



## **Biographical Sketch of August Wilson**

### **Personal Life:**

Born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945 to Daisy Wilson and Frederick Kittel, a German immigrant. August was the fourth child and oldest son of six. His siblings are Freda Ellis, Linda Jean Kittel, Donna Conley, Edwin Kittel and Richard Kittel.

The family lived in the Hill District, later moved to Hazelwood and then back to the Hill.

His father was estranged from the family, and while his brothers kept their father's name, at age 20, Wilson cemented his cultural loyalty by taking his mother's name, becoming August Wilson.

Daisy Wilson raised her six children in a cold-water flat behind Bella's grocery store on Bedford Avenue in the Hill. She died of lung cancer in March 1983.

Wilson's father, Frederick, died in 1965. Wilson's stepfather, David Bedford, died in 1969.

Wilson married Brenda Burton in 1969. Their daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson, was born the following year. The couple divorced in 1972.

In 1978, Wilson moved to Minnesota where he eventually met and married Judy Oliver. Their marriage ended in 1990, and he moved to Seattle. In 1994, he married Constanza Romero, a costume designer. Together they had a daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, in 1997.

Wilson was diagnosed with liver cancer in June 2005. He died on Sunday, October 2, 2005 at age 60 in Seattle's Swedish Medical Center.

Wilson planned his own funeral service, which was held on October 8, 2005 at Soldiers & Sailors Memorial in Pittsburgh. He was buried at Greenwood Cemetery in O'Hara Township.

### **The Early Years:**

Wilson attended St. Richard's Parochial School in the Hill, then progressed to Central Catholic High School, in Pittsburgh's Oakland section, in 1959. As the only African American student in the school, he was constantly threatened and harassed, so he left just before the end of his freshman year. He attended Connelley Vocational High School where he felt he wasn't challenged enough and

later switched to Gladstone High School. In 1960, at age 15, Wilson dropped out of Gladstone after a teacher accused him of plagiarizing a 20-page paper on Napoleon. He went on to receive his education at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and on the streets of Pittsburgh. In 1999, Wilson was awarded the first and only high school diploma given by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

In 1962, he enlisted in the U.S. Army for three years, but left after one year of service. Wilson worked odd jobs as a dishwasher, porter, cook and gardener to support himself. In 1965, Wilson purchased his first typewriter for \$20, using money paid to him by his sister Freda for writing a term paper for her. He then began to write poetry.

In the late 1960s, Wilson became part of a group of poets, educators and artists who formed the Centre Avenue Poets Theater Workshop. In 1968, he and friend and fellow playwright Rob Penny founded Black Horizon Theater, which was involved in the Kuntu Repertory Theater. Wilson's first staged play was *Recycle*, which drew on the unhappy dissolution of his first marriage.

In 1978, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota. on the suggestion of friend, Claude Purdy. While in St. Paul, Wilson concentrated more on playwriting and became a company member of the Penumbra Theatre. In 1979, Wilson wrote *Jitney*, which he considered his first real play. Wilson won a fellowship at the Minneapolis Playwrights Center in 1980, and the following year, he married for the second time to Judy Oliver.

By 1982, *Jitney* was staged by Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh. The cast included Sala Udin, who went on to become a Pittsburgh city councilman and is now an August Wilson Center Board member. The same year, the National Playwrights Conference at O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut accepted *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. It was there that Wilson met Lloyd Richards, an African American man who was dean of the prestigious Yale University School of Drama and artistic director of the highly influential Yale Repertory Theatre. Richards went on to direct Wilson's first six plays on Broadway.

#### **Professional Life:**

*Ma Rainey* premiered at Yale Repertory Theatre in 1984 and immediately moved to Broadway where Wilson won his first New York Drama Critics Circle (NYDCC) Best Play Award. *Fences* premiered at Yale Repertory in 1985. The following year, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* premiered at Yale. In 1987, *Fences* opened on Broadway and again won Wilson the New York Drama Critics Circle award, a Tony Award and Wilson's first Pulitzer Prize. The play grossed \$11 million in its first year on Broadway, a record for a non-musical. *Joe Turner* opened on Broadway in 1988 and won Wilson another NYDCC award. That same year, Wilson appeared on Bill Moyers' "World of Ideas," which aired on PBS.

*The Piano Lesson* premiered at Yale in 1989 and opened on Broadway the following year. It won Wilson yet another NYDCC award and his second Pulitzer Prize. Also in 1990, *Two Trains Running* premiered and Wilson's second marriage to Judy Oliver ended. He moved to Seattle.

In 1991, the only collection of Wilson's plays – "Three Plays by August Wilson" – was published by University of Pittsburgh Press. By 1992, *Two Trains Running* opened on Broadway and won Wilson the NYDCC award for Best American Play. In 1994, Wilson briefly returned to Pittsburgh to co-produce the filming of *The Piano Lesson* for television. The movie was the only one of Wilson's plays so far to be

adapted to the screen. He married Constanza Romero, a costume designer, the same year. In 1995, *Piano Lesson* was broadcasted on Hallmark Hall of Fame. *Seven Guitars* opened on Broadway in 1996 and won the playwright another NYDCC award. The following year, in 1997, his second daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, was born.

In 1999, *King Hedley II* was the inaugural play staged in the new \$20 million O'Reilly Theater in Downtown Pittsburgh's Cultural District. The following year, *Jitney* premiered in New York. It was the first Wilson play to be staged off-Broadway, and won him his seventh NYDCC award. In 2001, *King Hedley II* premiered on Broadway and is the first Wilson play not to win the NYDCC award.

*Gem of the Ocean* premiered in Chicago in 2002. That same year, *Jitney* won London's Olivier Award for the year's best play. In 2003, *Ma Rainey* was revived on Broadway, starring Whoopi Goldberg and original cast member Charles Dutton. Wilson also received the \$250,000 Heinz Award for Arts and Humanities in 2003.

*Gem of the Ocean* opened on Broadway in 2004 after a scramble to secure financing, however, it closed after 72 performances despite drawing full houses. It was, however, nominated for a Tony Award. In March 2005, *Radio Golf*, Wilson's final play in the cycle, premiered at Yale Repertory Theatre. Even while suffering from cancer and recovering from a slight stroke, Wilson made re-writes for the play's second production in Los Angeles that ran from July-September. *Radio Golf* was awarded another NYDCC honor for Best American Play.

#### **Highlights of Awards and Honors:**

- Pulitzer Prizes: *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*
- Tony Award: *Fences*
- Three American Theatre Critics awards
- More than a dozen honorary degrees
- New York Drama Critics Circle Awards: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, *Jitney* and *Radio Golf*
- Rockefeller and Guggenheim Fellowships in Playwriting
- Whiting Writers Award
- 2003 Heinz Award
- 1999 National Humanities Medal awarded by the President of the United States of America
- Member of both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences
- Honored in 1999 at the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Hill District Branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh with the first high school diploma awarded by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

#### **His Legacy:**

Wilson is best known for his 10-play cycle covering every decade of the 20th century. Known as either the Pittsburgh Cycle, or the Century Cycle, the plays chronicle the African American experience in 20<sup>th</sup> century America and all but one – *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* – are set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, where Wilson spent his youth and early adulthood. *Ma Rainey* was set in a Chicago recording studio.

On October 16, 2005, the former Virginia theater located on West 52<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York City's famed Broadway was renamed August Wilson Theatre. It marked the first time in history that a Broadway theater has been named for an African American. On February 17, 2006, with the blessing of the August Wilson Estate, the African American Cultural Center of Greater Pittsburgh officially announced its new name: the August Wilson Center for African American Culture. These two buildings are the only structures in the United States that bear August Wilson's name.