

August Wilson Biography

Playwright (1945–2005)

African-American playwright August Wilson won a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award for his play *Fences*, and earned a second Pulitzer Prize for *The Piano Lesson*.

IN THESE GROUPS

QUOTE

“Never is it suggested that playwrights like David Mamet or Terrence McNally are limiting themselves to whiteness. The idea that we are trying to escape from the ghetto of black culture is insulting.”

—August Wilson

Early Life

Playwright August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on April 27, 1945. His mother, Daisy Wilson, was of African-American heritage. His father was a German immigrant named Frederick Kittel.

As a child, Kittel attended St. Richard's Parochial School. When his parents divorced, he, his mother and his siblings moved from the poor Bedford Avenue area of Pittsburgh to a mostly white suburb in the Oakland section. After facing the relentless bigotry of his classmates at Central Catholic High School, he transferred to Connelly Vocational High School, and later to Gladstone High School. When he was 15 years old, Wilson pursued an independent education at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, where he would earn his high school diploma.

Aspiring Poet

Following his father's death in 1965, a 20-year-old Frederick Kittel adopted the pen name "August Wilson"—reportedly an homage to his mother—and declared himself a poet. In 1968, Wilson and a friend, Rob Penny, co-founded the Black Horizon Theater. The following year, Wilson married Brenda Burton. The couple welcomed a daughter, Sakina, in 1970; they divorced two years later.

Wilson remained primarily focused on making it as a poet—largely to no avail—until moving to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978.

Successful Playwright

August Wilson wrote his first notable play in 1979, *Jitney*, for which he earned a fellowship at the Minneapolis Playwright Center.

In 1981, Wilson married Judy Oliver. The following year, his new play, *Ma Rainey's Black*

Bottom, was accepted at the Eugene O'Neill Playwright's Conference. The year 1982 was particularly fruitful for Wilson, as it marked his introduction to Lloyd Richards, who went on to direct Wilson's first six Broadway plays.

Wilson's play *Fences* premiered on Broadway in 1987, earning the playwright his first Pulitzer Prize as well as a Tony Award. *Joe Turner* opened on Broadway in 1988.

Wilson divorced Judy Oliver in 1990. He took home another Pulitzer Prize that same year, this time for *The Piano Lesson*, following its Broadway premiere.

A collection of Wilson's work, entitled *Three Plays by August Wilson*, was published in book form in 1991. The following year brought the Broadway premiere of *Two Trains Running*.

In 1994, Wilson married for the third time, to a costume designer named Constanza Romero. *Seven Guitars* made its way to the Broadway stage two years later, followed by the birth of Wilson's and Romero's daughter, Azula, in 1997.

King Hedley II made its Broadway debut in 2001, and *Gem of the Ocean* premiered in Chicago roughly a year later. In 2003, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was revived on Broadway. *Gem of the Ocean* premiered on Broadway in 2004, where it made a run of 72 performances.

Death

August Wilson died of liver cancer on October 2, 2005, in Seattle, Washington. His new play, *Radio Golf*, had opened in Los Angeles, California, just a few months earlier.