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TAKE A BOW

A new award recognizes theaters that have staged all 10 plays in August Wilson’s Cycle, writes **Christopher Rawson**

It’s one of the great achievements in American literature, perhaps the greatest in American playwriting: the 10-play sequence of August Wilson’s American Century Cycle, inspired by the life he observed in his native Hill District, where nine of the 10 take place. But the playwright, his creative imagination and the Hill are only part of the story. For a play to complete its intended journey into the hearts and minds of an audience, it also needs a theater company to bring it to life. Fortunately, professional theaters across America have made Wilson their own. Although all 10 plays have been staged on Broadway, some more than once, the Cycle’s most continuous theatrical home has been in professional theaters nationwide.

So in the process of covering Wilson for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and teaching a course on his plays at the University of Pittsburgh, I began tracking theaters that had completed the Cycle. Now, to celebrate these theaters, the Post-Gazette has established the August Wilson American Century Cycle Award. Joining the effort is the August Wilson House, the organization committed to preserving and promoting Wilson’s childhood home on Bedford Avenue.

It’s just a small plaque, but there’s nothing small about a theater’s commitment across many years that the award measures. At present, at least 14 theaters have qualified, as listed separately on this page, the first as long as 11 years ago.

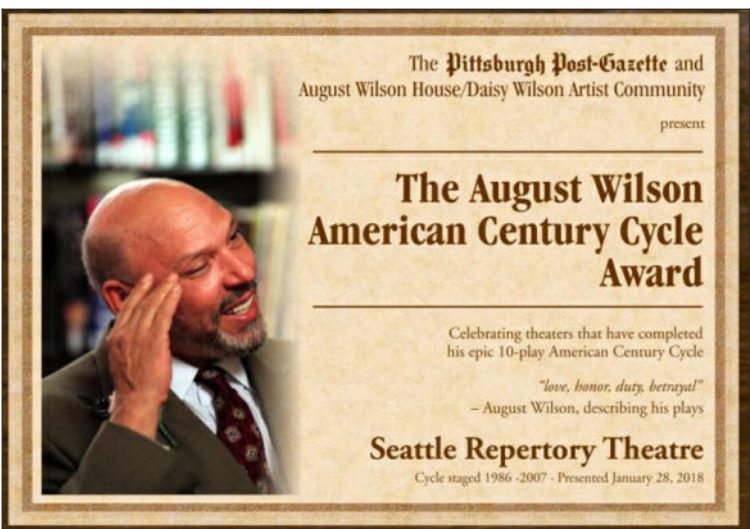
If we’d started the award then, we could have honored each theater as it completed the Cycle. But now we’re playing catch up. So we present the awards as occasion and travel schedules allow, at ceremonies arranged at each theater’s convenience. A larger plaque listing all the qualifying theaters will hang in the August Wilson House as soon as restoration work is completed.

So far, we’ve presented two awards, with plans to confer three more this spring. The first was presented a year ago to American Stage in St. Petersburg, Fla., just as it completed the Cycle with “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone.”

The timing there was ideal. Generally, the best we can do is make the award during another Wilson production. I managed to do this last month, when Seattle Repertory Theatre was staging “Two Trains Running” for the second time. Wilson’s widow, Constanza Romero Wilson, who manages the August Wilson Estate and is collaborating with our award, joined in the presentation.

This spring, we plan to make presentations to Pittsburgh Public Theater on a date to be determined and to the Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre on April 27, Wilson’s birthday and also the opening night of “King Hedley II,” to be staged in the backyard of the August Wilson House. Appropriately, Pittsburgh is the only city so far to have two theaters earn the award.

Then, on May 12, I’ll be in Houston to make an award to The Ensemble Theatre, Houston’s black theater company, which will be doing “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” (Traveling to see Wilson plays and hand out awards isn’t a bad way to spend time.) The ensemble is led by Eileen J. Morris, who has often directed in Pittsburgh. She is one of the many (think also of Pittsburgh’s Mark Clayton Southers) just a step or two away from completing a personal directorial Cycle, which would put them in the company of Lou Bellamy of Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minn., and Israel Hicks at the Denver Center Theatre.



The American Century Cycle (Listed in the order they were completed; dates refer to the setting for each play)	
1. “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” 1927	7. “Jitney,” 1977
2. “Fences,” 1957-65	8. “King Hedley II,” 1985
3. “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,” 1911	9. “Gem of the Ocean,” 1904
4. “The Piano Lesson,” 1936	10. “Radio Golf,” 1997
5. “Two Trains Running,” 1969	An 11th play, “How I Learned What I Learned,” shows the playwright in 2003 looking back at 1965. Rather than being part of the Cycle, it serves as both preface and coda.
6. “Seven Guitars,” 1948	

Theaters that have completed the 10-play Cycle. Listed in the order that they completed their 10th play; dates indicatie when they staged their first and last plays.	
1. Goodman Theatre, Chicago, 1986-2007	9. Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre, 2003-2013
2. Seattle Repertory Theatre, 1986-2007	10. Anthony Bean Community Theater, New Orleans, 2001-2013
3. The Black Rep, St. Louis, 1989-2008	11. The Actors Group, Honolulu, incomplete information
4. Pittsburgh Public Theater, 1989-2008	12. The M Ensemble, Miami, incomplete information
5. Denver Center Theatre, 1989-2009	13. The Lower Bottom Playaz, Oakland, Calif., incomplete information
6. Penumbra Theatre, St. Paul, 1984-2009	14. American Stage, St. Petersburg, Fla., 2007-2017
7. Huntington Theater, Boston, 1986-2012	15. Broadway, 1984-2017 (Broadway isn’t a theater company, but in a way it is, so why not award it a plaque, wherever it might hang?)
8. The Ensemble Theatre, Houston, 1985-2012	

But that’s the subject of another award, perhaps also to be joined someday by one for the actors, such as Kim Sullivan at American Stage and Pittsburgh’s own Montae Russell, who have done all 10 plays.

The first theater to complete the Cycle was Chicago’s Goodman in January 2007. Getting the month right matters: Seattle Rep completed the Cycle just three months later. The Black Rep in St. Louis completed the Cycle in February 2008, and the Pittsburgh Public followed that October.

Goodman and Seattle Rep had the jump because they were in the small group with Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Conn., the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston and the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles that were part of Wilson’s unofficial tryout circuit of theaters. They were willing to stage each new play while he was still polishing it prior to its arrival on Broadway.

The Public might have been part of that group, but the artistic director at the time, Bill Gardner, inexplicably was not a fan of Wilson’s first play, “Ma Rainey” (1984). By the time the second play — “Fences” (1987) — was a big Broadway hit, he’d lost a step. The Public didn’t do “Fences,” its first Wilson play, until 1989, but Gardner made up some time by doing “Joe Turner” the same year.

The Public finally moved into the inner circle when its new artistic director, Eddie Gilbert, read the 1979 script of “Jitney,” which had had its nonprofessional premiere at a small Pittsburgh theater in 1982. He told Wilson he’d like to stage its professional premiere. Wilson took that as his cue to come back to Pittsburgh in 1996 and expand the script, using all that he’d learned in the past 15 years. So that’s how Pittsburgh came to host the premiere of “Jitney” — twice!

Under Mr. Gilbert and his successor, Ted Pappas, the Public then embraced the Cycle. Even better, Mr. Gilbert asked if Wilson had a new play to open the Public’s handsome new Downtown home, the O’Reilly Theater. Having grown up in a city where blacks suffered oppression and worse, Wilson was so



Eugene Lee, Reginald Andre Jackson and David Emerson Toney in “Two Trains Running” at Seattle Repertory Theatre.



Kim Sullivan and Fanni Green in “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” at American Stage in St. Petersburg, Fla.



James Williams, William Wilkins and Lou Bellamy in “Fences” in 1997.

pleased that he delayed the premiere of “King Hedley II” while they built the theater, so the two could debut together.

“Jitney” and “King Hedley” are the only two Wilson plays to be staged here before reaching Broadway. But they were premieres, putting the Public in select company: Of the 10 Wilson premieres, six were at Yale Rep and two each at the Goodman and the Public.

Mr. Southers’ Pittsburgh Playwrights has its own distinction, accomplishing the Cycle plays in just 10 years and in the order of their professional debuts. The most puzzling absence from the award list is the Mark Taper, which did a number of the plays pre-Broadway but still has at least one play to do.

Yale Rep has a claim to being Wilson’s theatrical home. So does the Huntington, it believes, because it staged the most (eight) of the 10 plays pre-Broadway.

But Wilson had several homes. Biographically, it was Pittsburgh. He was born in the Hill, lived there for 13 years, then moved to Hazelwood for a couple of years before leaving for the Army and some teenage wandering. At 20, he was back on the Hill, where he embedded himself in its artistic, social and political life until he was 33.

The experience of those years is the core of the Cycle, even of “Ma Rainey,” the only play not set in Pittsburgh. It’s just as full as the others of the people he met and the conversations he overheard in Hill diners, barbershops, backyards and jitney stations and on its street corners and porches. They provided the rich brew into which he dipped the ladle of his transforming art.

But he didn’t really commit himself to playwriting until he left for St. Paul, where he lived from 1978 to 1990, writing the first five of the Cycle plays. St. Paul and especially its Playwrights’ Center and the Penumbra can also stake a claim (and they do) to being his theatrical home. So does Seattle, where he wrote the other plays and lived his final 15 years, until he died in 2005.

And there was another pre-eminent home along the way: Connecticut, of all places, home not just to Yale Rep but to the O’Neill Theater Center in Waterford. The O’Neill hosts an elite summer

workshop for new plays, and in the early 1980s, Wilson applied at least three times before being accepted. Once there, he met Lloyd Richards, head of the O’Neill as well as Yale Rep, who then directed his first six plays on Broadway.

Wilson returned to Yale in 2005 to premiere the Cycle’s final play, “Radio Golf.” It was a few days before his 60th birthday and had the feel of a reunion of the far-flung Wilson clan. The actors, many of whom had gone on to be famous, had come to call themselves Wilsonian Soldiers.

The theater people in New Haven that night were further evidence that Wilson had many homes. In the cities where theaters have dedicated themselves to his work, communities of Wilsonian actors and audiences flourish. Broadway is one such community: He worked there on eight plays, with two more appearing after his death. The maids at the Edison Hotel considered him a resident; there were tables in its coffee shop (aka The Polish Tea Room) where he regularly sat for hours, writing and talking. Wherever else he was working, he found similar spots where he could hang out.

Wilson’s angry testimony against racism and war, or the indignity of being a black man just trying to get a check cashed, spelled out his arguments with America, but he was at home in the American theater. The Post-Gazette used to call his plays the Pittsburgh Cycle, but American Century Cycle makes the justifiably more expansive claim.

Wilson was brought back to Pittsburgh (by his direction) for a funeral at Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hall & Museum in Oakland and burial in Greenwood Cemetery in O’Hara. But he is ultimately most at home where he lives on, in the people, places and stories that populate the Hill and in the theaters that bring his plays to life. The August Wilson American Century Cycle Award, presented jointly by his hometown newspaper and his childhood home, celebrates the conjunction of the two.

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