

Kansas City Repertory Theatre

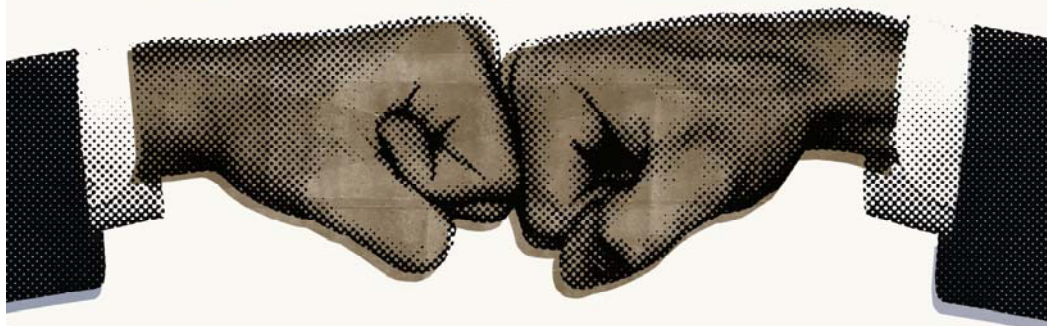
# LEARNING GUIDE

TONY AWARD NOMINEE

• BEST PLAY •

WINNING VOTES COULD MEAN LOSING HIMSELF.

# RADIO GOLEF



20 OCTOBER 17 - NOVEMBER 9 08

★★★★ written by ★★★★★

**AUGUST WILSON**

**DIRECTED BY LOU BELLAMY**

••••• ALL PERFORMANCES •••••

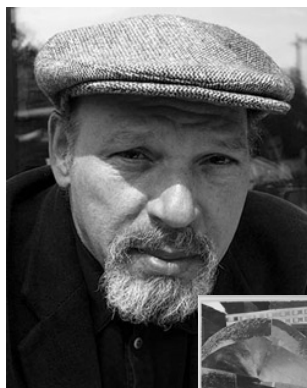
**SPENCER THEATRE**

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KANSAS CITY REPERTORY THEATRE ★★★★★ The Star THE KANSAS CITY STAR



# Kansas City Repertory Theatre LEARNING GUIDE



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We invite you to email any comments, questions or ideas about August Wilson's *Radio Golf* and/or this Learning Guide to Melinda McCrary, Director of Education at [mccrarym@kcrep.org](mailto:mccrarym@kcrep.org), 816-235-5708 or Amy Tonyes, Education Associate at [tonyesal@kcrep.org](mailto:tonyesal@kcrep.org), 816-235-2707

Kansas City Repertory Theatre  
A LETTER FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



Eric Rosen, only the fourth Artistic Director in Kansas City Repertory Theatre's history.

Politics and theatre can make strange bedfellows, but at this moment in American political history, theatre about politics is necessary, provocative, and even prescient.

I love the work of August Wilson, and I am in awe of *Radio Golf*. Not only is the play the most immediate and contemporary of Wilson's ten play cycle about the African American experience in 20th century America, but it also predicts and resonates with political realities that have come about nearly two years after Wilson's untimely death. While he was writing *Radio Golf*, Wilson couldn't have known that our nation would soon be wrestling so explosively with issues of race, class and the moral complexity of wealth – themes that are at the heart of this play and which are so relevant during the current election cycle. Yet Wilson's play says more about our times than any debate, interview, or political speech you are likely to have heard by the time you made it to the theatre.

To me, *Radio Golf* is proof of the enduring power of truly great art, and evidence of the truth that art can predict reality. Wilson's funny, powerful and moving portrait of a politician made to choose between personal advancement and the destruction of his cultural inheritance is a deeply moral story, and one that we as citizens would do well to observe.

Wilson himself was deeply concerned about the legacy of African American theatre, and the preservation of institutions that describe and serve African American artists, audiences and ideas. The genius of *Radio Golf*, like many of his plays, is that, while telling the particular experience of African Americans, he unites all of us, regardless of race, in his compelling moral vision. By being so specific in his worldview, Wilson is among our most universal playwrights. As you heard earlier this season in *Clay*, "When words speak truth they can change the world."

Yours,

Eric Rosen

Dear Educators,

Welcome to the Rep and Eric Rosen's exhilarating first season as our Artistic Director. By sweet design, each of our plays available to school audiences this season – *Clay*, *Radio Golf*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Arabian Nights*, and *Winesburg, Ohio*—compellingly explores a protagonist experiencing meaningful, if painful, growth and in the passionate pursuit of their dreams.

By even sweeter design, *Radio Golf* gives us a peek into the crucial days of a politician who reflects the combination of good works, admirable goals and questionable ambition we are currently witnessing on the political stages of our nation. We are particularly proud to bring you the final play in the remarkable cycle about African-American life written by the master playwright, August Wilson and directed by his friend, and our friend, the immensely gifted Lou Bellamy.

It will be exciting for your students to compare this play to their own experiences of moving forward in their lives while remaining connected to their families and to their community. The play asks fascinating questions about the nature of responsibility, loyalty and the challenges of making choices that are best for ourselves while respecting those with whom we share the journey. Although not many of us are running for a political office, we are all often stumping for our beliefs, fighting a good fight somewhere on a daily basis and, hopefully, honoring those who have come before us. What actions will we as individuals take to obtain what we want in life? Who among our friends do we listen to along the way? How do we celebrate our background and our potential at the same time?

And Wilson's plays make us laugh. Oh, let's not forget that. It's pure delight to hear a theatre full of young audience members guffaw at the oh-so-human comedy that permeates his plays. His eye for a character and ear for what about them is joyous is one of the highlights of each of his masterpieces. So it's not surprising that he shared with us this notion of priorities -- "*All you need in the world is love and laughter. That's all anybody needs. To have love in one hand and laughter in the other.*"

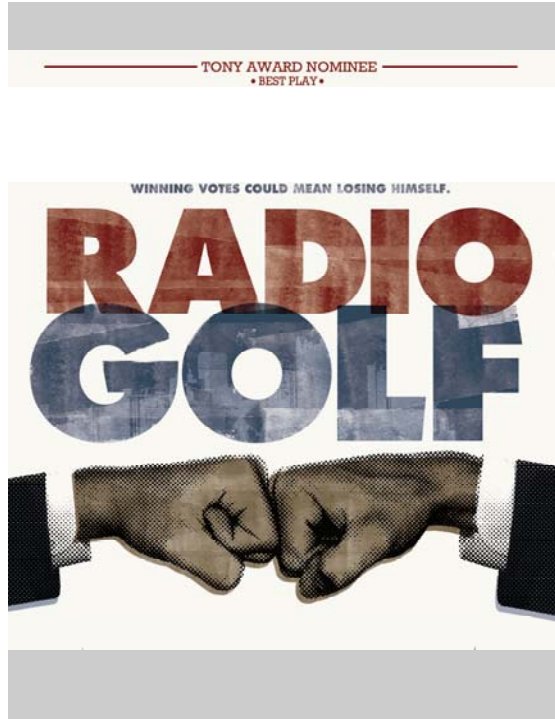
Wilson concluded a speech he made in 1996 to a Theatre Communications Group national conference with these words. "*I believe in the American theatre. I believe in its power to inform about the human condition, its power to heal, its power to hold the mirror as 'twere up to nature, its power to uncover the truths we wrestle from uncertain and sometimes unyielding realities. All of art is a search for ways of being, of living life more fully. We who are capable of those noble pursuits should challenge the melancholy and barbaric, to bring the light of angelic grace, peace, prosperity and the unencumbered pursuit of happiness to the ground on which we all stand.*"

Our continued applause to you for overcoming budget cuts, gas prices and paperwork in order to share American theatre with your students. We know it's worth it. Please stay in touch and let us know your reactions and thoughts on *Radio Golf*. We share them with Eric Rosen and the staff and artists who create the work on our stages.

Melinda McCrary, Director of Education and Community Programs  
[mccrarym@kcrep.org](mailto:mccrarym@kcrep.org) 816.235.5708

If you are interested in an in-school theatre-education workshop, please call and we can design a **Rep on the Road** program specifically for your students.

# THE STORY



## THE CHARACTERS

**Harmond Wilks:** A real estate developer and mayoral candidate

**Roosevelt Hicks:** A bank executive and Harmond's business partner

**Sterling Johnson:** An ex-convict, handyman and old school mate of Harmond

**Mame Wilks:** Harmond's wife

**Elder Joseph Barlow (Old Joe):** A seemingly crazy old man from the street

## THE STORY

*Radio Golf* is the final play by August Wilson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American playwright. The play is the last in Wilson's cycle of ten plays that examines the African-American experience in the 20th century in the United States. Each play tackles a decade, and *Radio Golf* is the final play covering the 1990s.

Harmond Wilks, an Ivy League-educated lawyer with an educated and ambitious wife, wants to redevelop the "blighted" area of the Hill District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Having inherited a prosperous real estate firm from his father and grandfather, Wilks is about to declare his candidacy to be Pittsburgh's first black mayor. Meanwhile, he and his friend Roosevelt Hicks are engineering a development deal on Wylie Avenue to build a high-rise apartment building with a ground floor filled with high-end chain stores like Starbucks, Whole Foods, and Barnes & Noble.



Piles of trash line the sidewalks along Elmore Ave looking down into Centre Avenue. Photographed in the Hill District, April 1999.

Photo by: Peter Diana / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (4/16/1999)

# THE STORY



Romare Bearden, *Pittsburgh Memory*, Collage on board,

## THE STORY—*con't*

The deal depends on federal money, which requires a finding that the area is blighted. There are offstage city politics and backroom deals. Harmond and Roosevelt, a newly-minted Mellon Bank vice president, think they are equal competitors in capitalism's public-private arena, but they may just be black front men for white money.

Suddenly another world intrudes when an old mansion at 1839 Wylie they have slated for demolition turns out to have a significant past. It was the home of Aunt Ester, the hereditary folk priestess whose tale goes back to 1619, when the first shipload of African slaves was brought to Virginia.

The play is set in the office of the redevelopment company, but much of the drama surrounds the fate of a "raggedy-ass" house at 1839 Wylie Avenue in the Hill District. This house was also the setting of Wilson's play, *Gem of the Ocean*.

## THE SETTING

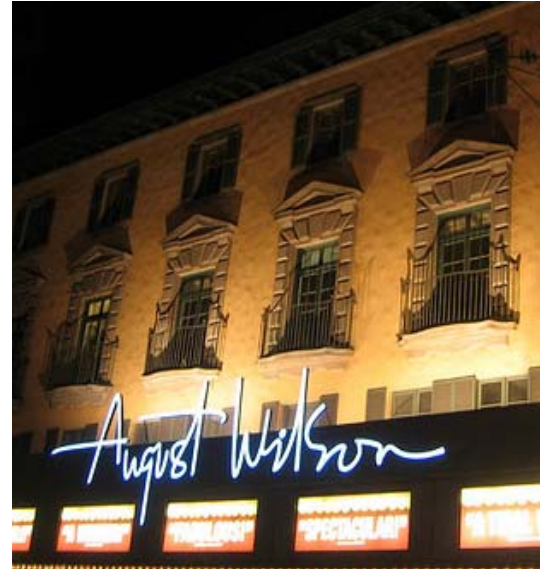
**Time:** Over a three-week time period, 1997

**Place:** A redevelopment office, the Hill District, Pittsburgh, PA

*Radio Golf* premiered in 2005 at Yale Repertory Theatre and then was presented on the West Coast by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, California. The Huntington Theatre Company in Boston, Massachusetts then produced it in October 2006, followed by the McCarter Theatre in 2007. *Radio Golf* opened on Broadway in New York on May 8, 2007 at the Cort Theatre, the same venue where Wilson's first Broadway play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, opened in 1984.

"*Radio Golf* may not boast as much poetry as other Wilson gems (say, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.) But it has every bit as much power and purpose. It's the most immediate and tightly wound of his plays, accessible to anyone, regardless of past knowledge of theater or Wilson. Like all his plays, it speaks volumes about the human condition. It's also the one that speaks most directly to the society we live in today, with all its opportunities, inequities and contradictions."

-Everett Evans,  
Houston Chronicle, 2008



August Wilson and the Broadway theatre that bears his name (formerly the Virginia Theatre).

## AUGUST WILSON - 1945-2005

In 2005, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson completed his now legendary cycle of plays that chronicle, decade by decade, the African American experience of living in America. The foundation for most of his plays was laid over successive generations in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, since the early 1900s a predominantly black community.

Wilson was born on the Hill April 27, 1945, one of six children of African American mother and father of German background. The future playwright dropped out of school at age fourteen, having been falsely accused of plagiarizing a research paper he had written on Napoleon. Instead, he continued his education at the local public library, reading everything he could by black American writers.

Wilson did not originally intend to concentrate on writing plays, but increasingly found himself drawn to dramatic writing as a way to affect social change. He first became involved in theatre in the late 1960s as a cofounder of Black Horizons, a Pittsburgh community theatre. His first play to be produced—at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul in 1981—was *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. [The founder and artistic director of Penumbra, Lou Bellamy, is the director of Kansas City Repertory Theatre's production of *Radio Golf*.]

The National Playwright's Conference at the O'Neill Theatre Center in Connecticut, a haven for developing playwrights, accepted Wilson's play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* for a workshop in 1982, marking the beginning of his long association with director Lloyd Richards, then head of the Playwrights Conference and artistic director of Yale Repertory Theatre. Beginning with *Ma Rainey*, Wilson wrote a series of ten plays which have been widely produced and earned great popular and critical acclaim. *Ma Rainey* opened on Broadway in 1984 and won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. *Fences* opened on Broadway in 1987 and earned the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and the Tony Award for best play.

***continued on next page***



“It ain't nothing to find no starting place in the world. You just start from where you find yourself.”  
-August Wilson

August Wilson in front of his childhood home in the Hill District, Pittsburgh, PA. Photo: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

## AUGUST WILSON—*continued*

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* opened on Broadway in 1988 and won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. *The Piano Lesson* opened on Broadway in 1990 and won the American Theatre Critics Association Award, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and the 1990 Pulitzer Prize. *Two Trains Running* opened on Broadway in 1992 and won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. *Seven Guitars* opened on Broadway in 1996 and received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and eight Tony nominations. *Jitney* opened in New York in 2000 and received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. *King Hedley II* opened on Broadway in 2001 and was nominated for six Tony Awards. Wilson's ninth play of the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean*, opened in New York in December 2005 and *Radio Golf*, his final work and the last piece of his chronological cycle, premiered April 2005 at Yale Repertory Theatre and has subsequently had productions at regional theatres across the country. *Radio Golf* premiered on Broadway in May 2007 and was nominated for four Tony Awards, including best play. In addition to winning the 1987 and 1990 Pulitzer Prizes for Drama, Wilson has been the recipient of Bush and Guggenheim Foundation Fellowships and the Whiting Writers Award. He has been inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Letters and was awarded the National Humanities Medal. Wilson also served as Chairman of the Board for the African Grove Institute for the Arts, which promotes the advancement and preservation of black theatre and performing arts.

Although August Wilson was extensively lauded for his accomplishments during his lifetime, perhaps the most fitting tribute to his achievement as one of America's most powerful dramatists came two weeks after his death in 2005 when the August Wilson Theater was dedicated on Broadway, the first time a Broadway theatre has been named after an African American.

**By Laura Muir, Director of Communications, Kansas City Repertory Theatre**



## FINAL PLAY OF LEGENDARY CYCLE RESONATES WITH HISTORY

At the heart of *Radio Golf* is an abandoned house at 1839 Wylie which plays an unexpected role in a redevelopment project in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. This derelict building is the home of Aunt Ester, who is one of August Wilson's most remarkable literary creations, and one of the main reasons for the mythological resonance of his celebrated body of work.

Wilson introduced Aunt Ester as an offstage character in *Two Trains Running* (produced by the Rep in 2005 and also directed by Lou Bellamy), the sixth work in his epic ten-play cycle about the black experience in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She is the living embodiment of the entire African-American cultural tradition, going all the way back to 1619, when the first slaves were brought to Virginia. Wilson envisioned Aunt Ester as a storehouse of racial memory and wisdom, and in this role she is a larger-than-life figure with both historical and mythical dimensions. In *Two Trains Running*, which is set in the 1960s, she is 349 years of age, making her as old as the black presence in America. Still an offstage character in Wilson's *King Hedley II*, set in the 1980s, she dies at the age of 366. Aunt Ester only appears onstage in *Gem of the Ocean*, the ninth play of his cycle, which is set in the 1900s; she is then 285 years old.

The name Aunt Ester evokes the word "ancestor," and in Wilson's canon she underscores the crucial importance to African Americans of honoring their ancestry and cultural heritage. *Radio Golf* addresses the dilemma of a black generation caught between the desire for financial and political success in a predominantly white society and the social debt which they owe their own history and traditions. In the play, Wilson expresses his concern that a new generation of upwardly mobile black Americans, in their efforts to be accepted by the dominant culture, is turning its back on their own. This phenomenon is epitomized in *Radio Golf* by Harmond Wilks and Roosevelt Hicks, real estate developers who, to further their personal ambitions, are preparing to tear down the last vestiges of the historical African American presence in Pittsburgh.

The address of Aunt Ester's residence, 1839 Wylie, is an allusion to the historical irony of their planned demolition. In 1839 there was an outbreak of racial violence in Pittsburgh as white residents of the city, who resented the growth of black populations in the North, did considerable damage to the city's black neighborhoods by burning and tearing down houses. In *Radio Golf*, set a century and a half later, this destruction is now being planned by African Americans themselves.

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# THE CYCLE



## THE CYCLE—*continued*

The importance of honoring the past is a major theme of Wilson’s canon, as it is a major aspect of the black experience in America. Wilson’s plays, almost all of which take place in Pittsburgh, explore the effects of dislocation and reunion on the descendants of African Americans who migrated from the rural south to the urban North. For families initially disrupted by slavery, then by black migration, the idea of reuniting with a lost or forgotten ancestry is particularly poignant, and Wilson gives it a profound spiritual dimension.

Wilson called his ten-play cycle “a four-hundred-year autobiography,” as he understood the congruence of African Americans’ personal identity and cultural history. Wilson also recognized the importance of preserving the vast tradition which is the black experience in America. In an interview conducted a year before he died, Wilson said, “People look at black American history and they say, ‘Oh, you poor people, what you were subjected to, that’s such a horrendous thing. I’m sure you want to forget that.’ And I say no, no, I don’t want to forget that, because it’s a triumph. Black America is a tremendous triumph.”

By Ed Matheny, Kansas City Repertory Theatre

1900s - *Gem of the Ocean* (2003)

1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982)  
Set in Chicago

1940s - *Seven Guitars* (1995)

1960s - *Two Trains Running* (1990)

1980s - *King Hedley II* (2001)

1900s 1910s 1920s 1930s 1940s 1950s 1960s 1970s 1980s 1990s

1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984)

1930s - *The Piano Lesson* (1989) - Pulitzer Prize

1950s - *Fences* (1985) - Pulitzer Prize  
and Tony Award

1970s - *Jitney* (1983)

1990s - *Radio Golf* (2005)

## THE INFLUENCES

"My influences have been what I call my four Bs—the primary ones being the blues, then Borges, Baraka and Bearden."

—August Wilson

August Wilson was the only black student at the Central Catholic High School in 1959 when threats and abuse drove him away. He dropped out of Gladstone High School in the 10th grade in 1960 when a teacher falsely accused him of plagiarizing a 20-page paper on Napoleon. Wilson, who had learned to read at age four, spent the rest of his teen years educating himself at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Library.



Bessie Smith, 1936, Library of Congress

### THE BLUES

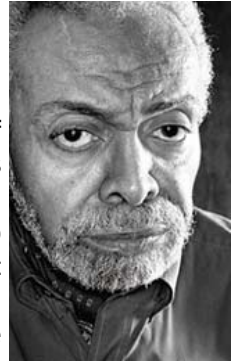
The blues is a vocal and instrumental form of music based on the use of the blue notes. It emerged as an accessible form of self-expression in African-American communities of the United States from spirituals, work songs, field hollers, shouts and chants, and rhymed simple narrative ballads. The use of blue notes and the prominence of call-and-response patterns in the music and lyrics are indicative of African influence. The blues influenced later American and Western popular music, as it became the roots of jazz, rhythm and blues, bluegrass and hip-hop. In the 1960s and 1970s, a hybrid form called blues rock developed from the combining of blues with various rock and roll forms.

### BORGES

Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges (1899–1986) was an Argentine writer whose output included short stories, essays, poetry, literary criticism, and translations. Borges' work maintained a universal perspective that reflected a multi-ethnic Argentina, exposure from an early age to his father's substantial collection of world literature, and lifelong travel experience.

### BARAKA

Amiri Baraka (born October 7, 1934) is an American writer of poetry, drama, essays and music criticism. Baraka, a convert to Islam, was born Everett LeRoi Jones in Newark, New Jersey. In 1967 he adopted the African name Imamu Ameer Baraka, which he later changed to Amiri Baraka. *Suicide Note* was published, followed in 1963 by *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* - to this day one of the most influential volumes of jazz criticism, especially in regard to the Free Jazz movement. His acclaimed controversial play, *The Dutchman*, premiered in 1964 and received an Obie Award the same year. In 1984 Baraka became a full professor at Rutgers University. Baraka was New Jersey's Poet Laureate at the time of the September 11, 2001 attacks. He wrote a poem titled "Somebody Blew Up America" about the event.



Amiri Baraka for *The New York Times*, photo by Chester Higgins, Jr. (2005)



Romare Bearden, *Patchwork Quilt*, cut-and-pasted cloth and paper with synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 1970, Museum of Modern Art.

### BEARDEN

Romare Bearden (1911–1988) was an African-American artist and writer. He worked in several media including cartoons, oils, and collage. Upon his death, *The New York*

*Times* called Bearden "one of America's pre-eminent artists" and "the nation's foremost collagist."

August Wilson's *Radio Golf*

# RADIO GOLF AND TODAY



Photo credit courtesy of [www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com)

## THE RELEVANCE OF RADIO GOLF TODAY

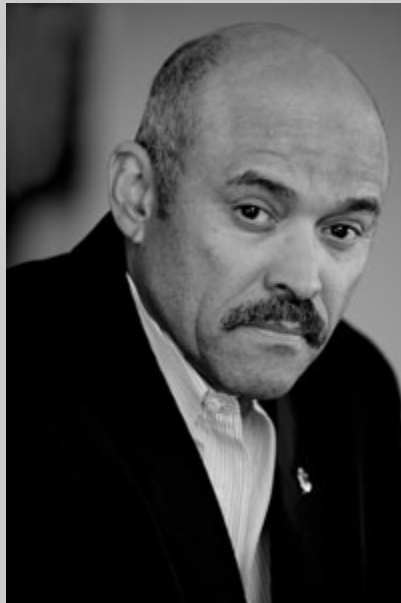
Kansas City Repertory Theatre's current production of August Wilson's *Radio Golf* couldn't be more timely, as it coincides with the final weeks of the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign and the election itself. *Radio Golf* explores the legacies of race and history which confront an African American man running for political office. The parallels to Democrat presidential nominee Barack Obama's own candidacy make this work an even more thought-provoking piece of theatre. Wilson wrote much of *Radio Golf* while he was in Kansas City for the Rep's 2005 production of his *Two Trains Running*, a time when Obama had just gained national prominence after his speech at the 2004 Democratic convention. And *Radio Golf* prophetically addresses cultural tensions that have surfaced during the current presidential campaign.

*Radio Golf* centers on the story of Harmond Wilks, a Pittsburgh real estate developer who aspires to be the city's first African-American mayor. His business dealings bring him into contact with Sterling Johnson and Elder Joseph Barlow, two seemingly disreputable residents of the black neighborhood that he plans to demolish for a gentrification project. At the heart of the play is their attempt to show Wilks that his personal success and prestige come at the cost of his heritage and identity. This conflict sheds light on Obama's recent tensions with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who made headlines when they suggested that, in his bid for national office, Obama has been too willing to distance himself from the black community. Johnson and Barlow push Wilks toward a crisis of conscience and moral awakening, and Wilks' transformation, as *Radio Golf* reaches its conclusion, is a fitting close to Wilson's extraordinary body of work.

By the time *Radio Golf* closes at the Rep on November 9, the presidential campaign will have ended and the country may have transformed its past by electing its first African American as president.

By Ed Matheny, Kansas City Repertory Theatre

# THE DIRECTOR



Lou Bellamy, Director of Kansas City Repertory Theatre's production of *Radio Golf*.

**Lou Bellamy** (*Director*) continues his work with Kansas City Rep having directed *Jitney*, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Two Trains Running*. He is the founder and artistic director of Saint Paul's Penumbra Theatre. During his thirty-two year tenure as artistic director, Penumbra has evolved into one of America's premier theaters dedicated to the dramatic exploration of the African American experience. Under his leadership, Penumbra has produced 23 world premieres, including August Wilson's first professional production, and is proud to have produced more of Mr. Wilson's plays than any theater in the world. Mr. Bellamy is an OBIE Award-winning director, an accomplished actor, and sought after scholar. Outside of Penumbra Theatre, Mr. Bellamy has also directed at Kennedy Center, Cleveland Play House, Arizona Theatre Company, Round House, Guthrie, Signature, and Trinity Repertory. He holds degrees from Mankato State University, Hamline University, and the University of Minnesota where he is appointed to the teaching faculty of the Theatre and Dance Department at the rank of Associate Professor. Mr. Bellamy was appointed a McKnight Fellow to the Salzburg Seminar in Theatre, convened at Schloss Leopoldskron in 1996. He has been honored with numerous awards including the W. Harry Davis Foundation Award for Excellence in Afro-centric Education, the Minnesota Martin Luther King, Jr. Humanitarian Award, the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc. Distinguished Contribution Award, the First Bank Sally Ervine Ordway Arts Award of Commitment, the first ever IVEY Award for Lifetime Achievement, and the 2006 McKnight Distinguished Artist Award.



Mame Wilks, Act I



Harmond Wilks, Act I



Roosevelt Hicks, Act I

## A CONVERSATION ABOUT COSTUMES

Costume Designer Mathew LeFebvre recently worked on productions of August Wilson’s *Gem Of The Ocean* and *Two Trains Running* which greatly informed his approach to the Kansas City Repertory Theatre’s production of *Radio Golf*. He spoke to us about the history and heritage woven into the fabric of the play and how that is reflected in his costume design for the production.

“*Radio Golf* features two different groups: the older generation, and the younger generation. For the younger generation (Harmond, Roosevelt, and Mame) their clothes are less a reflection of who they are as individuals than tools they use to get ahead in this new world. Harmond wears the “standard-issue” politician suits; Roosevelt’s suits have a bit more flash but are still chosen to get ahead, even his golf clothes are carefully selected to get ahead.

The older generation (Old Joe, and Sterling) are of the Hill District, and are at home in the environment of the play. Their costumes are a reflection of who they are and they look like they would be at home in one of Wilson’s earlier plays like *Seven Guitars*, or *Two Trains Running*.

One other theme that is at play in this design that is influenced by Wilson’s other works has to do with knowledge and history passing from generation to generation. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson elaborates on the character of Aunt Esther, who was first introduced in *Two Trains Running*. In *Gem*, we learn that every generation has an Aunt Esther. Black Mary, Aunt Esther’s assistant is being groomed to be her successor. There is also a moment at the end of *Gem* when Solly Two Kings dies, after being shot by Caesar Wilkes. After Solly dies, Citizen Barlow takes Solly’s coat, hat, and stick and walks out the door, carrying on where Solly left off. With Old Joe Barlow, I wanted to visually suggest that he is carrying on the history, so I’ve put him in a coat and hat. His look is kind of a fusion of Solly Two Kings, and Holloway from *Two Trains*. The passing down of the history of this community continues with Sterling, and at the end of the play, with Harmond Wilks as well.”



Elder Joseph Barlow, Act I



Roosevelt Hicks, Act I



Sterling Johnson, Act I

See more costume sketches at <http://homepage.mac.com/lefeb5/PhotoAlbum40.html>

Costume Sketches used with permission from Mathew LeFebvre

Kansas City Repertory Theatre's production of *Radio Golf*  
SPOTLIGHT ON THEATRE PROFESSIONS  
PROPS



The astrolabe from Kansas City Repertory Theatre's production of *King Lear* (2007) one of the many props created in the prop shop under the supervision of Michael Schall, Master of Properties.



Michael Schall notes that it takes a sense of humor to be a Properties Master. He shows it here in this photo with a mask that he created.

### A CONVERSATION ABOUT PROPS

Michael Schall, Kansas City Repertory Theatre's resident Properties Master took some time recently to speak to us about his career in the theatre. Originally from North Dakota, Michael received his B.S. in Film from the University of Texas and his M.F.A. in Set Design from the University of Florida. After freelancing as a set designer throughout the country, Michael eventually made his way to Kansas City where he began at the Rep in 1995. He served as Stage Carpenter and Shop Foreman before becoming Master of Properties in 1998.

#### First off, what is considered a prop?

Basically, anything an actor handles is considered a prop. A Properties Master functions much like an interior designer functions for an architect. We create the environment where the actor "lives." The Prop Master also handles any type of gun or explosive used in the play and the special effects.

#### You have been in the business for a long time. What innovations have made an impact on your work?

The internet has absolutely changed my life as a Props Master. It saves so much time. Before the internet, before Google, I had to spend so much of my time out shopping for props. Now I can search, shop and purchase right from my desk.

#### Speaking of shopping, do you have any favorite local shops where you purchase props?

My go-to shops are Antiques and Oddities at 18<sup>th</sup> & Broadway and River Market Antiques in the River Market.

#### Do you have a favorite show that you've worked on since you've been at the Rep?

That would have to be *Machinal* (which the Rep produced in 2001). It had lots of built props including a telephone operator's console.

#### What is your favorite show you've seen at the Rep?

My favorite would be *Triumph of Love* (2003), which is ironic because we didn't build any of it. Everything came from Seattle Rep. But, I loved it. It was funny, poignant and different from anything we had done in the past.

#### Tell us a little bit about working on Kansas City Repertory Theatre's current production of *Radio Golf*.

I'm a huge August Wilson fan. I've been very proud to play a part in producing his plays. I had the opportunity to meet him when he was here for *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (2002). That was a thrill. He was a great guy, very hip, but also down to earth and easy to talk to. *Radio Golf*, because it's set relatively recently (set in 1997), is not as challenging as other shows set in much earlier time periods such as the Great Depression or Shakespearian times. In those types of shows it's difficult or impossible to purchase or obtain props. For *Radio Golf* we can buy much of what we need but we still have to build most of the office furniture that you will see because of the size limitations of the stage.

#### What advice would you give to young people? What qualities do you need to become a successful Props Master?

It is important to have a sense of fun because the job can be stressful at times. You should have confidence in your abilities to solve problems and quickly come up with solutions. You should enjoy change, because it's always different; no two shows are ever alike.

# THE HILL DISTRICT—THEN



A bustling Hill district in 1932.



By the late 1950s through the mid-90s, the Hill District was mired in urban blight, unemployment and crime.

## EVOLUTION & DECLINE

Sprawling over blocks, the Hill District overlooks downtown Pittsburgh, PA. A predominantly Jewish neighborhood in the early twentieth century, the Hill District became one of the most energetic and powerful African American neighborhoods in the country from the 1930s to the 1950s. Variouslly called "the crossroads of the world" or "Fun City," the Hill District flourished as a center for business and art, and drew bustling crowds both day and night. The music scene this environment fostered rivaled that, at times, of the most groundbreaking cities in America.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Pittsburgh's Hill District became the definitive center for music and nightlife between New York City and Chicago. Among many other talented musicians who frequented the Hill, jazz greats like Count Basie, Lena Horne, Dizzy Gillespie, Cab Calloway, Art Blakey, George Benson, Artie Shaw, Jack McDuff, Ahmad Jamal, Mary Louise, Sarah Vaughn, Billy Eckstein, Art Coltrian, Dexter Gordon, Errol Garner and Duke Ellington all came and played.

Almost all of the many clubs that lined Wylie and Center Avenues attracted both African American and white customers. White musicians who played in clubs in downtown Pittsburgh often came to the Hill when they finished their gigs, and stayed jamming until late. Still, it was emphatically African Americans whose financial power and creative energy controlled and fuelled the famous Hill District.

But in the late 1950s, an urban renewal project, designed to strengthen and revitalize the area, did just the opposite. Public housing projects in the mid-1950s were intended to improve housing but instead became the centers of poor populations on welfare. The Civic Arena project, which tore down homes and businesses, sent the Hill into a rapid decline displacing over 8,000 residents. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, the resulting race riot made the area even more volatile. Further, the crack epidemic in Pittsburgh in the 1980s adversely affected the Hill District. By 1990, the area population had declined to 15,000 from more than 50,000 in 1950. By 1990 most of the residents lived in public housing.

# THE HILL DISTRICT—NOW



Before and After: Crawford Square. Urban Design Associates

## TRANSFORMATION

Once a vital urban area known for its jazz clubs and ethnic diversity, Pittsburgh's Hill district had deteriorated by the 1950s and, in the 1960s, suffered great damage during riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King. Today, revitalization of the district has begun thanks to the completion of Crawford Square, a mixed-income development on 17.5 acres in the lower Hill district. Crawford Square is the result of the combined efforts of the city of Pittsburgh and McCormack Baron & Associates, a St. Louis developer experienced in converting blighted inner-city neighborhoods into thriving urban communities.

Crawford Square was once a vacant urban wasteland. The rebuilding maintained the basic form of a traditional neighborhood and included a mix of small apartment buildings, townhouses, and single-family houses. The new housing has front yards and lawns with planting areas, and the street facades have ground-floor porches.

Crawford Square is a landmark event in the process of rebuilding Pittsburgh's Lower Hill. It has been successfully rebuilt as a residential neighborhood and has stimulated further revitalization in the rest of the Hill District. The urban design creates a series of streets and public spaces



that not only serve the development itself, but also provide new linkages for the rest of the Hill to the City.

Over 50 percent of the units are subsidized, but no distinction is apparent in either the architecture or the character of the neighborhood. A total of 500 units of mixed-income housing have been built, including a mix of rental and for-sale housing, with a wide range of prices. Today, the revived neighborhood is racially mixed and equally divided between market-rate and affordable homes.



### CHANGE HASN'T COME EASY

Representatives from the Citizens Committee for Hill District Renewal, Model Cities, NAACP and the Poor People's Campaign are warning the City Planning Commission they want no further redevelopment in the Lower Hill Dist. the billboard sign was erected at Freedom corner (Center Ave. and Crawford St.) in response to a map released by City planners showing proposed new housing in the Middle Hill but apparently ignoring the Lower Hill. Some feared the city planned to redevelop the area by replacing present rundown housing with cultural and high rent apartment buildings

Photo by: Peter Diana / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (4/16/1999)



## TOPICS FOR THOUGHT

**THINK-PAIR-SHARE:** Write your answer to each question below and then share with a partner. Together, combine ideas and present to the class.

1. What are the social and environmental implications of an urban renewal project?
2. What is gained and what is lost during urban renewal projects?
3. Compare and contrast the Hill District of Pittsburgh with areas of Kansas City. For example, how is the 18th & Vine area similar to that of the Hill District?
4. How does urban renewal affect the culture of an area? How can it affect established businesses in the area?
5. What sets urban renewal apart from suburban development? What are the pros and cons of each?
6. Why is integrating green space important when developing urban renewal projects?
7. How can an urban renewal project be created so that its architecture and purpose is timeless rather than short-lived? Cite area examples that are both successful and unsuccessful.



The Hill District, early 1990s.



The Hill District, 2003.



## THE BROKEN WINDOW THEORY

"Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it's unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside. Or consider a sidewalk. Some litter accumulates. Soon, more litter accumulates. Eventually, people even start leaving bags of trash from take-out restaurants there or breaking into cars."

—From *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in our Communities* by George Kelling and Catherine Coles

In *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities*, the book's authors, George Kelling and Catherine Coles, argue a successful strategy for preventing vandalism is to fix the problems when they are small. Repair the broken windows within a short time, such as a day or a week, and the tendency is that vandals are much less likely to break more windows or do further damage. Clean up the sidewalk every day, and the tendency is for litter not to accumulate (or for the rate of littering to be much less). In doing so, problems do not escalate and thus respectable residents do not flee a neighborhood. What are your thoughts about this approach to reducing crime?

### TOPICS FOR THOUGHT

1. How can a simple broken window lead to the decline of a neighborhood?
2. Support or oppose the "broken window" theory through verbal or written arguments.
3. What is the importance of "respectable" residents remaining in a neighborhood? What are the qualities of a "respectable" resident?
4. Is there a difference between vandalism and graffiti? Is all graffiti negative?
5. What can community members do to strengthen their own neighborhood? Brainstorm as a group and make a list of your ideas. What are the next steps you can take?



Vandalism, circa 2007.



Kansas City graffiti by Graffiti Artist D.L. Ross a.k.a. Scribe.

# CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS



## VOCABULARY

Below is vocabulary related to *Radio Golf*. Use a dictionary or other resources to determine the meaning and context of each word. Use each word in a sentence.

**blight**—the state or result of being blighted or deteriorated; dilapidation; decay

**deed**—a writing or document executed under seal and delivered to effect a conveyance, especially of real estate

**deface**—to mar the surface or appearance of; disfigure

**disenfranchise**

**gentrification**

**green space**

**The Hill District**

**idealist**

**injunction**

**opportunist**

**raze**

**redevelopment**

**rendering**

**solicit**

**urban renewal**

**BOOKS/ARTICLES:**

Fine, Ruth E. *The Art of Romare Bearden*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003. Images of Romare Bearden's work.

Fuoco, Michael. Hill *Return to Glory: District Determined to Regain Lost Greatness*. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: April 11, 1999. In-depth article on the rebirth of Pittsburgh's Hill District.

Graham, Lawrence Otis. *A Member of the Club: Reflections on Life in a Racially Polarized World*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. A collection of essays ranging in subject matter from an African-American's experience in corporate America to life as a black busboy at an all-white country-club.

Graham, Lawrence Otis. *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. A history of America's black elite— a conservative social class greatly shaped by concerns with skin complexion, going to the "right" schools and memberships in the proper social clubs.

Jones, E. Michael. *The Slaughter of Cities: Urban Renewal as Ethnic Cleansing*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2004. An examination of the motives behind the housing policies, social engineering and other factors that devastated whole communities beginning in the 1930s.

Kelling, George and Coles, Catherine. *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in our Communities*. New York: Free Press, 1998. The "broken window" theory argues that neighborhood decay, like unattended broken windows, furthers criminal behavior. The authors call community policing and the aggressive protection of public spaces the best crime-control options available.

Shannon, Sandra G., *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*. Howard University Press, 1996. Follows the chronology in which Wilson wrote his plays, presenting analyses of each play and exploring the underlying messages of his drama.

**DVDs/CDs:**

*The Piano Lesson*. Director Lloyd Richards. With Charles Dutton and Alfre Woodard. Lions Gate Home Entertainment, 2002. August Wilson's television adaptation of his own Pulitzer Prize winning play about a brother and sister who fight over the fate of a cherished family piano.

*Africans in America*. Directors Susan Bellows and Noland Walker. WGBH Boston Video, 2000. A six-hour television miniseries about the history of African-Americans told with re-creations and interviews.

*Bessie Smith: The Complete Recordings Vol. 1*. Singer Bessie Smith. Sony, B0000027HT, 1991. A boxed set of recordings providing an introduction to Bessie Smith's style and repertoire.

**WEBSITES:**

<http://www.tcq.org/publications/augustwilson/index.cfm> —Theatre Communications Group website with detailed information about August Wilson and his Century Cycle. Includes a moving audio interview with August Wilson by Susan Lori-Parks.

<http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/sc.html> - Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

<http://www.academicinfo.net/africanamlibrary.html> - African American Digital Library

<http://www.cmoa.org/teenie/info.asp> -- Pictures taken by Teenie Harris, a photographer who documented America's urban landscape – including the Hill District – with thousands of photographs

<http://www.carnegielibrary.org/exhibit/neighborhoods/hill> - A brief history of Philadelphia's Hill District

<http://www.history-of-rock.com/blues.htm> - Photographs of key artists and a short history of the blues

<http://www.beardenfoundation.org/index2.html> - The Romare Bearden Foundation website, which contains information about the artist as well as several images of his work.

<http://www.radiogolfbroadway.com/> - Website from the Broadway version of *Radio Golf*.

<http://www.wikipedia.org/> - General information about August Wilson

<http://homepage.mac.com/lefeb5/PhotoAlbum40.html>—Link to Mathew Lefebvre's costume sketches for the Kansas City Repertory Theatre's production of *Radio Golf*.



**Before the Performance**

If you have any questions *prior* to performance day, please e-mail Amy Tonyes, Education Associate, at [tonyesal@kcrep.org](mailto:tonyesal@kcrep.org) or call 816-235-2707. **If you have an emergency after 9:00 am on the day you are scheduled for performance, please call 816-235-2895.** This phone will not be answered at any other times and there is no voicemail on this phone. Remember to bring this contact information with you the morning of the show. Please review all of this information with staff and students prior to attending the performance.

**Food & Drink**

No food, drinks, candy or gum are permitted inside the theatre at any time.

Snacks will be sold at intermission but can not be taken into the theatre. Please alert students to this policy so that they will not buy more than they can enjoy during intermission. **Please let your students know to bring one dollar bills if they would like to purchase concessions. This will insure the line moves swiftly.**

Sack lunches can be stored by the House Management staff until after the performance. They cannot be consumed in the lobby before the production, and they will not be accessible during intermission.

There are several fast food restaurants near the theatre and the University Student Union is also open following the performance. (To reserve space at the University Student Union please call 816-235-1417 prior to your visit.)

**Electronic Devices**

**Electronic and recording devices should not be brought inside the theater.** This includes pen-lights, hand-held games, virtual pets, cell phones, mp3 players, pagers, ipods and bright or noisy jewelry.

The use of cameras and other recording devices is a violation of the actor's contracts. We ask that you refrain from taking pictures during the production.

**Arrival & Parking**

Please arrive at the theatre between 9:30-9:45 am. Performances begin promptly at 10:00am. We don't want you to miss anything. The Kansas City Repertory Theatre is located at 4949 Cherry, Kansas City, MO, 64110 on the UMKC Campus.

**When you arrive at the theatre, please stay on your buses. Someone from the Kansas City Repertory Theatre staff will greet your bus and let you know how to proceed.**

Each person planning to see the play will need a ticket to give the ushers in order to enter the theatre. This includes all students, chaperones, and drivers. If your bus driver will be attending the performance, please remember to give them their ticket prior to entering the theatre.

If your group is arriving in cars, please be sure to bring quarters for the metered lot on the east side of the theatre. The cost is \$.75 per hour. Please plan accordingly.

Stay with your group unless using the restrooms before entering the theatre.



### **During the Performance**

We ask that the teacher/chaperones sit among their students in various areas in order to encourage positive behavior.

Actors appreciate audience response that is appropriate to the play. By no means does The Rep want to discourage laughter or applause during a performance. However, talking, whispering, shouting or any inappropriate responses which are disruptive to the actors or to the rest of the audience is not tolerated. If behavior problems arise we ask that a teacher or chaperone accompany the student to the theatre lobby where we ask they remain until the end of the play.

At the end of the performance, the actors will return to the stage for a curtain call. This is the opportunity for the audience to applaud and share their appreciation of the play.

### **After the Performance**

**There is a 20-minute Q. & A. discussion with the actors following the performance.** If your group needs to leave at this time, we understand, and would like to know beforehand. However, we strongly encourage you to stay for this unique learning experience.

When leaving the theater, make sure you have all your belongings. Please gather any litter and dispose of it appropriately in the lobby.

We are very happy that you are with us this morning and want to encourage an atmosphere of respect for our artists and audience members.

### **Our Weather Policy for All Student and Public Performances**

Kansas City Repertory Theatre shall be under no liability for failure of the group to attend in the event that such failure is caused by, or due to, inclement weather, interruption or delay of transportation services, or any other similar or dissimilar cause beyond the control of the company.

### **Seating and Accommodations**

Performances (other than those published) that are Interpreted and/or Audio Described are available upon request. We require two weeks notice in order to facilitate your group's particular needs.

Theatre seating is assigned and based on sequence in which reservations and payments are received, talkback attendance, disability considerations, and group size.

### **What to Wear**

Dress for the weather. You may wear dress clothes in order to make the theatre field trip a special one, but it is not required. Please be advised that, at times, it may be chilly in the theatre.

**Please contact Amy Tonyes, Education Associate, with any questions, comments or concerns.**

**816-235-2707  
tonyesal@kcrep.org**

**For emergencies, on the day of the performance only, call 816-235-2895. This number will not be answered at any other times.**

# KANSAS CITY REPERTORY THEATRE

## ORDER NOW!

For more information on our Student Matinee Series or our education programs, please call 816-235-2707.

**A Christmas Carol**  
Nov. 24, 25; Dec. 2, 3, 4,  
9, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18  
Spencer Theatre

**The Glass Menagerie**  
Jan. 27, 29; Feb. 3, 5  
10:00am  
Copaken Stage

**The Arabian Nights**  
Feb. 12  
10:00am  
Spencer Theatre

**Winesburg, Ohio**  
Mar. 26, 31  
10:00 am  
Spencer Theatre

Melinda McCrary  
Director of Education and  
Community Programs  
mccrarym@kcrep.org  
816-235-5708

Amy Tonyes  
Education Associate  
tonyesal@kcrep.org  
816-235-2707



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