1

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

August Wilson: the ground on which he stood

> I am one of those warrior spirits. The battle since the first African set foot on the continent of North America has been a battle for the affirmation of the value and worth of one's being in the face of this society that says you're worthless.
>
> . . . As Africans prior to coming over here, they existed, and they were the center. Everything revolved around them in their world view. Over here, all of that has been taken and stripped away. So I say, 'Let's look at it. The world is right here in this back yard.' There is no idea that cannot be contained by black life. We have the entire world here . . . it all depends on where you're standing . . . I'm standing over here.
>
> August Wilson[1]

On 2 October 2005 August Wilson died at the Swedish Medical Centre in Seattle. It was just eight months after the death of another American playwright, Arthur Miller. They came out of different worlds. Miller was descended from immigrants on both sides of the family, Jews who went to America to escape persecution and seek their fortune. And if they subsequently lost the fortune they made, they nonetheless never lost belief in the system that had redeemed them from a far worse fate. To be sure, they encountered prejudice, but even so they slid with some ease into an America which swiftly bore the impress of European Jews as they emerged as entrepreneurs, artists, scientists and intellectuals surprisingly ready to interpret America to itself.

For some, particularly those in middle age at the moment of immigration, the maintenance of the old ways was a priority. For others, the trading of a previous identity was a small price to be paid for the acquisition of a new one. If Jewishness was perceived as a problem, it could be wished away, literally or symbolically. Names could be changed. Miller abandoned his grandparents' god, and though he continued to write works in which Jewish characters were confronted with the implications of their identities, this was not his subject. If his career was that of a man who engaged in a lifelong argument with America, and if he frequently found himself excluded by virtue of his critique, he was in essence a believer in the very values he so often challenged.

In particular, he rejected the notion that assimilation was a form of betrayal. He laid claim to Jewish culture, drained of its religious content, but otherwise took American claims sufficiently seriously to test them in plays in which true believers discovered the flaws of a system which nonetheless offered new possibilities. Wilson's case was fundamentally different, though the two writers met in a shared theatrical tradition, no matter how determined they were to modify and challenge it.

On one side Wilson was a descendant of slaves (while his white father was an immigrant from Europe, this was not an identity that interested him), a people who neither fled persecution nor sought a fortune, though their labour guaranteed it to those who systematically persecuted them. And when freedom from slavery came, such rights as they were granted were swiftly stripped away. Thereafter, a primary function became survival. Yet through all this suffering something new was born, a way of being in the world, strategies of resistance that were simultaneously strategies of self-invention, and by degrees, they, too, began to transform the society they were never quite permitted to join. It was their labour that built the infrastructure, that enabled industry to flourish. Their blood was spilt on foreign battlefields with little offered in return beyond a sustained hostility. Assimilation was not as easily available as it had been even for the Jew who suffered from anti-Semitism. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century assimilation was virtually unattainable. Nor, from Wilson's point of view, was it desirable. 'To make inroads into society,' he observed, 'you have to give up your Africanness . . . if you want to go to Harvard, you have to give up the natural way to do things as blacks . . . I think the process of assimilation to white society was a big mistake. We don't want to be like you.'[2] Of *Two Trains Running* (1990) he said, 'There were two ideas in the play, or at least two ideas that had confronted black America since the Emancipation, the ideas of cultural assimilation and cultural separation. These were, in my mind, the two trains.'[3]

The European immigrant drew a line across history. The past existed only to be transcended. Seemingly, much the same could be said of African Americans. A distant African past had been erased by those who enslaved them, while slavery was not an experience to be claimed, any more than what followed, as new rights were swiftly stripped from the supposedly redeemed. History was what white historians declared it to be, not because they sought to distort but because they were standing on their own ground and not that of others. For Wilson, though, Africa had never been dissected out of the African American, while slavery, as fact and image, was the ineluctable starting point of the American experience. Above all, a disregarded history

had to be reclaimed, a history this time written by those whose experience of America had been radically different from that of the European immigrant.

In terms of his own profession, he was too conscious of the black artist's role as entertainer of his oppressor to be happy to celebrate those individuals who took advantage of the escape route seemingly offered by show business in its various forms, any more than he was prepared to welcome the ending of the black baseball league when at last sport began to be desegregated. Something, it seemed to him, was lost in the process. That something, in both cases, was black people's roots in the black community, their role in a complex black culture which could only be damaged by the condescending offer of access to a dominant society. To Wilson, the trade was an unequal one. In fact, he went so far as to regret the Great Migration that had seen millions of black Americans trek north in search of freedom and success as if they were, indeed, true equivalents of Polish Jews or Italian workers ready to be embraced and absorbed as they passed through the Golden Door.

It was not simply that awaiting them, besides genuine emancipation, the vibrant life of the ghetto, emergent political and literary activity, and music which he called the carrier of a culture, were those determined to deny them access to work, housing, rights of all kinds. It was not only that further into the century urban decay, drugs and violence would work to undermine a real sense of community. It was that connections had been broken, people dispersed, personal and public stories interrupted. When eventually integration had become more of a reality, the middle classes, in distancing themselves from the ghetto, distanced themselves, too, from those others who they feared defined them in ways they no longer chose to embrace. For Wilson, the need was for communal strength, an acknowledgement of a shared past and hence a sense of shared identity in the present.

Slavery, in particular, was the source of shame, seemingly best not mentioned. Toni Morrison has spoken of the difficulty she found in approaching it but Wilson remarked that as the Jews at Passover begin by recalling their time as slaves in the land of Egypt, so, too, should black Americans celebrate the moment of their emancipation. Indeed, he called for an annual celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, and it was notable that while the European Holocaust was marked by a museum in Washington, the nation's capital, the genocide of Africans in the slave trade had no national marker.[4] But it was not only slavery that was suppressed. He noted that his parents, in common he believed with those of his friends, revealed little about their own pasts, not least because they could take no pride in what, he presumed, had been demeaning. But, for Wilson, history was a key. As he observed,

quoting his character Aunt Ester, 'If you drop the ball, you got to go back and pick it up' (*Conversations* 157). That is what his plays, in effect, do. They are based on the assumption that it is necessary to retrieve the past before it is possible to go forward. They are about the necessity to pick the ball up.

Miller, too, had been a believer in history. For him, it was a key to the moral self. The linking of action to consequence was an acknowledgement of responsibility, for the individual and society alike. His characters spend much of their lives desperately calling out their names, quite as if, in league with their society, they had conspired against themselves. What undoes them is denial, a refusal to confront their own past actions. Hence the very structuring of his plays was a statement. The birds, he was fond of admonishing, always come home to roost, the more especially, perhaps, in a society so determined to deny the reality of its past, so committed to turning away from history in order to stare into the bright light of a future which alone, Americans had been told, holds true authority.

Wilson, however, is drawn to the past for other reasons. Miller could assume a history that he was able to evoke because its contours were seemingly known. Wilson was about the business of identifying and, in truth, constituting a history. It was not a history contained in the history books. Miller returns to the Depression, to the Second World War, to the Holocaust, to the House Un-American Activities Committee, to filmmaking in the 1960s. This is not the business of Wilson's plays. He was committed to celebrating the lives of those who lived in the interstices of such history. To be sure, they suffered the Depression, were pulled away to war, but it is the daily traffic of individuals who share a mythology, ways of behaving, assumptions about human necessities, who share, in short, a culture, that interested him. Thus, as he explained, his 1930s play *The Piano Lesson*, (1987)

> doesn't deal with the Depression, because I am not interested. I have a 1960s play [*Two Trains Running*], but I don't believe the words Black Power are ever mentioned [in fact, he was worng – they are], and it doesn't deal with Martin Luther King. So what? It deals with the people, people who live their lives in a certain social condition that could not have existed other than in those particular decades . . . I am not particularly interested in history as such. You can get that from the history books.[5]
>
> [His interest was rather in those who] still had to go to work every day . . . still had to pay [the] rent . . . still had to put food on the table. And those events [the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, the antiwar marches] while they may have in some way affected the character of society as a whole, didn't reach the average person who was concerned with just simply living.[6]

In setting himself to chart that other history and that culture over the course of a century, Wilson was not, then, concerned to tell a public history, still less to present the pathology of black life in a racist society. His interest lay elsewhere. The story he set himself to stage was that of the lives of those who while peripheral to a society on the make, to the American century, materialistic, confident in its power, were scarcely peripheral to themselves. They did not cut themselves adrift from the American Dream, even as the door was slammed securely in their faces. The pursuit of happiness, the persistence of hope, defined them no less than those who so casually dismissed them as irrelevant to an unfolding national narrative of triumph. But, to Wilson, they were defined by something more than a desire to merge themselves into the generality.

This was not history in the sense of an accurate retrieval of detailed facts. He changed the date of a Joe Louis boxing match because it suited his dramatic purposes. In writing *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986), he made no effort to research 1911, when it is set. Admittedly, in the background, and shaping the emotional environment of characters who live out the moment-by-moment truths of personal and social existence, are the shifting realities of an unfolding public life. But historical accuracy came second place to a different kind of integrity. Rather than turn to reference books which, he explained, constituted a kind of straitjacket, he listened to the music of each decade, finding there a correlative to the concerns of a community for which music was the carrier of the history of a people whose resilience and cultural resources had been disregarded at times even by themselves.

Wilson was happy to acknowledge that Miller was a part of the dramatic tradition on which he could be said to have drawn, though when he began writing he had read and seen almost no plays (feeling that his wide reading in poetry had inhibited the development of his own voice, he determined not to make the same mistake in the case of drama). He was not happy, however, at suggestions that colourblind casting might be one route for the black actor anxious to assume his or her rightful place in the theatre. Thus he recoiled from the notion of black actors performing *Death of a Salesman* (1949) as an insult, an assault on the black presence, on the grounds that 'Blacks speak differently, think differently; they respond to stimuli differently, (*Conversations* 183). Black families, he insisted, 'would not have those problems and in any case do not resolve problems in that way',[7] in truth an odd comment since the relationship between fathers and sons would, as he himself confessed, prove no less central to Wilson's work than Miller's, while both writers staged the lives of characters desperate to affirm their identities and too easily seduced by myths and values tangential to their needs. The point

is, though, that Wilson was concerned precisely to delineate a distinct territory, to refute suggestions that African Americans were no more than a variation on the American theme. Their history, after all, was distinctive and their methods of surviving that history no less so.

For black actors to lend their talents to the classic and modern repertoire of Western drama seemed to him close to a betrayal: 'Our manners, our style, our approach to language, our gestures, and our bodies are not for rent. The history of our bodies – the maimings, the lashings, the lynchings, the body that is capable of inspiring profound rage and pungent cruelty – is not for rent. Nor is the meaning of our history or our bodies for rent.'[8] How, then, could he embrace, as he did, an Afrikaans writer such as Athol Fugard? Presumably, what he responded to was Fugard's placing of the black experience in South Africa at the centre of *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* (in 1976, the first professional play seen by Wilson, and the play whose impact on him was so great that he felt challenged to equal it), even though Fugard wrote out of a white liberal sensibility forged in part out of a reaction to his own early racism (as a child he had spit in the face of a black servant). Speaking in 1997, however, while acknowledging the importance of Fugard, he suggested that ideally he should have concentrated on the white experience in South Africa, a strange remark given that this was in large part what he did and does, though his attempt to inhabit the sensibility of his black characters was surely at the heart of his resistance to the apartheid regime which he so assiduously challenged.

By the same token, Wilson was unwilling to celebrate the production of black plays by regional theatres, seeing this not merely as tokenism, a kind of theatrical quota system, but as a refusal to acknowledge the primacy of black theatres, denied the kind of funding regularly made available to what he characterized as white theatres, white-managed, white-directed and with, essentially, white subscription audiences, the subscription ethos being one, he thought, which favoured mediocrity.

To be a black American writer was to embrace a complex fate but also to lay claim to more than one tradition. What primarily mattered was a sense of continuity between his life as a writer and his life as a black man in America. Miller had spoken of that same sense of continuity between a personal and aesthetic life but in Wilson's case there was clearly a sense of moral, social, historic obligation. There was, though, a disjunction between the polemical nature of some of his public statements and his plays. His cycle of plays was a statement rather than containing one. They did, in fact, constitute the ground on which he stood in that they recapitulated the history that had gone to consolidate his own identity and that

of those whose lives he celebrated in their variety no less than their commonalities. Those plays, from *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) to *Radio Golf* (2005), were not an argument for the significance of black lives – they were a demonstration of it.

Born on 27 April 1945, Wilson grew up in his mother's house at 1727 Bedford Avenue in the Hill District of Pittsburgh (a district in which he would later set his plays, while insisting that they could equally have been set in Detroit or Cleveland). He was the fourth of six children. His father, Frederick (Fritz) Kittel, like Tom's in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), seems to have fallen in love with long distance. Certainly at the time of Wilson's birth he was hardly a presence and it is, perhaps, no surprise that Wilson would later choose to take his mother's surname, not least because his memories of his father were of a destructively violent man. After his parents divorced, Wilson's mother, Daisy, turned to a black man called David Bedford, a high school football star who had spent twenty-three years of his life in prison for having killed a man during a robbery but who now worked for the city, cleaning sewers. He became Wilson's stepfather and it was he, not Wilson's birth father, who seems to have been a model, though he died when Wilson was twenty-four. No wonder there was never any ambiguity in Wilson's mind about his racial identity. His father's European ancestry, his whiteness, meant nothing to a young boy who lived, literally and symbolically, in his mother's house and whose everyday associations were with a predominantly black world.

Daisy Wilson cleaned houses and the family of seven lived in two rooms. Life was a struggle, but it was not struggle that Wilson later recalled. Deprivation might have characterized their material circumstances; it did not define their lives. The poor surrounded by the poor seldom feel poor. His mother had inherited beliefs, values, practical ways of surviving that she passed to her son who inherited, too, the richness of a wider world, a culture improvised in the face of disregard and prejudice. He afterwords remembered the small daily indignities of growing up black. In Woolworths no paper bags were offered to them. While he would attend St Bridget's church, he and his fellow blacks were considered members of a small church called St Benedict the Moor's, albeit a church that could not hold confession. His mother paid $300 a month for her row-house while a white woman two doors away paid $40.

Nonetheless, Wilson grew up feeling that to become overconcerned with the white world which sought to limit and define black possibility was to succumb to a temptation best resisted. To allow oneself to be defined by those who exclude you, to accept their standards of behaviour and concede their

authority, is to limit one's possibilities and be distracted from the business of identifying and celebrating cultural strengths that may have been engendered by oppression but which now stood as a key to identity.

Wilson began to write seriously at the age of twenty, reading his poetry at art shows (since he knew a group of artists) and once at a fashion show, earning himself $50, which in 1966 was serious money. He and others published a small magazine called *Signal* which metamorphosed into *Connection*, which in turn gave way to the Centre Avenue Poets' Theatre Workshop. This was a home for poetry readings and jazz but, in part because of the word 'theatre' in their title, its members began to consider presenting plays. They were now reborn as Black Horizons, putting on a play by Rob Penny (known as Black Rob) with Wilson directing, following a crash course in the local library. It was Penny who introduced Wilson to recordings of Malcolm X's speeches, tapes which he found moving.

Wilson was twenty-three, in 1968, when he co-founded this black arts theatre in Pittsburgh. Knowing little of theatre, he turned to Amiri Baraka's *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (1969) and to a special issue of the *Tulane Drama Review* (edited by Ed Bullins) whose opening essay by Larry Neal was entitled 'The Black Arts Movement'. In this Neal had laid claim to a 'black aesthetic', quoting 'Brother Knight' as insisting that the 'Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs . . . he must create a new history, new symbols, new myths and legends.'[9] Here, had Wilson but known it, was a template for his later life as a playwright (though when he tried to imitate Baraka's plays he found them alien to his own style). Black Horizons performed their plays in (mostly black) schools, charging fifty cents admission, rising to a dollar, in colleges around Pittsburgh and in Ohio, and even in Jackson, Mississippi. Wilson was both director and actor, learning his skills from a book.

For the black writer, the theatre had a central force. It was a social form which drew on and appealed to the community. It lent itself to polemics, didactics. It was concerned with transformation. What was at stake, though, was not integration, not the appearance of black actors in white musicals (characterized by Neal as 'hipper versions of the minstrel show'), still less 'Negroes acting out the hang-ups of middle-class America' (*TDR* 33). This was to be a theatre that would stage the lives of '*blues people*', and in the person of Baraka find a writer with a 'spiritual outlook', and of 'deep lyricism' since he was 'fundamentally more a poet than a playwright' (*TDR* 36).

That phrase must have had a special resonance for Wilson, for whom the new black theatre came as something of a revelation. Although regarding himself as a poet, and never previously having seen a play, he was attracted by the directness of theatre and set himself to stage all the scripts contained in

the *Tulane Drama Review*, which included works by Baraka (still identifying himself as Jones), Bullins, Ben Caldwell, John O'Neal, Sonia Sanchez and half a dozen others. It was an urgent theatre, unapologetic. Neal's article quoted from the black poet Don. L. Lee: 'We must destroy Faulkner, dick, jane, and other perpetuators of evil. It's time for DuBois, Nat Turner, and Kwame Nkrumah. As Frantz Fanon points out: destroy the culture and you destroy the people. This must not happen. Black artists are culture stabilizers, bringing back old values, and introducing new ones. Black Art will talk to the people' (*TDR* 29–30).

This was not to be protest literature in that protest was, by definition, aimed at white audiences in expectation of acceptance. Black art began where protest ended. It was primarily a question of audience. 'The Black Arts Movement', Neal insisted, 'is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community' (*TDR* 29). That would remain a central tenet of Wilson's own work, work which still lay five years in the future.

Wilson's was never protest literature. Rather, it was an attempt to sustain a culture and to bring the writer into closer alignment with his own community. Like Neal, he was also concerned to propose 'a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology'. Black power, Neal explained, 'is the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms . . . The two movements [Black Arts and Black Power] postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas – one black, one white. The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people' (*TDR* 29). Interestingly, the Kerner Commission Report on Civil Disturbances, also published in 1968, in response to the widespread 'riots' of the previous year, had come to a similar conclusion – that there were two Americas – and the special issue of the *Tulane Drama Review* was published shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, after which once again cities across America burned. Bullins and Baraka were at a production of Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*, at the Lafayette Theatre, when news of King's death reached them.

Wilson shared all the convictions and objectives identified by Neal but felt inhibited from writing plays. He was still more at home with poetry, drawn to the work of John Berryman and Derek Walcott. Dialogue, in particular, posed problems. But the theatre seemed central to his beliefs and belief was what he had been seeking. As he later explained, in 1968 he had been 'a young man coming into manhood searching for something to dedicate my life to' (*Ground* 11–12).

After a while, though, he was tempted to add playwriting to his newly acquired skills as a director, at first trying, then rejecting, Baraka's poeticized

agitprop. Inspired by seeing *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*, he wrote *Recycle* in 1973 (prompted by the break-up of his first marriage), which was produced by a Pittsburgh community theatre, and *The Coldest Day of the Year* (1976) in which an old man and woman engage in conversation on a park bench (a response, he explained, to the collapse of his relationship with his girlfriend of the time). A poetic work, the latter remained a favourite of his long after he had launched himself into his ten-play cycle, though its language was at odds with that in his later plays. In that same year he wrote *The Homecoming*, a brief play set in a railroad station in which three black men wait for the dead body of Blind Willie Johnson, a blues singer. They encounter two recruiting scouts from record companies, exploiters of black talent, whom they beat. The play was staged by an amateur company. Together with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) and a planned play about Otis Redding, this was to have formed part of a projected trilogy to be called *Dangerous Music*.

The key moment, however, came when, in 1978, Wilson's friend Claude Purdy persuaded him to rewrite a series of poems as a play, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (a musical satire on American society with twenty-seven characters), in 1978 inviting him to St Paul to finish it (a city, incidentally, that Wilson could not at the time locate on a map).

The play ran to 167 single-spaced sheets. After a staged reading by the Inner City Repertory Theatre of Los Angeles, Wilson moved to St Paul (though *Black Bart* would not be performed there until 1981) and worked for the Science Museum of Minnesota, writing a series of brief plays about scientists (Margaret Mead, William Harvey, Charles Darwin) and anthropological subjects, adapting stories from the Northwest Native Americans ('I never could understand why they were willing to pay me so much money to do that', *Conversations* 121) before taking a part-time job as a cook for the Little Brothers of the Poor.

It was in St Paul that Wilson began work on what would become *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. He also worked on early versions of *Fullerton Street* (1981), set in the 1940s and concerned with those who had moved north only to end up on welfare, and *Jitney* (1982). Although the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre's National Playwrights Conference rejected the latter two (the first receiving a staged reading at the Minneapolis Playwright's Centre and the second a production at the Penumbra Theatre in St Paul), it accepted *Ma Rainey* and Wilson began a personal and professional relationship with the director Lloyd Richards, whose parents had made their way to Detroit in the 1920s by way of Canada and who would subsequently direct the majority of his play cycle.

Richards had started work as an actor, appearing in New York in a play by Molly Kazan, directed by Hume Cronyn and starring Karl Malden, but his