

Theater: August Wilson Cycle Launches At Greene Space

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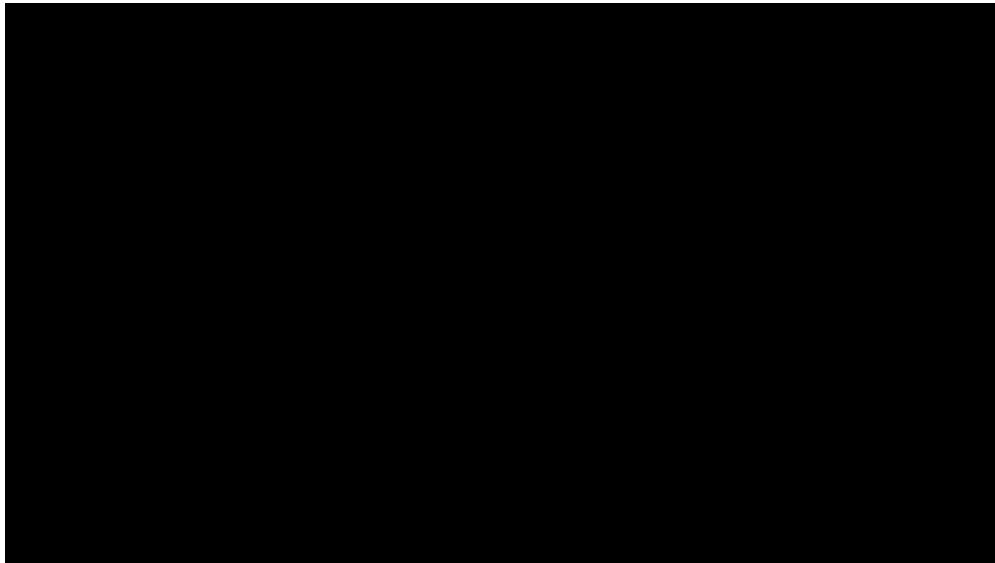
AUGUST WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE THE GREENE SPACE

The most exciting theatrical event of the fall isn't taking place on Broadway, or Off Broadway or in any theater at all -- it's happening at a radio station. *August Wilson's American Century Cycle* takes place from today through September 28 at The Greene Space in conjunction with WNYC, WQXR and the August Wilson estate. All ten plays in Wilson's remarkable series examining the 20th century will be given full dramatic readings with a live studio audience, and video streaming online. Overseen by Artistic Director Ruben Santiago-Hudson, the plays feature dream casts of performers and directors that are a who's who of talent including Phylicia Rashad, Wendell Pierce, Leslie Uggams, Jesse L. Martin, Kenny Leon, S. Epatha Merkerson and many more.

Needless to say, the precious few tickets to be in the audience have already been snapped up, but you can listen and [watch online right here starting tonight at 7 pm. with the premiere of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.](#)

It's just the latest landmark celebrating the career and ongoing vitality of the work of Wilson, who died tragically but with perfect timing just as he finished the monumental task of writing one play for every decade of the 20th century, most focused around the same neighborhood of Pittsburgh's Hill District. Among Wilson's ten play cycle are *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson* (both of which won the Pulitzer Prize), as well as *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars* and *Joe Turner's Come And Gone*.

"In the last two and a half, the last three decades, no writer has been more profound, more prolific than August Wilson. No writer," says Santiago-Hudson, the Tony winning actor who has always circled back to the work of Wilson. "No one else has put nine, ten plays on Broadway in the last two and a half decades. No one has written about a specific place, a specific time, a specific people decade by decade and that's why we're doing what we're doing."



Santiago-Hudson's career is notably diverse and rich: he performed on Broadway in the smash hit *Jelly's Last Jam* alongside his best friend Gregory Hines. His award-winning, autobiographical one-man show *Lackawanna Blues* became an Emmy-winning TV movie directed by George C. Wolfe from an adaptation penned by Santiago-Hudson himself. He starred for three years on the ABC hit show *Castle* and has a key role in the new AMC cop drama *Low Winter Sun* airing in the prime slot right after *Breaking Bad*. But Santiago-Hudson happily returns again and again to Wilson.

He won a Tony for his performance as Canewell in the original Broadway production of *Seven Guitars* and Santiago-Hudson has drawn increasing acclaim as a director of Wilson's work both around the country and at Signature Theatre Company in New York, where he most recently directed a much-praised revival of *The Piano Lesson*.

But few challenges can match bringing together creative teams to tackle ten plays in little over a month for broadcast over the air and archiving for posterity. The recordings will be shared with major cultural institutions like Yale Rep, people can play audio recordings on demand for at least three months after they're posted online and select plays will be aired on the radio in 2014. As of yet, no commercial release of the recordings is planned but the desire is to make them available as widely as possible for many years to come. But first the performances must be captured -- and it's all happening in an adrenaline-producing rush.

"We do *one* day, one full day of rehearsals," explains Santiago-Hudson. "It's more like a technical read. Then we give a performance reading in front of high school kids and then the evening performance with an audience."

The final archived work will likely be pulled primarily from the evening performance, with the benefit of the earlier show to fill in tiny sections where a noise or other technical snafu makes such modest editing desirable.

"These are August Wilson's plays in their entirety read dramatically and then we archive them so people can always access them whether for entertainment, curiosity, research, whatever you fancy. If you haven't had the opportunity to see them, you can just close your eyes and visually they can dance around in your head," says Santiago-Hudson.

Since his untimely passing at the age of 60, Wilson has been showered with as much notice as he earned during his lifetime, notably the naming of a Broadway theater in his honor. An annual event featuring young actors performing monologues from Wilson plays has grown in popularity. In Washington DC, they also held staged readings of the entire cycle. But the most important legacy is seeing his work being performed in regional theaters, on Broadway and around the world with increasing frequency. Wilson long ago left behind the condescending tag of "the greatest African-American playwright" to be regularly cited as one of "America's greatest playwrights" and now simply as one of the greatest playwrights, period. By being so specifically true to a particular people and place and time, Wilson's work has proven universal.

"It's funny," says Santiago-Hudson, who purposefully slides into vernacular to emphasize his point. "Black people -- basically -- where we have been heard is through our art. When they didn't want to hear nothing else we said, they would listen to Duke Ellington's jazz beat, they'd listen to James Brown say, 'I've got that feeling.' Or they'd go into a museum and be stopped by a Romare Bearden collage. When they don't want to hear nothing black people said, our art was singing -- singing songs and screaming. Coltrane was hitting that saxophone; August was writing them licks."

And don't think simply listening to an August Wilson play is a poor substitute for seeing a live performance. It's a telling, revealing way to hear anew the voice of this singular talent. Even those who have seen many of these plays will find new facets by experiencing them like this. Indeed, sometimes when seeing a show like *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and knowing an actor is launching into a remarkable monologue, you're tempted to close your eyes and be carried away by the language.

"He would do it," says Santiago-Hudson about Wilson closing his eyes to focus on the voices in a performance. "He would do it continually. The first time I saw him do it I thought he was asleep. He nods his head when he hears something he really loves and when he feels something a little off he pops his eyes open and looks."

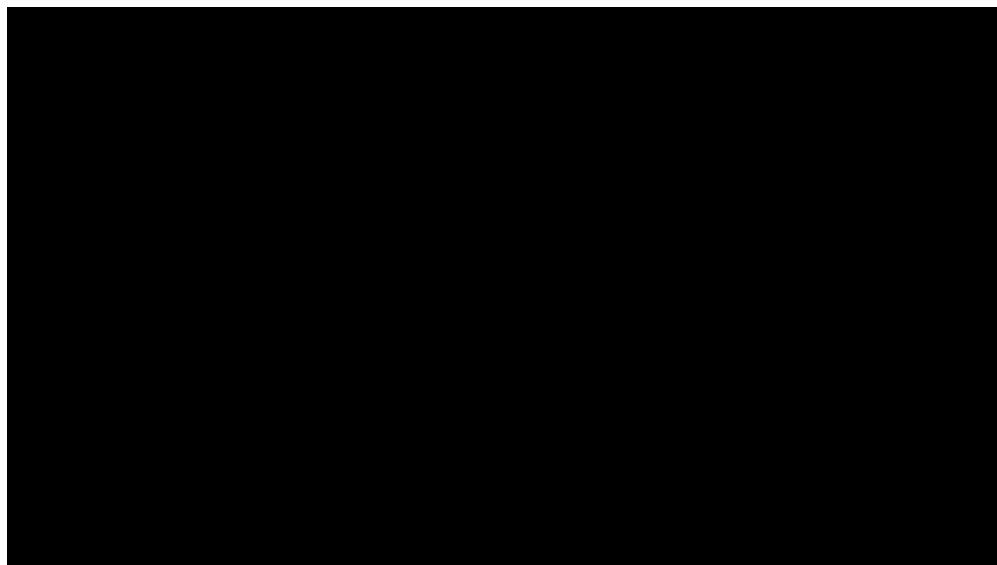
One can imagine Wilson would be nodding his head and keeping his eyes closed through most if not all of the ten plays being performed during the next five weeks. Tonight Ebony Jo-Ann finally (!) tackles Ma Rainey after being the understudy for both the Broadway debut and its revival, the terrific Clarke Peters of *The Wire* gets to sink his teeth into another great role and Wendell Pierce also of *The Wire* and *Treme* will appear in *Seven Guitars*.

"To finally get Wendell to do Ray Carter in *Seven Guitars*, I'm giddy just thinking about it," says Santiago-Hudson. "Wendell was the guy who was the reader on the first audition I did for Lloyd [Richards, a longtime collaborator with Wilson]. That's how life comes full circle."

Rashad appeared on Broadway in Wilson's work and now Santiago-Hudson is excited to see her directing as well. He was urged to direct by his mentors and he and Kenny Leon knew Rashad would make a great one as well.

"She just directed *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and prior to that she directed *A Raisin In The Sun*," says Santiago-Hudson, who first crossed paths with the actress on *Jelly's Last Jam*.

"She's amazing because she gets not only August, she gets people. It comes out of her and goes through the work. I've been trying to get Phylicia to direct for a while, prior to her starting to direct. Phylicia, you've got to direct! 'Aww, I don't know.' Next thing you know, she's setting the country on fire."



Right after the cycle ends, Santiago-Hudson has one week off and then launches into rehearsals for his performance in Wilson's autobiographical one-man show *How I Learned What I Learned*, which **he'll be performing at Signature Theatre beginning in November**. That's not the end of his plans concerning Wilson. (And you don't call what Santiago-Hudson wants to

do "dreams" because that implies something that is a wishful fancy, rather than an event he will make happen.) If you're wondering what those plans are, it's telling to note he's directing *Jitney* for the cycle.

"My next goal after this is complete is to finally get *Jitney* to Broadway, to put that final jewel in August's crown in place and say all ten of them in the cycle have been on Broadway," says Santiago-Hudson. "That has been a quest of mine, a goal of mine; I'm determined to make that happen. In no small way, what we're doing at the Greene Space is a prerequisite to that happening."

It's all part of his ongoing dialogue with Wilson and the brilliant body of work the playwright created.

"Even the plays I wasn't in, I had conversations with him about them. And I don't mean in passing. I mean, 'Let's sit down, brother, and talk.' Four, five, six hours of conversation. I'm talking so much now because he talked so much to me. I'm so full of what I have to say about him. It can't be said any clearer than when you come into the Greene Space and see what we do. That's the clearest interpretation of what August has left and taught us all -- his legacy, his work."

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **

Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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