

The Timeless African American Playwright

As we look back on the 250th anniversary of the City of Pittsburgh, many notable African Americans come to mind who have helped strengthen the “Steel City’s” durability. There is the notable CEO Bill Strickland Jr., there was the civil rights activist Daisy Lampkin, and the renowned composer, Earl “Fatha” Hines. But none made such an impact on Pittsburgh History as the preeminent African American playwright, August Wilson.

I was a sophomore at Central Catholic High School when I first read one of the works of August Wilson: Ten plays chronicling each decade of the African American experience in the 20th century. The American Literature course focused on his play entitled *Fences*. *Fences* took a glimpse into the life of an African American family in the mid 20th century. Moreover, it brought to life the pain, sadness, struggles, and anger in an African American man named Troy. Troy is possessed with the residual pain of anger and sadness about his past and hides his pain through alcoholism, a testament too many black men are familiar with. The powerful use of this character’s struggle demonstrates the life of many African Americans on the Hill during the 1950’s. Ever since reading this book, I have been amazed with August Wilson’s ability to capture the diary of a neglected people.

Born in the Hill District on April 27, 1945, August Wilson transcended what it meant to be called a ‘history maker.’ He grew up a few blocks from where I live, in the same impoverished neighborhood. Raised in a family of six, August became familiar with the struggles of African Americans at a very young age. Because his father abandoned August’s family, his mother Daisy Wilson took on the responsibility of raising the family; struggling against odds to make ends meet. I too, can relate to August Wilson’s struggles and emotions. My mother Rita, is the sole provider for my family of five, working hard to provide her children opportunities that were unavailable to her. Like August, I am familiar with the pains of having no father and the difficult task of keeping hope alive in a world of despair.

For a brief period of time August Wilson enrolled at Central Catholic High School. As the only African American student in 1959; threats and violence drove him away. Although he dropped out of school, he did not abandon his pursuit of education and decided to self-educate himself at the Carnegie Library. Because of his drive and perseverance, he was the only American in Pittsburgh to be awarded an honorary degree from the Carnegie Library. As a senior at Central Catholic High School, I appreciate the fact that August Wilson “blazed the trail” so that other African American students could some day feel at home at Central.

In 1984, August set in motion a series of historical documents which were centered on the Hill. These historical documents are of prophetic importance to Pittsburgh History. Through his plays, he portrayed the lushness, splendor, despair, and complexity of the African American experience, and exposed America to the truths about the ongoing struggles in America’s backyard. Writer Barbara Lewis said, “In the gallery of faces and

personal histories that Wilson has crafted, we encounter our ancestors whose sins, energies, and ambitions have directed and accompanied us to the present.”

His plays have had an indelible impact on the people of the Hill District. Because August gave voice to the blacks on the Hill, we now have a sense of worth and dignity. Key community leaders like the One Hill Community Benefits Agreement Coalition, and the Dinwiddie Community Alliance, now mobilize to influence the city’s decision on improvement of the Hill. Despite growing up in some of the hardest conditions, August was able to give form and utterance to the memoirs and experience of a neglected people. His plays are a vital part of Pittsburgh history. Although he is gone, his legacy is still germinating in the spirit of likeminded youth around the globe and is an everlasting example to the people of Pittsburgh. He is truly, the timeless African American Playwright.