of a black baseball player, shut out of organized baseball, who looks back over his life and tries to shape a better life for his son. Wilson intends to write a play depicting the black experience in America in every decade of this century. The Piano Lesson, set in the 1930s, is the newest play in the cycle and will have its premiere next season.

Directed by Lloyd Richards, Dean of the Yale School of Drama, the Huntington's presentation of Joe Turner's Come and Gone is only the second professional production of this play, which Wilson completed in 1985. After Boston, this production will tour the country, playing in several leading regional theatres.
SYNOPSIS

It is August of 1911, a generation after Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation granted legal freedom to all enslaved Africans in America. Still subject to Jim Crow discrimination in the rural South, black Americans have begun migrating to the industrial cities of the north, seeking work and the opportunity to establish a life with dignity for themselves.

Seth Holly, born of Northern free parents, and his wife Bertha, run a boarding house in Pittsburgh where many of these itinerant workers pass time while sweeping through the northern cities in search of jobs. One such boarder who approaches the Hollys for a place to stay is Herald Loomis. Loomis is an intense, odd man of thirty-two who has come to Pittsburgh from Memphis with his eleven-year-old daughter, Zonia, to search for a wife who has abandoned them. There is a sense of violence lurking under Loomis's steely exterior, a dark, explosive anger that causes Seth to be suspicious of this newcomer, and at first makes him reluctant to rent him a room; but Seth's wife, Bertha, takes pity on the little girl and so Loomis is allowed to stay.

The boarding house is full of other itinerants like Loomis looking for a place to put down roots and set up new lives. Jeremy, a talented guitar player, has come up from North Carolina and gets work here and there in mills and on road crews until he is forced out by white immigrants competing for the same jobs. Bynum is a mystic who works magic with roots and plants to "bind" people. Mattie, a young girl whose man has left her, is seeking another man to whom she can belong until he also moves along without her.

Loomis asks around about his wife, Martha, and engages the services of a white peddler, Rutherford Selig, who has a business on the side helping dispersed slave families to reunite. Seth Holly knows of a woman in town who fits Loomis' description, but refuses to reveal this to Loomis because of his suspicions about Loomis's character.

After dinner one night, the boarding house begins to entertain itself by doing a juba, a rhythmic dancing and singing of hymns. Loomis, who has been watching the others in silence, suddenly explodes, venting his pent-up rage in a violent tirade against praising God. He reveals himself for the first time.
as a man who has been cruelly abused by life, and asks his fellow boarders what they have to thank God for? For the suffering and injustice that is their daily companion? He rants about terrible visions, until he is no longer in his right mind and collapses. The other boarders have listened in stunned silence to Loomis's raging. Bynum talks to Loomis and manages to calm him down. Loomis's violent outburst shocks and scares the other boarders. Seth tells Loomis he has to leave after the week for which he is paid up.

Bynum, a healing man by nature, has taken an interest in Loomis. He coaxes Loomis into revealing the trauma that has caused his rage, and Loomis relates his pathetic story. Loomis was once a pious man who spent his time farming and spreading the word of God. One day, he stopped to preach to a group of men gambling in the street, when the whole group was rounded up and arrested by Joe Turner's men. Loomis was forced to do hard labor for seven years as a result of his "crime." No word was ever sent to his family of his whereabouts, and when he was at last released he went home to find that his wife was gone, and had left their young daughter nearby with her mother. Loomis has been looking for her ever since, so that he can pick up the pieces of his life and find a place to start over again.

When Loomis's week is up and they still have not located Martha, he and Zonia pack up to leave. Just after they exit, Rutherford Selig the peddler and "people finder" enters with a woman. It is Martha. Just as Seth is telling them that they are too late, Loomis and Zonia, who have seen Martha coming, reenter. It is an anxious reunion. Loomis bitterly accuses Martha of abandoning him and their daughter. Martha tries to explain that she thought he was dead, and that she was forced to come North because the members of their church, where Loomis had once been a devout member, were persecuted and forced to flee. To everyone's surprise, Loomis tells Martha that he's moving on, and leaving Zonia with her; he says that he chased her all these years just so he could say his goodbye and start over again. He tells Zonia she has to go live with her mother now. He tells them all that no man or woman is going to bind Herald Loomis any more. Joe Turner has come and gone, and now Loomis is free. He pulls a knife as if he expects someone to try and stop him from leaving. Martha, aghast at his behavior, begins reciting Psalms, trying to win his soul back to Jesus, but Loomis can no longer believe that there is any justice in religion or find any comfort in the idea of heavenly salvation as a reward for his suffering on earth. Jesus is a white man, a Simon Legree asking him has he done his day's work, and then throwing him a scrap of a promise of salvation and asking him to live on that. Loomis says goodbye to Martha and leaves, knowing that he can at last make his way on his own legs.
CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

Seth Holly - owner of the boarding house

Bertha Holly - his wife

Bynum Walker - a resident of the boarding house; a mystic and a "rootworker," who concocts spells and magic from plants.

Rutherford Selig - a peddler

Jeremy Furlow - a resident who has just recently come to Pittsburgh from North Carolina.

Herald Loomis - a newcomer to the boarding house, searching for his lost wife.

Zonia - Loomis's eleven year old daughter.

Mattie Campbell - a young woman looking for a man to cling to.

Reuben Scott - a boy who lives next door to the boarding house who befriends Zonia.

Molly Cunningham - a resident of the boarding house, more worldly wise than Mattie.

Martha Pentecost Loomis - Herald Loomis's wife.
The situation for blacks in the South did not change dramatically after the Emancipation Proclamation put an end to their physical bondage in 1863. While the Reconstruction years saw significant advances for black people in the areas of education and some blacks entered professions such as medicine, law, and politics, the vast majority of blacks in the South still lived in poverty, economically dependent on their former white masters, and repressed by conservative landowners interested in preserving the system of white superiority. To ensure that blacks remained in a position of economic and social inferiority after the war, many former Confederate states passed laws known as black codes, which severely restricted the ability of blacks to exercise their newly-won liberty. Black codes, which varied from state to state, often included provisions which barred blacks from any occupation other than agricultural laborer, enforced curfews, and required that a black obtain his employer's permission to travel on his own. One newspaper in New Orleans noted that blacks were now allowed on the streets only one hour later than they were under slavery. "This additional hour is the fruit of victories in the field," wrote the editor; "four years of a bloody war have been fought to gain that one hour." Black codes were abolished when representatives of the federal government, still occupying the former Confederate states, found them too repressive.

The careful enforcement of federal equal rights edicts by Union occupying forces in the early years of Reconstruction enabled blacks to make significant gains toward enfranchisement. Blacks were effective in organizing themselves politically, and many attained positions of considerable influence. There were sixteen black men in the United States Congress between 1869 and 1880, two of them senators. South Carolina had two black lieutenant governors in that time, Louisiana had three, and Mississippi one. Several states had black superintendents of education, as well as black representatives in state government. Blacks participated in all constitutional conventions called to write new laws for the former Confederate states. Education, which had been forbidden by law for blacks in the South during slavery, became a primary goal for most former slaves once they were free. Schools were immediately established all over the South. The Freedmen's Bureau, an assistance organization set up by Union occupying forces, established 2,000 schools for freedmen in the South after the war, in addition to those that were set up by Northern teachers and by blacks themselves. No sacrifice was too great to obtain an education, and students of all ages were taught to read for the first time in crude classroom buildings they had built themselves.
When Union troops withdrew in 1877, the South entered an era of repressive white control, in which white conservatives who regained power at that time were able to practice systems of legalized persecution and repression of Southern blacks with impunity. Unfair systems of sharecropping and tenant farming, in which former slaves who for the first time had to buy their own food, clothing, and farming tools, were made to pay prices so high that many had to go into debt to their former masters, kept blacks in a state of perpetual poverty. Blacks were often driven from the polls or intimidated from trying to exercise their right to vote. Those that insisted on voting might be threatened by their white employers with losing their jobs.

One of the most abusive and widely practiced systems of economic enslavement in post-Reconstruction South was an institution known as peonage, of which Herald Loomis in Joe Turner's Come and Gone has been a victim. In the play, Herald Loomis is falsely arrested as a gambler and forced to work seven years as a convict laborer in order to pay off his fine.

The institution of peonage was described in a letter to the magazine "The Crisis," edited by the black scholar W.E.B. DuBois, in 1911:

Kind Sir:

I am not an educated man. I will give you the peonage system as it is practiced here in the name of the law.

If a colored man is arrested here and hasn't any money, whether he is guilty or not, he has to pay just the same. A man of color is never tried in this country. It is simply a farce. Everything is fixed before he enters the courtroom. I will try to give you an illustration of how it is done.

I am brought in a prisoner, go through the farce of being tried. The whole of my fine may amount to fifty dollars. A kindly appearing man will come up and pay my fine and take me to his farm to allow me to work it out. At the end of a month I find that I owe him more than I did when I went there. The debt is increased year in and year out. You would ask, "How is that?" It is simply that he is charging you more for your board, lodging, and washing than they allow you for your work, and you can't help yourself either, nor can anyone else help you, because you are still a prisoner and never get your fine worked out....

Of course we can't prove anything. Our word is nothing. If we state things as they are, the powers that be make a different statement, and that sets ours aside at Washington and, I suppose, in Heaven, too.

.....One more word about peonage. The court and the man you work for are always partners. One makes the fine and the other one works you and holds you, and if you leave you are tracked up with bloodhounds and brought back."
To many blacks, denied the opportunity to better themselves in the South, and subjected to increasing numbers of violent attacks by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, the North seemed a promised land (in the last 16 years of the nineteenth century, more than 2,500 persons were lynched in the United States). What began as a trickle of Northern migration during the Civil War years became a flood as blacks from the rural South flocked to the industrial cities of the north seeking better conditions for themselves and their families. However, they soon learned that life in the North was not easy in all cases. Daily life in the city was harsher for the poor, and neither did they find in the North an end to prejudice. The anxiety of blacks uprooting themselves and adjusting to life in an urban environment that was frighteningly different from the world they had left behind was described by author Richard Wright in 12 Million Black Voices:

"Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city. We, who were landless upon the land, we who had had our personalities blasted with two hundred years of slavery and had been turned loose to shift for ourselves--we were such a folk as this when we moved into a world that was destined to test all we were.

Night and day, in rain and in sun, in winter and in summer, we leave the land. The miles click behind us. Into Chicago, Indianapolis, New York, Cleveland, Buffalo, Detroit, Toledo, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Milwaukee we go, looking for work. We hug our suitcases, fearful of pickpockets. We are very reserved, for we have been warned not to act 'too green.' Then we board our first Yankee street car to go to a cousin's home, a brother's home, a sister's home, a friend's home. The apartments in which we sleep are crowded and noisy. We live amid swarms of people, yet there is a vast difference between people. No longer do our lives depend upon the soil, the sun, the rain, or the wind; we live by the grace of jobs and the brutal logic of jobs. In the South life was different; men spoke to you, cursed you, yelled at you, or killed you. But here in the North cold forces hit and push you. It is a world of things."

Black migration to the North reached its height during World War I, when foreign immigrants who made up much of the labor force in the industrial North were temporarily barred from entering the country, and the opportunities for blacks seeking work were greatest. In many cases, blacks did find more opportunity in the North. But more often, however, as in Joe Turner's Come and Gone, they were faced with the same problems of discrimination and prejudice that they left behind in the South.
Free blacks—During slavery, there existed in both the North and the South a small group of blacks who were not slaves. Successful runaways were free, as were the offspring of free mothers. Some slaves were set free for meritorious service, and some purchased their freedom. Some reformers purchased slaves and set them free while others left wills freeing their slaves. In 1860, there were about 500,000 free blacks, and almost four million slaves. Free blacks did not have the same status as white citizens, and most lived under codes that severely restricted their freedom.

Black codes—laws designed by Southern whites after the Civil War to keep the newly freed blacks in a state of white control. These codes included laws that severely restricted land ownership for blacks, imposed curfews, prohibited liquor and firearm possession. Most insidious of all was a vague law against vagrancy which enabled the whites in power to arrest and jail blacks on unjustified charges.

Reconstruction—In 1867, Congress passed the Reconstruction Act establishing military rule in the South as a means of enforcing federal edicts protecting former slaves, as well as to supervise the establishment of acceptable state governments in the South. Reconstruction, a period of high hopes for Southern blacks, lasted from 1867 - 1877.

Peonage—a system of "debt slavery" wherein blacks were fined for questionable infractions of the law, and their fines were paid by landowners who would then allow them to work off their debt by working on the plantation. Although peonage was officially outlawed by the federal government in 1867, it was nonetheless widely practiced with impunity in the South for decades. No convictions on the charges of peonage were ever made until 1901, and in that particular case, the criminal was pardoned by President Roosevelt.

Jim Crow—Named after a black song and dance character, Jim Crow was a system of laws in the South that required blacks to stay in special sections of trains, depots, etc. It was first enacted in Tennessee in 1875, but the rest of the South quickly followed suit and Jim Crow was expanded in some areas to include separate bathrooms, parks, drinking fountains and even Coke machines.

Joe Turner—The subject of a blues song (based on a traditional song) by W.C. Handy, Joe Turner is a symbol of white conservatives in the South who enforced the laws under which blacks could be unfairly arrested and held in bondage. There is conjecture that the name and song refer to a real-life brother of a the Governor of Tennessee, who lived around the turn of the century.

Plessy vs. Ferguson: A Supreme Court ruling in 1896 which upheld that the doctrine of "separate but equal" was not unconstitutional and led to the perpetuation of Jim Crow laws in the South. Plessy vs. Ferguson remained in effect until 1954.
XIII Amendment--A constitutional amendment which abolished slavery.

XIV Amendment--defines "American citizen," and forbids the abridgement of a citizen's constitutional rights by states; ensures "due process of law" for all citizens and equal protection under the law for all citizens. All confederate states had to ratify this amendment before they were allowed back into the Union after the Civil War.

XV Amendment--ensures the right to vote for all citizens regardless of race.

XXIV Amendment--Eliminates poll tax as a prerequisite to voting in federal elections. The poll tax was often used as a means of preventing blacks from taking advantage of their right to vote. XXIV Amendment was enacted in 1964.

Urban migration--To escape repression, violence and lack of opportunity in the South, numerous blacks chose to migrate North to find jobs in the industrial cities which had a great demand for labor. This migration reached its height during World War I when foreign immigrants were barred from the U.S. and black Americans were able to take advantage of the increased demand for labor. Many who thought the North a promised land were sorely disappointed and found work hard to get, and the crowded conditions of the city ghettos where they could find housing were cruel and dehumanizing.

Freedmen's Bureau--Organization established to provide economic and medical assistance to freedmen and destitute whites in the South after the Civil War, which also instituted an educational program which included over 4,000 free schools for freedmen to help them find jobs, homes and security.
August Wilson was born in Pittsburgh in 1945. He began writing as a poet, and his verse has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies including Black Poets of the Twentieth Century (Harper and Row). He started to write for the theatre in the late 1970's, largely at the instigation of his friend Claude Purdy, a director with Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota. Wilson achieved fame for the first time when his play Ma Rainey's Black Bottom received its premiere under the direction of Lloyd Richards at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1984, and subsequently moved to Broadway. Ma Rainey won the New York Critics' Circle Award for Best Play in 1985, and received a Tony Award nomination. Since Ma Rainey, Wilson has written three other plays: Fences, which had its premiere at the Yale Rep in 1985, will open on Broadway this spring directed by Richards and starring James Earl Jones. Joe Turner's Come and Gone received its premiere this spring at Yale, again after an O'Neill Center workshop and under Richards' direction; the present Huntington production is its second professional presentation. Wilson has recently completed yet another new play, The Piano Lesson, which has not yet received its first major production. Wilson was recently awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for Playwriting. He is married to Judy Oliver, a social worker, and has a daughter, Sakina, 16. Wilson is a resident of St. Paul, Minnesota.

Following are excerpts of an interview with Wilson conducted by the Huntington's Producing Director, Peter Altman.

Peter Altman: Maybe we could start by talking a little bit about your biography. You were born in Pittsburgh.

August Wilson: I was born in Pittsburgh in 1945.

PA: When did you go to St. Paul and what was the reason you moved there?

AW: I moved to St. Paul in 1978. My longtime good friend Claude Purdy, who is a director, had been trying to get me to write a play so finally I sat down and wrote one and gave it to him in Pittsburgh. It was called Black Bart and the Sacred Hills, a musical satire. Then he left Pittsburgh to come here (to Minnesota) to direct. And he sent me a ticket and said, "Why don't you come out here and rewrite the script?" So I came out for ten days and did a quick rewrite of the script and then I went on back to Pittsburgh. And then in January '78 he called me up and said the Inner City Theatre in Los Angeles wanted to do a staged reading there so we went out to L.A. and on the way back we stopped in St. Paul. It seemed like a nice quiet town. And I happened at that time to meet the woman who became my wife—so I went back home to Pittsburgh and then I moved up in March.

PA: You had a job at the Minnesota Science Museum.

AW: Yes. I worked there for two years as a scriptwriter. A theatre troupe was attached to the Museum. We had a series of different plays that we performed on the Museum floor, in the Anthropology section. There was a
series about Indians, adapted from their tales. "How the Coyote Got His Name" from the Northwest Indians, was one, and there was "How the Spider Woman Taught the Navajo to Weave."

PA: Could you tell me about any other jobs you've had since then, other than writing?

AW: Yes, I quit the Museum in 1980 to go to work for a social service organization called Little Brothers of the Poor. I cooked lunch for the staff every day. I'd work four hours, and have four hours to write.

PA: How long did you do that?

AW: I did that for three years. I was working there when I wrote Ma Rainey.

PA: When you were working in the Science Museum and cooking and doing other jobs, did you think of yourself as a writer, as a poet and a playwright?

AW: I never considered myself as a playwright at that time. But I'd started writing poetry in 1965.

PA: You continue to write poetry, don't you?

AW: Up to this day. But I never thought of myself as a playwright even after I'd written this play for Claude.

PA: Let's go back to Black Bart and the Sacred Hills. What happened after its reading in Los Angeles?

AW: It had a staged reading there and eventually in 1981 we did a production here at a theatre in St. Paul that Claude was working with called Penumbra Theatre. Then I wrote another play called Jitney that I submitted to the O'Neill Center and they sent it back.

PA: You just mailed it, and they didn't know you yet at that time, and they refused it and returned it to you?

AW: Yes, they returned it to me. And there's a Playwright's Center here in Minneapolis. And I sent the script to the Playwright's Center and they had their own fellowship. I think it was $200 a month. They agreed to do a staged reading. When I first walked into the room there, they had a meeting of all the fellowship winners. There were sixteen playwrights. I had never in my life been sitting in a room with sixteen playwrights. And I thought, well, I'm here too so I must be a playwright. For my next play I could think of myself as a playwright, which was very important.

PA: What did you write after that?

AW: I wrote a play called Fullerton Street, set in 1941, and we did a staged reading of it at the Playwrights' Center. I think it was actually in the process of working on that play that I really, for the first time, realized the possibilities of the stage. I understood what I was doing wrong with the piece.
PA: Do you intend to rewrite any of your early plays? Might you be tempted to go back to Fullerton Street at some point?

AW: No, I doubt it. But I learned a lot working on Fullerton Street, and the play I wrote after that was Ma Rainey.

PA: Was Ma Rainey the third play you submitted to the O'Neill?

AW: I'd submitted a couple of film scripts also. A total of five scripts. Ma Rainey was the third play I sent to the O'Neill.

PA: And it was the first one they accepted. Then what happened?

AW: I went to Waterford (Connecticut, where the O'Neill is located.)

PA: Was that the first time you met Lloyd Richards?

AW: Yes, the first meeting.

PA: Did you two have a sense the first time you met that this would be the beginning of an important relationship for both of you?

AW: I was totally in awe of the man. I knew he was director of the conference. I was just a participant in the conference. At that time I had no idea that he would go on and direct the play.

PA: You weren't working on a one-to-one basis with him? He was working with a group of playwrights of which you were one?

AW: Absolutely. I had no idea that Lloyd and I would be working together. My play was directed by Bill Partlan.

PA: What happened next?

AW: I came home. After the conference, I came home. I had an interesting play. There were various theatres who were interested in it, among them Yale Rep. I spent several months talking to a New York producer. But those negotiations got nowhere. So I called Lloyd up and asked him if he wanted to do the play and he said yes.

PA: One of the things that I think would be interesting to make clear is the chronology, the sequence of your plays since then. Have they been written in the order that they've appeared before the public? In other words, was it Ma Rainey and then Fences and then Joe Turner and then most recently The Piano Lesson?

AW: That was the order.

PA: Let's talk about Joe Turner's Come and Gone. Can you tell me something about the spark that led to Joe Turner?
AW: Sure. It was a painting by Romare Bearden that Claude Purdy showed to me. Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket. We were sitting looking, admiring this painting—a boarding house painting with a man coming down stairs with a huge hand reaching for his lunch bucket and a woman looking to go out. She's standing with her purse and her hat, and outside the window you can see the mill—a very orderly scene. And sitting at the table in what I'd call a posture of abject defeat is another man. I became intrigued by this figure who I thought was central to the painting, as opposed to the mill hand. I began to wonder who he was. I actually started to write a short story called "The Matter of the Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket," and eventually that figure became Herald Loomis in my play.

PA: Did you know that the time was 1911 when you started? Did you have in mind that that would be the period of the story?

AW: No. When I first began to work on the story I had it set in the 20s. It was later that the idea occurred to me to set it in 1911 to take advantage of the African retention. I felt that the closer I could set the play to the time of slavery without setting it in the 19th century, the better it would achieve my purpose.

PA: Did the character of Herald Loomis get suggested to you by any story you'd ever heard or any personal history you'd heard about, or was it entirely something from your imagination?

AW: I was intrigued by the figure in the painting and tried to find out who he is, and then I remembered the song, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," by W.C. Handy, and I put it and the painting together and then everything happened for me because then I knew his history.

PA: How did the song help?

AW: The song is very simple. The lyrics are very simple. "They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone. He's got my man and is gone. He come with forty links of chain—got my man and gone." It's a song for the women around Memphis. Once I realized that that was what in fact happened around Memphis, was in fact why he was sitting there with that posture, then the whole play came to life.

PA: In different interviews that I've read, you've spoken about your plays as part of a cycle, an historical cycle. How early did you get the idea that you would be thinking in terms of a cycle?

AW: I think it was after I wrote Ma Rainey. Jitney I set in the 70s and Fullerton Street I set in the 40s and Ma Rainey was 1927 and I think the idea occurred to me, why don't I just choose the largest idea that confronted blacks for particular decades and write a play about it?

PA: So now The Piano Lesson is in the '30s, Ma Rainey is in the '20s and Fences is in the '50s moving into the 60s. Are you working on something from the 70s and '80s? Is that part of your plan for the future?
AW: I'm working on something from the 60s next.

PA: When the cycle is finished, how many plays do you envision will be in it?

AW: Twenty or thirty. When I've done 1911, '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, all the decades, that won't be the whole story so I'll go back again.

PA: I know that you've talked in various interviews about how you believe that while you're writing about black history, you're not writing just for a black audience; and that you want the material of your plays to be universal. In Joe Turner, for instance, the theme of finding your identity, your own song, is one that anybody in search of his identity could relate to. I just wonder if you feel any sort of responsibility or pressure to write topically on social themes, or in a tradition of black literature; or do you feel free to write in whatever way you wish to do?

AW: I place myself squarely in that tradition, but I think you can go further. The main thing is that working as an artist I feel that what I have to do is satisfy myself. I work off a quote from Romare Bearden. When asked about his work, he said, "I try to explore in terms of the life I know best those things which are common to all cultures." That's what I try to do.

PA: Let's talk a little about the interpretation of your plays, if we might. When you are writing or when you have finished a play, do you have a particular sense of the visual aspects of that play, of how it will look in performance?

AW: I don't really see the space the characters are moving in. I see the story and I'm concerned with the characters. But at the same time, I know what my likes are and if you give me a set design or costumes that seem to be a violation of the spirit of what I'm trying to do, I would reckon with that.

PA: What would you like to talk about that I haven't asked you so far? Is there anything particular that it's important for you to have the Huntington audience know before they see this play?

AW: I love the play. For me, I think that whatever the audience thinks of the play, if they can walk out of the theatre and know that these are African people they've been seeing, then I will be satisfied. One of the things I'm trying to do is to point out the differences in blacks' and whites' sensibilities. If the audience can walk away with that, I'll think the play is successful; then each black person they see, they'll look at a little bit differently.

I had an experience when I went to see a play called Chopin in Space, by Philip Bosakowski at the Yale Rep. It was about Poland. All I can say about the play is that it was about Polish people and about Poland. And I know that when I walked out of the theatre, I was looking at the people there and trying to identify who was Polish because I wanted to look at them more closely than before because I'd just found out something about them. And I notice that when Poland is in the news now my ears perk up. If I can duplicate that experience for other people, that would be what I'm trying to accomplish.
TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the character of Bynum. Is he just an old kook or does he have some secret spiritual knowledge that transcends that of those around him? What is his function in the play?

2. Discuss the distinction drawn by the landlord between himself and his tenants; discuss the social structure evident in this play.

3. Discuss the juba scene.

4. What did you think of the play's end? Did it seem contrived to have Martha appear just as Loomis was leaving?

5. What is Wilson saying about the role of faith and religion in our lives? How can faith co-exist with continual suffering and disappointment?

6. Have you ever been judged unfairly? Have you ever done something that you thought was good and had someone overlook the merit of your ideas because you were "a child?" How does that make you feel?

7. What evidence do you see that Loomis has begun to heal by the last scene?

8. What is the significance of Bynum's "shiny man?"

9. In this study guide, Wilson is quoted as saying "I want what I'm writing about to be timeless." Can you identify some of the timeless issues which are dealt with in Joe Turner which apply to people of all races and backgrounds?
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


