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An Interview with August Wilson

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an interview with
AUGUST WILSON

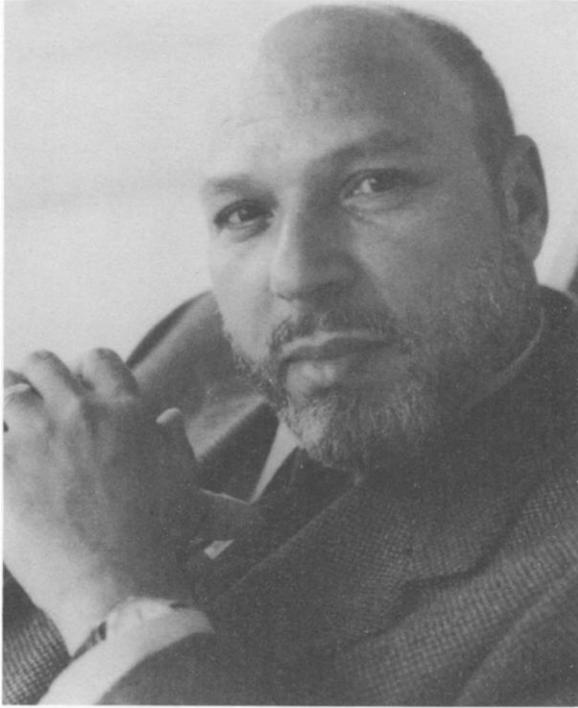
Conducted by Bonnie Lyons

A

ugust Wilson was born in 1945 in Pittsburgh to a black mother and a white father, a German baker who abandoned the family. He was raised by his mother on The Hill, a black ghetto of Pittsburgh, quit school at fifteen, and then split his days between the streets and the public library, where he particularly explored the section marked "Negro." His discovery in 1965 of Bessie Smith and the blues gave him a world that contained his imagination. His interest in black cultural nationalism in the 1960s led to his co-founding Black Horizons Theatre, a community theater aimed at raising black consciousness in Pittsburgh in 1968. His work with community theater was hampered by some of the usual problems, including unpaid actors having to rehearse after working all day, and in 1971 he began to concentrate on writing poetry and short fiction.

After unsuccessfully submitting several scripts to the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, home of the National Playwrights Conference, Wilson submitted *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and in the summer of 1982, Lloyd Richards, the director of the O'Neill, invited Wilson to attend. Since that time Wilson's career has been linked with Richards, whom Wilson has called his "guide, mentor, and provocateur." All of Wilson's plays have moved from the O'Neill, to Yale (where Richards is the dean and artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theater), to Broadway under Lloyd Richards's guiding hand.

August Wilson is the most ambitious and one of the most esteemed American playwrights of our time. His extraordinary life project is to complete a ten-play cycle chronicling the black experience in Amer-



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AUGUST WILSON

ica, one play for every decade of the century. So far he has completed *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) for the 1910s, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985) for the 1920s, *The Piano Lesson* (1990) for the 1930s, *Seven Guitars* (1996) for the 1940s, *Fences* (1986) for the 1950s, and *Two Trains Running* (1992) for the 1960s. As he discusses in the following interview, he is currently working on the play for the 1980s. While his plays are scorching indictments of racism and often include disclosures of past traumatic racial incidents which have scarred the characters, his work also celebrates the joy of music, food, stories, humor, and love. Wilson's most obvious strengths as a playwright are his ability to create vivid, fully realized characters and to provide them with rich, graphic, metaphorical language.

This interview took place in February 1997 in Merchants Cafe in Pioneer Square in downtown Seattle, near August Wilson's office. Dressed in a white dress shirt and tie coupled with a casual jacket and a cap, Wilson was soft-spoken and somewhat restrained at first. He became more and more animated as he spoke about his passion for black life in America and for his plays. Wilson is well aware that he created his characters, but he spoke of them with such knowledge and affection that I was reminded of the famous story of Balzac calling for his characters on his deathbed.

Q. Elsewhere you've talked about writing as a way of effecting social change and said that all your plays are political, but that you try not to make them didactic or polemical. Can you talk a little about how plays can effect social change without being polemical or didactic?

A. I don't write primarily to effect social change. I believe writing can do that, but that's not why I write. I work as an artist. However, all art is political in the sense that it serves the politics of someone. Here in America whites have a particular view of blacks, and I think my plays offer them a different and new way to look at black Americans. For instance, in *Fences* they see a garbageman, a person they really don't look at, although they may see a garbageman every day. By looking at Troy's life, white people find out that the content of this black garbageman's life is very similar to their own, that he is affected by the same things—love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty. Recognizing that these things are as much a part of his life as of theirs can

be revolutionary and can affect how they think about and deal with black people in their lives.

Q. How would that same play, *Fences*, affect a black audience?

A. Blacks see the content of their lives being elevated into art. They don't always know that is possible, and it's important to know that.

Q. You've talked about how important black music was for your development. Was there any black literature that showed you that black lives can be the subject of great art?

A. *Invisible Man*. When I was fourteen I discovered the Negro section of the library. I read *Invisible Man*, Langston Hughes, and all the thirty or forty books in the section, including the sociology. I remember reading a book that talked about the "Negro's power of hard work" and how much that phrase affected me. At the time I used to cut the lawn for a blind man named Mr. Douglas, who was the father of the Olympic track star. After I read that, I didn't so much cut his lawn as plow it, to show the Negro power of hard work. Looking back, I see that I had never seen those words together: "Negro power." Later of course in the sixties that became "black power." Forty years ago we had few black writers compared to today. There have been forty years of education and many more college graduates. And it's important to remember that blacks don't have a long history of writing. We come from an oral tradition. At one point in America it was a crime to teach blacks to read and write. So it's only in the past 150 years that we've been writing in this country.

Q. Elsewhere you've said that the primary opposition in your plays is between blacks who deny their African roots and those who don't. Would you still describe your work that way?

A. Today I would say that the conflict in black America is between the middle class and the so-called underclass, and that conflict goes back to those who deny themselves and those who aren't willing to. America offers blacks a contract that says, "If you leave all that African stuff over there and adopt the values of the dominant culture, you can participate." For the most part, black Americans have

rejected that sort of con job. Many blacks in the ghettos say, "If I got to give up who I am, if I can't be like me, then I don't want it." The ones who accept go on to become part of the growing black middle class and in some areas even acquire some power and participation in society, but when they finally arrive where they arrive, they are no longer the same people. They are clothed in different manners and ways of life, different thoughts and ideas. They've acculturated and adopted white values.

Q. Can you conceive of an authentically black middle-class person? Aren't you one?

A. I would say that, yes. I went to the home of a black chiropractor whose wife was also a professional in L.A., and I was surprised how black he was, but it's not common. European immigrants faced a similar situation when they arrived in this country in the early 1900s. Margaret Mead writes about the anxiety to become Americans, giving up their own languages, being ashamed of their Old World parents. But for blacks there is a bigger problem, because even though the recent white immigrants had different ethnicities, they were all Europeans.

Q. You're self-educated. How do you feel about schools and self-education?

A. The schools are horrible and don't teach anybody anything. From about the fifth grade on, I was always butting heads with my teachers. I would ask them questions and they would say, "Shut up. Sit down," because they didn't know the answers. So I'd go to the library to find out. When I quit school at fourteen, I didn't want my mother to know, so I'd get up and go to the library and stay there until three o'clock. My mother taught me to read when I was four years old, and in the library for the first time in my life I felt free. I could read whole books on subjects that interested me. I'd read about the Civil War or theology. By the time I left the library, I thought, "Okay, I'm ready. I know a lot of stuff." It always amazed me that libraries were free. Now of course you can learn everything at home on the Internet. But the way education is structured in schools, you have to take all kinds of required courses before you

can get to the subject that interests you. In 1987 I gave a lecture at the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh and was able to return a book, *The Collected Poems of Paul Dunbar*, that I had checked out of the library in 1959. For thirty years I kept that book, taking it with me every time I moved—which was often whenever the rent was due. Actually the library let me keep the book.

Q. Elsewhere you've talked about Athol Fugard's plays as an important influence on your work. Are you in sympathy with black South African playwrights who consider the situation of black South Africans their legitimate material, not his?

A. I am in sympathy with them, even though I admire Athol Fugard's work. He wrote those plays out of his magnificent spirit that made him want to fight this racial battle at a time when black playwrights in South Africa had no outlets for their work. Those people were voiceless. That was good. But ultimately, ideally, I think he should write about the white experience in South Africa and more about himself, from his own focus.

Q. When you look at your work as a whole, what patterns do you see?

A. *Fences* is the odd man out because it's about one individual and everything focuses around him. The others are ensemble plays. I think I need to write another one like *Fences* to balance it out.

Q. Do you think you might write a play with a woman at the center?

A. It's possible, but it would be a bit more difficult for me. But right now in the play I am working on, the character I call my spectacle character, like Gabriel in *Fences* or Hambone in *Two Trains Running*, is a woman for the first time. And that character is generally a big character, so I'm working on that.

Q. Elsewhere you've said that you start plays with an idea. Can you talk about what kind of idea? Is it a social or historical idea?

A. Let's take the play I'm working on now. In it I'm interested in examining family structure, to see if it broke down and when and

why that occurred. The play is set in 1985, but it means going back twenty years to see how we got to where we were in 1985. In this play a number of characters have killed other men. Through the characters and events of the play I want to explore the family and to expose the culprit. That's important.

Q. From your description it sounds like your new play will be about violence as well as the breakdown of the family. Are they related?

A. When I look at the situation of black America in 1985 I want to see where these kids got these guns. I personally think I can trace it all back to Bernard Goetz in his paranoia shooting those four black kids on the subway, two of them in the back. He was seen as heroic. And shortly after that, young blacks were shot in Teaneck, New Jersey, and chased down streets in New York and beaten with baseball bats and shot. I think the black kids said, "Wait a minute, we're under attack here." And they went out and got guns. They armed themselves because they were under assault. Now, unfortunately, they are using the guns on each other. But Goetz is where it began.

Q. In the past you've said that the situation for blacks in America is worse now than it was forty years ago. Do you still think so?

A. Without question, yes.

Q. What would make it better? Let's say you had great political power, what would you do?

A. I would make an announcement that slavery is morally reprehensible and will never occur again. The Emancipation Proclamation was a military move, not a moral admission, so this needs to be a policy statement. Then having said that I would tell blacks they are free to participate in American society as Africans, that they don't have to give up their heritage. We have black doctors, lawyers, hydraulic engineers, artists, and they all work for someone else. None of them work for themselves. Every manhole cover, mailbox, building, or street is owned by white people in virtually every city in America. The only area in black life where I see people participating as Africans is in the area of rap music. They aren't censored, they say

what they want to say, they do what they want to do, they set up their own record companies. Why are all the most influential black scholars at Harvard and not at Howard? We need to make Howard University as desirable a university as Harvard. I also find it interesting that none of the historically black colleges have a black studies program. And at the graduation at black colleges they don't sing gospel.

Q. How were things better in the forties?

A. We used to have our own black baseball league, for example. Everything was black-owned. On a Sunday black families would go over to the field, and some would sell peanuts or chicken sandwiches and so on. We were more self-sufficient. When blacks were finally allowed to play in the white leagues, the loss for the black community was great. Similarly in the forties black women were not allowed to go downtown and try on dresses in the department stores. So we had our own dress stores in the neighborhood and the doctors and dentists and teachers and business owners all lived in the same neighborhood and we had a thriving community. Then the doctors and dentists started moving out, and the whole community began to fall down. So now we're in a situation in which the basketball league is 99 percent black, but it's owned by whites. If all the money made from black sports and black music were in black hands, if it were spent in our neighborhoods, things would be very different.

Q. Elsewhere you've said you want your audience to see your characters as Africans, not just black folks in America. Can you talk about that?

A. I'm talking about black Americans having uniquely African ways of participating in the world, of doing things, different ways of socializing. I have no fascination with Africa itself. I've never been to Africa and have no desire to go. I've been invited several times and turned down the invitations because I don't like to travel. When my daughter went to college, she called me all excited that she was studying about Timbuktu. I told her, "You study your grandma and her grandmother before you go back to Timbuktu." People don't want to do that because soon you wind up with slavery, and that's a

condition people want to run away from. It's much easier to go back to the glory days of Timbuktu, but to do that is falsely romantic. It doesn't get you anywhere. I remember when I first went with a friend to a Passover seder and heard them say, "When we were slaves in the land of Egypt." I met a kid in 1987 in New York who thought slavery ended in 1960. This is God's honest truth. He was seventeen years old and he thought slavery ended in 1960. That's our fault. Like the Jews, we need to celebrate our emancipation; it would give us a way of identifying and expressing a sense of unity.

Q. Do you see anything anomalous about your wanting blacks to see themselves as Africans but your not having any desire even to visit Africa?

A. I'm simply saying blacks should hold on to what they are. You don't have to go to Africa to be an African. I live and breathe that. Even in the sixties, with all the romantic involvement with Africa, I never wore a dashiki to participate in the black power movement. Africa is right here in the southern part of the United States, which is our ancestral homeland. I don't need to make that leap across the ocean. When the first African died on the continent of North America, that was the beginning of my history.

Q. Speaking of your history, I remember reading that you said the first word you typed was your own name. Do you have any interest in autobiography?

A. Not about me as an individual. I don't like to read biographies or autobiographies myself. And if your material is autobiographical, sooner or later you're going to run out of material. I take the entire black experience in America, from the first black in 1619 until now, and claim that as my material. That's my story, my life story, and that's a lot to write about. But in truth, whatever subject you take, you as a writer are going to come up with something that is based on who you are, so even in choosing the black experience I am writing it from my own perspective.

Q. Do you have any particular fondness for one of your characters more than the others?

A. No, but *Joe Turner* is my favorite play. I like all my characters, and I always say I'd like to put them all in the same play—Troy and Boy Willie and Loomis and Sterling and Floyd. I once wrote this short story called "The Best Blues Singer in the World," and it went like this: "The streets that Balboa walked was his own private ocean, and Balboa was drowning." End of story. That says it all. Nothing else to say. Since then, I've been rewriting that same story over and over again. All of my plays are rewriting that same story. I'm not sure what it means, other than life is hard.

Q. At various points you've said that the only institution in the black community that you affirm is the church, but at other times you have affirmed Amiri Baraka's comment that when a person looks in the mirror he should see an image of his God, and that black Americans don't because Jesus was white. Could you talk about your attitude toward Christianity?

A. The Christianity that blacks have embraced, they have transformed with aspects of African religion, African style, and certainly African celebration. The church is the only stable organization in the black community, and the community is organized around the church. If you want to disseminate information in the black community, the way to do it is through the church. But as a whole, the Christian churches have been the source of organizations like the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, and even today the church sanctions inequities. When I grew up in Pittsburgh, blacks couldn't go to our black church for confession; we had to go to a white church for that.

Q. Could you talk about your relationship with Lloyd Richards?

A. Because he has directed all my plays, the plays are all the product of the same two artistic sensibilities. They become seamless, like one play.

Q. Has your relationship with him changed over the years?

A. Not really. What Lloyd will sometimes do is tell me to see if I can cut something, but he won't ever tell me what to cut.

Q. Have you ever moved a scene from one play to another?

A. Part of Loomis's big speech in *Joe Turner*—"My enemies all around me picking flesh from my bones. I'm choking on my own blood and all you got to give me is salvation"—those words were originally Troy Maxson's. Both men are questioning God, wondering why suffering occurs when God is here and God loves us all. Troy is telling God, "I did everything You asked, I walked through the valley, whatever You asked me to do I did. So where is my given? Where is what You owe me? I ain't done nothing. I ain't asking for nobody else's. I'm asking for mine." In their different ways Maxson and Loomis are asking the same theological questions. And I've got other stuff that was cut from various plays, including this wonderful little scene with a black cat. That scene was originally part of *Seven Guitars*, in fact we played it in Chicago before it got cut. It's going to turn up again someplace. I just love it, this black cat.

Q. Elsewhere you've praised a willingness to bleed and shed blood. Speaking of blood and scars, is Risa's act of scarring her own legs positive in the same way Loomis's act of slashing his own chest is at the end of *Joe Turner*? Are they symbolically similar acts?

A. Loomis is not only illustrating his willingness to bleed but saying that if salvation requires bloodshed, he doesn't need Christ to bleed for him on the cross. He's saying something like, "Christ can do some stuff I can't, but if it's about bleeding, yeah, I can bleed for myself." Risa's act is an attempt to define herself in language different from what society uses for women. So I think both are positive. Actually, for a while I was concerned because all my protagonists seem to have scars. People often tell me that I must have a scar, but I don't have a scar anywhere. But I think it's symbolic of being marked. It's a willingness to do battle. It doesn't matter if you win or lose, it's just the willingness like Boy Willie grappling with the ghost in *The Piano Lesson*.

Q. You've said that you try not to create characters who are victims. Yet aren't all these scars a sign that they have been victimized? Is the issue how they deal with their victimization, how they respond to it?

A. We're all victims of white America's paranoia. My characters don't respond as victims. No matter what society does to them, they are engaged with life, wrestling with it, trying to make sense out of it. Nobody is sitting around saying, "Woe is me."

Q. You've never focused a whole play on a relationship between a black woman and a black man. Why?

A. First of all, it's difficult. You have to write the woman's part. I think *Seven Guitars* comes close. When I was writing that play, I tried to work on that aspect. Some of the scenes between Floyd and Vera never made it into the final version. Other developments took over. But I'm exploring that relationship in the play I'm working on now.

Q. So for a male playwright, it's easier to create male characters than female characters?

A. It's certainly easier for me. That's one part of it; the other part is that I may be afraid of writing a soap opera. The man-woman relationship is certainly an important part of life, but I think you need to place it inside something else, something broader. In the play I'm working on, there is an emphasis on the male-female relationship and also the mother-son relationship, which I'm developing in depth for the first time, with the woman as the spectacle character.

Q. Could you talk a bit about what you mean by a spectacle character? Is this character a spectacle for the other characters?

A. No, they're fully integrated into the other characters' lives, but they are a spectacle for the audience. I think that's my interpretation of Aristotle's spectacle in the *Poetics*.

Q. Do you think you define plot the same way Aristotle did?

A. For me plot grows out of characterization, so there are no plot points. The play doesn't flow from plot point to plot point. I guess it's easy to plot that way, since every TV drama moves along those lines. It becomes very mechanical. Some people call my plays plotless; that's simply because they haven't been able to recognize the plot in

them. In my plays you don't say, "Here is a point here, hold on to this because we're going to need it." I think you need to hold on to everything. In my plays things happen gradually, and you come to see why things are in the play. For example, in *Seven Guitars* you hear four men talking, and you may think the play is not going anywhere. But it is. All that stuff, every single thing they talk about, connects and is important to your understanding of the drama.

Q. It may seem a strange connection, but are your plays more like Chekhov's than most playwrights', both in their being ensemble plays and in their seeming plotlessness?

A. I think you're right. I didn't know Chekhov's work, so there is no question of influence, but when I saw *Uncle Vanya*, I thought, "He's cool. I like this play. Yes, it's just people sitting around talking, and the drama is made out of the talk, but there are things going on, a lot of stuff is happening." It was good that I saw *Vanya* since I had thought I was doing something unique.

Q. Do you think there's any correlation between how much a play changes as you work on it and the quality of the final version?

A. No. *Joe Turner*, my favorite of my plays, didn't change much. The title changed—it was originally named after one of Romare Bearden's paintings. And originally there was supposed to be a real competition between Seth and Selig over this store that becomes available. That would have been interesting sociologically because Selig was white but Seth had a more secure financial position. But as I worked on the play, I realized that that competition was too much sociology, that what I was trying to do was something else. I wanted to keep the focus on Loomis and Martha. I start with an idea, but as I work, things expand and change. The fun process of writing is figuring out where you're going and how to get there. That's where the real creativity is. I'm just beginning to discover that confidence is one of the most important things that an artist needs. If you don't have that confidence, you simply can't do the work.

Q. Has it been the extraordinary acclaim that your plays have received that has enabled you to become more confident?

A. I'm not sure that's how you gain confidence, through having your work endorsed. You have to know yourself and what you're capable of. It's a matter of exploring inside yourself, of having the courage to face your demons and your confidence that you can, that you'll survive the encounter. All of these things are what makes the art. If you take the easy way out and avoid going deep inside yourself, you get art that is less than it can be. Robert Duncan talks about surety as a line of poetry burned in the hand. Surety enables you to say, "I can get these words to say what I want them to say." I worked for many years as a poet before I acquired that surety.

Q. Does having grappled long and hard once with your inner demons give you more courage to grapple again?

A. The grappling strengthens your spirit and emboldens you for your next journey. You tell yourself, "Oh yeah, I was here before. Get away, you demon—I'll step on you!" Each time you go inside and you find new demons. You're just exploring yourself; it's like walking down the landscape of the self. The process is about making art, and what you choose to write about is totally different from autobiography.

Q. In the past you've mentioned the importance of listening to your characters and trusting them. Can you talk about that a bit?

A. You listen to them, but you never lose consciousness that they are your creations. When I first started writing plays I couldn't write good dialogue because I didn't respect how black people talked. I thought that in order to make art out of it I had to change it, make it into something different. Once I learned to value and respect my characters, I could really hear them. How you talk is how you think; the language describes the one who speaks it. When I have characters, I just let them start talking. The important thing is not to censor them, to trust them to just talk. What they are talking about may not seem to have anything to do with what you as a writer were writing about, but it does. Just let them talk and it will connect, because you as the artist will make it connect. Let's say one guy goes, "Always seemed like I had a halo around my head." Another guy says, "Yeah, I remember the time you come and asked me did you have a halo, talking about did you have a halo." And the first guy says, "You see

I went to everybody, I went and asked my mama. She said, 'You ain't got no halo but you still my angel child.'" You might think, "What are these guys doing standing on the corner talking about having a halo?" You find out that this is a really interesting conversation, that they are saying what they think of themselves. The more my characters talk, the more I find out about them. And the more I find out about them, the more material I have. So I encourage them, I tell them, "Tell me some more." I just write it down, and it starts to make connections. When I was writing *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie just announced that Sutter fell in the well. That was news to me. I had no idea who Sutter was or why he fell in the well.

Q. And yet how central that development turns out to be.

A. At first Sutter was a black man; later that changed. You have to let your characters talk for a while, trust them to do it and have the confidence that later you can shape the material.

Q. What other surprises have your characters had for you?

A. When Loomis cuts himself in *Joe Turner*. Of course everything was pointing toward that, he couldn't have done anything but cut himself, but I didn't see it yet. That particular scene took me about twenty-five minutes to write. I was home working on the play. It was December 1, and to get the play in before the O'Neill deadline I had to put the play in the mail by midnight. I also had to have copies made, and there was three feet of snow on the ground. I went into this bar-restaurant on Grand Avenue in St. Paul, and I had no idea what Martha and Loomis were going to say to each other when they finally got together. Then I just wrote it in one shot. I simply sat down and wrote it. I don't think I changed a word of it. I just wrote to the end of the play and Loomis cut himself. That was the first time that kind of experience happened to me. I was there at the house of God, I was there. When I looked up, I was drenched; my clothes were sticking to me. I looked at my watch and saw that it was twenty-five minutes since I had started. And I had my play, I knew that I had the end of it. Up until that hour I had no idea what was going to happen.

Q. Do you still write mostly in bars and restaurants?

A. I write at home now more than I've done before. I started writing poetry when I was twenty years old, and you cannot sit at home as a twenty-year-old poet. You don't know anything about life. At that time many of my friends were painters, and I'd go visit them. I'd hear them complaining about needing money to buy paint supplies. And I realized how lucky I was because my tools were simple. I saw that I could borrow a pencil or paper, that I could write on napkins or paper bags. I'd walk around with a pen or pencil and paper, and I discovered poems everywhere. I was always prepared to write, and I just continued to do that over the years. Once when I was writing on a napkin, a waitress asked, "Do you write on napkins because it doesn't count?" I had never realized that if I'm writing on a napkin I'm not really writing. I'm telling myself, "This is just a napkin, for God's sake." It frees me up. If I pull out my tablet, I'm saying, "Now I'm writing," and I become much more conscious. She saw it; I didn't recognize it, but she did. That's why I do things like write on napkins. Then I go home and there's another kind of work. Taking the stuff out of notebooks from bars and restaurants, typing it, rewriting. Sometimes I'll copy out one line of dialogue and it will expand into two pages before I go on to the next line.

Q. Has your process changed much over the years?

A. My writing process is more or less the same. But I haven't been able to find a place in Seattle where I'm comfortable writing. I went to this one place, and there must have been around fourteen people sitting around writing. And I thought, "I've found the place where writers come." I sat there and I waited but nothing came. I thought, these other people are taking all the writing stuff in the air, they're taking it all away. Afterwards I made this joke about how my muse got into an argument with someone else's muse and had been put out of the restaurant, but I didn't know it, so I was sitting there waiting with nothing happening.

Q. *Fences* is organized around Troy Maxson, and *Seven Guitars* is a murder mystery told mostly in flashback. Is *The Piano Lesson* a kind of debate between Berniece and Boy Willie?

A. That play sets up the question of whether you can develop a

sense of self-worth by denying the past. Everyone sees the play differently than I do. Because Boy Willie wants to sell the piano, they think he is trying to deny the past. But Berniece cannot even touch the piano—she’s the one who is denying everything, she’s the one trying to run away from the past. He is saying, “I don’t need a piece of wood to tell me who I am, to remind me of my past. If the wood can give me a future, if selling the piano will enable me to buy the land where we were slaves, then I’ve come full circle.” That’s what he is trying to explain to her. If she had a use for the piano like giving music lessons to help pay the rent, then he would be willing to relinquish it to her and say he’s got to get the land a different way. So it’s when Berniece breaks her self-imposed taboo against touching the piano, when she calls on her ancestors, that something radical changes. The ghost Boy Willie was wrestling with upstairs gets off of Boy Willie, and Boy Willie knows something important has happened. When Berniece calls on her ancestors, she’s calling on the ancestors inside herself, not something outside herself—just like Loomis recognizing he can bleed for himself. And when I was writing the play, I thought, if we do this right, people in the audience would call out the names of their ancestors—“Sadie Smith, Cousin James, I want you to help me.” It would take a lot of trust because that name is sacred to the person, but through that the audience would feel like a community. I can see it happening with a black audience, because black people do that in church all the time. The audience calling out names sacred to them would disrupt the play, but the performance would have another kind of intensity.

Q. In your cycle of plays, you’ll have one play per decade of this century, but in your introductory note to *Seven Guitars* you say, “Despite my interest in history, I’ve always been more concerned with culture.” Could you talk a little about history versus culture?

A. I’m more interested in the historical context than in actual history, so for example I changed the actual historical date of a Joe Louis boxing match because it suited my dramatic purposes. I always come back to the quote from James Baldwin about the black tradition, which he defined as “That field of manners and rituals of intercourse that will sustain a man once he’s left his father’s house.”

The primary focus of my work is looking at black culture as it changes and grows in evolving historical contexts.

Q. Bynum in *Joe Turner* and Aunt Ester in *Two Trains Running* are similar characters in reclaiming and holding on to the past. Does the fact that Bynum is a character in a play set in the early years of this century and Aunt Ester is ancient suggest a fear that these kinds of people and certain folk connections are in danger of disappearing?

A. Aunt Ester suggests that your experience is alive, that there is a repository of wisdom and experience a person can tap into.

Q. How about all the characters' talk about her great age and illness?

A. But she doesn't die. She's sick, anybody who is 322 years old is gonna get sick once in a while, but she ain't gonna die. Hambone dies, Malcolm dies, but she doesn't die.

Q. You've talked about your fear of theater becoming an elitist form because of the cost of tickets. Do you have any idea what people who are committed to theater could do to avoid that, or is that coming toward us inevitably?

A. I think it's the nature of the beast. Lights, sets, costumes, actors' salaries, rehearsals—there are enormous costs. But we could have more than one kind of theater; we need more theater on street corners, theater in the schools. Theater should be a natural part of everyone's ordinary life, or else it will become like opera where tickets cost seventy-five dollars. In other parts of the world, in places like Haiti, there is art all over, paintings on walls, on trash cans, in hallways. We need to have theater that is everywhere, like that art.

Q. In addition to plays, you've written poetry, and now you're also writing a novel. Can you talk about the differences between those forms, and whether material comes to you in one form or another?

A. For me, poetry is distilled language. Somewhere I read poetry defined as enlarging the sayable. I like that definition, and I think poetry is the highest form of literature. Writing a novel is like setting

out on this vast, uncharted ocean. I never knew how anyone could do it. But now I see that like any kind of writing, you start with the first word and finish the first page. Then you've got a page and you go on to the next. I realized that writing a novel is like writing a play in that you don't have to know where you're going. You just go and you find out as you go along. You plot your way, whether with a compass or by the stars. I've had this idea for a novel for many years now. I've got about sixty pages; in the past month I've written another ten pages, because the novel is there and it wants to be born. But I can't write the novel, because I've got to finish three plays to complete my cycle. I've got to stay on track. I need to write plays faster; I can't take three or four years to write one. For me the big difference in writing a novel is that a narrator can take an audience to places you can't on a stage.

Q. How about the internal life? Some people think that a novel can explore a character's inner life in a way a play can't.

A. No, I think a play can do that through dialogue—the talk replaces that analysis. What I can do in a novel is take you down this dusty road and have you taste the dust. Suddenly it gets dark and two million crows come flying across, going south. They black out the sun. I can't do that on stage. But in a novel I can make you see those crows and have that mean something.

Q. Playwrights have taken quite varying positions about the importance of production. Edward Albee has taken an extreme position, saying, "A first-rate play exists completely on the page and is never improved by production; it is only proved by production." Do you agree?

A. I agree with that, because the play is there on the page; it provides a road map or a blueprint. I don't write for a production; I write for the page, just like a poem. A play, like a poem, exists on the page even if no one ever reads it aloud. But I don't want to underestimate what a good production with actors embodying the characters offers. But depending on the imagination of the reader, he may get more by reading the play than by seeing a weak production.

Q. What have the productions of your plays not directed by Lloyd Richards been like?

A. I like when directors try different things even though they don't always work. I don't want to see a production that's a damn near duplicate of the original. One production of *Ma Rainey* had a spiritual dancer in it. I personally didn't think it worked, but I didn't mind them trying it out. What I objected to was their listing the spiritual dancer under the list of characters as if that dancer was part of my script. Another production had Hambone after he died come back dressed in a white suit looking in the window of the restaurant. The audience loved seeing this homeless person in an elegant white suit. I wouldn't have done that if I were directing the play, but it worked for the audience.

Q. Have you ever been drawn to directing your own plays?

A. I started my career in the theater as a director, but I've never wanted to direct my own plays. I've always wanted to see what someone else brings to them. Likewise I make very few set notes or costume notes, because I don't want to take away the job of the set designer or costume designer. They should get to do the work they were trained to do.

Q. One playwright has said that drama is made up of sound and silence. Do you see drama that way?

A. No doubt drama is made up of sound and silence, but I see conflict at the center. What you do is set up a character who has certain beliefs and you establish a situation where those beliefs are challenged and that character is forced to examine those beliefs and perhaps change them. That's the kind of dramatic situation which engages an audience.

Q. Then is the conflict primarily internal rather than external, between characters?

A. Internal, right, where the character has to reexamine his whole body of beliefs. The play has to shake the very foundation of his whole system of beliefs and force him to make a choice. Then I think

you as a playwright have accomplished something, because that process also forces the audience to go through the same inner struggle. When I teach my workshops I tell my students that if a guy announces, "I'm going to kill Joe," and there's a knock on the door, the audience is going to want to know if that's Joe and why this guy wants to kill him and whether we would also want to kill him if we were in the same situation. The audience is engaged in the questions.

Q. Tell me about your teaching.

A. I don't really teach; I just on occasion offer little workshops. I've done three-day workshops at a Tucson writers' conference three years in a row. The students all show up with plays or scenes they want to read. I tell them that after the third day if they still want them read, we will read them. But because of all they've learned in those days, they always say, "Give mine back to me, don't read that."

Q. What kind of techniques do you use?

A. After we talk about what a play is, I ask them to invent a painting and then describe it. That word-painting becomes the set description, but they don't know it. You have to trick them.

Q. And does the trick free them up?

A. Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Because they are not conscious of what they are doing. If you tell them to write a description of a set, they get too conscious and can't do it. One guy described a train station in his word-painting and said, "There's a woman wearing a white dress over there and some guys sitting in another part of the station." Then I started asking questions. "Is she coming or going?" "Going." "Where is she going?" "To visit her grandmother." And simply by asking these questions we find out who this person is. Then we'll find out about these guys over in the other part of the station. All of a sudden the student yells, "I can write a play about this!" You've caught him totally by surprise. Until we fleshed out the painting, he didn't even know who the woman was. I ask the students what the people in their paintings say and how they talk, and

gradually they see that characters characterize themselves through their speech. They begin to build character portraits.

Q. This word-painting technique sounds a lot like your writing on a napkin.

A. Yes, I think it's about changing their approach. I tell them anybody can write a play, just like anybody can drive a car. All of us can learn the rules of the road, make the turns, switch on the lights. But there is Mario Andretti out there. I can't make them all into Mario Andretti, obviously. I've never taken a playwriting class or read any books on it. Everything I know comes from my own writing. Those students, many of whom came back all three years, really did become better playwrights; a couple of them even had productions of their plays produced. Then I quit going. After I finish these three plays, I think I'd like to teach and write that novel. But first I've got to finish those three plays. That's first.