One of America’s most powerful and original dramatists, August Wilson offered an alternative history of the twentieth century, as seen from the perspective of black Americans. He celebrated the lives of those seemingly pushed to the margins of national life, but who were simultaneously protagonists of their own drama and evidence of a vital and compelling community. Decade by decade, he told the story of a people with a distinctive history who forged their own future, aware of their roots in another time and place, but doing something more than just survive. Wilson deliberately addressed black America, but in doing so he discovered an international audience. Alongside chapters addressing Wilson’s life and career, and the wider context of his plays, this Companion dedicates individual chapters to each play in his ten-play cycle, ordered chronologically and thereby demonstrating Wilson’s notion of an unfolding history of the twentieth century.

Christopher Bigsby is Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia and has published more than thirty books covering American theatre, popular culture and British drama, including Modern American Drama (Cambridge, 1992), Contemporary American Playwrights (Cambridge, 2000), Arthur Miller: A Critical Study (Cambridge, 2005) and Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory (Cambridge, 2006). He is co-editor, with Don Wilmeth, of The Cambridge History of American Theatre, which received the Barnard Hewitt Award for Outstanding Research from the American Society for Theatre Research. He is also an award-winning novelist, has written plays for radio and television, and is a regular radio and television broadcaster.

A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book
CONTENTS

List of contributors vii
Note on the text viii
List of plays ix

1 August Wilson: the ground on which he stood
CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY 1

2 Been here and gone
JOHN LAHR 28

3 August Wilson’s relationship to black theatre: community, aesthetics, history and race
MARY L. BOGUMIL 52

4 Music and mythology in August Wilson’s plays
KIM PEREIRA 65

5 Gem of the Ocean and the redemptive power of history
HARRY J. ELAM, JR. 75

6 Joe Turner’s Come and Gone
SAMUEL A. HAY 89

7 Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom: cutting the historical record, dramatizing a blues CD
ALAN NADEL 102

8 A piano and its history: family and transcending family
FELICIA HARDISON LONDRE 113
CONTENTS

9 The tragedy of Seven Guitars
Brenda Murphy 124

10 Safe at home?: August Wilson’s Fences
Matthew Roudané 135

11 Two Trains Running: blood on the tracks
Stephen Bottoms 145

12 Jitney, folklore and responsibility
David Krasner 158

13 King Hedley II: in the midst of all this death
Joan Herrington 169

14 Radio Golf: the courage of his convictions – survival, success and spirituality
Margaret Booker 183

15 Critics on August Wilson
David K. Sauer and Janice A. Sauer 193

16 An interview with August Wilson
Christopher Bigsby 202

Index 214
LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

MARGARET BOOKER Independent scholar
STEPHEN BOTTOMS Leeds University
MARY L. BOGUMIL Southern Illinois University
HARRY J. ELAM, JR. Stanford University
SAMUEL A. HAY Lafayette College
JOAN HERRINGTON Western Michigan University
DAVID KRASNER Yale University
JOHN LAHR Writer and journalist
FELICIA HARDISON LONDRE University of Missouri, Kansas City
BRENDA MURPHY University of Connecticut
ALAN NADEL Rensselaer Institute
KIM PEREIRA Illinois State University
MATTHEW ROUDANÉ Georgia State University
DAVID K. SAUER AND JANICE A. SAUER University of Southern Alabama
Before his death in 2005, August Wilson completed his cycle of ten plays, each set in a different decade of the twentieth century. They were not written in sequential order beginning with the 1900s, but for the purposes of this book they are presented chronologically so that it is possible to follow the unfolding story of that century as seen from the perspective of a man now recognized as America’s most powerful and successful African American playwright.

Chapter 2 was originally published in the New Yorker on 16 April 2001 (pp. 50–65), and is reprinted here with the kind permission of the author, John Lahr. American spellings and punctuation have been retained.

The interview with August Wilson originally appeared in the first volume of Writers in Conversation with Christopher Bigsby, which I edited for the Arthur Miller Centre for American Studies at the University of East Anglia in 2000.

Christopher Bigsby
LIST OF PLAYS

The following list of the ten plays that make up August Wilson’s ‘Pittsburgh Cycle’ indicates the decades in which they are set and the year of first production.

Gem of the Ocean 1900s (2003)
Joe Turner’s Come and Gone 1910s (1986)
Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom 1920s (1984)
The Piano Lesson 1930s (1987)
Seven Guitars 1940s (1995)
Fences 1950s (1985)
Two Trains Running 1960s (1990)
King Hedley II 1980s (1999)
Radio Golf 1990s (2005)