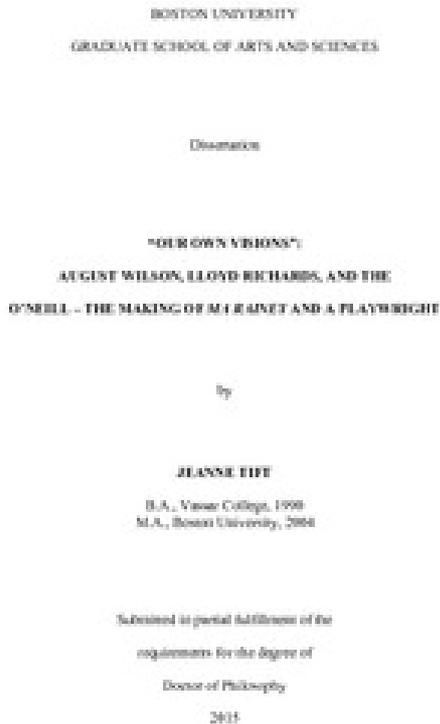


"Our own visions": August Wilson, Lloyd Richards, and the O'Neill--the making of Ma Rainey and a playwright



Date Issued
2015

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In this dissertation I examine the creation of August Wilson's first commercially and critically successful play, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, and the essential roles of his mentor--director Lloyd Richards--and the O'Neill Theater Center in that creation. A three-part chronology gives detailed biographical sketches of the two men, including their work at the O'Neill Center and their similar familial backgrounds, as well as an overview of American theater in the twentieth century, with a special emphasis on African-American drama, placing Wilson's and Richards' work in context. Drawing on interviews and articles about these men and their working relationship, a close view is given of the in-depth revision that Wilson and Richards practiced on Ma Rainey and subsequently on the six plays that they produced together; revision began as soon as Wilson completed a draft of the play and continued well into

rehearsals and even performances as each production travelled around the country, ending with a run on Broadway. After working together on the Ma Rainey script for almost two years after meeting at the O'Neill, Wilson and Richards staged the play first at Yale and finally on Broadway in October 1984. The many changes made to Ma Rainey between the time Wilson first submitted the play for consideration for the National Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill and the Broadway script was finalized reveal the profound influence of Richards in terms of overall structure, characterization, scope of stage directions, tone, and message, and other aspects of the play. The program that Richards shaped as artistic director of the O'Neill was focused on extensive rewriting within a workshop environment for playwrights; this approach was the foundation for the way he and Wilson worked together and made it possible for the playwright to realize ambitions that had eluded him. With Richards' genius for working with playwrights--his own original success was with Lorraine Hansberry and A Raisin in the Sun--and his powerful connections in the theater world, he was able to propel his discovery, Wilson, to become one of the most acclaimed American playwrights in history.

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August Wilson, 60, whose plays about 20th-century black life were among the most celebrated of modern dramas, died yesterday at Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, his city of residence. He disclosed in August that he had inoperable liver cancer. Starting with "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" (1984), a story of perseverance among exploited black jazz musicians in the 1920s, Wilson gained attention as one of the most vital and provocative literary voices of his generation. Having August's body of work in there leads people to an examination of theater and an examination of themselves in theater." Neither Wilson nor his work was universally beloved. Some critics were repelled by what they called the monotony of his themes and the plays' unrestrained dialogue. Wilson plays that he directed on Broadway (all but Seven Guitars played New Haven). Richards' honors include the Drama Desk, the Pioneer Award of AUDELCO, the Frederick Douglass Award and (in 1993) the National Medal of the Arts. He has also served as President of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers. He retired from his posts as dean of the Yale University School of Drama and artistic director of Yale Rep in 1991, but remained professor emeritus at Yale. Lloyd Richards was a gentle, quiet, patient man; with a will of steel. His determination and his artistry took the O'Neill's National Playwrights Conference to national and international acclaim. We are and will be forever in his debt." Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is a 1982 play – one of the ten-play Pittsburgh Cycle by August Wilson – that chronicles the twentieth century African American experience. The play is set in Chicago in the 1920s (the only play in the group not set in Pittsburgh), and deals with issues of race, art, religion and the historic exploitation of black recording artists by white producers. The play's title refers to a song of the same title by Ma Rainey referring to the Black Bottom dance.