



AUGUST WILSON'S
THE PIANO
LESSON

DIRECTED BY Gregg T. Daniel

OCT. 13–NOV. 10, 2024



aNoiseWithin

Dear School Partner,

Welcome to A Noise Within Theatre! We are thrilled to welcome you to the 2024-25 season—a season that we like to call **True Grit**—with stories that delve into the depths of tenacity and determination. In *The Piano Lesson*, a brother and a sister come head-to-head as they battle over the fate of a family heirloom with a ghostly omniscience, posing the essential question: *can one live fully in the present without first embracing their past?*

In this study guide, you will find articles, classroom activities, behind-the-scenes interviews, and other exciting materials, all crafted to align with the Common Core and the California VAPA Standards. This study guide can be enjoyed by teachers and students alike, our hope being that teachers and students enjoy it together!

We offer this study guide as a free resource for contextualizing the show and drawing parallels with our modern world, and you can find guides from our past seasons available for download on our website.

We hope this study guide will prepare you to enjoy the show to its fullest potential and to create a lasting memory of a fantastic day at the theatre. We are happy to have you!

Warmly,

A Noise Within Education



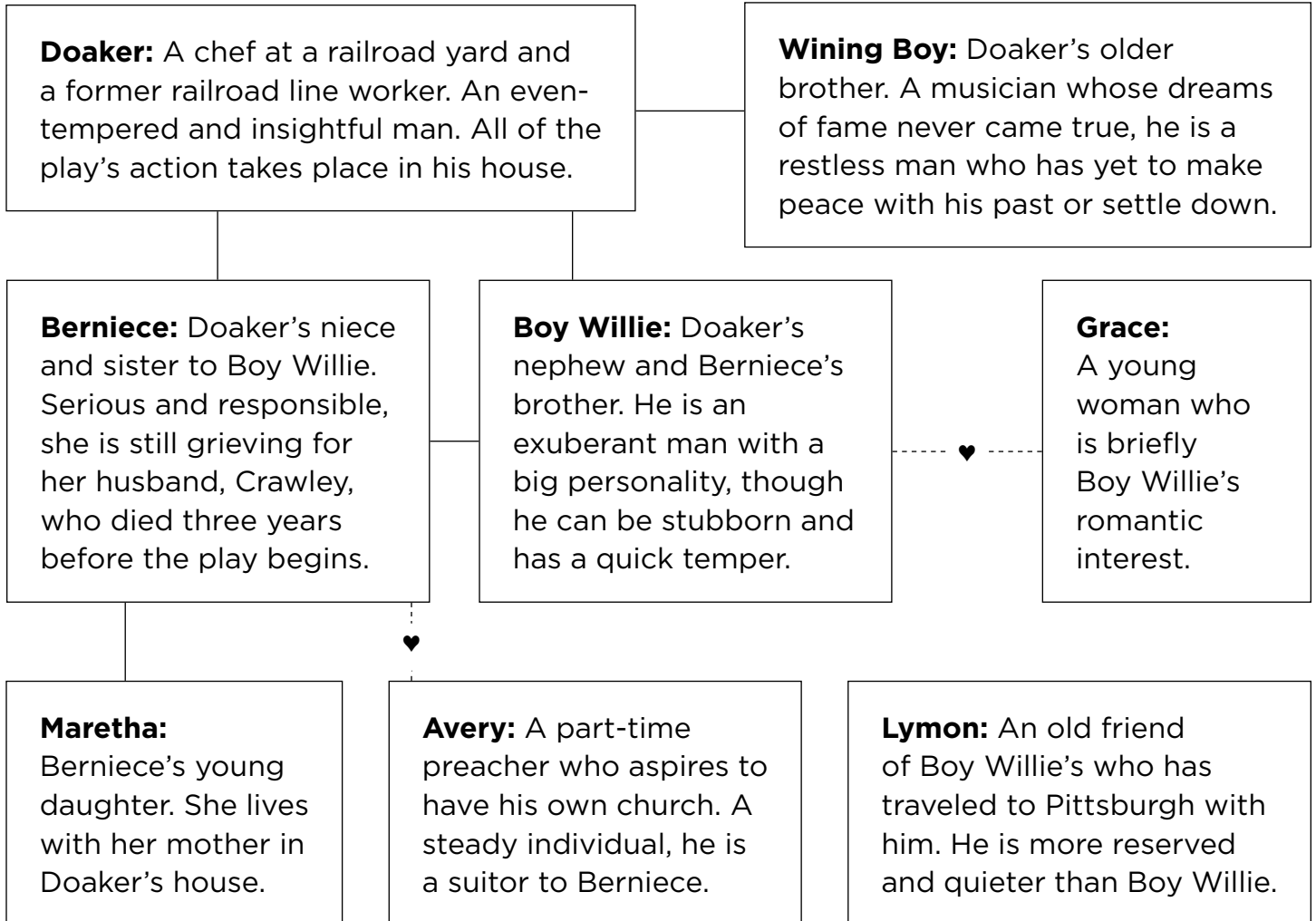
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The Piano Lesson



INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT The Piano Lesson

In *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie teases Lymon for being too lazy to work as the water boy on Parchman Farm. One of the best known songs by the American singer Odetta (who was sometimes called the "Voice of the Civil Rights Movement") was the work song "Waterboy."



Play Synopsis

ACT 1

Scene 1

The year is 1936. The play begins at 5am with loud knocking on the door of the house in Pittsburgh's Hill District where **Doaker Charles** lives with **his niece, Berniece, and her young daughter, Maretha**. Doaker opens the door, and **his nephew, Boy Willie**, enters with **Boy Willie's childhood friend Lymon**. The two men have driven a broken-down truck full of watermelons **from Mississippi to Pittsburgh**, hoping to earn the money that **Boy Willie needs to purchase land in Mississippi** that belonged to **a white man named Sutter, who has recently died**. Berniece enters, annoyed that Boy Willie is making noise. Skeptical about his plan, she returns upstairs, and Boy Willie reveals to Doaker that **he also intends to sell the family piano**. Doaker tells him that **Berniece will never sell it**, but they are interrupted by Berniece, screaming that she has seen **Sutter's ghost**. Doaker investigates but sees nothing. Maretha meets Boy Willie. **Avery, a part-time preacher** and friend of Berniece's, arrives. Boy Willie asks Berniece about the piano, but **she flatly refuses** to sell it.

Scene 2

Doaker's older brother, Wining Boy, is visiting Doaker. Boy Willie and Lymon enter, and the four men chat casually, reminisce, and sing. Doaker tells the others about the **history of the piano**. He also explains that Sutter was killed by **the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog**. Boy Willie suggests to Lymon that they try to move the piano, but when they attempt it, **everyone hears Sutter's ghost**. Berniece enters, and she and Boy Willie get into a **heated argument**. They are interrupted by **Maretha's terrified screams** from upstairs.



Play Synopsis *continued*

ACT 2

Scene 1

Doaker irons his work pants as he sings. Wining Boy enters, and Doaker admits to him that **he saw Sutter's ghost** three weeks earlier. Boy Willie and Lymon arrive in high spirits, **having sold most of the watermelons**. Wining Boy sells Lymon what he claims is a "magic" suit of clothes, and Lymon and Boy Willie **head out on the town**.

Scene 2

Later that evening Berniece is preparing her bath, but Avery comes to the door. They have a long conversation, during which **Avery proposes marriage**, but Berniece tells him that **she isn't ready**.

Scene 3

Late that night, **Boy Willie enters with Grace**, a woman he has met that evening. They hope for a romantic encounter, but **Berniece comes downstairs and asks them to leave**, which they do. Lymon arrives, and he and Berniece have **a long conversation that ends with a kiss** before Berniece goes back upstairs while Lymon prepares to sleep on the couch.



INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT

The Piano Lesson

HOLLYWOOD: Actor and producer Denzel Washington has committed his production company to making all ten of the American Century Cycle plays into movies. So far three have been completed: *Fences* (starring Denzel Washington and Viola Davis); *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (starring Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman, in his last screen performance); and *The Piano Lesson* (starring John David Washington and Samuel L. Jackson), which is scheduled for release in November 2024.

Fences, Viola Davis and Denzel Washington. Blackfilm.com

Play Synopsis *continued*

Scene 4

[Spoilers Ahead!]

Next morning Boy Willie returns. He awakens Lymon, telling him that he has found a **buyer for the piano**, but when they attempt to move the piano, **they can't budge it** (seemingly because Sutter's ghost is resisting their efforts). Doaker enters and tells them to stop. They leave, but Boy Willie tells Doaker that **they'll be back**.

Scene 5

Boy Willie tells Maretha about the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. He and Berniece **continue arguing**. Avery arrives to **bless the house** and **drive out Sutter's ghost**, but before he can do so, Lymon arrives, then Wining Boy, then Grace. When Boy Willie and Lymon attempt to move the piano, all of **the characters suddenly sense Sutter's presence**. Avery tries to bless the piano but cannot do so. Ultimately **Berniece is able to exorcise the ghost and achieve peace** for her troubled family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

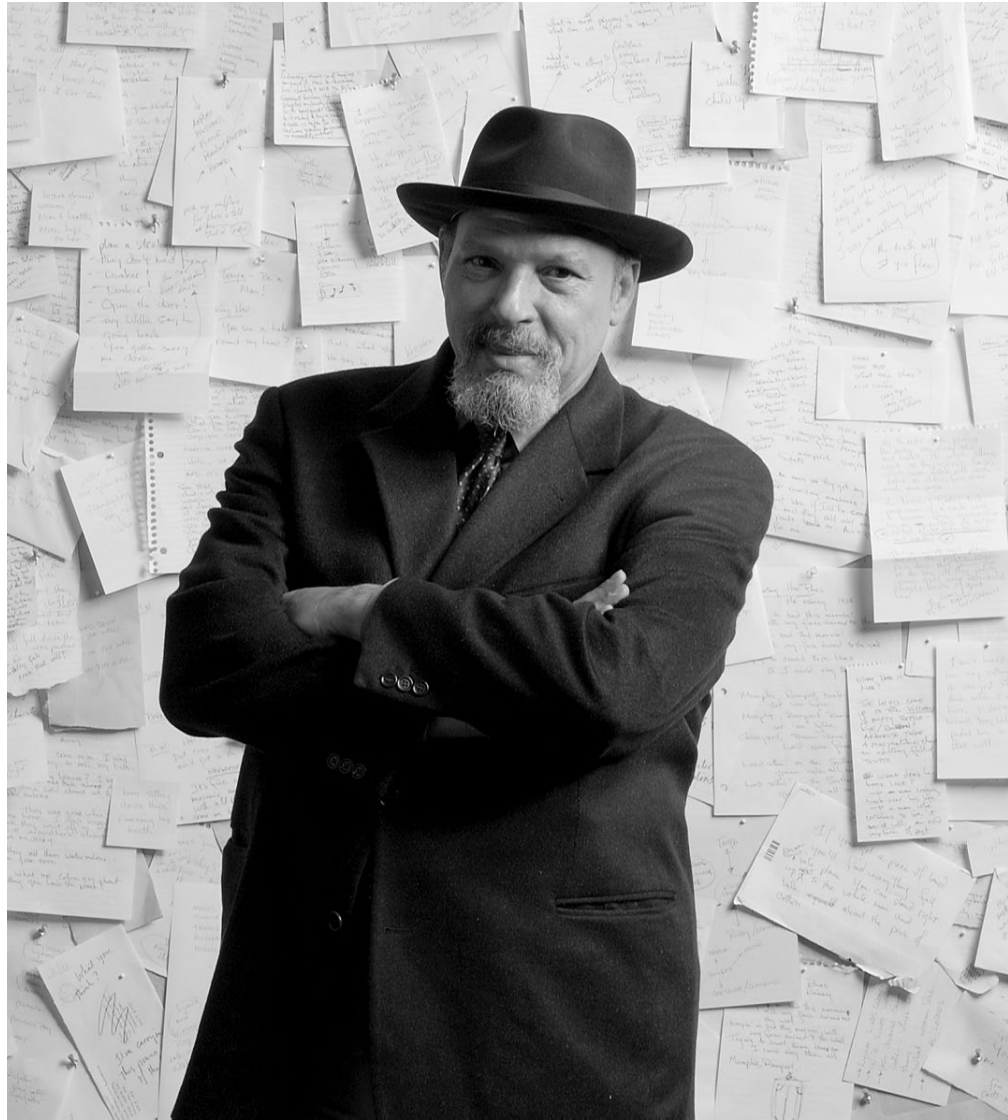
August Wilson

*Biography provided by
Concord Theatricals:*

AUGUST WILSON (April 27, 1945–October 2, 2005) authored *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, *Fences*, *Two Trains Running*, *Jitney*, *King Hedley II*, and *Radio Golf*. These works explore the heritage and experience of African Americans, decade-by-decade, over the course of the twentieth century. His plays have been produced at regional theaters across the country and all over the world, as well as on Broadway.

In 2003, Mr. Wilson made his professional stage debut in his one-man show, *How I Learned What I Learned*. Mr. Wilson's works garnered many awards including Pulitzer Prizes for *Fences* (1987); and for *The Piano Lesson* (1990); a Tony Award for *Fences*; Great Britain's Olivier Award for *Jitney*; as well as eight New York Drama Critics Circle Awards for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, *Jitney*, and *Radio Golf*. Additionally, the cast recording of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* received a 1985 Grammy Award, and Mr. Wilson received a 1995 Emmy Award nomination for his screenplay adaptation of *The Piano Lesson*. Mr. Wilson's early works included the one-act plays *The Janitor*, *Recycle*, *The Coldest Day of the Year*, *Malcolm X*, *The Homecoming* and the musical satire *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*.

Mr. Wilson received many fellowships and awards, including Rockefeller and Guggenheim Fellowships in Playwriting, the Whiting Writers Award, 2003 Heinz Award, was awarded a 1999 National Humanities Medal by the President of the United States, and received numerous honorary degrees from colleges and universities, as well as the only high school diploma ever issued by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. He was an alumnus of New



Cooper, David. August Wilson, playwright. 2011. Flickr

August Wilson *continued*

Dramatists, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a 1995 inductee into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and on October 16, 2005, Broadway renamed the theater located at 245 West 52nd Street—The August Wilson Theatre. Additionally, Mr. Wilson was posthumously inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame in 2007.

Mr. Wilson was born and raised in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and lived in Seattle, Washington at the time of his death. He is immediately survived by his two daughters, Sakina Ansari and Azula Carmen Wilson, and his wife, costume designer Constanza Romero.

Additional contribution by Miranda Johnson-Haddad:

Wilson's widow, Constanza Romero, has said that "August, while seeking out all the beauty, the struggle, the truths and wisdoms in African American Culture, mined the larger themes that make us all human." Wilson's ability to combine the specific with the universal has led many theatre professionals to compare him favorably to Shakespeare, whom Wilson greatly admired. And like Shakespeare, Wilson did not avoid tackling uncomfortable topics, nor was he afraid to confront himself and his own anxieties. Wilson's advice to rising artists echoes a line spoken by Shakespeare's Prospero, who says "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine." Similarly, Wilson urged young artists to "Confront the dark parts of yourself, and work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing." August Wilson's plays are a testament to his genius and his bravery, and they continue to sing to us today.



The American Century Cycle

In chronological order of the decade in which they are set, the plays in August Wilson's American Century Cycle are: *Gem of the Ocean* (1904), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1911), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1927), *The Piano Lesson* (1936), *Seven Guitars* (1948), *Fences* (1957), *Two Trains Running* (1969), *Jitney* (1977), *King Hedley II* (1985) and *Radio Golf* (1997).

Interestingly, Wilson wrote the plays in a completely different order. The first was *Ma Rainey*, which is also the only play not set in Pittsburgh's Hill District; instead, it is set in Chicago in 1927. Moreover, Wilson did not explicitly set out to write a 10-play cycle (as American playwright Eugene O'Neill had attempted to do during the years 1935-1939, although he completed only two). The final two plays that Wilson wrote were the "bookend plays": *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf*. Wilson died of liver cancer in 2005, only a few months after completing *Radio Golf*.

Images clockwise: A Noise Within past productions. Gerald Rivers in *King Hedley II*. Christian Telesmar & Sydney A. Mason in *Radio Golf*. Veralyn Jones, Carolyn Ratteray, & Evan Lewis Smith in *Gem of the Ocean*. Photos by Craig Schwartz



Themes & Motifs

Kai Ealy and Nija Okoro. Photo by Daniel Reichert.

The Ancestors

The ancestors are present in many forms in *The Piano Lesson*. Their most significant visual manifestation is in the carvings on the piano itself. In addition, Doaker tells their story at length in Act 1, scene 2 when he explains the history of the piano and the significance of the carvings. And in the play's final scene, Berniece calls upon the ancestors by playing the piano that she has for years refused to play; she begs them to help her, and they do.

Family conflict

Although the topic of father/son conflict tends to be a focus of Wilson's later plays (*Fences*, *King Hedley II*, *Radio Golf*), in *The Piano Lesson* the primary family conflict occurs between a brother and sister, Boy Willie and Berniece. Ultimately, the two are able to understand and accept each other by accepting their shared past.

Legacy

In *The Piano Lesson*, August Wilson is deeply interested in exploring the concept of legacy among Black Americans during the 1930's. Central to the action of the play is the family piano itself, which is both a gift from the ancestors and the physical manifestation of a shared legacy of oppression and grief. Wilson demonstrates that questions of legacy, and of what Black Americans want or need to carry forward with them to achieve a better future, is deeply complex and difficult to resolve, even within one family. (Boy Willie, for example, sees the piano in terms of its monetary value, whereas Berniece wants to preserve it and keep it.) The struggle to define a legacy, whether physical or metaphorical, ties in closely with the themes of the ancestors and family conflict (above).

Ghosts

There is at least one ghost (Sutter's) that is literally present in *The Piano Lesson*, but there are many other ghosts too, including benevolent ones (such as the ancestors) and the avenging spirits known as "the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog." Many ghosts haunt some of the other plays in Wilson's American Century Cycle as well: Harmond's dead brother in *Radio Golf*, Hedley's late girlfriend in *King Hedley II*, and Troy's father in *Fences*.

Themes & Motifs *continued*

Parchman Farm

The Mississippi State Penitentiary. It was known as Parchman Farm because inmates were subjected to penal labor (hard manual labor) in nearby agricultural settings. The oldest prison in Mississippi, the Mississippi State Penitentiary is now a maximum-security prison. In *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie, Lymon, Wining Boy, and Doaker have all done time at Parchman. For more on Parchman Farm, see the “Interesting Facts” and the “Bonus Materials” documents in the Study Guide.

Music

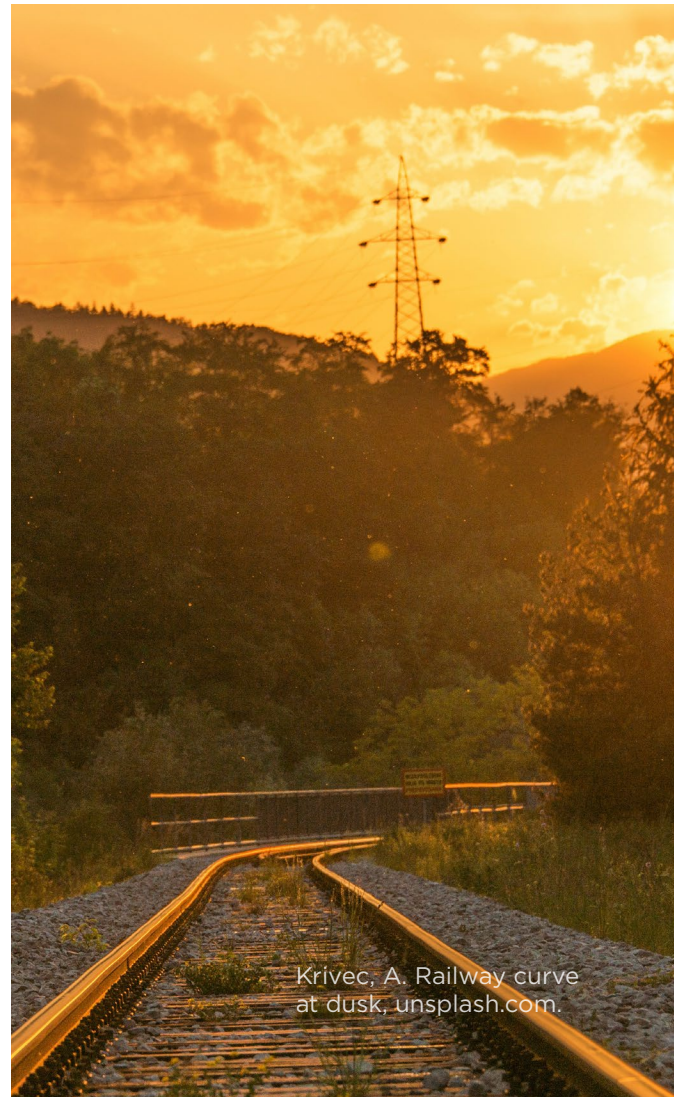
As in many of Wilson’s plays, music plays a central role in *The Piano Lesson*, as do the experiences of Black blues musicians and recording artists. For more about the influence of music, particularly blues music, on Wilson, see the essay in the Study Guide entitled “Singing the Blues and Chasing Ghosts in *The Piano Lesson*” and the “Bonus Materials” document.

Great Migration

Most of the characters in *The Piano Lesson* have left the South for Pittsburgh as part of the Great Migration, the period from 1910-1970 when millions of Black Southerners headed north and west in search of better lives. For more information about the Great Migration, see the essay in the Study Guide entitled “Pittsburgh and the Great Migration” and the “Bonus Materials” document.

The Railroad

The theme of the railroad recurs throughout *The Piano Lesson*, and in many different ways: as a source of employment (for Doaker); as the link between the American South and the North, and therefore an important means of transportation for Black Americans during the Great Migration; and as a means of vengeance (the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog), among others.



Krivec, A. Railway curve at dusk, unsplash.com.

Do You Believe in Ghosts?

ACTIVITY Objective

Craft your own original ghost story.

Step 1. Group Discussion

Do you believe in ghosts or anything supernatural (vampires, poltergeists, etc...)? Why, or why not?

Step 2. Free Write

Think about an experience you've had that could be described as **ghostly** or dealing with the **supernatural**. Using first-person perspective, describe the experience on paper in 5-10 sentences. Leave the paper anonymous; do not write your name.



Step 3. Write a ghost story.

Place all anonymous compositions in a hat. Shake them up! Select one. Use this composition as source material to write your own **original** ghost story.

Feeling a little stuck? Ask yourself these questions:

1. What is the **setting** of my original ghost story? Here are some ideas:
 - An old house
 - A deserted railroad car
 - A dark forest
 - A medieval castle
2. What is **the inciting incident**? What is the first event that frightens your lead character(s)?

The National Archives UK @ Flickr Commons

Singing the Blues and Chasing Ghosts in *The Piano Lesson*

In his Introduction to the 2007 editions of August Wilson’s American Century Cycle plays, theater critic John Lahr wrote, “The blues are catastrophe expressed lyrically; so are Wilson’s plays, which swing with the pulse of the African-American people, as they moved, over the decades, from property to personhood.” Lahr knew that blues music and playwriting were inextricably intertwined for Wilson, and music figures prominently in Wilson’s plays because music has always been an essential part of Black American experience. Wilson once wrote, “I chose the blues as my aesthetic. I create worlds out of the ideas and the attitudes and the material in the blues. I think the blues are the best literature that blacks have. It is an expression of our people and our response to the world. I don’t write about the blues; I’m not influenced by the blues. I *am* the blues.”

And yet the music industry has also been one of the many spheres where Black Americans have been taken advantage of. During the 1930’s and 1940’s, many Black artists recorded their songs only to see exploitative white producers pocket the proceeds while the artists themselves faded into impoverished obscurity, and Wilson’s plays reflect this injustice. In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Ma Rainey has become such a reliable and lucrative hitmaker that she is accorded some degree of respect by white producers. But Ma’s ego leads to frequent conflicts with the members of her band, who wield no such influence and are often in conflict with each other. Nor does Ma’s success protect her from tragedy, and the play ends with catastrophic violence. Similarly, in *Seven Guitars* musician Floyd Barton believes that he is headed for fame, having made a successful recording, but his hopes also end tragically.

In *The Piano Lesson*, Wining Boy has had comparable experiences. Doaker tells Boy Willie that Wining Boy “made one or two records a long time ago. That’s the only ones I ever

Right image: Gertude Pridgett “Ma” Rainey. Wikimedia Commons
Bottom image: Adebayo, G. unsplash.com.



Singing the Blues and Chasing Ghosts in *The Piano Lesson* continued

known him to make. If you let him tell it he be a big recording star.” Wining Boy’s drinking and his inability to accept his circumstances seem rooted in disappointment that his dreams have come to nothing. Yet *The Piano Lesson* does not end tragically, even though the action seems headed that way as the struggles over the family piano threaten to engulf and destroy all the characters in the play.

Tragedy is ultimately averted, however, thanks to Berniece, and it falls to her to exorcise the ghosts of the past that haunt her family. She achieves this by imploring some of those same ghosts to help her, and only when she has done so can the troubled members of her family find peace. This is the “lesson” in the play’s deceptively simple title, a lesson that Boy Willie, especially, must learn: as long as we resist the ghosts of the past, they will continue to haunt us.

The Blues are songs of grief and pain, but the very act of singing them, of acknowledging that grief and pain, helps both the singer and the listener to rise above it. August Wilson understood this, and in *The Piano Lesson*, he seems to suggest that wherever Black Americans chose to live during the early twentieth century – whether they were among the six million Black Southerners who, like Doaker and Berniece and Avery, relocated during the Great Migration, or whether they remained in the South, like Boy Willie – they all would need to accept the horrific legacy of the past before they could hope to move forward into the future. To do otherwise meant staying mired in the very past that they were attempting to escape and becoming, metaphorically speaking, like the silenced Black musicians who fell into obscurity, their names and sometimes even their songs erased and forgotten. The Blues must be sung and heard, just as the ancestors must be remembered and acknowledged, with gratitude. And Berniece does so in the final words of the play: “Thank you.”

INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT **The Piano Lesson**

Blues artist Bukka White, who did time at Parchman Farm, recorded a song called “Parchman Farm Blues” in the 1940’s. It begins “Judge give me life this morning’ / Down on Parchman Farm”



What do YOU think August Wilson meant when he wrote: “I am the blues”? Do you agree with Wilson that Black Americans needed to accept and embrace the complex legacy of their shared past in order to move forward? Do you think this need to accept the past applies to other American populations (e.g. the Hispanic, AAPI, and Jewish communities) as well?

Sounding Out the Blues

ACTIVITY

Objective

Deepen your understanding of the Blues genre.

Complete this activity after reading ‘Singing the Blues and Chasing Ghosts in *The Piano Lesson*’ on page 15.

Step 1: Journaling Warm-Up

What musical genre do you most love? Folk? Rap? K-Pop?

What is it about that genre of music that you love so much? How does that musical genre make you feel when you listen to it?

Step 2: Group Discussion

Now, think about the musical genre known as **the Blues**. What images or feelings pop up in your mind when you think of **the Blues**?

Step 3: Research

Select one of the following musical artists:

Bukka White

Bessie Smith

Muddy Waters

“Ma” Rainey

Research your chosen musical artist and respond to the following prompts:

1. When and where did this musical artist grow up?
2. How was this artist’s experience in the music industry? Was their musical career smooth? Was it rocky? Why?
3. What kinds of topics did this artist often sing about?

Identify one popular song by this musical artist. Listen to it—multiple times. Many old song recordings can be found on YouTube or streaming services such as Spotify.

1. What is the song title?
2. What is this song about? What do you think the musical artist is trying to convey?
3. Identify a song lyric that you feel best represents this song. What makes this lyric stand out to you? How does this lyric capture the overall message of the song?
4. How does this song deepen your understanding of the Blues?

Pittsburgh And The Great Migration: “History Speaks”

The city of Pittsburgh, in Western Pennsylvania, is strategically located at the intersection of three significant waterways: the Allegheny and the Monongahela Rivers, which merge in Pittsburgh to become the Ohio River. Many other cities in New York, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois are located along the shores of the Great Lakes. These advantageously located cities experienced economic boom times beginning in the early 1800’s, and they became preferred destinations during the Great Migration, a roughly sixty-year time period (from 1910-1970) when many Black Americans left the South to travel north in search of better economic and social opportunities. In her book *The Warmth of Other Suns*, journalist **Isabel Wilkerson describes the Great Migration as “the first mass act of independence by a people who were in bondage in this country for far longer than they have been free.”**

The twentieth-century American South was a place of terrible harshness for Black Americans. Landmark Supreme Court decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, and legislation such as the Civil Rights Act, were still decades away. “Jim Crow” laws—the state-sanctioned and state-enforced laws that maintained rigid segregation in all areas of society—as well as blatantly racist practices, such as voter suppression and redlining, combined to create nearly insurmountable odds for Black individuals struggling to thrive and prosper. Moreover, the American South was a violent and dangerous place for Black Americans, often fatally so. These dire circumstances, combined with the prosperous times and plentiful jobs that industry brought to many Northern and Midwestern American cities, led countless Black Southerners to leave their homes and travel north in search of a better life.

Pittsburgh was one such destination city, and the Hill District, where August Wilson grew up and where nine of the ten plays of his American Century Cycle are set, became a vibrant center of Black American life during the early twentieth century. (The exception is *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, which is set in Chicago, in 1927.) Initially the communities that made up the Hill District included Irish and Italian immigrants and Eastern European Jews, as well as Black Americans. But the Black community grew the most rapidly, and the Hill District soon became an important cultural center, especially for jazz music, and Hill residents flocked to the many new clubs in the area where famous blues and jazz artists played to enthusiastic crowds.

The characters in *The Piano Lesson* represent the different ways in which the Great Migration played out. All of the characters (possibly except for Grace) have come to Pittsburgh from the South. Doaker has apparently settled down for good in Pittsburgh, as

Pittsburgh And The Great Migration: “History Speaks” *continued*



Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. Wikimedia Commons.

have Berniece and Maretha. Boy Willie never intends to stay in Pittsburgh, while his friend Lymon never intends to leave. Doaker’s older brother, Wining Boy, travels restlessly back and forth between Pittsburgh, the Midwest, and the South, hoping to find the fame as a musician, and the personal peace, that have so far eluded him. And Avery is described as having “taken to [Pittsburgh] like a fish to water, finding in it opportunities for growth and advancement that did not exist for him in the rural South.”

In 2023, Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson wrote a history of the Great Migration and the effects of Jim Crow in her dissenting opinion in the affirmative action case. She concludes, “History speaks. In some form or another, it can be heard forever.” Watching *The Piano Lesson*, we can hear history speaking in the characters’ words, in their songs, and even in the sounds made by Sutter’s Ghost. August Wilson endeavored in his plays to fill in the gaps and erasures created not only by formal histories but even by some Black individuals themselves, represented by Boy Willie (who wants to sell the piano) and Avery (who is unable to bless it because its power is stronger than his attempts to overcome it). Wilson seems to suggest that in order to move forward, Black Americans first needed to acknowledge (as Berniece does) the inheritance of enslavement bequeathed by the ancestors, and to carry that awareness with them as they traveled north into an uncertain future.

Discussion Questions

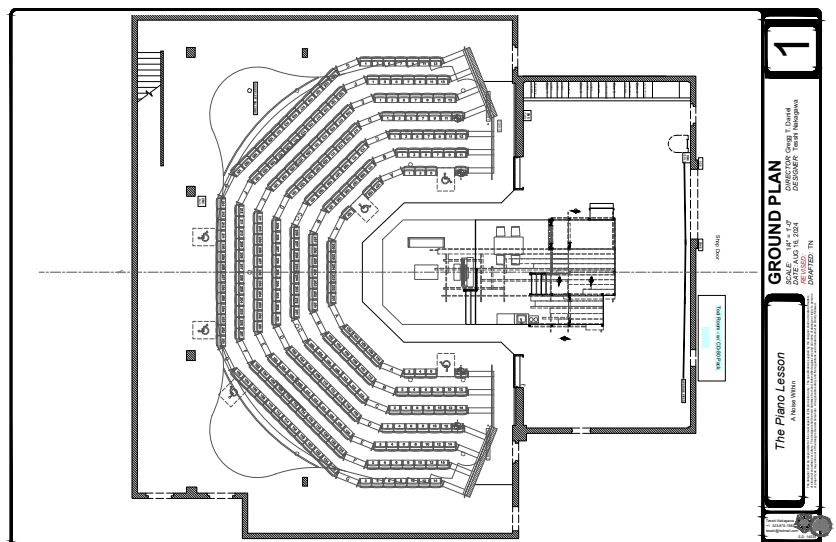
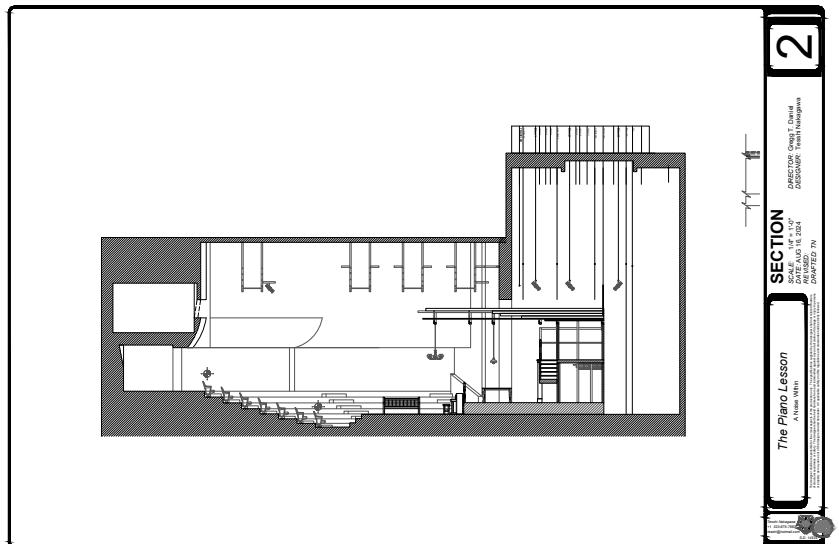
1. The theme of **family legacy** is central to the action of *The Piano Lesson*. Do you think it is important to preserve family legacy? How does our family history impact our **identity** in the present?
2. Boy Willie and Berniece have opposing attitudes towards their **inheritance** and **the piano**. Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to forge a new life; Berniece wants to keep the piano in the family. How does their conflict over the piano reflect their differing values on legacy and heritage?
3. **Music** often serves as a form of storytelling and communication in *The Piano Lesson*. How do the characters use music to convey their personal stories and cultural heritage?
4. **Ghosts** are present in different ways throughout the play – the ghost of Sutter, the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, the ghosts of the Ancestors. What do the various ghosts represent in terms of family history and the living characters' **unresolved issues**? What elements of the past do the ghosts keep alive?
5. How does August Wilson shape the characters' circumstances to reflect the **historical and social contexts** faced by Black Americans in the 1930s? How does the setting of **Pittsburgh**, and the characters' paths towards arriving and settling there, further demonstrate these realities?
6. What does the play's conclusion reveal about the characters' feelings towards **the past and the future**? How does the **family** resolve these feelings together?

A Conversation with the Set Designer

We sat down with Tesshi Nakagawa to learn about the set design process for *The Piano Lesson*.

How did you first get started as a set designer? Do you have a set design origin story?

I first got into set design when I was a high school student in Japan, after seeing Japanese productions of Broadway musicals such as *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Misérables*, and *Beauty and the Beast* etc. in Tokyo. I was captivated by how those massive set pieces moved so effortlessly and magically with the music, as if they were dancing on the stage alongside the performers, transforming the scenes like a pop-up book come to life. Although I was deeply drawn to it, I hesitated to pursue Theater Arts in college, questioning how I would make a living with such a degree, especially since there weren't many theater programs in Japan at the time. Lacking the courage to follow my passion, I chose to study Economics instead, a more traditional and popular path for men in Japan. During my college years, I traveled extensively across Asia, Europe, and of course, the United States. It was on Broadway, the 'mecca' of theater, where I saw *The Phantom of the Opera* at the Majestic Theater, and tears filled my eyes as I stood in ovation long after the house lights came up. In that moment, I knew without a doubt what I was meant to do with my life and where I was meant to be. Since then, I've been unwavering in my path, pursuing scenic design with all my heart.



Preliminary Drafts.

Set Designer *continued*

Previous to *The Piano Lesson*, have you ever designed an August Wilson play? *The Piano Lesson* is set in 1930's Pittsburgh. Have you ever been to Pittsburgh? How are you capturing the city of Pittsburgh in your design?

This is my very first time designing an August Wilson play, and I've never been to Pittsburgh. So, the first step in my design process involved extensive research into the historical background of the Black community in Pittsburgh, as well as the mood, character, and style of the city in 1930s. During my research, I discovered images of the Hill District, a historic African American neighborhood in Pittsburgh, characterized by small, narrow townhouses clustered on the hillside. That image immediately resonated with me, and I realized it would be a perfect fit for our ANW theater stage, which features a long, deep, and narrow thrust stage that extends out into the audience. That townhouse shape not only complements the stage dimensions but also offers a unique and intriguing perspective for the audience, allowing them to peer into a long, narrow house on stage.



Top: Houseson The Hill Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, 1938 from Picryl.com. Bottom: Two preliminary Renderings.

There is a repeated ghostly presence throughout the play. How does the presence of ghosts impact your design?

The ghost is one of the most challenging aspects of the production, and I absolutely don't want to spoil anything—hahaha! While I can't reveal too much about the theatrical magic we're planning, I can say that it will be a big collaboration between set, sound, lighting, and, of course, the actors' performances to make the ghostly actions feel alive and believable. During the rehearsal process, I'm sure we'll come up with even more great ideas to bring these supernatural elements to life.

Bonus Material

The Piano Lesson

Interview with August Wilson about *The Piano Lesson* and his work on the teleplay for the 1995 Hallmark movie: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQBT_x2mblw

A short (26-minute) documentary on August Wilson in St. Paul, MN when Penumbra Theatre produced *The Piano Lesson*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qjbYGaHWTI>

The 2022 Broadway Revival of *The Piano Lesson*

The revival starred Samuel L. Jackson as Doaker, John David Washington as Boy Willie, and Danielle Brooks as Berniece. It was directed by LaTonya Richardson Jackson (Samuel L. Jackson's wife).

Trevor Noah interview with John David Washington, who played Boy Willie in the 2022 Broadway revival: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QB7rwkPVG90>

Interviews with the cast of the 2022 Broadway revival: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppQurwZCnpc>

August Wilson

For an excellent overview of Wilson's life and works, including a detailed timeline, see: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/>

See also The August Wilson African American Cultural Center, <https://awaacc.org/about/about-august/>

A 2016 project created a "green space" at 1839 Wylie Avenue, the home of Wilson's character Aunt Esther, who appears in *Gem of the Ocean* and is referred to in other plays: [1839 Wylie Avenue - Grounded Strategies](#)

August Wilson's childhood home was restored and opened in 2022 as an arts center (this site also provides a good historical overview of Wilson and the Hill District): [August Wilson House](#)

Patti Hartigan's 2023 biography of August Wilson, *August Wilson: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023), although not authorized by the August Wilson estate, nevertheless contains extensive information, some of which is based on Hartigan's interviews with Wilson over many years.

Bonus Material *continued*

Blues Music and August Wilson

For a good summary of the influence of blues music on August Wilson and his music, see: <https://playbill.com/article/august-wilson-and-the-power-of-blues-com-100695>

For an interview with Kathryn Bostic, who wrote the score for many of Wilson's plays, see: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand/3706/#:~:text=KB:%20Blues%20music%20informed%20his,seamlessness%20between%20score%20and%20text.>

For an outstanding documentary on the efforts of several young white men to find forgotten Blues singers during the summer of 1968 (including Skip James, whose lyrics Wilson includes as an epithet at the beginning of *The Piano Lesson*), see the 2016 documentary *Two Trains Runnin'*, produced and narrated by Common: https://www.imdb.com/video/vi1364375065/?ref_=vp_rv_ap_0

CONTENT WARNING: *The documentary above ^^ contains disturbing video and still imagery of racist speeches and attacks in the deep South during the 1950's and 1960's.*

The Great Migration

To learn more about the Great Migration, see Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson's 2010 book *The Warmth of Other Suns*. (In July 2024, *The New York Times* published their list of the 100 best books of the 21st century so far. Wilkerson's book came in at number 2.)

For a succinct and powerful history of the legacy of racism, including Jim Crow and the Great Migration, see Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson's dissent in the affirmative action case *Students For Fair Admissions, Inc. vs. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, June 29, 2023.

The groundbreaking 1991 movie *Daughters of the Dust* (which was the first movie directed by a Black woman, Julie Dash, to be distributed theatrically), set in 1902, tells the story of three generations of Gullah women as some prepare to leave St. Helena's Island (off the coast of South Carolina) and head North in search of better opportunities. Beyoncé's 2016 visual album *Lemonade* pays homage to this movie, which led to its re-release later that year, twenty-five years after its initial release.

ABOUT

A Noise Within

A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.



aNoiseWithin
Classic Theatre, Modern Magic

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