



Jim Houghton and August Wilson at the O'Neill Playwrights Conference (where Wilson developed five plays including *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*) in 2002. Houghton, to whom this production is dedicated, served as Artistic Director of the O'Neill from 2000-2003. Photo by Vincent A. Scarano.

The Grace of Attention: BRIEF ENCOUNTERS WITH **AUGUST WILSON**

BY MADELEINE GEORGE

I first saw August Wilson speak at Town Hall in New York City on January 27, 1997, in a debate about race and theater with the critic Robert Brustein. Wilson had recently made a splash in his keynote address to the Theatre Communications Group by arguing forcefully for Black theater as a distinct artistic genre, and coming out against “colorblind” or “nontraditional” casting. “For a black actor to stand on the stage as part of a social milieu that has denied him his gods, his culture, his humanity, his mores, his ideas of himself and the world he lives in,” Wilson said in his now-famous speech, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, “is to be in league with a thousand nay-sayers who wish to corrupt the vigor and spirit of his heart.” Brustein,

a vocal opponent of “diversity initiatives” in the arts, argued for the “universality” of mainstream theater, and branded Wilson a “separatist” for insisting on the particularity of the Black American experience.

The debate was moderated by playwright-performer Anna Deavere Smith. My playwright friend and I had bought tickets as soon as we heard about it; we were young and penniless and we sat up high in the mezzanine. I remember the emotional roller-coaster ride of the debate—how sickened I was by Brustein’s obnoxious condescension, taking the great August Wilson to school about the history of theater and politics, but also how intermittently frustrated I was with Mr. Wilson, when he patiently explained

that everyone must choose their racial and cultural identity and stick with it, that sexual orientation is not a real political category, that men should not play women on stage and women should not play men. It was a thrilling, maddening, urgent conversation. My friend and I stumbled out into the freezing cold night arguing at a fever pitch ourselves.

The second time I saw August Wilson speak was at the O'Neill Playwrights Conference five years later. The O'Neill is basically summer camp for new plays—a beautiful seaside estate in coastal Connecticut converted to a theater center, where every summer writers, directors, actors and designers gather for a month to develop new work. Wilson developed five

of his plays there over the years, including *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. In 2002 I was a participant in the conference, and Mr. Wilson came through as a visiting artist. The first evening he was there, everyone working at the conference gathered to hear Mr. Wilson read aloud from the play he was then working on, *Gem of the Ocean*. In his cap and button-down shirt, sitting on a folding chair with no special lights, Wilson delivered a monologue from Aunt Ester, the 285-year-old “washer of souls,” born into slavery, who anchors that play. His performance was to a professional actor’s performance as an a cappella soloist is to a symphony. In a clear, unadorned voice, he lifted up the melody of the monologue and let us hear its shape. I remember thinking, *Every word of this monologue is action*. “Action” isn’t necessarily the first word we think of when we think of Mr. Wilson’s plays—“lyrical,” “musical,” “emotional” are adjectives that get thrown around often when we talk about Wilson’s dialogue or scene structure. But as a playwright, his deepest concern is the motivations of the human heart: what people *do* to get where they think they need to go. When he read us his words, that’s what he helped us hear.

The day after this performance, I found myself sitting alone with Mr. Wilson at a picnic table on the breezy front porch of the main house, overlooking a green field that led down to the Atlantic Ocean. Naturally I was mute with awe, looking for

a way to slink away without seeming rude. I remember he asked me some easygoing questions about my work. He seemed curious enough about the answers that I didn’t slink away. I wish I could remember anything about what he said to me, but really I was too terrified to keep the level of discourse very high. What I remember is the tenor of our interaction, his patience, the respect he afforded me, his assumption that we could talk as equals, his willingness to follow our conversation wherever it led. It lasted maybe half an hour—maybe.

Two years later, I was coming out the doors of New Dramatists, a service organization for playwrights in New York City, of which August Wilson is among the most distinguished alumni. I pushed open the heavy wooden doors and there was August Wilson coming up the stone steps. “Oh, hello, Madeleine,” he said, just as if we were well acquainted and had been recently interrupted in a conversation we were about to resume. I couldn’t believe that this great man remembered my name. I couldn’t believe that in that one brief encounter he had taken me in with such specificity and seriousness. I thought, *The pantheon of humanity in this man’s mind must be beyond anything we regular people can imagine*. He sees people. He hears them when they speak. How many thousands of young writers and artists, how many tens of thousands of human beings of all kinds, have been touched by the grace of his attention?

I listened to excerpts of August Wilson’s debate with Robert Brustein again recently (you can, too, if you’re interested—I highly recommend it; although it’s nearly 20 years old, the issues on the table could not be more timely: www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1109529). In many ways the evening was as I had remembered—the waves of hisses, boos, and cheers from the agitated audience, Wilson’s contained frustration, Brustein’s barely contained condescension. But what struck me most listening again, twenty years on, was the way Mr. Wilson ended his opening remarks. Although the stakes of the debate couldn’t be higher—these are life-and-death issues of self-determination, cultural survival, and artistic integrity—Mr. Wilson is curious and keen to listen. More than that, he is aware that he is in a room full of human beings. After laying out his position, he explains that he is “looking forward to hearing Mr. Brustein further espouse his views, and to espousing further my own.” Then he turns to us, the audience, the world, and addresses us directly: “You have demonstrated a willingness to explore the nature of your own lives by coming here tonight, and I salute you,” he says. “And I ask that we find a common cause that can enlist us all, for in the end, it comes down to people sitting on a stage talking about life as a battlefield of the spirit, and how art and life illuminate and embolden and celebrates that battle, finding in it a meaning for the weight and substance, the content and context, of our lives.”



Director Tim Bond in one of the informal, under-the-tent discussions sparked by August Wilson’s address at the 1996 TCG conference. Photo by Jamey O’Quinn. Reprinted from American Theatre and used by permission of TCG.