

August Wilson's

Seven Guitars

Directed by Gregg T. Daniel

October 17–November 14, 2021



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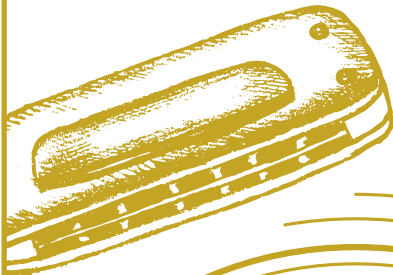


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CHARACTER MAP *SEVEN GUITARS*

CANEWELL

One of Floyd's best friends. He is an excitable and often quick-to-anger harmonica player. He has spent years living in Floyd's shadow and resents Floyd for that. He is in love with Vera.



RUBY

Louise's pregnant niece from Alabama. She does not know who the father of her child is. After flings with two men that ended with one man dead and the other in jail, she travels to Pittsburgh to stay with Louise and carry out her pregnancy.

FLOYD

Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton is a blues singer who has recently been released from a 90-day sentence in a workhouse for vagrancy. He has one hit song, "That's All Right," and dreams of travelling to Chicago with Red Carter, Canewell, and Vera to record a new album.

HEDLEY

A Caribbean immigrant who has a dream of being a "big man" one day. He believes in saints, spirits, and the ghost of Charles (Buddy) Bolden, a famous jazz trumpet player. He dreams of fathering the person who will liberate Black people from systemic oppression.

RED CARTER

One of Floyd's best friends and a new father to a baby boy. He is a drummer and has played with Floyd in the past.



LOUISE

A larger-than-life, no-nonsense woman. She describes herself as being "forty-eight going on sixty." She alleges to have no interest in love and romance but has a strong emotional attachment to Hedley.



VERA

Floyd's ex-girlfriend. While she loves Floyd, she does not trust him implicitly—he has broken her heart before. She lives in the same apartment building as Louise and Hedley and shares a yard with them.

SYNOPSIS

In Pittsburgh's Hill District in 1948, Vera, Louise, Hedley, Canewell, and Red Carter gather in Vera's backyard after the funeral of their friend Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton. Floyd, a talented blues musician, was on the brink of success when he died. The group reminisces about Floyd's life.

Time shifts to before Floyd's death. Floyd has just served a 90-day sentence at a workhouse for vagrancy. Floyd had pawned his guitar to pay for flowers for his mother's grave. He was walking home from visiting the gravesite when he was stopped by police and arrested because he was not carrying any money. Released from the workhouse, Floyd has come to the Hill District to make amends with Vera, his girlfriend, and recruit Canewell (who plays harmonica) and Red Carter (who plays drums) to record an album with him at a studio in Chicago.

The following morning, Canewell stops by the yard with a Goldenseal plant as a gift for Vera to grow in the yard. After dropping off the plant, Canewell goes with Floyd downtown to collect the 30 cents per day Floyd is owed for his 90 days of work in the workhouse.

Later that day, Louise tells Vera about her niece, Ruby, from Alabama is coming up to stay in Pittsburgh. In Alabama, Ruby was involved with two men, one of whom killed the other out of jealousy. Ruby is pregnant and unsure which man is the father of the child.

Floyd and Canewell return from downtown, upset. Floyd was unable to pick up the money he is owed from the workhouse because he did not have the proper documentation. Without that money, he cannot afford to buy his guitar back from the pawnshop—and he needs his guitar to record his new album.

Red Carter stops by to share that his wife has given birth to a baby boy. A boxing match between Joe Louis and Billy Conn comes on the radio and the group all listens as Joe Louis wins. In the midst of celebrations of Joe's victory, Ruby arrives. As Ruby begins to settle in, a rooster from Miss Tillery's yard next door begins to crow. The crow sounds irritate the group—they believe there is no need for a rooster in a big city like Pittsburgh. Hedley goes to Miss Tillery's yard and brings the rooster back. He slits the rooster's throat in front of everyone.

A few days later, Hedley is grilling chicken sandwiches in the yard and singing about Buddy

Bolden. Ruby hears Hedley's song, and asks who Buddy Bolden is. Hedley tells her that Buddy Bolden was a famous trumpet player that his father once saw perform in New Orleans. Hedley describes how his late father came to him in a dream and told him that one day, Buddy Bolden would appear and give Hedley enough money to buy a plantation.

Later that day, Floyd returns with big news: his manager, T.L. Hall, has booked a gig for him, Canewell, and Red Carter to play at the Blue Goose club on Mother's Day. T.L. Hall has promised to meet Floyd at the pawnshop the next morning to help him get his guitar back and pay Floyd an advance for the Blue Goose gig. What is more, Floyd has a date—June 10th—on the books at the recording studio in Chicago for the band to work on their next album.

The next day, Floyd returns from his meeting with T.L. Hall at the pawnshop angry and empty-handed—T.L. Hall never showed up. Red Carter shares that T.L. Hall has been arrested for running an insurance scam, selling over \$50,000 worth of fake insurance policies. Frustrated that his dream might be slipping away, Floyd resolves to get to Chicago and make an album regardless, and he runs off.

After being gone two days without a word, Floyd returns and has just finished burying something in the yard when Vera comes out of the apartment. She agrees to give Floyd a second chance at a relationship and promises to go with him to Chicago.

As everyone gets ready to head to the Blue Goose for the band's performance, Canewell stops by the yard, a newspaper in hand. Miss Tillery's son, Willard Tillery, was shot and killed by police. According to the paper, there was a robbery at the Metro Finance Office, and Willard fired shots at police while he was fleeing the scene. The police returned fire and killed Willard. Police are still searching for two other men they believe were involved.

Later that evening, Floyd, Vera, Louise, and Canewell come back from the Blue Goose, elated—the gig was a hit. Canewell notices the roots of the Goldenseal plant he gave Vera are uncovered, and offers to re-plant it for her so the roots do not dry out. As Canewell re-digs the hole for the plant, he finds a handkerchief with \$1200 cash. Floyd claims the money is his and the two begin to fight over it. Canewell suddenly realizes that Floyd was one of the two men involved in the robbery who got away. Canewell hands Floyd the money and leaves.

SYNOPSIS CONTINUED...

Floyd is counting the cash as Hedley returns. Hedley, drunk, mistakes Floyd for Buddy Bolden, who he thinks has finally come to give him his father's money to buy a plantation. When Floyd refuses to give Hedley the cash, Hedley cuts Floyd's throat.

Time shifts back to the gathering after Floyd's funeral. Police do not have any leads on who may have killed Floyd. Alone in the yard with Canewell, Hedley shows Canewell the wad of cash he got from "Buddy Bolden"—the same cash Canewell found in the ground the night Floyd was killed. ♦

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: AUGUST WILSON



August Wilson, 2003. Photo from The Estate of August Wilson

August Wilson

was born on April 27, 1945, in the Hill District community of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as Frederick August Kittel, Jr. to Daisy Wilson, a cleaning lady, and Frederick

August Kittle, a German immigrant and baker. Wilson's father was absent for most of his life, leaving Daisy Wilson to raise August and his six siblings in a two-room apartment.

In 1958, Daisy Wilson married David Bedford. Growing up, Wilson had a complex experience with race. His mother, Daisy, was black, his father, Frederick Kittle, was white, and David Bedford, his stepfather, was black. The complexity of Wilson's experience with race is expressed in many of his plays.

While Wilson was a bright and creative student, he found school life difficult. In 1959, Wilson attended three different schools. He began high school at Central Catholic High School, a predominantly white, private school. There, he was the victim of race-based bullying so extreme that he transferred to Connelly Trade school. However, Wilson quickly grew bored at Connelly Trade school and transferred once more to Gladstone High School. There, he was accused of plagiarizing a paper he had written, and he secretly dropped out of school altogether at the age of 15.

After leaving school, Wilson continued to educate himself—he would go to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh during school hours to study while his mother thought he was at school. During his self-education, he read the works of Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, and he learned to love the blues and Bessie Smith's voice. During this time, he began to spend time in restaurants and barbershops around the Hill District simply to listen to the residents' voices and stories. Wilson would later draw on these voices and stories as inspiration for his writing.

In 1962, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Army. However, he only served for one year. After leaving the Army, he began to work a variety of odd jobs while he wrote poetry. By the late 1960s, Wilson had officially adopted the name August Wilson in honor of his mother, and he became involved in the Black Arts Movement. During this time, he collaborated with poets, artists, and educators and became the co-founder of the Black

Horizon Theater in Pittsburgh. Wilson served as the resident director of the theater company until the mid-1970s, when Black Horizon Theater dissolved. Before the company dissolved, Wilson met Brenda Burton, his first wife. In 1970, they married, and Wilson's first daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson, was born.

In 1978, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota. There, Wilson began to focus on playwriting. In 1981, he married Judy Oliver, his second wife. One year later, he was accepted to the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut in 1982. During this conference, Wilson met Lloyd Richards, the dean of the Yale University School of Drama and the artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre. Lloyd Richards was a legend in the theatrical world, especially in Black theater. Richards became a mentor for Wilson and eventually directed Wilson's first six Broadway productions. The same year, Wilson's play, *Jitney*, premiered at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh as the first play in his American Century Cycle, a 10-play cycle depicting the Black American experience throughout each decade in the 20th century.

In 1984, Wilson's play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the second play in Wilson's American Century Cycle, premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre to great critical acclaim. The production moved to Broadway and earned Wilson his first New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Throughout the 1980s to the early 2000s, Wilson continued to write plays for his American Century Cycle. During this time, he won two Pulitzer Prizes for his writing: one for *Fences* in 1987, and one for *The Piano Lesson* in 1990.

In 1990, Wilson's marriage to Judy Oliver ended, and Wilson moved to Seattle, Washington. There, he met Constanza Romero, a costume designer, and the two married in 1994. Three years later, Wilson's second daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, was born.

In June 2005, Wilson was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer, and he died a few months later on October 2 in Seattle. His funeral service was held in Pittsburgh, and he is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, not far from his mother, Daisy. ♦

Edited from:

"August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 29 Feb. 2016: www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-augustwilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/.

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TIMELINE OF **AUGUST WILSON'S LIFE**

1945

August Wilson is born on April 27th in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His given name is Frederick August Kittel, Jr. after his father, Frederick August Kittel, Sr. He is the fourth of seven children in his family, and the oldest son. Frederick August Kittel, Sr. is absent for most of Wilson's life.

1959

Wilson begins his first year of high school at a predominantly white private school. After enduring race-based bullying, he transfers schools twice and ultimately ends up at Gladstone High School.

1960

At Gladstone High School, Wilson is accused of plagiarizing a paper on Napoleon Bonaparte, and he decides to secretly drop out of school. He begins to spend his days at the Carnegie Library reading and teaching himself.

1963–1964

Wilson works a number of odd jobs while he begins to write poetry. He buys his first typewriter.

1965

Frederick August Kittel, Sr. dies, and Frederick August Kittel, Jr. changes his name to August Wilson in honor of his mother.

1968

Wilson co-founds the Black Horizon Theater with colleagues. He becomes the company's self-taught resident director.

1969

Wilson marries Brenda Burton, his first wife—the two divorce in 1972.

1976

Wilson's first play, *The Homecoming*, is produced at Kuntu Repertory Theater in Pittsburgh.

1981

Wilson marries Judy Oliver, a social worker.

1982

Jitney, the first play written in August Wilson's American Century Cycle, premieres at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh. The same year, Wilson is accepted into the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. There, he meets Lloyd Richards, and the two forge a lasting friendship.

1983

Wilson's mother, Daisy Wilson, dies.

1984

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom premieres at the Yale Repertory Theatre and transfers to Broadway. Wilson wins his first New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the play.

1987

Fences opens on Broadway. With this production, Wilson wins a New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his first Pulitzer Prize.

1990

The Piano Lesson opens on Broadway. This production earns Wilson a New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize. Wilson is named the 1990 Pittsburgher of the Year by Pittsburgh Magazine. Wilson and Judy Oliver divorce, and Wilson moves to Seattle, Washington.

1994

Wilson marries Costanza Romero, a costume designer.

1995

Wilson writes *Seven Guitars*

1996

Wilson writes the controversial essay, "The Ground on Which I Stand," about Black cultural separatism. The same year, *Seven Guitars* opens on Broadway and wins the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play.

1997

Wilson's second daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, is born.

1999

The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh awards Wilson with a high school diploma, the only diploma the institution has ever given.

2005

Radio Golf premieres at Yale Repertory Theatre—it is the last play in Wilson's American Century Cycle. In June, Wilson is diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. He dies on October 2 in Seattle, Washington.

Edited from:

"August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 29 Feb. 2016, www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-augustwilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/.

AUGUST WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE: THE HISTORY OF CYCLE PLAYS

After the Roman Empire fell in the 600s CE, theatre all but disappeared. What was once a celebrated and communal artform in ancient Greek and Roman societies, theatrical storytelling largely fell out of practice. However, around the year 1000 CE, theatre started to make a comeback. However, the artform had changed. No longer was theatre a tool for social commentary and satire or for exploring great tragedy as it had been in ancient Greece and Rome. Instead, theatre became a tool to express stories based in Christianity.

During this time, churches began to produce liturgical dramas, short dramatic performances of biblical stories. The number of these short dramas grew until eventually, they were organized into what is known as a cycle, covering all biblical stories from creation to the Last Judgment. These cycles were known as Mystery Cycles and were made up of up to 50 short plays which were typically performed over two-or-three-day periods.

AUGUST WILSON'S CYCLE

Over the course of his playwriting career, August Wilson wrote his own cycle of ten plays collectively called the "American Century Cycle." In his cycle, Wilson sets each of his ten plays in a different 20th Century decade. The result is a chronicle of the complexities of the changing social and historical landscape of the Black American experience over the course of 100 years. The plays in Wilson's cycle, except *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, are set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—the area of Pittsburgh where Wilson grew up.

When he began writing his plays, Wilson did not have a large-scale cycle in mind. In fact, he wrote the plays out of order—Wilson's first play, *Jitney*, is set in the 1970s, his second is set in the 1920s, and his third in the 1950s. Eventually, Wilson realized that he could create a cycle out of his plays. While the ten plays in his cycle all serve a greater narrative spanning 100 years, there is no single thread that runs through all ten of the plays.

Instead, the cycle tells the story of a neighborhood through time—the changes in the community that inhabits the neighborhood, and the challenges the individuals in that community face. In his cycle, Wilson highlights characters who typically go unnoticed in society—an elderly woman in *Gem of the Ocean*, a garbage man in *Fences*—giving voice to otherwise invisible groups. The plays in his cycle also tend to feature spiritual and supernatural elements of African and African American cultures set against the gritty realism of a city plagued by inequality. In an essay published in *The New York Times* in 2000, Wilson wrote this about his work: "I wanted to place this culture on stage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us all in areas of human life and endeavor and through profound movements of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves."

Wilson's American Century Cycle Includes:

- Gem of the Ocean* (written in 2003) set in 1904
- Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (written in 1986) set in 1911
- Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (written in 1984) set in 1927
- The Piano Lesson* (written in 1989) set in 1937
- Seven Guitars* (written in 1995) set in 1948
- Fences* (written in 1985) set in 1957
- Two Trains Running* (written in 1990) set in 1969
- Jitney* (written in 1982) set in 1977
- King Hedley II* (written in 2001) set in 1985
- Radio Golf* (written in 2005) set in 1997

Edited from:

"10 Plays, 100 Years - Playwright August Wilson Reveals the History of a Community (From the Playbill)." Marin Theatre Company, www.marintheatre.org/productions/fences/fences-august-wilsons-century-cycle.

THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The Black Arts Movement is often seen as the artistic and cultural sister movement of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and early 1970s. As Civil Rights activists advocated for social justice and racial equality in the United States, artists responded to the social injustices they saw on a daily basis through painting, poetry, literature, film, and theatre. Artists and academics organized to create works that challenged the unequal social and racial structures in the United States and addressed issues of Black identity and Black liberation.

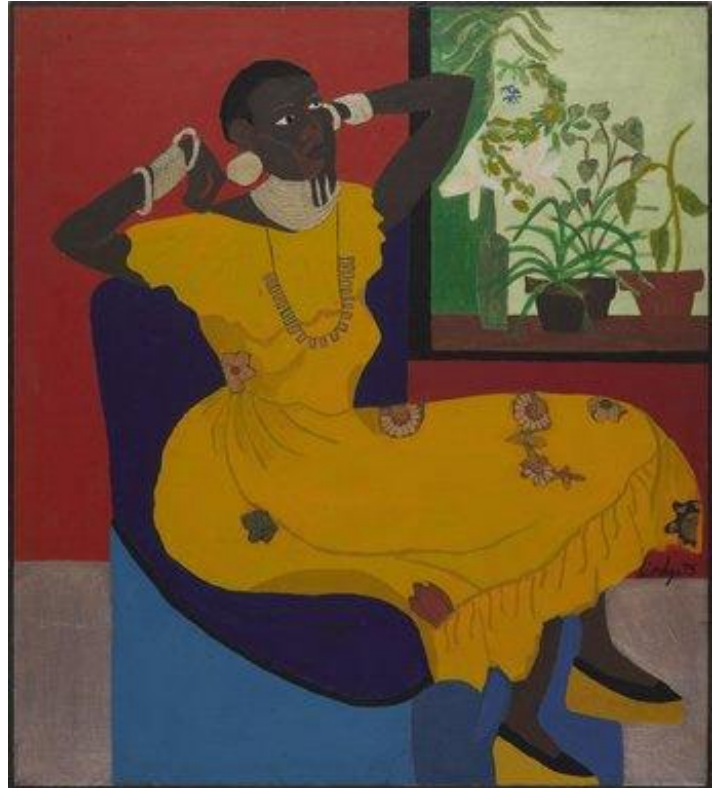
The movement was originally spurred by the assassination of Malcolm X, a prolific Civil Rights activist and staunch supporter of Black Nationalism. As a Black Nationalist, Malcolm X promoted the celebration of Black identity and ancestry as separate from a larger American identity. He fought against the assimilation of Black identity into American society. His death deeply affected those who were proponents of Black Nationalism. Malcolm X's assassination prompted the writer LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) to create the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem New York. The establishment of this theatre company is considered the beginning of the Black Arts Movement.

The concept of community is at the core of Black Arts Movement works. Art that emerged as part of the Black Arts Movement directly addressed the needs and aspirations of Black America. In addressing these needs, the Black Arts Movement art radically reorganized the symbols, myths, and icons that were popular in mainstream American culture by creating and expressing a separate set of symbols, myths, and icons. In creating its own, separate artistic symbolism and narratives, Black Arts Movement artists explored and expressed a cultural identity distinct from the larger American cultural identity—one that celebrated ideals and beauty centered on Black culture and experiences. The aesthetic created through these new symbols, myths, and narratives became concerned with the ethical implications of the relationship between an oppressor and those oppressed. In examining the oppressor-oppressed relationship, the Black Arts Movement art and artists began to pose the following questions:

Whose vision of the world is more meaningful?

What is truth?

Who is able to express that truth?



“Empress Akweke” by Dindga McCannon, 1975

Who should express that truth?

In exploring and answering these questions, the Black Arts Movement sought to fulfill what civil rights activist and sociologist W.E.B. DuBois called for creating art that is “about us,” “by us,” “for us,” and “near us.”

AUGUST WILSON AND THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The Black Arts Movement reached its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s when it produced some of the most radical music, art, drama, and poetry. It was in this creative and social environment that August Wilson began to develop his distinct voice as a poet, writer, and theater practitioner. Wilson describes his greatest sources of inspiration as the “Four Bs”:

1. Jorge Luis Borges, a poet and key literary figure in the genre of magical realism.
2. Blues music.
3. Romare Bearden, an African American artist who created works depicting daily African American life through oil paint, printed images, and collage.
4. Amiri Baraka, a playwright, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, who created the Black Arts Repertory

THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT CONTINUED...

Theatre in Harlem, and who is credited with sparking the start of the Black Arts movement.

With these four sources of inspiration in mind, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizon Theater with fellow playwright Rob Penny. Wilson describes the work he did with the Black Horizon Theatre as work based on the “idea of using the theater to politicize the community or, as we said in those days, to raise the consciousness of the people”—an idea that has its roots in the community-centric and political core of the Black Arts Movement.

Beyond his work with Black Horizon Theater, Wilson became a prominent public proponent of Black American self-determination. He made his views about self-determination clear in a televised debate about colorblind casting during which he delivered an address titled “The Ground on Which I Stand.” In his address, Wilson calls for Black artists to define themselves through their own art rather than to participate in a work of art originally created by and for another group: “I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth. As there is no idea that cannot be contained by Black life, these men and women found themselves to be sufficient and secure in their art and their instruction.” ♦

Edited from:

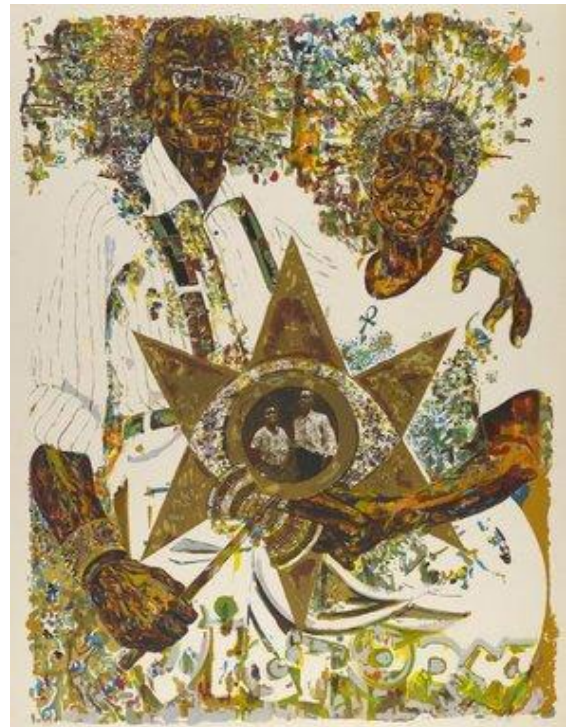
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Neal, Larry. “The Black Arts Movement.” *The Drama Review*: Summer 1968, vol. 12, no. 4, 1968, p. 28., doi:10.2307/1144377.



“Revolutionary (Angela Davis)” by Wadsworth A. Jarrell, 1971



“Victory in the Valley of Eshu” by Jeff Donaldson, 1971

PITTSBURGH IN 1948: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *SEVEN GUITARS*

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania holds an important role in transportation and industrialization in American history. Situated at the point where the Ohio, Allegheny, and Monongahela rivers intersect, Pittsburgh became known as the “Gateway to the West”. Beyond its proximity to easily navigable rivers, Pittsburgh is situated on land rich with natural resources—coal, timber, natural gas, and limestone. The abundance of natural resources combined with the accessibility of waterways helped make Pittsburgh an industrial hub.

Seven Guitars is set in Pittsburgh’s Hill District—the 1.8 square mile Pittsburgh neighborhood where August Wilson was born. Hailed as “the crossroads of the world,” the Hill District has a rich cultural and artistic history. The Hill was first settled at the end of the 18th century by middle-class, Black Americans freed in the wake of the Revolutionary War. By the early 20th century, the Hill District—and Pittsburgh, as a whole—started to see major shifts in population demographics. From 1910 to 1930 the Hill District saw an influx of new Black residents. As the United States entered World War I, demand for labor at Pittsburgh’s steel mills skyrocketed. This demand for labor contributed to the Great Migration of Black Americans from the south to northern cities, like Pittsburgh, which promised greater job opportunities and more prosperity for Black Americans than southern cities.

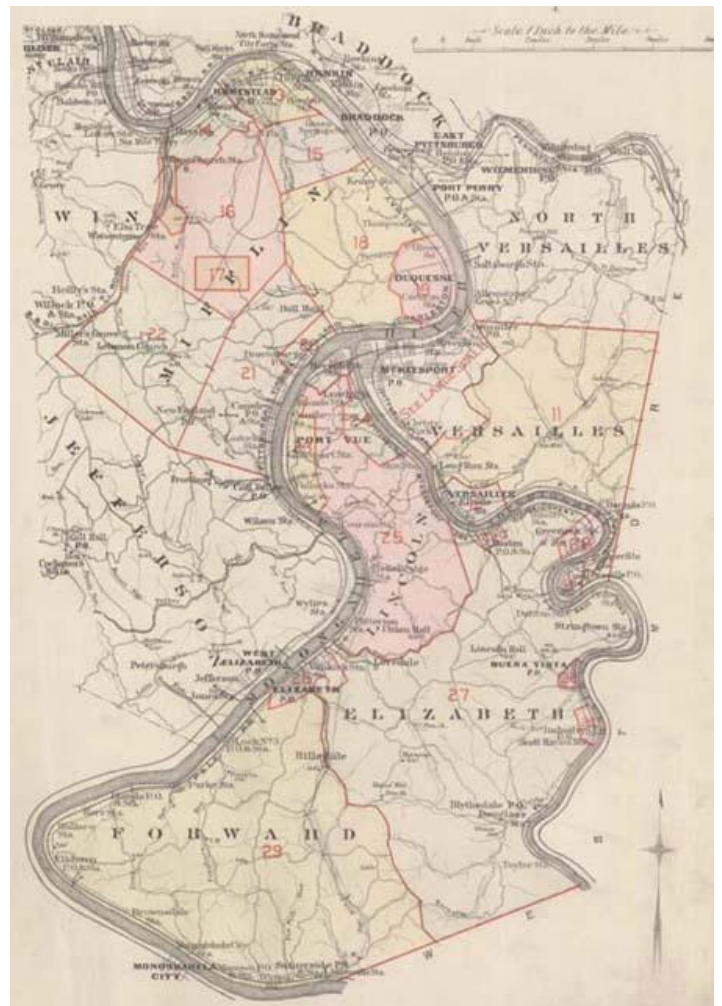
From the 1930s through the 1950s, music, art, and culture began to thrive in the Hill District. During this time, the Hill District was home to Pittsburgh’s first Black-run radio station, *The Pittsburgh Courier* (a prominent weekly Black-owned newspaper), and the Pittsburgh Crawfords, a popular all-Black baseball team. Jazz clubs became staple institutions in the Hill District’s vibrant music scene and served as launching pads for emerging jazz musicians interested in stepping into new music markets.

Despite the booming cultural and artistic landscape of the Hill District and Pittsburgh’s growing job market, Black Americans continued to suffer from a lack of social infrastructure and systemically racist laws and policies. During this time, poverty disproportionately affected Pittsburgh’s Black community, and racial segregation practices were still in place.

JIM CROW ERA

On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued an Emancipation Proclamation to free all enslaved people in both the Union and the Confederacy. However, as the Confederacy did not recognize Abraham Lincoln as their president, they did not adhere to his proclamation. It was not until the Civil War ended in 1865 that former Confederate states rejoined the United States and recognized the Emancipation Proclamation as legitimate. It was then that slavery officially ended in the United States.

However, once slavery ended and the country entered a period of reconstruction following the war, new, extremely restrictive and racially biased laws began to emerge throughout the United States.



“1900, Index Map 2 - Real estate plat-book of the south-eastern vicinity of Pittsburgh” by G.M. Hopkins & Co

PITTSBURGH IN 1948: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *SEVEN GUITARS* CONTINUED...

These laws, known as Jim Crow Laws, targeted the rights of Black Americans. Even the name “Jim Crow” has roots in racism as “Jim Crow” was the name of a minstrel show which featured a character in blackface.

These laws began as strict statutes detailing when, where, and how freed slaves could work and how much they could be compensated. These laws also controlled how Black citizens could own property and travel. These laws essentially became a legal way in which southern states could force Black citizens into indentured servitude.

Over time, these laws evolved. In 1896 in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the United States Supreme Court confirmed that racial segregation was constitutional under the “separate but equal” doctrine. This ruling ensured the survival and prevalence of Jim Crow laws throughout the next half-century and beyond.

After this ruling in the South, lawmakers began to draw physical lines through public spaces indicating where people of color could and could not go. Signs reading “Whites Only” hung over stores and restaurants.

Northern states, on the surface, were seen as more tolerant and accepting of Black Americans. However, they were not immune to these racist laws. While there were no physical lines drawn through public spaces, restrictive housing laws perpetuated segregation by limiting where Black families could live. Northern states also began to enforce laws against loitering and disorderly conduct disproportionately in Black communities. What is more, many northern states began to alter what was considered to be public space. Wealthy and white individuals began to buy what were once public parks and beaches and began to limit who could access these spaces.



A Black American man drinking at a water cooler for “colored” people at a streetcar terminal in Oklahoma City in 1939.

Jim Crow laws continued to maintain racial segregation and target Black American rights for nearly one hundred years. It was not until the Voting Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in any public space, that Jim Crow laws were abolished.

This is the social, cultural, and historical backdrop to August Wilson’s *Seven Guitars*. ♦

Edited from:

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Editors, History.com. “Plessy v. Ferguson.” History.com, A&E Television Networks, 29 Oct. 2009, www.history.com/topics/black-history/plessy-vferguson

THE HISTORY OF **BLUES** MUSIC

“The blues are the roots and the other musics are the fruits. It’s better keeping the roots alive, because it means better fruits from now on. The blues are the roots of all American music. As long as American music survives, so will the blues.” –Willie Dixon

Blues music originated before the Civil War in the southern United States. As they worked in the fields, slaves turned to chants, hollers, work songs, and spirituals for two primary functions. First, chants and songs were practical communication tools that allowed slaves to communicate logistical information across large spaces—and even with slaves at neighboring plantations. Second, music was one of the safest ways for slaves to express their thoughts and emotions during this time of severe oppression. Chants and songs gave slaves to vent frustration, cope with suffering, and celebrate victories during the 246 years of active slavery in the United States (1619-1865), and the years of tenant farming and sharecropping that followed during Reconstruction.

These songs and chants echoed key elements of West African music traditions that enslaved African men, women, and children brought with them when they were taken from their home and brought to the United States during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. These musical elements include:

Pentatonic scales (musical scales with five notes per octave)

Call-and-response components

Improvisation

Complex, syncopated rhythms

Post-Civil War, the blues began to spread from the rural south to major metropolitan areas like New Orleans and Memphis, eventually making its way to Pittsburgh and Chicago via travelling performers. Early blues performances were predominantly one-man shows that featured vocals and a sliding guitar or harmonica. The spread was slow, and throughout the late 19th century, the blues was almost exclusively considered a form of rural folk music and was typically only performed by Black musicians for Black audiences. It was not until the early 20th century when the blues began to reach more northern metropolitan areas that the genre began to make its way more into the mainstream music scene.

While the blues spread, the themes and sound of the songs began to shift to reflect new circumstances. Blues artists began to swap out acoustic guitars for electric. Blues bands began to form and the blues sound began to fill out with drums, stand-up bass, and piano in addition to guitar and harmonica. Major players in this shift included W.C. Handy (the “father” of blues and the first person to transcribe a blues

song onto sheet music), Mamie Smith (who, in 1920, became the first singer to record a blues song), Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, Howlin’ Wolf, Jimmy Reed, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey (the “mother” of the blues). Chicago became the hub for the new, modern iteration of the blues, and it is where Floyd dreams of returning to record a new blues album with Red

Carter and Canewell in *Seven Guitars*.

Pittsburgh, where *Seven Guitars* is set, became home to a regional iteration of the blues called Boogie Woogie. Pianist Pine Top Smith is credited as the creator of the Boogie Woogie, a subset of blues characterized by a heavily percussive and syncopated style of blues piano. Beyond Boogie Woogie, the blues became quite popular in Pittsburgh in the late 1920s. The heart of Pittsburgh’s blues scene was the Hill District, which was considered a launchpad for emerging East Coast blues artists.

The influence of the blues on the popular American music canon is profound—the blues is often considered the root of all popular Western music styles. While jazz and the blues branched off from each other early on and the two can be considered like musical brothers now, the blues led directly to the development of musical genres such as R&B, rock and roll, bluegrass, and even country. ♦

Edited from:

<https://www.musical-u.com/learn/blues-music/#> and <https://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/essaysblues.html>



Images clockwise left to right: Lead Belly with a melodeon c. 1942, Location unknown, unknown photographer. Buddy Bolden circa 1905, unknown photographer. The Bolden band around 1905 (top: Jimmy Johnson, bass; Bolden, cornet; Willy Cornish, valve trombone; Willy Warner, clarinet; bottom: Brock Mumford, guitar; Frank Lewis, clarinet)

THEMES

AGENCY, OPPORTUNITY, AND DREAMS

“I had seven ways to go. They cut that down to six. I say let me try one of them six. They cut it down to five. Everytime I push... they pull. They cut it down to four. I say what’s the matter? Everything can’t go wrong all the time. They cut it down to three. I say three is better than two I really don’t need but one. They cut it down to two [...] I am going to Chicago. I don’t want to live my life without. Everybody I know live without. I don’t want to do that. I want to live with [...] Floyd Barton is gonna make his record. Floyd Barton is going to Chicago”—Floyd, Act 2, Scene 3

Throughout the play, we see all seven characters face constant social, legal, and financial barriers in pursuit of their respective dreams. Floyd, particularly, struggles against these barriers as he works to make his dream a reality.

On the brink of major success, and with one record already a local hit, Floyd experiences two significant setbacks: he has to pawn his guitar so that he can pay for flowers to put at his mother’s gravesite, and he is arrested and given a 90-day sentence at a workhouse for vagrancy. Once out of the workhouse, Floyd is still determined to take ownership of his life and make new music. In the days after his release, things start to look up for him in that regard. He hears that a studio in Chicago is interested in producing a new record with him. What is more, his manager T.L. Hall has booked a big gig for Floyd, Red Carter, and Canewell at the Blue Goose—one that promises to pay well enough so that Floyd can buy back his guitar from the pawnshop and buy his mother a marker for her grave. However, the day Floyd is set to meet with his manager to get an advance for the gig and to buy back his guitar, T.L. Hall is arrested for running an insurance policy scam. Without the advance for the Blue Goose concert and without the means to buy back his guitar—which he needs for the Blue Goose concert and to record a new album in Chicago—Floyd sees his dream of making it big as a blues artist begin to slip away once more. After realizing that he cannot trust others like T.L. Hall to help him take the next steps towards his dream, he begins to take matters into his own hands—he attempts to take agency in a world where because of his socio-economic status and race, he has almost none. He does this by robbing the Metro Finance Offices with Willard Tillery. The robbery leaves Willard dead, shot by

police. However, with the stolen money, Floyd is able to buy back his guitar, buy a new dress for Vera, and buy two Greyhound tickets to Chicago.

Floyd consistently equates Chicago to paradise. A city of opportunity, where a recording studio wants to work with him to make new music—a city of hope:

“Chicago is what you make it. It got some quiet parts. It got whatever you want. That’s why everybody go there. That’s why I’m going there. I’m going there to take advantage of the opportunity.”—Floyd Act 2, Scene 3

However, Floyd never makes it to Chicago. When Hedley sees Floyd counting the cash stolen from the Metro Finance Offices, Hedley mistakes Floyd for Buddy Bolden—who Hedley believes has come to fulfill a prophecy and give him the money to buy a plantation—and kills him.

LEGACY

In *Seven Guitars*, characters navigate the fine line between honoring the legacies of their parents and establishing their own legacies they wish to leave behind. Canewell carries his grandfather’s legacy in his name. His grandfather used to cut sugar cane in Louisiana, and was once told that he could “cane well.” Floyd honors his mother’s legacy by adorning her gravesite with flowers and designing a headstone to memorialize her life. On the other hand, Floyd also relentlessly works to establish his legacy as an important blues figure.

As new and soon-to-be parents, Red Carter and Ruby are particularly aware of how their actions now may influence the legacy they will leave with their children. Fatherhood has made Red Carter more cautious about his financial decisions. He has given up drumming and is starting to turn his attention to more stable sources of income. Ruby, on the other hand, is expecting a child. However, she does not definitively know whether the father is Leroy or Elmore—two men she dated when she lived in Alabama, one of whom shot and killed the other. Instead of waiting to find out the father, Ruby consciously decides that she is going to tell Hedley that he is the child’s father and that she is going to name the child after him. Hedley dreams of being the father to the person who will tear down the systems in place in 1948 to oppress Black

THEMES CONTINUED...

Americans:

“Somebody have to be the father of the man to lead the black man out of bondage. Marcus Garvey have a father. Maybe if I could not be like Marcus Garvey then I could be the father of someone who would not bow down to the white man. Maybe I could be the father of the messiah.”—Hedley Act 2, Scene 1

In naming Hedley as the father of her child, Ruby ensures that Hedley’s dream of establishing a legacy as the father of a person who takes a prominent role in dismantling systemic oppression and white supremacy has a chance at becoming reality.

DIGNITY

Each character in *Seven Guitars* struggles to maintain a sense of dignity in an oppressive world. Vera and Louise actively work to assert their dignity and their independence in a world where a woman’s worth was often determined by what she could offer to a man. Vera, particularly, actively works to draw emotional boundaries and maintain her dignity when Floyd, who was unfaithful to her, returns from the workhouse and asks her to go to Chicago with him. She ultimately decides to go with Floyd, but on her own terms—she purchases a one-way Greyhound ticket from Chicago back to Pittsburgh, which she plans to hold onto should Floyd act unfaithfully again.

Sick with tuberculosis, Hedley receives a letter from the Board of Health instructing him to report to a sanitarium later in the week for testing. This letter upsets Hedley—he sees going to the sanitarium as losing his ability to control his own life, as losing his dignity. The idea of going to the sanitarium and losing his dignity is so upsetting to Hedley that he purchases a machete and keeps watch in the yard all night, ready to attack anyone who might come to take him to the hospital.

Floyd has a complicated relationship with dignity, especially as it relates to success and the law. In charging him with vagrancy for walking in the city without any money, the justice system has inherently charged Floyd with worthlessness. However, while Floyd is in prison, his song “That’s All Right,” becomes a hit. So while the justice system has stripped him of dignity in one sense, the success of “That’s All Right” simultaneously becomes something for which others look up to him.

Later, when Canewell discovers that Floyd was one of the robbers who escaped from the Metro Finance Offices, Floyd owns his part in the theft. In fact, it is somewhat of a source of pride for him—with the money he took, he is now able to go to Chicago and make his next record. For him, the ends of the robbery justified the means. In fact, it is almost as if the robbery fuels Floyd’s own sense of dignity. He saw an opportunity in the robbery to reclaim control of his life, and he took it. ♦

THE INJUSTICE SYSTEM: THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF SEVEN GUITARS

August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* takes place 73 years ago, in an era in which Jim Crow laws blatantly restricted the rights of Black American citizens across the country. We hear about the effects of these laws in Wilson's play. On the most extreme end of the spectrum, we hear about inconsistent enforcement of vagrancy laws. Floyd was arrested under a vagrancy charge for not having any money as he was walking home from his mother's grave, while Red Carter was arrested and charged with vagrancy for having what the police deemed as too much money. On a more subtle but equally harmful end of the spectrum, we hear about how Floyd, Canewell, and Red Carter have consistently been underpaid—or not paid at all—for their music while their manager and the recording studio have taken large cuts. The disparities the Black characters in *Seven Guitars* face are rooted in oppressive legal and social systems that date back to the beginnings of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (circa 1619), the legacies of which continue to disproportionately target Black Americans today.

In 1896, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that it is Constitutional to



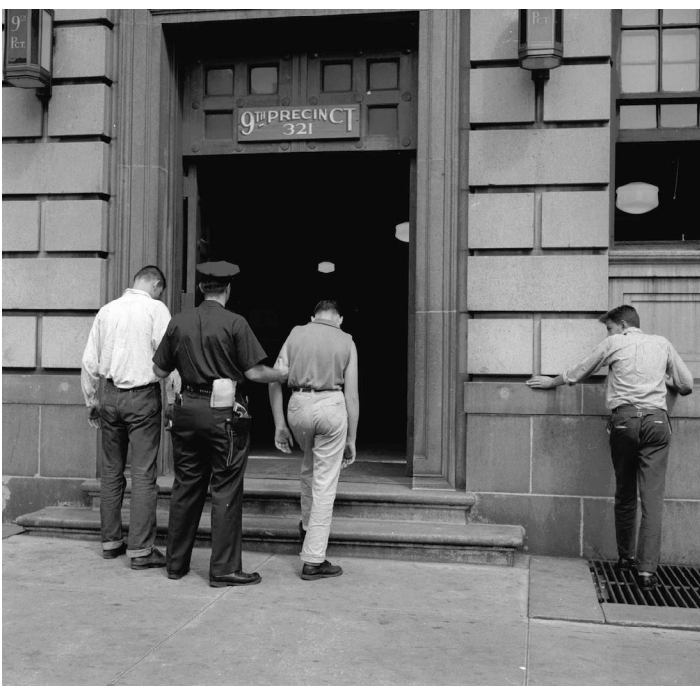
Library of Congress Prints & Photographs
Division Original Author: Unknown Created: 1866

enforce and maintain racially segregated, “separate but equal” spaces, it inherently legally justified racially discriminatory behavior and policy. The discriminatory behavior that the Supreme Court’s 1896 decision validated became alarmingly normal and widespread throughout the country and went legally unquestioned for the next half-century.

While considerable progress has since been made in American society in regard to reforming longstanding and deeply rooted racially discriminatory laws and behavior, racial inequity is still widespread in contemporary society. Outright acts of discrimination are no longer justifiable by written law and are, in some respects, less tolerated; however, racial discrimination remains prevalent on a systemic level. The system that plays perhaps the largest role in the perpetuation of racial inequality in the country is the justice system.

The United States’ criminal justice system is the largest in the world. In 2015, 2.2 million individuals were incarcerated in federal, state, or local prisons and jails, accounting for nearly 22% of all prisoners in the world. Within the United States’ massive correctional and criminal justice system, there is significant racial disparity. For example, Black Americans are more likely than white Americans to be arrested. Once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted. Once convicted, they are more likely to receive lengthy prison sentences. In fact, Black American adults are nearly six times as likely to be incarcerated than white adults.

This disparity has its roots, in part, in how the criminal justice system is structured to favor those with great financial means over people of lower socio-economic status. In his book, *No Equal Justice*,



circa 1955: Two members of a teenage street gang are taken into the 9th Precinct police station after their arrest in New York City. Carl Purcell—Getty Images

THE INJUSTICE SYSTEM: **THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF SEVEN GUITARS** CONTINUED...

former Georgetown Law Professor David Cole states:

“These double standards are not, of course, explicit; on the face of it, the criminal law is color-blind and classblind. But in a sense, this only makes the problem worse. The rhetoric of the criminal justice system sends the message that our society carefully protects everyone’s constitutional rights, but in practice the rules assure that law enforcement prerogatives will generally prevail over the rights of minorities and the poor. By affording criminal suspects substantial constitutional rights in theory, the Supreme Court validates the results of the criminal justice system as fair. That formal fairness obscures the systemic concerns that ought to be raised by the fact that the prison population is overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately Black.”

One of the ways the justice system targeted Black Americans post-Civil War was in the establishment of vagrancy laws. Vagrancy laws criminalized unemployment, homelessness, poverty, loitering (being in a public place without a distinct purpose), and suspicious activity. The breadth and vagueness of these laws essentially allowed law enforcement officers to target anyone who might appear “out of place.” In this regard, vagrancy laws served as ubiquitous tools for maintaining a class and race-based hierarchy in American society. The vagueness of these laws also allowed for the enforcement and application of them to adapt to any new perceived threats to the social fabric at different times and in different places.

While vagrancy laws were deemed unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972, they too have been redesigned in the years since the SCOTUS ruling. Today, we see the legacy of vagrancy laws at play in profiling practices, traffic stops, and 911 calls about suspicious behavior—all of which disproportionately target Black Americans.

Viewing the justice system through this critical lens, it becomes clear that our current justice system is steeped in practices and policies that mirror those



SEATTLE, WA - JUNE 14: Black Lives Matter protesters rally at Westlake Park before marching through the downtown area on June 14, 2020 in Seattle, United States. Black Lives Matter events continue daily in the Seattle area in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. (Photo by David Ryder/Getty Images)

of the Jim Crow era—practices and policies that inherently target and limit Black citizens’ rights. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, articulates the archaic roots of the contemporary U.S. legal system’s practice of incarceration of Black Americans on a mass scale:

“As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.” ♦

Edited from:

“Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System.” The Sentencing Project, www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities, and

<https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-259>

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR: **GREGG T. DANIEL**

What attracted you to *Seven Guitars*?

There are a number of entry points into *Seven Guitars* which attracted me. Of course, the use of music is critically important. Our protagonist, Floyd “School Boy” Barton is a Blues musician. The Blues defines and consumes Floyd’s life, his fiercest desire is to become a successful Blues musician. Systemic racism confronts him at every turn, yet Floyd dares to dream big and prays luck will turn his way sooner or later. The irony of the play is Floyd’s redemption comes in an entirely unexpected and tragic way. The historical nature of the play attracts me. I’m fascinated by American stories which remind us of our past, of the places we’ve been as a society, and where we might be headed. August Wilson believed that unless we embrace the past with all its pain and beauty, we can’t determine our present or create our future. *Seven Guitars* takes place in 1948. Looking at what the world was like during that era fascinates me.

What is your role as the director? How did you begin your process for directing this show?

My role as a director is to create a vision of the play guided by the playwright’s words and my instincts. I begin by asking myself, what are the questions that lie at the heart of the play? How do I address them? What are their importance to us? My vision for the production may not be the same vision other directors have had for the material, it is uniquely mine. What’s exciting about any vision is to allow it to be influenced by the designers, dramaturg, and actors gathered to mount the play. It’s my hope that once it is shared, it will inspire our production team and ultimately our audience. I don’t see my job as having all the answers, my job is to ask the right questions, questions which will provide a foundation for exploration while encouraging all our talented artists to offer their creativity.

Ever since I was young, I’ve been a reader. Reading has opened up worlds in ways I could never imagine. I’m a firm believer in “you can’t lead, if you don’t read.” When I direct a play, I plunge into past reviews, commentaries, scholarly studies, etc. I want to absorb everything which has been written on the play. Then, I put it all aside when we begin rehearsals and trust whatever knowledge I gained will help to inform my choices. No one attends a performance to be moved by the research; so much of directing requires intuition.

Who is your favorite character in *Seven Guitars* and why?

That’s a tough question, to single out one character in *Seven Guitars* is akin to picking out a favorite child among your family. As a director, you come to intimately know and understand each of these characters. I attempt to ferret out who they are, what they want out of life, what are their disappointments and their triumphs. This kind of investigation leads me to know and respect each one. Now that I’ve gone a long way around the question, I’ll answer it. I would have to say Hedley is ONE of my favorite characters. His is one of the most interesting struggles in the play. Hedley is written in the vein of those Wilson warriors like, Solly Two Kings (*Gem of the Ocean*), Hambone (*Two Trains Running*) and Harold Loomis (*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*) etc. They seem to be out of touch in the world around them. However, they are gifted with a very unique perspective which others don’t necessarily see, hear, or understand. Hedley’s take on the Black man’s rightful position in a society which would deny his humanity makes his vision almost messianic. Hedley is an eloquent activist, one who’s well ahead of his time.

Why this play right now?

Classic plays are for all time. The struggle of men and women to cope with the challenges life presents is innately what good stories are made of. In this case, one of the characters in the play (Floyd Barton) is told by a judge who sentences him to ninety days in the jailhouse that “Rockefeller worth a million dollars and you ain’t worth two cents.” This indignity profoundly affects Floyd as he struggles for the rest of the play trying to validate his life’s worth. I believe in the face of the “Me Too” and “Black Lives Matter” movements as well as the murder of George Floyd, our society is in the process of reassessing the “worth” of its under represented and marginalized communities. So much of a BIPOC person’s value and self esteem is defined through the specter of White Power and Privilege, we’ve been forced to confront the pernicious nature of prejudice and bigotry and are tasked as a nation to address it.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR: **GREGG T DANIEL** CONTINUED...

What part of the play are you most excited to see come to life?

I'm a lover of music, especially Jazz and Blues. The Blues provide the soundtrack for the play as well as it's texture (after all, it is titled, *Seven Guitars*). I'm excited to see how our production team (including composer, sound designer, choreographer, etc.) will layer the music into the production. Each of the seven characters sings the blues in their own way. They're all metaphorically guitar players creating their own Blues score.

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<https://www.courttheatre.org/about/blog/august-wilsons-century-cycle/>

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Playwright August Wilson on Writing About Black America (1988 interview): <https://billmoyers.com/story/augustwilson-on-writing-about-black-america/>

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ABOUT **A NOISE WITHIN**

A NOISE WITHIN A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists performing in rotating repertory immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue. Our plays will be performed in rotating repertory, sometimes simultaneously in multiple spaces, and buttressed by meaningful supporting programs to create a symphonic theatrical experience for artists and audience.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at a Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.

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Cara Grasso	<i>Contributor</i>
Rachael McNamara	<i>Author</i>
Tomas Dakan	<i>Education Intern</i>
Craig Schwartz	<i>Production Photography</i>
Teresa English	<i>Graphic Design</i>



Geoff Elliott & Julia Rodriguez-Elliott
Producing Artistic Directors

ADDRESS 3352 E Foothill Blvd
Pasadena, CA 91107

TEL 626.356.3100

FAX 626.356.3120

EMAIL info@anoisewithin.org

WEB anoisewithin.org