

University of Central Florida

STARS

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

2013

August Wilson's Gem Of The Ocean A Dramaturgical Case Study

Rebecca Barringhaus

University of Central Florida



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

STARS Citation

Barringhaus, Rebecca, "August Wilson's Gem Of The Ocean A Dramaturgical Case Study" (2013).

Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 2513.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/2513>

AUGUST WILSON'S *GEM OF THE OCEAN*
A DRAMATURGICAL CASE STUDY

by

RK BARRINGHAUS
BFA University of Central Missouri, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master Arts
in the Department of Theatre
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2013

Major Professors: Julia Listengarten and Sybil St. Claire

© RK Barringhaus 2013

ABSTRACT

In 2004, August Wilson completed *Gem of the Ocean*, the first play in his Pittsburgh Cycle. Seven years later, the University of Central Florida's production of *Gem of the Ocean* went against what most consider traditional staging. With a Russian born director and a mostly white production team, playing to a predominately white audience, what are the challenges of accurately transforming the text to the stage, while still providing a truthful telling of a story? The following is a case study based on the idea of "active dramaturgy" or, more specifically, cultivating an atmosphere within the production that relies on critical thinking and original analytical thought to create an environment where creativity drives the work of the production. This approach is discussed by dramaturg Lenora Inez Brown in her book *The Art of Active Dramaturgy*.

As the first play within the Pittsburgh Cycle, *Gem of the Ocean* represents the life of African Americans during the first decade of the twentieth century; nine more plays, respectively, represent each of the following decades. Wilson's work closely followed the prescription adapted by African American W.E.B. Du Bois who called for theatre "by us, for us, near us, and about us" (Herrington 132).

The fact that I am a white American troubles the state of the accepted norms for a Wilson theatre production. My ability to perform as a dramaturg is based on my capacity to inform and educate through whatever means necessary, not the color of my skin. Brown posits that an active dramaturg is one that "seeks ways to articulate heady ideas into active language--that is, language that a performer can easily use to shape an acting choice or a designer, a design choice"

(xii). None of this is based on skin color, race, or religion; therefore, it was my objective as the dramaturg to stress the importance of the shared story within the play that could relate to anyone of any background.

Throughout the course of this production, my major challenge as a dramaturg was to maintain the accuracy of African American representation, while working with the non-traditional, multiracial production team, on the race specific work of August Wilson. In this thesis, I explore the application of active dramaturgy on the production process.

For my grandparents

Virgil and Wanda Barringhaus

Joe and Phyllis Wilkinson

Without you I wouldn't be who I am today. Thank you. I love you.

AKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my committee members: Dr. Julia Listengarten, Dr. Sybil St. Claire, and Dr. Donald Seay, not only for supporting me in this academic venture, but also for making me a better student, educator, and artist. My hope is that one day I can educate and enrich the way you all do.

I also want to thank the cast and crew of UCF's *Gem of the Ocean*. Without you wonderful people I wouldn't be writing this. You are all talented artists, and I think I learned more from you than you could ever possibly learn from me.

To all the graduate students with whom I took classes, worked, and shared an office --you guys are truly amazing people. I wish you the best in everything you do.

To my mother Jayne -- you are the best parent anyone could ever ask for. Without you I don't know where I would be. Thanks for having all your ducks in a row, and thanks for all the copies.

Sam, thank you for being the wonderful person you are. It is not without all of your encouragement, love, and patience that this thesis exists.

I love you all, and thank you for everything.

-RK Barringhaus

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CASE STUDY FRAMEWORK.....	4
What is Active Dramaturgy?	5
Initial Research	7
<i>Gem of the Ocean</i> Synopsis	10
<i>GEM OF THE OCEAN</i> TEXTUAL ANALYSIS.....	16
Female Presence in <i>Gem of the Ocean</i>	17
Water in <i>Gem of the Ocean</i>	21
Identity and Character.....	25
The World of <i>Gem of the Ocean</i>	32
PRODUCTION ANALYSIS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA’S PRODUCTION OF <i>GEM OF THE OCEAN</i>	35
Production Elements	35
Acting and Character	41
The Journey to the City of Bones	47
Production Team Influences	48
AUGUST WILSON’S PRESENCE IN <i>GEM OF THE OCEAN</i>	51
Wilson’s Four B’s	51
Wilson Represented in Solly and Caesar	54
Wilson’s Own Dramaturgy	58
CONCLUSION.....	61
REFERENCES	66

INTRODUCTION

When a dramaturg embarks on a play within August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle, no matter that person's race, this individual takes on a great deal more than just a one-hundred page script. Nine other texts and numerous other characters become the responsibility of the dramaturg, particularly the character of Aunt Ester, an almost three hundred year old washer of souls. All of these characters become your responsibility; you must know their future (as in *Gem of the Ocean*) and/or their past. To read all ten plays in the Cycle is like looking at old family photo albums and hearing your grandparents tell you stories about relatives that were gone long before you ever arrived. Somehow you know them and are part of them, and they are part of you, without ever meeting them.

Wilson's unique characters made a cohesive match with our unique production team. Most of our production team was not African American, and we had a multitude of other cultural backgrounds as well. To those of us raised here in the United States, slavery is part of our shared history, to others on our production team not raised here; they did not share that same history. Indisputably, however, my perception of slavery as a Caucasian American is almost certainly different than that of the members of the cast, but like Wilson, like me, and like the members of our audience, our cast had never been slaves. All we could do is use the information that historical evidence provides us.

The color of my skin automatically excluded me from fully understanding the hardships of slavery, bondage or segregation and that is a truth that I fully acknowledge and disclose. In a

sort of reverse racism, I had to prove my aptitude to educate and inform the African American cast in a non-biased way that benefited the production as a whole. It became my mission to find a new way in which to look at the text that was different from the traditionally race-ruled perspective and prove that what matters most for a dramaturg, is the ability to do their job, and not the color of their skin.

What became the most important aspect of our production was our capacity to find commonalities within each other, the characters, and subsequently use that to tell the story. In our present day, a time extremely different from that of the play, where our society communicates through abbreviated vernacular sent by phone, and our ability to communicate through spoken word (no matter the race, color, or religion) has become haltingly lazy, it is through storytelling that we as a team found our common ground. As a Caucasian American, I continued to look for ways to relate and convey themes and ideas with my African American counter-parts, audience members, or cast members.

In his famous article *I Want a Black Director*, Wilson said “Someone who does not share the specifics of a culture remains an outsider, no matter how astute a student they are, or how well meaning their intentions” (201). There is a pomposity in this statement. I never claimed not to be an outsider and I think it is my outsider status that propelled me to be a dramaturg first and foremost. As a Caucasian American dramaturg, I searched relentlessly for ways to communicate wholly the ideas, themes, and information to a group that I do not belong to, but most importantly, a group that the text of the play is about. It is in this work that I found a major connection with Brown’s “active dramaturgy” “...dramatic/analytical interpretation will [...] and

must change from production to production. To generate the flexibility in thought needed to create a unique, production--specific vision” (xii-xiii). The perimeters in Brown’s book are loose, and open to interpretation; the following thesis is my understanding and application of the approach.

With a plethora of books on dramaturgy both European and American, there was no lack of resources for the basis of my work. While all of these resources are incredibly informative and credible, none of them prepared me for being one of the minorities in the rehearsal room. It is from this experience, that I present the idea of “non-biased dramaturgy” in this thesis.

In the following thesis I will discuss my work as dramaturg on our production of *Gem of the Ocean*. My individual success, as well as the success of the production, proves that though we may still be considered outsiders by Wilson’s standards, we accurately told a story that may seem exclusive to a group of people, but is more or less the story of a nation.

CASE STUDY FRAMEWORK

The definition for dramaturg varies from country to country, theatre to theatre, and dramaturg to dramaturg. The process of dramaturgy depends on such things like the type of production, such as newly written works, versus production dramaturgy on works previously produced. It is no surprise to me when people ask, often repeatedly, what it is that a dramaturg really does. I define it very much like Lenora Inez Brown; I believe that dramaturgs, me included, simply help the production team to articulate the telling of the story by building a framework for actors, directors, designers, and audience members.

As with any position in the theatre realm, there is no handbook on “how to dramaturg” (though several texts call themselves handbooks): to dramaturg a show is more of a trial and error, learn as you go scenario. Every text, production, and cast will be different, and it is the job of the dramaturg to adapt their style to the situation. My experience at the University of Central Florida (UCF) during the production of August Wilson’s (1945-2005) *Gem of the Ocean* was no different. As a white¹ dramaturg working on a black² production, I assisted the production team in the articulation of the story in a way that helped in the staging of the production, but did not cross any boundaries as I cannot fully relate to the experiences of the black population.

¹ I use the term white in reference to my skin color in this entire thesis. I feel it best articulates the contrast in the two groups in which I write about. I am light of skin color but am an amalgamation of nationalities like most Americans; I don’t however have any African American bloodlines that I am aware of.

² I also use the term black in this thesis in reference to people of African American decent. The term African American is used in quotes and in the context of information from outside sources. I use the term black, because it is the most widely used term among the people of my generation.

Gem of the Ocean is the first of the ten plays in August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle. The Pittsburgh Cycle, also known as the Twentieth-Century Cycle³, covers the twentieth century with one play depicting each decade. This Cycle brought the trials and tribulations of black life to the stage. Wilson creates a sort of family tree within the Cycle, the characters in *Gem* are seen in other plays within the Cycle, and so are their children.

This case study talks about the rehearsal, performance, and production elements in which my dramaturgy was employed. Also, my method of dramaturgy is discussed and my choices examined. It was my intent to chart my work on this production as an example of active dramaturgy with the challenges of a multi-racial team on a race specific production.

The three sections in this initial chapter provide relevant information, and will prepare the reader for various references along the way. In the first section 'What is Active Dramaturgy' I explain what I define as "active dramaturgy" according to the Brown's text. In the next section, 'Initial Research' I will give examples of some of my initial research, and how it did or did not inform choices made later in my work. Finally, I provide a synopsis of the play. I intend to offer the play synopsis to make the numerous quotes and references to the text more digestible to the reader, especially in the case that they are not familiar with the text.

What is Active Dramaturgy?

In her book *The Art of Active Dramaturgy: Transforming Critical Thought into Dramatic Action* Lenora Inez Brown doesn't give a prescription for being an active dramaturg; she instead

³ For the sake of time I have shortened any future references to The Pittsburgh Cycle, to simply the Cycle. When I refer to Wilson's body of work, I refer to only those in the Cycle, unless otherwise stated.

gives you lessons and scenarios that lead you to your own definition of an active dramaturg. It is through this that I have come to find my own meaning for the term. It is my understanding of this text and terminology presented that I use as a basis for my work. Brown focuses on four major components, though they could also be looked at as five separate components. The components to active dramaturgy; they are: critical and analytical thinking and writing, research, reflection, and questioning.

Critical and analytical thinking and writing are central themes throughout Brown's text. These skills are necessary to pose and respond to questions from or to the actors and production team. Doing this engages everyone involved in practical and constructive ways; instead of criticizing the work negatively, effective dramaturgs facilitate finding solutions to problems.

Brown states that dramaturgy is not history, but uses history to inform choices. To be a good dramaturg, and especially an active dramaturg, knowledge of many topics outside of the theatre is necessary, and, with that, the ability to gain knowledge of topics outside the theatre. Most importantly dramaturgs must have the capacity to conduct research, be it visual: in the form of pictures or movies, historic: as in finding solid historical fact, or analytical: as in using a combination of the above stated to create new research topics.

Finally, reflecting and questioning frequently go hand in hand, and one often leads to the other. Reflecting on what you have read, practiced, or seen should create questions which will lead you to employ the use of one of the first two components, research or critical and analytical thinking and writing. Creating and answering questions will also lead you back to reflection and

the other components. It is through this cycle that an active dramaturg can be successful in their work.

The four components listed above were used heavily in my work on *Gem*. Throughout the following chapters, I will highlight these instances. Much of my initial research relied on my ability to do these things without thinking I was doing them, and to use my early instincts to propel me further into my research.

Initial Research

The initial research for any show can either help you along the way, or eventually become irrelevant. As a dramaturg, I find it very important to set the tone for a production by providing more than enough initial research to the production team and myself. I went about this production no differently than I normally would. I walked into the first read-through and production meeting having background research on the playwright, the play, and some of the major elements and themes the director wanted to highlight. I believe this is the most basic of Brown's four components, because an effective dramaturg must be able to do research. In the sections below, I will chronicle my initial research process and topics. In the respective chapters, I will provide a more in-depth explanation of research for characters or topics that arose during the rehearsal process.

One of the starting points in my research was music. I decided on using music as a starting point because I thought that the musicians and music we were adding to the production might prove a difficult task. Having some ground work in the types and styles of music we could use might prove helpful. I also felt that so much of the music we listen to today has influences in

the tribal, jazz, folk music of the time, and finding those connections could benefit the production.

Though the production had a music director, Pascha Weaver, our director wanted me to give her some information with which to start. I began to look at different tribal, African, gospel, and jazz artists, as well as African tribal instruments. A group that I was initially drawn to--Carolina Chocolate Drops--is a modern country and folk music group with an album entitled "Genuine Negro Jig." The musicality of this group is based in the tradition of jug bands and the use of song to tell about life experiences. I liked the rough, gritty, country sound of this group and I felt that their music exemplified some of the qualities within the characters of *Gem*, such as having a troubled past, but working towards a new future.

Another artist that initially caught my eye was Béla Fleck, a white banjo player. Fleck's album that sparked my interest had the subtitle 'Africa Sessions.' The songs on this album have a heavy use of banjo, with an African dialect spoken and/or sung in the background. The musicality of this album lived in both the African tribal and country, jazz worlds.

I gave some selected songs to the director, as well as some information on tribal musical instruments. Though none of the music I found in my initial research was used in our production, I think the tonal quality and arrangements were present in the live music performed during our production.

One final research topic regarding music was the Juba, a traditional dance developed in the south during the days of slavery. This dance involved speaking in tongues, incantations, clapping, stomping or a variation. I thought it was important to look at this and use it as a

possible stepping off point for the journey. I think the idea of the Juba was definitely incorporated in the scene, with the stomping and incantations. Most of the characters in that scene would have seen a Juba while in slavery, or been taught by their parents. Wilson directly references the Juba in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and I would like to believe that, that is what is inferred during the Journey to the City of Bones.

I also thought that it was essential to the production process to get a feel for the way people, blacks in particular, lived, looked, and presented themselves specifically in the early twentieth century. I made sure to find pictures realistically depicting everyday life for blacks, including a women's club called the Phyllis Wheatley Club and a baseball team called the Comics. In my opinion, finding visual information is one of the best ways to explore how people presented themselves during the specific time period in the play. These photos were shown to the director and some cast members.

One of the final initial research items I looked at was historic Pittsburgh and, more specifically, the Hill District⁴ where the play is set. In doing so, I used one of Brown's components, critical thinking, to consider this as a viable research option. I thought this was especially important because housing, architecture, transportation, and other elements are extremely different now than they were one hundred years ago. I wanted to show, not just tell the actors and other production staff members, the images of life and how life looked before modern technology.

⁴ The Hill District is a historically black collection of neighborhoods in Pittsburgh. It is the setting for most of the plays in Wilson's Cycle.

I think my style of dramaturgy is very hands on and visual. I believe that it is not enough to tell people what something is, or how something looked; I always search for images or physical items to present during design meetings so we can have a dynamic discussion. I also think that as a dramaturg it is my job to be reliable and present accurate material. I tend to feel that my research is validated when I can give the people I am working with something they can see, or touch, which later translates to work on stage. I think having physical items as research makes me a more dependable resource. To do these things I used Brown's four main components: critical and analytical thinking and writing, research, and reflection. *Gem* is a complicated text and production, and the more information I could provide to the production staff and cast in the early stages allowed for more opportunities for creativity later.

Gem of the Ocean Synopsis

In the following chapters I will often talk about details and events from the script and production; my intention with providing this synopsis is to enable the readers to better follow and fully understand various references to the plot and characters that are offered throughout this study.

The play takes place in the home of Aunt Ester in the year of 1904. The setting is the Hill District, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Aunt Ester is almost three hundred years old and a spiritual guide to the black community. She is a former slave. With her, live Eli and Black Mary, Aunt Ester's helpers.

The play opens with a prologue, where we see Citizen, a young man, who has traveled from Alabama in search of a new life; he is distraught, and in need of help. He has been told by

people in the community that Aunt Ester can wash his soul and make him at peace with himself. Aunt Ester's friend and protector, Eli, denies Citizen entry into the house to see Aunt Ester; Citizen is told to come back Tuesday.

Act 1 Scene 1 starts out with Black Mary and Eli working in the kitchen. Citizen sits outside across the street waiting for Tuesday to come, so he can wash his soul of his sins. Selig, a white peddler and friend of Aunt Ester's, enters bringing the goods that have been requested of him. He tells Eli and Black Mary about a man who jumped in the river and drowned after being accused of stealing a bucket of nails from the mill where he worked. Solly, a companion of Aunt Ester comes in; he is a former slave like Eli and Aunt Ester. He and Eli worked together on the Underground Railroad. He also provides more information on the man that has drowned and brings news from his sister that life is rough for the blacks in Alabama. At the close of Scene 1, Solly and Eli leave to attend the funeral of the man who drowned.

Act 1 Scene 2 opens on Citizen sneaking into the house looking for food. Aunt Ester catches him and knows that he has good intentions. She invites him to stay, a non verbal agreement to help him wash his soul.

Act 1 Scene 3 brings Solly, Eli, and Black Mary sitting in the kitchen. They discuss the arrival of Citizen, and Solly's planned trip to Alabama to get his sister. Citizen enters from outside and meets Solly and the other members of the house. Caesar, Black Mary's brother, and the local law enforcer, enters the scene. With Caesar, comes turmoil and stress. He interrogates Citizen about motives for coming to Pennsylvania. The room clears except for Black Mary and Caesar; he questions her life living with Aunt Ester and tries to defend his position as enforcer

within the black community. The tension between the two shows that their relationship is strained; Caesar leaves angry.

Act 1 Scene 4 is the first time we see Citizen and Black Mary alone together. There is a sexual tension between them.

In Act 1 Scene 5 we see Black Mary washing the feet of Aunt Ester. Aunt Ester talks of her age and experiences that age has brought her. Through this conversation, we are shown that Black Mary, should she choose to accept it, is to become Aunt Ester's protégé and act as the "washer of souls" for future generations. Citizen is called to Aunt Ester: he admits that it was he who stole the bucket of nails, not the man who drowned in the river, and this is the reason he needs his soul washed. Aunt Ester prepares him for the journey that will wash his soul. To do this, she focuses his thoughts not on his sins, but on a purpose, to go up river and find two pennies, side by side. On this trip, he is also to get a piece of iron from a man. The scene and act end with Eli rushing in and telling of a fire down at the mill.

Act 2 Scene 1 opens with Selig in the kitchen talking about how the fire at the mill is all people can talk about. Citizen returns from the trip that Aunt Ester sent him on, finding two pennies heads up on the sidewalk, but not the iron. Aunt Ester tells Black Mary the two pennies have no meaning, they only helped Citizen find purpose in himself, and detract his thoughts from his sins. Aunt Ester asks Black Mary to bring the map; Black Mary brings in a quilt with an intricate map on it. Citizen is shown the map, and what it depicts--the City of Bones. Citizen learns that to wash his soul of his sins he must take this journey to the City of Bones, but he is confused as to how this will happen. Aunt Ester takes the bill of sale used to sell her into slavery

as a child and folds it into a paper boat; it is this boat that will take them on the journey to the City of Bones. Citizen does not believe the boat of paper can take him on that journey, but he has a trust in Aunt Ester and wants his soul to be washed of his sins. Aunt Ester tells Citizen to wash his body; they are going on the journey that night.

Act 2 Scene 2 opens with Black Mary and Eli speculating on what horrible thing Citizen has done. Solly comes by on his way to go get his sister from the south. Citizen emerges from his room cleaned and ready to go on the journey that Aunt Ester has described. Eli and Solly see this as an opportunity to educate him in the history of slavery. We learn that Eli and Solly helped people to freedom while working on the Underground Railroad. During this time Eli, Solly, and Citizen become intoxicated while getting caught up in the telling of the story. Aunt Ester comes into the room, immediately sobering the men.

It is now time to go on the journey⁵ to the City of Bones. Solly makes the decision to stay and help Citizen on his journey. Citizen is told to hold on to the two pennies he found on his trip, and Solly gives him a link of chain to replace the iron he was supposed to get on his trip. This chain link was is part of what kept Solly chained up while he worked as a slave. He needs the pennies and chain for the journey. Aunt Ester gives Citizen the bill of sale she folded into a boat. The group, Aunt Ester, Solly, Black Mary, and Eli, begins singing; they have all been on this journey before. The next section of the play is an emotional and physical journey for Citizen. At the gates to the City of Bones, he meets the gatekeeper, who is the man who drowned in the river for his crime, and receives his forgiveness. Once the journey is over, the house reverts back to its

⁵ For the rest of the thesis when I talk about this particular scene both in the script and in production I refer to it as the journey to the City of Bones, or simply the journey.

normal state; Citizen's soul has been washed clean and a weight has been lifted off his shoulders. Before the close of the scene Caesar comes in and accuses Solly of setting fire to mill. Before Caesar can catch him, he runs out the back door.

Act 2 Scene 3 opens with Citizen and Black Mary discussing the likelihood of Solly setting fire to the mill. Black Mary and Citizen trade stories of loves lost; there is an attraction between the two that has continued to grow from their first meeting. Aunt Ester comes into the scene and tells Citizen to go and get Selig before he gets too far and to make sure Caesar doesn't see him. Before she retires to her room to wait, she nags at Black Mary for her fire temperature. Black Mary sees this as the last straw explaining to Aunt Ester that not everything has to be her way. For Black Mary this is a turning point, where she begins to realize that she is ready for what Aunt Ester wants her to do -- take over as the "washer of souls." This is the reaction that Aunt Ester has been waiting for, now Black Mary is ready to carry on in Aunt Ester's footsteps, when the time comes.

In Act 2 Scene 4 Citizen returns with Selig, and Solly appears from Aunt Ester's room. He has been hiding from Caesar in the house, the whole time. A plan is developed for Solly who will escape arrest from Caesar by hiding in Selig's wagon until he can get to safety. As they are leaving out the back, Caesar comes to arrest Aunt Ester for helping Solly, a fugitive. The scene ends with Aunt Ester following Caesar with little struggle.

Act 2 Scene 5 opens with Aunt Ester's return from being held in jail. She goes straight to bed, without a word to anyone. Citizen bursts in the back with news that Solly has been shot by Caesar. They carry his body in to administer aid, but it is too late. Caesar comes in and makes it

known that he feels Solly deserved what he got. Caesar leaves after Black Mary tells him that she wants nothing to do with him ever again and that he is not welcome. The group mourns the death of their fallen friend. In the final moment of the play Citizen steps into the role of Solly taking the both physical and metaphorical stick as he plans to go down south and get Solly's sister.

***GEM OF THE OCEAN* TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

As any effective dramaturg would do, the first thing I did to prepare for initial production meetings was to read the play. Though an in-depth textual analysis cannot come from just one reading, I came away with some initial thoughts. These initial thoughts propelled me to use the reflection portion of Brown's components. Music and its use in the play, references to the bible, and spiritual cleansing were key points found in my first read-through. These and many other thoughts stuck with me and guided me throughout the process. Upon reflection on these topics, I realized that they could propel me into research within the show. With the idea that this story is an account of people, not just African Americans or blacks, I began to delve further into my study.

Though *Gem of the Ocean* is the first play in the Cycle, it was the second to last to be written and produced. Going through and reading the entire Cycle backwards, I discovered there are innumerable connections, repetitions, and even some inconsistencies within the ten plays. When you sit down and devote the time to reading all ten plays, you begin to wonder why Wilson waited until the very end to write his first and last plays (*Radio Golf* the last play in the Cycle was the last play written before Wilson's death). During the time I was working on this production I constantly questioned Wilson's motives in writing the first and last plays of his Cycle at the very end of his life. I feel that the story within the Cycle is incomplete without them. Unfortunately, extensive research has provided me with no definite answer.

Gem, like many Wilson plays, *Gem* long, wordy, and dense. Wilson doesn't suggest beats or pauses, but leaves them to the actors and directors. On the page are long paragraphs of wordy

dialogue, and little of that dialogue is conversational or fast paced. Often times actors are left to their own devices while their counter-parts recite several pages worth of monologues. With the first act consisting predominately of exposition, it is up to the actors to make the text come alive with action on stage. *Gem*, like many of his plays, has a multitude of biblical references, and at times read like a chapter of The Bible, or a church service.

In this chapter, I focus on four main discoveries found in my initial and subsequent reads of the play. They are: matriarchal occurrence, the presence, references, and allusions to water, the identity and character of the people presented in the play, and the world in which the play lives. These four topics were a large part of my work on the production and led me to make specific decisions, and do specific research.

Female Presence in *Gem of the Ocean*

Like all of the plays in the Cycle, *Gem* does not boast a large female cast; only two of the seven characters are female. Though they are clearly outnumbered, Aunt Ester and Black Mary have a strong presence that dominates the male gender in performance and in text. Using examples of other strong female characters in his works, and examples from the text, I will illustrate the matriarchal power present within *Gem* and how it informed some of my choices.

Wilson claimed that femininity wasn't a major component of his writing, but *Gem* says something different. Aunt Ester does exist as the central female image in the play, and also throughout the rest of the Cycle, where she is mentioned but not seen. Aunt Ester tells Black Mary that she is, in fact, -not the first of her kind. "Miss Tyler gave me her name. Ester Tyler...I stayed right on there with her until she died. Miss Tyler passed it on to me" (43). Aunt Ester is

trying to, and eventually does pass her ability to wash souls on to Black Mary. There is a distinct lineage within the play that contradicts Wilson's self-proclaimed lack of focus on strong female characters.

Aunt Ester drives the action in the first play of the Cycle; the main action of the last play, *Radio Golf*, revolves in the demolition of her house at 1839 Wylie. This to me presents a clearly feminine undertone to the Cycle. Without Aunt Ester, these people would have no other reason to be together. Her presence is what connects all of these people as one. It is Aunt Ester's existence that attracts Citizen, who has stolen the bucket of nails, which causes the riots, and leads to the fire, prompting Solly to run. This subsequently leads to Caesar shooting Solly, and finally Black Mary and Citizen to step into their new roles which affects the future generations within the Cycle. These roles play a part in the rest of the Cycle.

Black Mary is chosen by Aunt Ester to follow in her footsteps. The night before Black Mary shows up on the doorstep of 1839 Wylie, Aunt Ester dreams of her. The day after the dream, Black Mary is on the doorstep asking to do laundry; this is three years before the start of the play. It is an important part of the story watching Black Mary progress from a stubborn confused girl, to the confidant woman she becomes in the final beat of the play. Though not in the stage directions, we presented Black Mary sitting in Aunt Ester's chair as the final beat, and thus taking over her role as a spiritual leader of the community.

Wilson was notorious for writing strong women in his work such as Rose Maxson in *Fences* and Risa in *Two Trains Running*. To be specific, Rose Maxson exemplifies strength both physically and emotionally when her husband's paramour has his baby. The woman dies during

childbirth. Rose takes the child in to care for it, because she knows the child has no other place to go and, most importantly, that it is not the fault of the child. Risa, on the other hand, is constantly oppressed by the men around her. She is a broken woman who feels as though she cannot participate in the black power movement because she is a woman. She shows her strength through the faith she rarely speaks of, because she knows that faith is something that can't be taken from her. These women, like Black Mary and Aunt Ester, represent a female authority in Wilson's works.

In a 1991 interview with Sandra G. Shannon⁶ Wilson said that he “doubted seriously if [he] would make a woman the focus of [his] work, simply because of the fact that [he was] a man” (222). To disagree with Wilson's quote, I do not necessarily believe you have to be a female to write strong female characters, or even black to create strong black characters. In my opinion, what it comes down to is compassion, experience, and finding a common ground. Wilson had both of these things. He was married three times, which produced two daughters (to whom *Gem* is dedicated), and he also had a close relationship with his mother, the only parent he could rely on. His life had an unintentional abundance of female company; it is no surprise that his work displayed it.

One way in which I wanted to further the female presence in production was in the masks, worn by the musicians during the journey. During the initial discussions regarding the masks I presented the idea of having the gate keeper's mask be a mask with inherently feminine features such as fuller lips and an overall curvier appearance. The masks we were drawing our

⁶ Sandra G. Shannon is a noted Wilson scholar. Her writings on, and interviews with Wilson were a major help in this thesis. I refer to her several times throughout the rest of this paper, from this point forward I refer to her simply as Shannon.

inspiration in research from, were African, and in the African culture the female figure, as well as her presence and identity, is greatly respected. My thinking for making the mask with feminine features was based on the idea that Aunt Ester was ultimately the keeper of the gates in the City of Bones. I thought that the mask, even though it is worn by Solly, should have represented the major female presence in African culture and in the Cycle.

The mask design we eventually settled with did not have a feminine undertone, due to fact that the mask is supposed to appear to Citizen as Garret Brown, the man who drowned in the river. Citizen knows he is being tried for Brown's death, and needs to be confronted by it to forgive himself. The mask would appear different to everyone who journeys to the City of Bones; depending on the sins they needed to be washed clean of. In this instance, it was a man's presence that needed to be signified to the audience, and the representation of Aunt Ester as gatekeeper was unneeded.

The journeys Aunt Ester, and Black Mary take, in addition to the metaphorical one to the City of Bones, are separate but equal in importance to the story. Aunt Ester's journey is that of acceptance. She knows Black Mary will take her position but not until she feels it is time. There is an intense inner struggle within Aunt Ester to see Black Mary's ability to carry on the legacy and accepting that it is her time to step aside. Black Mary's journey, on the other hand, is a struggle for an approval, which she unknowingly has had all along.

It wasn't Wilson's intention to tell story from a female perspective within *Gem*, or in the rest of the Cycle. It is my opinion that he told many more stories than he originally sought to. Every female character that Wilson created contributed to the individual story and to the Cycle

as a whole. Aunt Ester specifically motivates the story, the story the Cycle tells, in several ways. First it is 1839 Wylie, Ester's home, which is a focus both in the first and last play. Also, her ability to advise and cleanse the souls of the community is a constant theme that drives the action of several of the plays. Without her female presence both spiritually and physically, the Cycle would be incomplete.

Admittedly, it may be easier for me to see the female focus of this work because our production team was so overwhelmingly staffed with females, or possibly because I am a female. From direction, to design, to stage management our production had a female influence. This is not an argument that women do things better, or understand Wilson's texts better, just that women do things differently. We naturally see things differently and tell our stories differently. An example of this, is that if our production was directed by a man; a man may see Solly's journey through the play as the most important, and want to focus on that more than Aunt Ester's journey. After I, a woman, first read the text, I was naturally drawn to the character and identity of Aunt Ester. In my opinion, -it is her story we tell. Because of this predisposition, I tried to strengthen the story told through her eyes, by validating her actions and work through research.

Water in *Gem of the Ocean*

There is an outstanding theme of 'water' in *Gem*. Water plays an important role in the play, and I first began to notice the connection after a meeting about the color of Black Mary's dress. These initial discoveries of the importance of water led me to find other water references in the play. Even long after the production had closed and I began working on this thesis I still

found innumerable connections with the water both in the Cycle and in *Gem*. This section explains the presence, references, and allusions to water in the text and my analysis of them.

The first time I began to notice the connection to water was after a production meeting with the costume designer. There is a sexually charged scene between Black Mary and Citizen about her dress; Black Mary's blue dress catches the eye of Citizen. He relates to Black Mary a story of lost attraction by telling of a woman he once met, and her blue dress. The costume designer bought a brown checkered fabric from which to make the dress. It was her intention to make the dress brown and have the line changed to 'brown dress.'

During the production meeting, the importance of the color blue was discussed. The director had me read the opening lines to Citizen's story. In the first three sentences of his story, Citizen mentions the color blue three times. Wilson was trying to stress the importance of the color blue with repetition, as most playwrights do. After that production meeting, I remember walking down the hall to Dr. Listengarten's office; I turned to her and said "that dress has to be more blue, after all the show is called *Gem of the Ocean*!" Blue, the color of the ocean and bodies of water, is an important image to the play. The water theme is reinforced by Mary's dress color and Citizen's acknowledgement of it. Substituting the word brown in the place of blue would have changed the underlying meaning of the text.

I think one of the most important references to water is in the title; the play is called *Gem of the Ocean*, named after the boat that Aunt Ester conjures up during the journey. The Atlantic Ocean was the water crossed to bring slaves from Africa; the water was all that was separating them from bondage in America and freedom at home in Africa. Water is also suggested

numerous other times. Garret Brown, the man blamed for stealing the bucket of nails, drowns in the river. He could have come out of the water because he knows he did not steal that bucket of nails, but he stays in to prove his innocence.

More water is used while Black Mary washes the feet of Aunt Ester. This represents the ritual cleansing of the Christian faith. Citizen is also asked to cleanse himself before he goes on the journey. Another reference to water, and cleansing, occurs during Black Mary's cooking; Aunt Ester scolds Black Mary for wasting water "I told you don't waste the water. Put them [vegetables] in the pot and wash them off in the pot" (39). Spencer and Chambers in their article *Ritual Death and Wilson's Female Christ* write of Wilson cleansing and washing himself before writing: "I always want to say I approach it with clean hands – you know a symbolic cleansing" (144).

Most importantly, Aunt Ester is a washer of souls, which implies the use of water and cleansing. Aunt Ester's connection with water stretches beyond the ritualistic cleansing and the boat, the 'Gem of the Ocean;' she is a part of the water, and the water is a part of her, she tells Citizen:

I been across the water. I seen both sides of it. I know about the water. The water has its secrets the way the land has its secrets. Some know about the land. Some know about the water. But there is some that know about the land and the water [...] I can talk about the land and I can talk about the fire. But I don't talk about the water. There was a time, Mr. Citizen when God moved on the water.... (52)

Aunt Ester is speaking of her respect and connection to the water. She realizes that water can do more than clean your physical self; it can clean the soul within. She is represented in *Gem* as a Christ-like figure: people believe she can wash their souls clean of sins, but she states “God the only one can wash people’s souls. God got big forgiveness” (20). The only person, who does not believe that Aunt Ester is capable of washing a soul clean, is Black Mary, who believes that a clean soul comes from forgiveness within the individual. Black Mary says that Citizen must help himself and that Aunt Ester has no magic powers (40).

There are several smaller references to water throughout the script. While on the journey, Citizen grows thirsty and needs water, but it is all gone. Aunt Ester dreams of Solly bringing a boat across the water, full of men. In the dream, Solly tells Aunt Ester he will come back for her and part the water so she can cross it. His men drown in the dream, and he smote the water. Citizen is also told by Aunt Ester to follow the Monongahela River up to Blawnox to prepare for the journey. Later in the Cycle, Wilson informs us that Aunt Ester requires no money from those she helps but asks them to throw twenty dollars in the river as payment. Finally, Selig the peddler travels up and down the river.

In our production one thing that became necessary was real running water in the sink. I think the presence of water on stage helped to make water an important presence in the production. The presence of the running water also helped ground the production in reality; after all, a sink with running water is something we experience daily. When Black Mary washed the feet of Aunt Ester, we also used real water, to make the cleansing real.

The initial discoveries of the importance of water led me to find other water references in the play. These references affected choices made by the production team, and cast members, including the use of real water on stage, the color of Black Mary's dress, and the way in which actors felt about spiritual cleansing.

Identity and Character

A major theme in *Gem* that struck me, and continues to strike me, is the dichotomy between black identity and African American identity. As a Caucasian American, I am obviously not a part of the black community nor do I try and identify as something I am not. I feel that this was unquestionably, an uncontrollable weakness in my work. I could not fully relate to the actors playing the characters and any struggle they encountered while trying to find the identity of the individual they were portraying; nothing I could do would help me relate. On this same note, there was a very common ground for the actors, other production staff members and I, in that none of us have ever experienced slavery first hand. Do I feel that the color of my skin made me a less than adequate dramaturg? No, on the contrary, it made me more aware of the production's challenges, which in turn helped me to critically think about my role in the production, and in relation to the text.

Throughout *Gem*, there is a strong theme of identity, and these identities tell many stories within the production. Some of the character's identities are related to their life in slavery, other characters identify with the modern time of the play. It was the jobs of both the actors and I to help strengthen these identities, making the text come alive on the stage. It is clear that each

character is very unique in the way that Wilson wrote them. I offer the following analysis of each character individually based on the text alone.

Aunt Ester is the mediator between the two worlds of modern day and old world African traditions. Aunt Ester was brought over on a boat as a young child and sold into slavery. Aunt Ester is herself the gem of the ocean. From then on, she lived as a slave, for over two-hundred years by her count. Aunt Ester is the representation of the African presence in America, because she is as old as that existence in America. It is for this reason that Aunt Ester is comfortable with her identity. She was freed and now lives as someone who washes souls; it is her identity as the 'Gem' that gives her that ability to make others sparkle when they have been tarnished by their sins. This 'gem' - like quality that exists within her also gives her the ability to be strong and resilient on the outside while she carries the secrets and memories of so many on the inside. She lives in a house that is hers and employs people who take care of, and work for her. She has gone from being the African slave girl to a modern woman of the twentieth-century. Her character still exists very much in the two worlds, living in the modern age, but using her African roots to help conjure up the journey, with her voodoo, to the City of Bones.

Other characters are much more singularly defined in their roles. Caesar identifies very much with modern society and aims to forget his past as a slave. At one point, he tells Black Mary, his sister, "I got to play the hand that was dealt to me. You look around and see you black. You look at the calendar. Slavery's over. I'm a free man" (37). He feels that since slavery is over, those whose lives have been compromised during the times of slavery should create a new life for themselves with a new title. He adorns himself with articles from the "white man," such

as his gun, badge, and his handbook of laws. His blackness is reaffirmed by the white powers he submits too. He describes himself as the “boss man,” but knows his powers only reach as far as the other blacks in the community.

In his famous article, “I Want a Black Director,” Wilson talked about the *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1961) definitions for both white and black. These definitions have since changed with the publication of new editions. Black is as follows “Black: outrageously wicked; a villain; dishonorable; expressing or indicating disgrace, discredit, or guilt; connected with the devil; expressing menace; sullen; hostile; unqualified; committing violation of public regulations, illicit, illegal; affected by some undesirable condition; etc.” (qtd. in Wilson 203). This definition of ‘black’ is a description of Caesar’s character. He uses Caesar’s character as one of the many representations of the modern black man during the time and to fulfill the ‘black’ stereotype. Caesar’s character both in text and on stage represents the modern black man.

Caesar’s position as a cop within the black community led me to further research the validity of this position. I initially questioned the power that this position could have held. Using the fourth element in Brown’s components I began to research information on the topic. I felt that finding solid information on black cops in the early twentieth-century, and specifically Pennsylvania/Pittsburgh, instances would make the role more real for both Michael Rodney, who played Caesar and the rest of the production team. In an article published by the U.S. Department of Justice, entitled “Perspectives on Policing,” by Hubert Williams and Patrick Murphy, I found information that was incredibly helpful. This article validated Caesar’s position in the community, but also provided insight with actual instances. From the article we gleaned that

“black policemen... all worked in plain clothes... and were assigned to black neighborhoods.”

The article also went on to say that it was against the law for these black officers to arrest white citizens. Though this information was used by actor Michael Rodney to inform character choices, it did not change our costume designers original design ideas. Our production elaborated a little on the position, giving Caesar a suit (though not a uniform) and badge which displaced him even more from the rest of the cast.

Eli and Solly are similar in their steadfastness; they are both older and worked as conductors on the Underground Railroad. Caesar would have been around twelve years old at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, where as Eli and Solly would both have been in their twenties to early thirties. Their involvement in the Underground Railroad secures their outlook on their identity. Together they helped dozens of people into freedom; this bond they have with each other, and with people like them, helps mark their identity to their past as slaves, and their futures as citizens.

Solly and Eli’s long friendship is based on a common hardship they have lived through together, as well as their refusal to forget what happened, unlike Caesar who wants nothing more than to rise above the lower level status given to blacks at the time. Without Eli, Aunt Ester wouldn’t be able to live the life she does. He is her gatekeeper in the spiritual world and protector in the physical world. Eli also acts as a brother to Black Mary, giving her the love that Caesar doesn’t. For all the intensity and energy that exists in Solly, Eli counters that with his calm and purposeful attitude. Eli is a mediator and uses this quality to put the people around him at ease.

Solly carries around a piece of chain, “That’s my good luck piece. That piece of chain use to be around my ankle. They tried to chain me down but I beat them on that one. I say, I’m gonna keep this to remember by. I been lucky ever since” (57). He refuses to forget what was done to him and four million other Africans. He is an American living on American soil with African blood that runs through him. His name, Solly Two Kings, represents more than just the biblical reference; it is also representative of what Wilson believed was an inherent nobility present in the lives of African Americans. Wilson’s male characters throughout the Cycle often proclaim to be the king, or a king, usually of nothing in particular, showing that they are above the world that society has created for them. His characters want to be the new role model for the blacks of their time.

Wilson’s interest and respect for Malcolm X is present in his work. Shannon, a noted Wilson scholar, states that Wilson’s admiration for Malcolm X “to some extent, inform[ed] the behavior of each of his black male protagonists” (32). In *Gem*, it is clearly Solly who holds this position. Wilson, in an article he authored about Malcolm X entitled “The Legacy of Malcolm X,” described him as “... a man who did not hold his tongue, a man who was unafraid, a man who was not seeking approval from whites” (89). Solly makes no effort to hold his tongue when he and Caesar, a courier of the whites, get in a row about his walking stick. Solly has all the approval he needs within himself.

Black Mary, Caesar’s sister, would have been too young to feel the direct results of slavery but has lived her whole life hearing the stories and seeing the scars. Aunt Ester sees something in Black Mary that represents the dualism that she also has within herself. Aunt Ester

wants Black Mary to carry on her post of being the washer of souls and carrier of other's memories. "I'm carrying their memories and I'm carrying my own. If you don't want it I got to find somebody else" (43). Aunt Ester knows she cannot let the memories from what she has seen, done, and heard die, but she also needs to allow for new memories to be made. Aunt Ester would not have chosen Black Mary had she not seen the dual identity of present and past within her. Aunt Ester knows that the past will inform the present and future because of what she does, and, eventually what Black Mary will do.

The only white character, Rutherford Selig, is welcomed into the home like an old friend. Though Selig is white, I found him the hardest to relate to. I am still unsure whether it was the portrayal of the character, or if it is how he is written. Wilson rarely uses white characters, in the Cycle there are a total of three used on stage. Selig even appears in the next installment, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Selig is a peddler who travels the area selling pots, pans, and other goods to the people in the area. In *Joe Turner*, we find out that he is a people finder. In the time of slavery his family was paid by slave owners to find runaways; now, during the time period the text is placed in, he finds people separated from their families, split up from slave sales. In *Gem*, he is a friend to the people of 1839 Wylie and shows no bias in who he sells to.

Citizen Barlow like Black Mary is too young to have been in bondage, but he is the product of it. His mother named him Citizen, after freedom comes, in an attempt to push her son towards fulfilling his potential as a citizen. Citizen represents the people of his generation: Black Mary and others growing up after the Emancipation Proclamation and the turn of the century. He tells Solly: "My mama named me Citizen after freedom came. She wouldn't like it if I changed

my name” (26). Solly quickly points out that this name carries some weight. Solly says: “Your mama’s trying to tell you something. She put a heavy load on you. It’s hard to be a citizen. You gonna have to fight to get that. And the time you get it you be surprised how heavy it is” (27).

Citizen and Solly’s conversation about their name derivation led me to research slave name origins. This was not a request made by a cast or production team member, but more-or-less something that I felt could help me understand the characters, and their “blood’s memories,” a term often used by Wilson. I used all four of Brown’s components in examining this topic. I first began to question whether there was any method to the naming of slaves, and then began to critically analyze the names present within the text. Finally, after research, I was able to reflect on how important the names of characters such as Solly and Citizen are. From the article, “Finding Our History: African-American Names,” Sonia Weiss says, in Africa, children are traditionally named after the circumstances surrounding their birth. As slaves, the Africans were given names as they got on or off the boat to their new land. Often, the names most popular for slaves were derived from biblical references, or the slave owner’s surnames; slaves were given little choice in the naming of themselves or their offspring. Once freedom came, most former slaves went about creating new names for themselves, very rarely going back to their ancestral names from Africa. Though Solly’s newly adapted moniker is a biblical tribute, it is also a name chosen by him that implies the rule of his own personal kingdom To Citizen, his name is a badge of honor; he is a citizen of the world because of what his ancestors endured. He values his name, because it was given to him by his mother. The actor (Robert Wright) who played Citizen states his name like a trophy passed down from his mother.

In the final scene where Solly dies, Wilson made sure to find a replacement for him, the man who saved sixty-two men. The stage directions read: “Citizen takes off his coat. He puts on Solly’s coat and hat and takes Solly’s stick. He discovers the letter from Solly’s sister in the hat. Eli pours a drink and raises it in toast” (85). In our production, Citizen is left to carry on Solly’s legacy. Then Black Mary moves and sits in Aunt Ester’s chair during the final beat. It is then that we find out Black Mary has decided to carry on the legacy Aunt Ester has willed her. Wilson felt the need to continue the tradition of these people who have made their living saving others, i.e., Aunt Ester and Solly.

Since there is no spoken text in those last moments, we had to be sure to show these characters entering into their new roles in life. Citizen quietly takes Solly’s things and exits with a look of determination on his face. Black Mary silently crosses to the rocking chair Aunt Ester inhabits most of the play. She then sits down placing Aunt Ester’s worn bible in her lap. These subtle movements told the rest of the story, without dialogue. This final button within the play represents the passing on of the stick, or the continuation of the story. Black Mary will become the new washer of souls, and keeper of memories; she is the new ‘gem.’ Citizen literally takes the stick being passed to him, Solly’s walking stick represents his work on the Underground Railroad, as well as his steadfastness in being a free black man.

The World of *Gem of the Ocean*

The world in which the play takes place is a very real, and at the same time, a fantastical place. Clearly this world is not that of a fantasy, or imagined place, but there are things that stand out as extraordinary. Aunt Ester’s age of two-hundred and eighty-five is the first thing we

question, but then accept because so much of the play is very real. The journey to the City of Bones is another fantastical element. The idea that this woman can wash your soul by taking you on a journey, with a boat made of paper, is something you want to dismiss as unreal, but can't because the characters believe it. For these reasons and more, the world Wilson created within the walls of 1839 Wylie Avenue is extraordinary.

Wilson's text leaves room for creativity in the staging and dressing of the production, allowing each production to make 1839 Wylie its own. Since *Gem*, and all of Wilson's other pieces, are not necessarily based on historical accuracy but contain many historical elements with the added touch of delusion, we were able to freely create our own perception of the environment. The physical world was that of a two story house, located at 1839 Wylie Avenue in the Hill District of Pittsburgh during the year of 1904. All of these details are very real, tangible things. It is within the world of the house that these real elements are disrupted by magic.

The elements of the world both in text and performance that seem unreal or fantastical are the ones related to Wilson's holy figure, Aunt Ester. She can perform a sort of voodoo in her ability to conjure up a journey, also there is a kind of magic in being able to wash the souls of those in need. Though Aunt Ester is a real person (i.e., she eats the same food as everyone else, rocks in a rocking chair, and smokes a pipe), she is much more than that: she is a washer of souls.

In his preface to *Seven Guitars* Wilson talks about his plays and historical accuracy:

Despite my interest in history, I have always been more concerned with culture, and while my plays have an overall historical feel, their settings are

fiction, and they are peopled with invented characters whose personal boundaries fit within the historical context in which they live.

I have tried to extract some measure of truth from their lives as the struggle to remain whole in the face of so many things that threaten to pull them asunder. I am not a historian. ... (1)

Wilson was aware that some scenarios within his work required the audience to sustain disbelief. The world of *Gem* has the ability to transform locations, be centuries old, and still exist in the present. This energy within his work distances the action from being a totally historical piece, and 1839 Wylie is a place that is truly extraordinary.

After many readings of the play some of my initial influences and images are still some of the strongest, these are the female presence in the text, the abundance of references to water, the identity and characters found within the text, and the world in which the play is set. I used these and many other influences from the text as the foundation for my work as dramaturg.

PRODUCTION ANALYSIS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA'S PRODUCTION OF *GEM OF THE OCEAN*

The University of Central Florida's production of *Gem of the Ocean* is the only production of the show that I have ever seen, but because of the uniqueness of our production staff, cast, and crew, I think it stands alone in its own novelty. In the following chapter, I will discuss elements within the production that directly related to my work as dramaturg. I will also discuss my own dramaturgical explorations with the members of the production team. Furthermore, I will analyze the acting and character choices in our particular production, and finally describe the scene of the journey to the City of Bones, the pinnacle moment in the show.

Production Elements

The following section is an in-depth explanation of the production elements, as well as the specific elements in which my dramaturgy played a hand. This section employs Brown's component of reflection heavily since this entire thesis, and therefore all of this reflection, happened after the close of the production.

Usually the first thing that catches your eye when you walk into a theatre for a production is the set. This production was no different. The two story box set was angular, and sharp in its outline, but inviting with its multi-colored fabric walls. Each side of the set was bookended with a tree made of cable and rope, draped with a gauzy fabric that felt mysterious and swamp-like. The house seemed lived-in and real, even though the walls were made of fabric; never once did you question if 1839 Wylie was a real home. All of the furniture and dressings in the house seemed thoroughly used, and everything had a purpose.

The abstractness of some of the elements of the set helped keep the world of the play intact and real, with an element of dreaminess. When Citizen and the others went on the journey to the City of Bones, the walls undulated, and all of the other elements changed; it felt like the theatre had been transformed to a different location. The scenic designer drew inspiration for the walls from older boats and patch-work sails. Her ability to integrate elements from her research directly into the finished product created an eye-catching result which influenced much of the production.

As with any Wilson production, music played a very important role. Before rehearsals started, and even before auditions, it was decided that the production would feature musicians. Music also became one of my initial research topics, because we felt that it was such an important aspect of the show. These musicians would be a part of the production; the musicians would be present behind the audience during the changing of scenes. The actors playing Selig and Caesar were also used as musicians during scene changes. The other vital part the musicians played in the production was during the journey. During the journey three of the musicians came out from behind the audience in costume and masks. The use of the musicians during the journey helped to create a new environment during that particular scene; the audience had never seen the musicians, costumes, or masks, nor did the actors within the scene acknowledge their presence.

The live music was a key element to the atmosphere we had created. If we had pre-recorded all of the musical interludes, they would have sounded monotonous and would have been repetitive; with the live musicians; the music was different every time and created a visceral response from the audience and the cast. There was also the added element of the musicians

encompassing the audience creating a wall of sound. Too often with recorded music, the sound becomes focused in one area; we elected to encompass audience members in order to bring them into the world of the play.

The musical interludes were written by the cast, and our music director. The musicians were also understudies for the show; their constant presence in rehearsal, in my opinion helped in their ability to create the musical interludes and underscoring. Though not in the script, the musicians and interludes provided a personal touch to the production. Furthermore, the way in which they were created and arranged was very ‘blues-like’ way. It is worthy to note that the blues was one of Wilson’s four B’s⁷ and an inspiration in all of his works. Wilson thought that the Blues was the voice of his people; the music created for our production became the voice of the production.

The costumes in this production were one thing that I as a dramaturg had some issues with, but the audience seemed to have no issue in believing them. In the end, it is the audience’s opinion that really matters, so I had to let go of my qualms. Caesar’s suit first and foremost, I believe, was on the side of not fitting into the world. The silver shine, in my opinion, was distracting, and the fabric seemed too modern to me. I also found research stating that the blacks who were hired to police other blacks did not wear uniforms, and his suit seemed too much like a uniform for my liking. However, I think the suit worked for the audience members, creating a notable physical difference about Caesar.

⁷ Wilson’s four B’s are: Blues music, Jorge Luis Borges a short story writer from Argentina, Amiri Baraka an African American playwright, and Romare Bearden an African American painter and collage artist. He cited these four artists as his biggest artistic influence. A more extensive explanation of his four B’s can be found later, in the next chapter about Wilson.

Black Mary's dress was my other concern; there is a point where Citizen talks about her wearing a 'blue' dress, and in the production she is clearly wearing a brown dress with some blue in it. I personally felt that the dress should have been much blue; this play has a huge connection with water which is talked about in a previous chapter, and Black Mary's character needs to represent those connections. Though, eventually with the help of lighting we were able to make the dress look much more blue than it was.

Props were a large undertaking in this production. The set is that of the lower level of a house including a living room, dining room, and kitchen, so all props and set dressings had to match that of a lived-in house. We decided to use all real food, and the actors ate on stage, which was very effective in creating environment. I worked closely with the props master to ensure that not only did everything fit into the word, but also that it created the sense of the period. I looked at a lot of auction and antique sites, and then passed relevant things on to the props master.

Some of the more significant items that I researched were dinnerware, furniture, and packaging. Since there are several scenes where there is food being consumed and prepared, it was important to me, and the rest of the production team, that the table settings and kitchenware looked like that of the period. Since the time of the play is that of over one hundred years ago our pieces were not from that time, but looked and felt like it. Along with that I thought it was crucial to take the characters of the play into account. The chances of Aunt Ester having full sets of dishes were slim, in my opinion. The props master and I talked about having several pieces of dishware from different sets, to show not only that Aunt Ester didn't have a lot of money, but also that the things that she owned were used to their full extent.

Furniture was another item that we focused our attention on. Most of the furniture would be like that of the dishes, mismatched and worn. At the kitchen table one of the chairs did not match, and I felt that it really fit into the environment at 1839 Wylie. All of the furniture was wood, and either worn or made to look worn.

Packaging was also a big concern when it came to giving the sense of the period. The food Black Mary brings home couldn't be in modern plastic packaging, so we had to create packaging that replicated that of the time. One of the items was beans. While Black Mary is cooking, she puts dried beans into the pot. I explained to our props master that the best solution, and most accurate for the period, would be to put them in a small brown paper sack suggesting that Black Mary got the beans from a barrel at a dry goods store and chose the amount she wanted for her soup. Liquor was another item that had to be packaged correctly. We couldn't have modern labels or threaded lids, as they were not in use yet. A plain glass bottle stopped with a cork was used, because it was the best representation of liquor bottling of the time.

One of the projects the props master and I collaborated heavily on was the candle Aunt Ester lights and leaves as a vigil when she sends Citizen to find his two pennies. We discussed the fact that most likely Aunt Ester would have a special candle for this purpose, and then we talked about what it would look like. I suggested the idea of making a candle out of other candle pieces, so that it looked as if it had been pieced together from the remains of previous vigil candles. Instead of using a real candle and building on it, she bought a battery powered candle that would be much safer in the theatre and put different colors of wax around it. I thought it was

simplistically beautiful, and in my opinion, it worked well for the production. I do believe some of the production staff was wary of the candle because it stood out against the rest of the set.

Though I stood by the idea and design of the candle, when we took our show to Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (KCACTF), the candle came up in critical discussion. While at KCACTF I was in a room where the dramatic criticism workshop was going on, and all students participating were asked to write a narrative on each show presented that week and share it. I happened to be in the room during the *Gem* critique. One student called the candle an out of place Christmas candle, claiming it was distracting. Obviously, if the candle had been an issue to the rest of the production team it would have been cut long before KCACTF. In the end, it was a candle that was used for about fifteen minutes being critiqued heavily. The stakes in the situation were very low. Though I felt something close to guilt, because it had been my idea.

These production elements: costumes, props, and set dressings, helped to make my presence in the production stronger by applying the research I provided when fitting. Going back to critically think about decisions and choices in which I had a hand, caused me to question my input such as in the instance of the candle. After reflection and consideration I am comfortable with the choices I made because they were choices influenced by research, and critical thinking. This experience really created a better understanding for me, and I hope others, on how to utilize a dramaturg. It was my hope to create a more truthful production through my work, and I think that was achieved.

Acting and Character

When the actors began to move around the space, they all had a purpose, and they filled their space. Each actor imbued their character with their own traits and attributes. Taking the text off of the page and putting it on the stage is not easy to do, especially when the production has very real elements mixed with fantastical ones. The cast was made up of UCF students and one faculty member. It was their work as a cohesive acting team that created such a unified, clean production.

Eli, played by Terrence Jackson, was an old character, with a soul that seemed to be centuries older than him; he used glasses, walked stiffly, and had to wet his mouth often when talking and eating. During rehearsals, Jackson would wear a sweater and glasses to help him get into his aged character. Since he is only in his early twenties in real life, he had to alter his physical appearance to get into the mindset of Eli, a much older, experienced man. Jackson's ability to transform himself into a man who has seen and done things that our generation can only read about was particularly exciting. Though Jackson did not often come to me for help, or ask many questions, he was always an attentive listener and participant when I was working with the cast as a whole.

Citizen Barlow, played by Robert Wright, was much younger, than the other characters, with a John Coffee (a character in Stephen King's *The Green Mile* played by Michael Clarke Duncan in the film) complex; he has done something bad, but needs to be forgiven by others before he can forgive himself. Wright, a tall and thick young man, used his stature to create a menacing shell with soft interior. When he opened his mouth to talk, you knew he had done

something horrible, but was such a genuinely good man that you could forgive him. Citizen is a big man, but doesn't use his bulk unless he has to. Wright was wonderful to work with from a dramaturgical standpoint. He took constructive criticisms or suggestions such as speech corrections and line notes with ease and earnestly worked to make Citizen a very real and believable character.

While playing Citizen, Wright had a tendency to drop the ends of his words, a very modern thing to do. For example, Citizen travels up to Pennsylvania from Alabama with a man named Roper Lee; Wright had a tendency to pronounce it 'Ropa' Lee,' instead of 'Roper Lee.' When he talked about the money, he would say things such a 'twenty-five cent' instead of the plural 'twenty-five cents.' He once told me while we were doing some diction work that he had assumed (incorrectly) that he wouldn't have to worry about accents or diction on this show since it was written for a black man. We had to constantly work to get clear, crisp diction out of him, but he was always willing to work at it and accept notes.

Black Mary, played by Kevia Goins, is a headstrong woman who is still a bit of a lost soul, but refuses to let anyone else see it. In the beginning of the play, Black Mary just wants Aunt Ester to tell her what to do and where to go. By the end of the play, Black Mary realizes that the future is hers to take hold of. During the line "I left and been left" (40), Goins showed Black Mary's worldly experiences in her short time on earth. Goins played Black Mary with a fire inside of her just burning her up to get out, and was always looking for ways to flesh out her character. She would sit by me at rehearsals and ask questions about the period and location, so she could store that information for later use. The most memorable experience for me was

regarding the making of bread. Goins is not somebody who cooks often, but Black Mary did and she did it with a passion, and a sort of fluidity that only comes with experience. Our director wanted Goins to watch the movements of her mother, or grandmother in the kitchen. She wanted Goins to be able to replicate those movements and their fluidity. To assist her in this, I looked up several recipes from 1904 and earlier so she could see the work that went into food preparation. Our adjudicator at UCF was impressed at how comfortable she looked in the kitchen, working with real food on the set.

Aunt Ester Tyler, played by faculty member Be Boyd, is wise beyond her years, knows something about everything, and is older than dirt. Boyd played Aunt Ester as if her soul was finally catching up to her almost three hundred years of age. To Aunt Ester, age is irrelevant, and Boyd made sure this was clear to this audience. Aunt Ester walks as if her joints are rusty, but during the journey she is oiled up and ready to work. Working with her was intimidating at first, since she is a faculty member within the department and, therefore, one of my superiors.

Boyd is a seasoned educator and actress, so as a young dramaturg I felt the task of giving suggestions, or information, was out of the question. On a one on one level, Boyd needed little dramaturgical assistance, but she was very willing to give me notes and suggestions. One of the suggestions she gave me, was after I gave a line note to the actor playing Eli about using a modern slang term while adlibbing; she told me to provide the actors with a list of period specific words to use for adlibbing. I personally felt that the actors needed to focus on learning the actual lines, instead of memorizing words they could use if they forgot their lines. At first, I was a little taken back by Boyd's insistence on giving me notes and suggestions, mostly because

she was not the director and neither was I, but then I began to see it as a learning experience. My experience working with her taught me to always be prepared to work with any kind of actor or actress, and not let myself be intimidated by position, or clout.

Solly Two Kings, played by David Tate, is bigger than any room he will ever be in; he makes a point to fill up every space he enters with his charm and loud voice. Tate is a tall slender man, but made sure to make Solly's presence known. Solly's age of sixty-seven shows in his banter, and older ways, but is made almost obsolete by his young and promiscuous attitude. The playful sexual tension between Boyd and Tate was masterfully crafted considering their age difference. Though Solly is smaller in many ways than Citizen, he uses his size at all times. Tate was, in my opinion, glad to have a dramaturg for this production. He came to me after the first read-through wanting to make a connection with me, which personally made me feel very welcome. We went on to have several one-on-one meetings about his character and the history within the play. Tate was one of the only actors that seemed to be interested in what was happening around the time the play was set; he was also one of the most trying cast members to work with from the standpoint of a dramaturg (I go into more detail on why this was the case, in the paragraphs below).

It was clear in production that the actor (David Tate) who played Solly, wanted the world to know he was proud of his name. David put a lot of weight in the name, sometimes too much, but when it came to his character he always seemed to be making a proclamation with the slaying of his name.

One of the things I tried with Tate was leading him on self guided research. He specifically wanted historical information about the early twentieth-century, so I provided him with many jumping off points, and opened myself up for discussions when he wanted to talk about the things he was finding. This of course meant that I had to have a base knowledge of the history within the period so we could have productive, in-depth conversations relating to his character and the play. One specific episode with Tate helped me grow as a dramaturg. Tate was uncomfortable saying an expletive ('motherfucker') written in the script. He came to me wanting to know the origin and inception of the word. His thinking was that if it was not considered 'period' then he shouldn't say it for that reason, and not because he didn't want to. The production team didn't really have an issue with the cutting of the expletive, and neither did I, but I tried to stress to Tate that there was a reason Wilson had used that term, regardless of its historical accuracy.

As attentive and dedicated as Tate was, there were also some frustrations with him. His characters full name is Solly Two Kings. He had a habit of referring to himself on stage as Solly Two *Kangs*. This is a very modern dialect pattern that, in my opinion, brought us out of the world of the play. At one point during a discussion about it, he said he was going to do it at least once a performance, I then proceeded to ask him why he would do that. He looked at me, and said: "the next time you play Solly Two *Kangs* you can say it however you want, but right now you are just the dramaturg." He was the only actor to really have issues with dialogue notes. During the run of the show, I think he maybe only said '*Kangs*' once that I know of, at KCACTF, but there were about seven performances I didn't attend, that he could have slipped it in.

Rutherford Selig, played by Chris Metz, is a man with a job that he is proud of. He acts younger than his age and uses his charm to get what he wants. Metz played Selig with an air of used car salesman about him, cheesy, but harmless. Metz made it clear that Selig took pride in his work of selling pots and pans because of the friendships he made, such as those at 1839 Wylie Avenue. Metz never really had a direct need for me as dramaturg. When group discussions happened with the entire cast, he was always open and active.

Caesar Wilks, played by Michael Rodney is also a big character, similar to the character of Solly. Rodney is tall, with a dark complexion, and he naturally comes off as menacing, and he used his strict, hard features to bring out the roughness in Caesar. Caesar is weak in the heart and has gone years without feeling any true love for himself or anyone else but Black Mary, his sister. Rodney made sure to open his character up only to the character of Black Mary. His egotistical outer-shell is nothing but a front, to intimidate those around him. Rodney was unsure of what to do with a dramaturg, but used this experience to learn.

In my role as a dramaturg, I think I learned a lot about actors during this production. The simple fact that I was in the room watching the actors become their characters as the rehearsal process progressed taught me more about acting, than acting ever did. One of the things that I gleaned from the process is that every actor is different and needs to be approached, communicated with, and directed in a different way. Some of these actors did not need me, and that was fine. Others wanted me to do their job for them, and others just wanted to know I was there to help if they were going to need it. Working with this production staff was also crucial to

my knowledge as a dramaturg. As a dramaturg, learning your place in the production is vital to your own and the production's success.

The Journey to the City of Bones

The Journey to the City of Bones was an extravagant undertaking by our cast and production team. In the script, the journey was seven pages long with very few stage directions or suggestions. Running time of the journey was over ten minutes in length, with live music, masked musicians, and massive amounts of movement work. The journey is the most active and emotional part of the show and it's the first time any real action happens on stage; it was important that we articulated its importance to story, to the audience.

In the beginning, I think there was some confusion on how to make the journey work in the space, and then the idea of turning 1839 Wylie into a boat during the journey was presented. The use of the walls as billowing sails, the upper landing as the front of the ship, and the wooden floors to represent the wood of a boat worked out well. All of these elements, combined with the exaggerated movement of the actors created a completely new and separate location for the audience.

The journey was also the tightest part of the production technically; for lighting, sound, and acting. The actors became completely invested in the journey spiritually and physically, fully exploring the depth of what they were each going through, and effectively creating a cohesive unit. Robert Wright, who played Citizen, was often lost in the emotions of the journey, putting forth everything he had physically and mentally to have his character's 'soul washed.' There were also times when Be Boyd, who played Aunt Ester, was also lost in the scene; she would

seem to be talking in tongues chanting incantations that were thick with other worldly power as she came down the stairs, completely lost in the world of the play. The journey became a very ritual-like occurrence for the cast and crew. The use of the three “masked musicians,” as we called them, made the City of Bones come alive. The masked musicians encompassed the audience and created an atmosphere very different from what the audience and cast were experiencing before or after the journey.

Production Team Influences

The following section features my working relationship with various members of the production team. It also tells of how their work and encouragement influenced me, and how they helped me throughout the process.

Our stage management team was comprised of Theatre UCF students in the stage management program. Our stage manager was constantly in contact with me and extremely professional. I knew my relationship with the stage management team was crucial, because without them I wouldn’t be able to effectively communicate with actors, designers, or directors. Though our stage management team had little experience in working with dramaturgs, they were always helpful and open to my relationship with them. They constantly provided assistance in communicating information I provided them, to the cast and staff, and welcomed me into the rehearsal space, so I could be more involved.

Within the production team I think the most encouragement and constructive criticism came from the directing staff. The director Dr. Julia Listengarten and assistant director Rebecca May Flowers were always sure to include me in decisions, and always had new directions in

which to lead me. Initially, I was asked by Dr. Listengarten to join the production staff in early August. Listengarten, an advocate for student dramaturgs on her productions, was incredibly helpful during the initial research phase providing me with her early production ideas and inspirations.

Listengarten and her assistant director saw that I was respected and utilized during the process. In the rehearsal room I was always welcomed, and my opinion was often asked about staging or diction. Her ability to allow others, such as me and the assistant director, to provide opinions, and work off of them fostered my growth as an artist and student. Her attention to detail, ability to see beyond the text on the page, and, most importantly, to find questions in the script that lead you in new directions, is what made this process a great learning experience.

Overall, I think that this production had a very solid foundation in good technical practice. As an active member of the production team, I was included in many conversations that influenced the production as a whole. Though there were other members of the production staff not mentioned in this section with whom I worked with, these are the people who utilized and assisted me through the process.

One of the hardest parts about working with designers and technicians is knowing when to speak up and when to back off. There were certain designers, such as the lighting designer, that I never really came in contact with during the production. There were other designers that by the time I came into the picture, or in contact with them, they had already made up their mind about their design choices. These designers needed little from me, because they had already done their own research. Still other designers enjoyed the collaborative process that a dramaturg can

bring to the table, and their work thrived when assisted; for instance, props. I think learning how these and other relationships worked, and how to foster them was something I really enjoyed during this production.

With no other productions to compare it to, I realize my analysis is biased. I do, however, believe that many of the elements in our production were quite unique. Most of the uniqueness I believe has to do with the production team, and the varying backgrounds that the team members brought with them. I think most importantly we were able to articulate the story and share it with our audiences each performance in Orlando, as well as later in Daytona.

AUGUST WILSON'S PRESENCE IN *GEM OF THE OCEAN*

Every author or playwright puts themselves into their own work whether they admit to it or not. August Wilson is no exception. Although he stated several times that he didn't write himself into his work on purpose, because otherwise, there would be nothing left to tell. It is very apparent that Wilson is present in his work, using the neighborhood he grew up in and creating characters like the people he grew up around. Wilson's major inspirations in life, his four B's: artist Romare Bearden, author Jorge Luis Borges, playwright Amiri Baraka, and simply the Blues are represented in not only *Gem*, but also in the other plays within the Cycle. Wilson's four B's are present in all of his works, and act almost as a character within his plays.

There are several incarnations of Wilson in *Gem*. It is my opinion, that Wilson is best represented through a shared personality of Solly Two Kings and Caesar Wilks. As a dramaturg, I think it is good practice to pinpoint the author's personal intentions in their work. It is through the discovery of these intentions that true analysis and character building can occur. Though neither of these may have been Wilson's intention, it is my belief that he represents himself through these two characters best. Finally, Wilson's plays are based on real people, places, and experiences. His own type of dramaturgy is present in his works through historical accuracy, (or inaccuracies), and the ominous presence of his past.

Wilson's Four B's

Wilson's work is often praised for having realistic dialogue for both blacks and whites of the time period. In his early writing career Wilson began listening to the people around him, both

black and white, and used what he heard as dialogue for his texts. He began to realize that the identity of the characters, mostly, though not exclusively black characters, lived in their speech. He then began to take the voices and words of the people he had grown up around and write them into his plays, finally giving his characters the identity they needed to be fully developed. This section employed a lot of Brown's components of questioning and critical thinking. I critically thought about the text as a whole and looked for instances where I could find correlation between Wilson's characters and the circumstances of his own life.

Wilson's own identity was developed early in his life. His many African American influences would continue to guide him and become extremely present in his work throughout his career. Wilson's four B's, as they became known included artist Romare Bearden, author Jorge Luis Borges, playwright Amiri Baraka, and simply the Blues.

Blues music was one of Wilson's first major influences, a key ingredient in almost all of his works. He felt that the Blues spoke about his culture and environment; moreover, Wilson thought the Blues were speaking to and for him. From the first time he heard Bessie Smith sing 'Nobody in Town can Bake a Jelly Roll like Mine' on a 78 rpm record he knew he had found the voice for his people. In *Gem*, the Blues is represented in his ability to integrate song with life and to find the music that inherently exists in our daily activities. The sounds of Black Mary cooking, Solly walking with his walking stick, and Aunt Ester shuffling across the floor are all part of our everyday music, and Wilson's ability to add these details to his works shows his connection with music.

Our production team took it a step further and created the voice for our production through music. The musicians, under the supervision of our music director Pasha Weaver, created scene change music, and musical moments throughout the script. They used the images and themes in the script that influenced them. With all of our music written, and performed by the cast, there was a truly personal element within the production.

It was Amiri Baraka, a leader in the black theatre movement of the sixties and seventies, who first inspired Wilson to begin writing plays. Wilson, a budding poet during the sixties and seventies saw Baraka's work and wanted to imitate that kind of art. By Wilson's own account, he failed at his first attempts to make political theatre. After a playwriting hiatus, he came back to the art and found his voice. Though his work isn't overtly political, his *Cycle* carries an intensely empowering message to the black community. In *Gem*, his message is about the newly acquired freedoms and possibilities available to the blacks. Since it is the first play in the *Cycle*, he makes sure to note how far black people have come from bondage, and how far they plan to go (represented in *Radio Golf*, the last play in the *Cycle*).

Although he was a very different type of writer than Baraka, Jorge Luis Borges, a short story writer from Argentina, created a writing formula that intrigued Wilson. He didn't save the ending of the story for a big climactic finish; instead, he let the characters tell their own future, sometimes at the beginning of the narrative. Wilson was never a writer that revealed a big secret; instead he calmly allows the story to flow. In *Gem*, this is exemplified in the first act where there is hardly any action, while the major action of the play rests somewhere about two-thirds of the

way into the story. He allows the resolution of *Gem* to easily flow into *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the next play in the Cycle.

Through artist Romare Bearden's collages of African American life, Wilson was finally able to see the stories he had imagined on the page. To Wilson, Bearden had managed to capture the spirit of African American-ness on canvases. Three of his collage works were the direct inspiration for two plays: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson* in the Cycle. Wilson even began to use Bearden's technique of assembling pieces to create his own works. He began to realize that putting together his works was easier if he found bits and pieces of dialogue, character, setting, etc. and patched the work together as a whole later. In our production of *Gem*, the back drop was designed in a collage format. Our scenic team sewed together a random collection of fabrics that were dyed in different ways to create collage-like walls that enveloped the set, creating an exclusive world for the production.

From these four inspirations Wilson took what was most relevant to his own work. Later in his career he added two writers, Ed Bullins and James Baldwin, his fifth and sixth B's. Both of these writers wrote about everyday life, and Wilson liked their representations of what life was like on an everyday basis. All of the elements that these B's posses inspired Wilson to create the works he did and shaped him as an artist. A piece of each of these inspirations is in all of Wilson's works.

Wilson Represented in Solly and Caesar

In an interview with Shannon, Wilson clearly stated that "None of the characters [in his plays] are modeled after me" (203). He would then go on to say that he is "definitely a part of the

story. I claim it-all four hundred years of it. I claim the right to tell it in any way I choose because it's, in essence, my autobiography, only it's my autobiography of myself and my ancestors" (203). He told several reporters and critics that he was, in writing the Cycle, writing a 'four-hundred-year-autobiography.' Therefore, it seems logical that he must have projected himself in his characters at some time or another. Wilson claims that this story, this four-hundred-year-autobiography, is contained in his 'blood's memory;' it is his ancestors talking. In writing the Cycle, Wilson hoped that black Americans could use the stories to fill in the blank historical points of their pasts.

Solly Two Kings and Caesar Wilks are the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of *Gem*. The two are polar opposites, and through that it is possible for Wilson to show his admiration for blacks, while at the same time voicing his frustrations and speaking his truths about his people. It is my opinion that there are traits within both Caesar, and Solly that are representative of Wilson, and his life. Caesar and Solly represent the conflicted nature within Wilson, there is a tension and anger whenever the two are around each other. This tension arises from their differing opinions about what a free black man should be doing with his life.

Wilson uses Solly as the story teller, because as a playwright, he himself is a story teller. He presents information to the audience/reader with the assistance of the other characters. He is loud and bold, and his character stands out in text and performance. Wilson's use of Solly as a sort of narrator is effective: all of the physical action of the play happens strictly within the walls of 1839 Wylie. It becomes the responsibility of someone (in this case Solly) to report to both the characters and the readers/audience the goings on in the outside world.

Like Solly, Wilson did not go by his birth name, Frederick August Kittel (“*Fences* Introduction”). Solly changes his name when freedom comes so he can live without the fear of being caught again. “My name is Two Kings. Used to be Uncle Alfred. The government looking for me for being a runaway so I changed it” (26). Wilson despised his absent white father from whom his last name came from and opted to use his mother’s maiden name, Wilson, when he began writing. He too freed himself of the bondage, with a father he found no connection with.

Wilson was no stranger to creating the unlikeable or even villainous characters within the black community in his writing; in *Gem*, it is Caesar. Wilson created these unlikable characters in his work even if it cast a negative shadow on the black community for the sole purpose that it was realistic. Every community, be it black, white, or other, is going to have unsavory characters that trouble the stasis of everyday life. Wilson just chose to use these people as footholds in his work to make for a more realistic environment. Wilson admitted that there was a time when he thought the most important blacks were the ones locked up. His reasoning being that they have the “warrior spirit,” and that this spirit is needed in life. He did not necessarily condone the negative things those people had done to get locked up, but he believed those people needed to exist (Shannon 37). His reasoning has a sound base in truth; without those who trouble the ideas of the norm, where would our stories come from?

Wilson thought that “committing various crimes and moral indiscretions is far better than acquiescing to the dead-end lives society has prescribed for them” (qtd in Shannon 38). In a television interview with Bill Moyers in 1988, he is said to have disliked programs like *The Cosby Show* because it was unrealistic and set idealistic and at times, unreachable goals for the

black community. Wilson created characters such as Caesar to interject what he felt was realism in his work.

Wilson's unsavory character in *Gem*, Caesar, has a life much like that of his creator. Caesar's early life, assumedly, following freedom seems to be rough. He tells Black Mary of going to the workhouse (jail) and what he had to do to survive. Like Caesar, Wilson also had a troubled early life. At the age of fifteen, Wilson dropped out of school after being falsely accused of plagiarizing a paper on Napoleon. Rather than continue to profess his innocence, to no avail, he left school, and worked odd jobs to survive. Once Caesar gets out of jail, he tries to climb to the highest rank a man of his color can, through whatever means necessary. His ego grows as he gets more power; this ego pushes the people who care for him, such as Black Mary, away. Wilson also donned a uniform but only for a short time; he joined the Army, but left after only a year.

Wilson's creation of Caesar as a man in uniform is his representation of what he didn't finish as a young man, or what he could have become. Caesar's character thinks he is the 'boss man' around the Hill District when all the people there want is to be left alone and live a life of freedom. Though Caesar is a product of slavery like the people in his community, he takes his anger and frustration out by becoming what he once despised. Most of their lives the people of the community had lived under the rule of slave owners, who thought they were their 'boss men,' and Caesar is just another form of oppression.

Wilson's Own Dramaturgy

“I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother’s life--her myths, her superstition, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter--are all worthy of art” (*Guitars* 1) These were Wilson’s words on history, in his preface to *Seven Guitars* (the first half of this quote is used in the *Gem* textual analysis). Wilson never claimed to be a historian, anthropologist, or even an experienced dramaturg, but there is a certain piece of history that goes into all of his works.

To use the words of Shannon in her introduction to her in-depth study of Wilson, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* “[Wilson] takes liberties with factual information” (3). This is not to say that he is not writing truth, just that he adds his personal influence on it. Many of the people Wilson wrote about were, in fact, real living people, but he took it upon himself to fictionalize them for his own artistic purpose, but why? Is it to avoid research? Or, is it to make for better drama?

Wilson often went on record as saying that he didn’t research the subjects he wrote about. To him, the history and information was already inside him and needed a way to express itself. His inspiration was drawn from the boarding houses, and ghettos he lived in as a youth, as well as the artists and figures that inspired him. It is not my intention to say his work isn’t historic or reliable, but that his work is a piece of literary art before it is a piece of history.

In *Gem*, it is at times hard to believe the dates, and given ages for some of the characters. Solly and Eli would have needed to be a little older than listed in the cast of characters to have

had the substantial life experiences they tell about. Caesar most likely would need to be younger to eventually have the children that are mentioned and present in *Radio Golf*. Though their ages could still be realistic the way Wilson wrote them, with the abnormally low life expectancy of black Americans in 1904, it is highly unlikely that the ages Wilson gives his characters are realistic. His goal was not for readers or audience members to focus on the history, but on the human journey of the African to its current standing of black American. The reason I even mention these inconsistencies is because one of the crucial jobs of a dramaturg is to trouble, or question the information you are provided with. Doing this allows for more opportunities to reflect on your work, and critically think about the text in production.

With all of that stated, Wilson still grounded his work in truth. Wilson seemed to be writing the history of blacks in America, not based out of a text book, but out of the oral tradition of the African culture. Jay Plum states that Wilson “‘rights’ American history, altering our perception of reality to give status to what American history has denied the status of ‘real’ (Plum 562). Plum is making a point with his use of the term ‘rights’ first he means that Wilson ‘corrects’ history by writing it more in truth than other whites or even blacks do. Secondly, he means that Wilson is writing history, black history, for the first time. Wilson considered his works to be the new history books for the black American.

Coming into this process, I knew not all of my work would be based around history, or even the beliefs, works, or biography of Wilson. His writings often lead you down multiple conflicting paths. Within his plays, and within the Cycle, there is a historical undertone with a

modern sense of time. It was important for me to remember that this and all of his other plays are art.

At the start of this project, I tried to use Wilson the playwright as a topic within my dramaturgical research, and got little out of it. I found all biographical accounts of him to be very similar, and he was a private man leaving me with few full length interviews and writings. Though Wilson is an immensely interesting character, and I think that his four B's are incredibly relevant to the study of the work, I found it much easier to step away from him initially and let my own instincts guide me. I naturally went back, later in the process, to study him, his influences, and other basic dramaturgical items.

CONCLUSION

What is a dramaturgy? Who is a dramaturg? What do dramaturgs do? I firmly believe there is no set definition for this title. Every production is different, and every experience will teach you something you didn't know before you walked in the room. Though my work on *Gem of the Ocean* is over, my work as a dramaturg is far from done.

It was my intent to chart my work on this production as an example of active dramaturgy, with the challenges of a multi-racial team on a race specific production. This was achieved through explanations of what I and Lenora Inez Brown see as active dramaturgy, in providing research, questioning accepted norms present within the play, reflecting on my work, and the work of others, as well as critically thinking about the text as a whole. During, and after the production process, I found flaws in my own research and process, but have used those as a valuable learning experience. That is part of any process.

Going back to Brown's four, or five components depending on how you look at it, I think I learned some very valuable lessons both as a dramaturg and theatre practitioner. I think first and foremost I strengthened my ability to question. I questioned, and still question, Wilson's ability to try and exclude whites from participating in his work. I also questioned the norms presented in the text of the play, such as ages and occupations.

Research is an easy one, because to be a dramaturg there is an inherent idea of research. Coming into the process I knew there would be a lot of research involved, but I could not predict what specific topics would have to be explored. As a dramaturg any research you conduct

strengthens your ability to research. I think this production strengthened my ability to find answers to specific questions and apply them to my work.

In terms of reflection, this was a skill I don't think I was able to really realize I was using until after the production closed. I was forced to reflect on my work and my contribution to the production. This thesis is as a whole an act of reflection, as well as some questioning. Critical thinking and writing on the other hand is something I still struggle with as a dramaturg and practitioner. I think the toughest part for me is realizing when I am, in fact critically thinking. Questioning, reflecting, and research do not happen without critical thinking.

Throughout this process, the one thing that has always lingered in my mind is the fact that I am not black, nor do I have any African blood within me. It was never my intention to let that interfere with my work or my relationship with the production team. The simple fact of heritage and skin color never left my mind, and maybe that's for the best. I know for a fact that I am not the first white dramaturg on a Wilson production, and I appreciate that. It wasn't my ultimate objective to do something nobody has ever done before; it was my aspiration, to do my job. This thesis is not an attempt to defend myself. I realize that if Wilson were alive he would probably wildly disapprove of my work for the simple reason that I cannot fully relate to his stories. The truth is I can't. I trouble Wilson's ideas because that is what effective dramaturgs do. Wilson was never a slave, but his characters were. Our actors, and production staff, also were never slaves, and that commonality I think is part of the universality of this production. I present this work as a study, and merely that. I was doing my job to the best of my ability, and in the end that is all that can be asked of me.

During the writing of this thesis I encountered dilemmas that never occurred during rehearsal. One of them was whether or not I should capitalize the words 'black' and 'white.' I finally settled on the lower-case version after much debate, and with the help from my committee. I wanted to use the capital version for the sheer fact that I was dealing with a specific group of people as a whole, but now upon reflection I used the lower-case version, and feel it fits. Another issue for me was what terminology to use when referencing the characters of the play, should I use black or African American. I decided on black for the sole purpose that it is the term most used by my generation. It was always important to me that I use terminology that was politically correct, but also appropriate for my study, and to never offend. I think I have done that.

Another issue I had was presenting the idea of black aesthetics in this thesis. I think it was something that was discussed, without specifically being named, a lot during rehearsals, and meetings. I tried to bring that into this paper but felt like I couldn't honestly and accurately talk about the dichotomy between black identity, and African American identity. I do touch on it in the Identity and Character section but it is not a main point in my work.

While presenting my work on this production at the Graduate Research Forum at UCF one of my adjudicators, a professor for the TESOL department, told me that my work should act as a manual, to others wanting to go into this sort of work. He commented on how valuable my work is to my field, and told me to continue with it. Though I can't see this work as being any kind of manual, I valued the fact that he thought my work could potentially help others trying to do this type of work, and that has been an of inspiration for this thesis.

As with any project there are things I would do over. First off, I would have made an information packet for the cast and crew (a big source of dramaturgical information). Though the cast was more interested in talking about information and bringing up ideas and answers through face to face communication, I would still like to have that packet for my own ease of mind. I felt like so much of my initial and subsequent research went unnoticed by virtually everyone because of this shortcoming. Fortunately, the cast and I formed a close bond, and I was present at rehearsals several times a week to provide information and answer questions in person, and not through a piece of paper. This bond allowed us to talk candidly about historical accuracy, faults in Wilson's work, and other things that made our production unique.

Another thing I would do over is journaling. I know many theatre artists who journal the production process from beginning to end. I have never been one to do that, but I think in the future it will be immensely helpful. In all truth it would have made the process of writing this thesis easier.

During the final stages of this thesis project I was reminded of one of our main themes during the production, -- the universality of the story. I came across a television show on the AMC channel called *Hell on Wheels*. This show is set in the mid to late 1860's, shortly after the end of the Civil War and during the railroad boom. There is a source of contention between the black builders and white 'bosses.' One of the main black characters, Elam, is very similar to the character of Solly Two Kings, both in personality and looks. Elam doesn't smite all whites, just the truly bad ones. For many of the blacks, this was their first job as a free men, and there is talk of the fact that they are freed, so why do they have to follow a 'masters' rule. The show has

many connections to *Gem*: for instance, in the first episode the song ‘Twelve Gates to the City’ (a song Wilson integrates into *Gem*) underscores a scene. It was in watching a few episodes of this television show that I truly realized that within *Gem* there is a universal story, and no matter your race, it is yours to tell.

This project allowed me to learn, and grow in many ways: from the actual rehearsal process, to taking the production to KCACTF, to writing this thesis after it was all over. It is because of this experience that I want to further my work in the telling of stories in an active and non-biased way. It is my hope that in the future I can continue to work on these types of non-traditional projects to further educate and influence the theatrical and dramaturgical community. I feel that I have given this piece as an example of active dramaturgy, with the challenges presented to me on this production.

REFERENCES

- Brown, Lenora Inez. *The Art of Active Dramaturgy: Transforming Critical Thought into Dramatic Action*. Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2011. Print.
- Gainor, J. Ellen et al. Introduction. "Fences" *Norton Anthology of Drama: Volume Two*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009. Print.
- Harrington, Joan. "I Aint Sorry for Nothin' I Done." New York: Limelight Editions, 1998. Print.
- Plum, Jay. "Blues, History, and the Dramaturgy of August Wilson." *African American Review* 27.4 (1993):561-567. JSTOR. Web. July 2012.
- Shannon, Sandra Garrett. *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*. Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1995. Print.
- Spencer, Vivian, and Yvonne Chambers. "Ritual Death and Wilson's Female Christ." *August Wilson: Completing the Twentieth-Century Cycle*. Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010. 134-144. Print.
- Weiss, Sonia. "Finding Our History: African-American Names." *Family Education*. 1999. Web.
- Williams, Hubert, and Patrick Murphy. "The Evolving Strategy of Police: A Minority View." *Perspectives on Policing*. 13 (1990): 9-10. Web. Sept. 2011.
- Wilson, August. *Gem of the Ocean*. New York: Theatre Communications Group: 2004. Print.
- "I Want a Black Director." *May All Your Fences Have Gates*. Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994. 200-204. Print.
- Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. New York: Theatre Communications Group: 2007. 1988. Print.
- "The Legacy of Malcolm X." *Life*, December 1992, 84-94. Google Books. Web. July 2012.
- Seven Guitars*. New York: Plume, 1997. Print.
- "A World of Ideas." *Bill Moyers Journal*. 1988. Video.