

## **From August Wilson to Tyler Perry: Crossing Paths on the Way to Tomorrow** Gene Bryan Johnson

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### Abstract

“From August Wilson to Tyler Perry: Crossing Paths on the Way to Tomorrow” begins by asking why events such as the NAACP Image Awards do not recognize black playwriting. I trace the roots of Tyler Perry’s financial success to urban Gospel theatre marketing innovations developed in the Frankfurt School-like environment of New York City circa 1984, and demonstrate how black communities bore a significant portion of the pain yet contributed the lion’s share of meaningful artistic expression. This essay connects Wilson’s roots as a disciple in the tradition of the 1960s Black Power movement to his belief in the need for contemporary theatre “about us, by us, for us and near us,” and intertwines historical facts with personal anecdotes and interviews with actor/scholar Stephen McKinley Henderson, members of Wilson’s production team and estate, TOBA circuit veteran Bill Dillard, urban Gospel theatre producer Tiffani Gavin, scholars Paul Carter Harrison, Todd Boyd and Carlton Molette and others. I argue that, while Perry’s “plays” do not reach the artistic level of Wilson’s theatre, Perry’s use of the Internet and social media has set a new standard for identifying, identifying with, marketing to, entertaining and inviting black audiences into the theatre.

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Nominees for the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual NAACP Image Awards were announced in early January of 2007. It was a perfect opportunity for an institution billing itself as “the nation’s premier event celebrating the outstanding achievements and performances of people of color in the arts” to recognize the late August Wilson, arguably the greatest American playwright of his generation. Wilson, an African-American, had died a little more than a year before, on October 2, 2005 and enough time had passed for the Black American mainstream to give the man his due. From *Gem of the Ocean* to *Radio Golf*, the ten plays that comprise his one-play-per-decade dramatization of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as mostly experienced by African American residents of Pittsburgh’s Hill District, is a brilliantly conceived portfolio of daunting complexity and stunning simplicity.

That Wilson was African-American is both beside the point and the whole point of his accomplishment. According to theater critic Peter Marks, Wilson’s work will “rank among the classics” alongside plays by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Eugene O’Neill.[1] “Wilson possesses the magic of a wizard and the richest voice in the contemporary American theater,” wrote Vincent Canby in the New York Times.[2] Yet, despite two Pulitzer Prizes (*Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*), a Tony (*Fences*) and seven New York Drama Critics Circle awards, August Wilson had yet to be honored by the NAACP.

The NAACP Image Awards have greatly expanded scope since being formed in 1967 to “honor outstanding black actors, actresses, writers, producers, directors, and recognize those working in Hollywood who supported those artists.” Twenty-five years later, it had grown to include music, television and movies plus one category for Literary Work—a contest in which Terry McMillan’s best-selling “Waiting to Exhale” beat out fiction by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, non-fiction by Marian Wright Edelman and a biography of Thurgood Marshall by Roger Goldman and David Gallen. African American critic and writer Earl Ofari Hutchinson wrote, in 1999, that the Image Awards are “a promoter of entertainment but not courage.”[3]

They are “cheap imitation Academy Award drool over foul-mouthed rappers, comics, celebrity gadabouts and black Hollywood box office showpieces,” he wrote in 2002.[4]

Today’s categories include nods for such fare as “Outstanding Reality Television Series” but has also expanded to eight subcategories for “Literary Work”: fiction, non-fiction, debut author, biography, poetry, instructional, children’s and youth/teens. 2007’s nominations represented a cross-spectrum of Black America. Maya Angelou for poetry and Carol Boston for her Harriet Tubman biography. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, talk show host/entrepreneur Tavis Smiley, novelist Walter Mosely, politician Barack Obama, celebrity Star Jones and others. It was in this spirit of inclusion that recognition for playwrights writing plays seemed obvious and hopefully inevitable. There were, however, at least two oft-produced playwrights on 2007’s list though neither was there for his plays.

Bishop T.D. Jakes has been called “the most powerful black man in America” by *The Atlantic Monthly*[5] and “the next Billy Graham” by *Time* magazine.[6] His book *Mama Made The Difference* was nominated for “Outstanding Literary Work - Instructional.” Jakes—pastor of Dallas mega-church The Potter’s House, best-selling author, wealthy entrepreneur, recording executive, confidante to presidents, philanthropist and prosperity evangelist—had also been producing profitable musical adaptations of his books since the 90’s when he hired a young director named Tyler Perry. Perry was also nominated that year for writing and directing the film *Madea’s Family Reunion*, a production based on his play of the same name.

I first heard of Perry in 2002 when my mother and her sister (my Aunt Mary) joined me for dinner before seeing Susan-Lori Parks’ *Top Dog/Underdog* on Broadway. A few years earlier I had taken both to see August Wilson’s *King Hedley II* and this was another attempt to get them hooked on the kinds of non-musical stage dramas I’m drawn to. Neither seemed particularly excited about going to the theater that evening (I suspect they were more interested in visiting me than seeing Jeffrey Wright and Mos Def) and it didn’t take long for the conversation to turn from small talk to the state of black theater. “August Wilson was alright but I REALLY like Tyler Perry,” Aunt Mary said. “Tyler who?” I asked. “Tyler Perry,” she repeated. “Never heard of him,” I said.

I admitted that the Broadway production of *Hedley* wasn’t Wilson’s most compelling work but explained that it would have been much better had Charles Dutton, the

original choice for leading man, not pulled out shortly before opening day. But I argued that surely Wilson is light years ahead of Tyler What's-his-name. ("Tyler Perry," Aunt Mary said.) "Plus," I argued, "got to admit Viola Davis was smokin'. You know she won a Tony, right?" Aunt Mary wasn't buying it. "Don't know nothing about light years and Tony," she said between mouthfuls of barbecued chicken and collard greens, "but I'm telling you—we went to see Tyler Perry and Tyler Perry was funny. He had us rolling." Just thinking about this guy made Aunt Mary put down her silverware and double up with laughter.

I was struck by the way she repeated his full name—Tyler Perry this and Tyler Perry that—as if she were his agent and pronouns were inadequate. "Tyler Perry was really something and I went right out and got all the Tyler Perry videos," she said, sounding suspiciously like someone who enjoyed a Sunday sermon so much she rejoined the church just so she could be Baptized again. Later that evening, one half-hour into *Top Dog*, Aunt Mary was falling asleep. I did eventually get videos of Perry's *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, and *Madea's Family Reunion*. "I know you gonna like them," Aunt Mary said, implying that once I saw the real thing I would never again enjoy that boring August Wilson.

In 2005, the year August Wilson died, a film version of Perry's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* had establishment Hollywood and the mainstream press wondering how their well-compensated executives could be blindsided by a 50-million dollar-grossing hit that cost less than 6 million to make. Sure, the script wasn't great, the thinking goes, but why didn't they know he had been touring to capacity crowds and using the Internet to nurture a growing audience? Don't these people read *Variety*, which reported in 2003 that Perry was a "major talent" with "crossover potential?"[7] As of the end of 2006, according to *Variety*, his plays had collectively grossed upwards of \$75 million in ticket and DVD sales. His distributor, Lionsgate, was in on the secret partly because President Mike Paseorneck was smart enough to ask the opinion of an African American employee working in the inventory control department. That worker, it so happened, was a west coast equivalent of my Aunt Mary.

The black press had a field day. "Long before mainstream America had ever heard of Tyler Perry or Madea, the beloved granny character that he brings to life, Black America already knew," wrote Margena Christian in *Jet*. Perry, she says, "uses creative genius to teach poignant lessons about life and love that can be transforming." [8] An equally effusive profile in *Essence* was titled "Diary of a Brilliant Black Man." Perry by now had a Fox-TV series, a TBS-TV series, his own production facility in Atlanta and a multi-picture contract-extension with Lionsgate. The "brilliant genius," tall, dark, handsome and single, is the niche marketer's wet dream—so big he doesn't have to go mainstream because the mainstream has come to him. No one, however, can forget that his most important characteristic is his devotion to God.

When Perry was born, in New Orleans on September 13, 1969, August Wilson was in his mid-twenties and directing plays at Pittsburgh's Black Horizons Theater

Company. Wilson fancied himself a disciple in the tradition of the 1960s Black Power movement that included playwrights Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), Sonia Sanchez and Black Panther Minister of Culture Ed Bullins. By 1972 he had married and divorced a Black Muslim woman and was publishing his poetry in *Negro Digest*, *Black Lines*, and *Black Americans: Anthology of the Twentieth Century*. In January of 1978, one year after Wilson started writing his own plays, the Inner City Theater of Los Angeles staged a reading of *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. Four years later, in 1982, Lloyd Richards, Dean of the Yale School of Drama and Artistic Director of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwrights Conference, read *Wilson's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. By 1984 August Wilson was debuting on Broadway.

It is not surprising that, in 1984, New York's black cultural scene was as rich as it was. The city was, in a case study right out of the Frankfurt School, a mess and black folks bore a significant portion of the pain. An epidemic of crack cocaine addiction had driven the homicide rate to record highs, rogue police officers were stealing from drug dealers and corrupt politicians were (once again) bilking city coffers. Harlem's political elite was marshaling progressive communities into a coalition that would, in a few years, strike at the entrenched power structure and make David Dinkins the city's first black mayor. Hip-hop came out of the underground, Spike Lee was producing *She's Gotta Have It* and *The Cosby Show* was in its second season on NBC (both were shot in Brooklyn). Jean-Michel Basquiat was on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*.

A number of black shows made it to Broadway. Andre DeShields was starring in *Harlem Nocturne*, Whoopi Goldberg had her one-woman show, and *Dreamgirls* was a smash. The timing was perfect for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* to herald the arrival of a great new African American voice onto the Broadway stage. Uptown, in Harlem, an innovation in black theater was being propelled by a visionary marketer who would go on to produce August Wilson's most powerful play while laying the groundwork for the career of Tyler Perry.

Vy Higginsen knew the black community better than anyone. She grew up in a Harlem brownstone, studied marketing and merchandising at the State University of New York's Fashion Institute of Technology and sold advertising for *Ebony* magazine. She became an expert on the black consumer market "when some companies didn't want to be associated with black people and other companies said 'black people don't read'." [9] In the 70s Higginsen went to broadcasting school and became an on-air host at top-ranked WBLS-FM. She founded *Unique New York*, a briefly significant lifestyle magazine catering to an exploding black middle class. By 1984 Vy Higginsen was a Harlem legend who had written, co-produced, and starred in a grassroots theatrical phenomenon that identified a brand new demographic profile and created an innovative method of marketing to them.

*Mama I Want To Sing* was loosely based on the life of Higginsen's sister, R&B singer Doris Troy who hit number 10 on the pop charts in 1963 with the self-penned "Just One Look." An early example of the Gospel musical, *Mama* was about a girl

driven to sing secular songs against the wishes of her pious parents. The production broke existing Off Broadway records by running for eight years in a previously unused theater on 104<sup>th</sup> Street near Harlem. It featured Troy and Higginsen with a cast of relative unknowns (including a young Chaka Khan) but Higginsen was confident in her ability to reach an un-tapped market with her product. “Every one could relate to the story and you could bring your child or grandmother and not be embarrassed,” she says. “We sold discounted tickets to church groups so they could mark them up, charter a bus and raise money.”[10] She started buying unsold advertising time on black radio stations throughout the tri-state area, a move that brought new tourist streams into Harlem. Ticket packages included discount coupons to businesses such as Sylvia’s Soul Food Restaurant and concession stands manned by local residents. It was a textbook example of black dollars going into black businesses located in black neighborhoods. “That’s how you build a community,” Higginsen says, “because now that we got them to New York they got money and want to know where do I eat. So we sent them to Sylvia’s and everybody in the neighborhood made a little money.”[11]

Writing in the *New York Times*, on April 13, 1984, Steven Holden described *Mama I Want to Sing* as “primitive even by Off Off Broadway standards” but acknowledged that “musically the mood in the theater was jubilation.”[12] His review maintained an obvious critical distance (they might like it but you will not) but by this time *Mama* was mainstream media critic-proof. “People who didn’t come from the culture or history were not qualified to criticize it,” Higginsen stated, “this show is for the people and they will tell us whether they like it or not. We were selling out 10 shows a week in Harlem.

“We sold out the Theater at Madison Square Garden—6000 seats—and the downtown people said ‘listen we want you to come to Broadway.’”[13] Higginsen listened, she said, but turned “the downtown people” down when they explained that she had to fire long time employees to make way for union actors and stagehands. She also declined to help the producers of *Dreamgirls* who “couldn’t understand why it was running to a 95% white audience and black people weren’t going downtown to see it.” She could not, however, resist the opportunity to co-produce the 1988 Broadway production of August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*.

“August Wilson was a genius,” she said. His previous play, “*Fences*,” had been a Pulitzer Prize winning Broadway hit and Joe Turner was considered by most critics, and by Wilson himself, to be a far superior play. “It was a great show, very touching, very moving, extremely powerful—with Angela Bassett before Angela Basset became Angela Basset!” But Higginsen’s enthusiasm for the production quickly waned when the day-to-day realities of producing on Broadway began to cramp her style. “The Broadway people would spend 40-65 thousand dollars on a full page ad in the *New York Times*,” she says incredulously, “do you know how much radio time that money could buy?”[14] She shrugs her shoulders and raises her hands. The audience for *Mama* didn’t read the *Times* but they sho nuff did like blocks of discounted tickets. Unfortunately block-ticket discounting, a cornerstone of Higginsen’s marketing innovation, did not interest her Broadway partners. “We

were not going to change their minds about how to reach audiences,” she says today, “even though that’s why they supposedly came to us in the first place.”[15]

The black church-going fans of *Mama I Want To Sing* did not flock to Broadway to see *Joe Turner* and the play closed after three months and 105 total performances. According to Higginsen the production was doomed by more than just the marketing plan. “When black people saw *Joe Turner* they felt pain looking at the reality of their history,” she says, “and white people felt guilt for what their ancestors did.” Joe Turner made people think but *Mama* made people feel good about themselves—something she believed was infinitely more marketable. “Broadway had no place for us but by then I knew I could take ‘*Mama*’ on the road.”[16]

Black comics, performers and musicians have been touring black American communities since the early 1900s, when descendants of slaves, in search of the economic promise and freedom from oppression dangled by the urban North, began leaving the rural South in mass numbers. Over a million African American men, women and children—singles, families, friends, neighbors and ad hoc groups of strangers—traveled, often by train, to cities such as New York, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Baltimore and Pittsburgh. Some would find menial jobs along this path to freedom and put down roots. No one has described The Great Negro migration as well as August Wilson who states it simply and concisely in his prologue to *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, which is set in 1911.

From the deep and near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the Gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope...[17]

Though they had lost much of their history, as Wilson rightfully points out, the migrants did have stories about the lives they had come to know—tales recounted through music, comedy, song, and dance. J.A. Rogers describes itinerant piano players reproducing the sounds of improvised Negro dance bands of the South—harmonicas, Jews’ harps, make-shift string instruments, bones, tin cans and hollow wood. The pianists “would wander up and down the Mississippi from saloon to saloon” listening to the rude improvisations of dock laborers and railroad gangs, “whipping the ivories” into marvelous chords and perfectly reproducing everything they heard.[18] During the same period, writes Montgomery Gregory, black actors performed in minstrel shows that mimicked the “grotesque caricatures” of the Negro race that white actors in blackface had turned into a thriving entertainment business.[19]

“We called it the Toby Circuit, for tough on black asses,” recalled 80 year-old trumpeter/singer/dancer Bill Dillard in 1991. “We worked four shows a day, seven days a week, for \$30 “when you got paid, if you got paid,” he told this author after a

performance in New York's Greenwich Village.[20] Known officially as the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA) the Toby Circuit was controlled by white theater owners and booking agents presenting black talent to black people in whatever space was available. The Toby Circuit came to be called the "Chitlin' Circuit" and served at least three purposes: 1) it brought music and entertainment to black people, 2) it spread ideas and innovations, 3) it provided employment and training to some of the most important musicians and performers in American history.

"Harlem," wrote essayist Alain Locke, "attracted Africans, West Indians, American Negroes, the peasant, the student, the businessman, the professional, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast." Minstrel stars Bert Williams and Florence Mills transcended the form's limitations to become what writer Montgomery Gregory described as "dramatic geniuses who have elevated their work to the highest art." These years, according to Gregory, also marked the first significant step for serious Negro drama that attempts to "sound the depths of our racial experience." [21]

This was the period in which W.E.B. Du Bois became a founding officer of the newly created NAACP where, as editor of its *Crisis* magazine, he agitated for his belief that a "Talented Tenth" (for ten percent), of college educated Negro intellectuals would lead the mass of underprivileged Negroes to equality. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, it is the same period in which August Wilson set *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Indeed black life in the Pittsburgh-based mill-town did stand in stark contrast to the intellectual excitement of Harlem's renaissance.

Montgomery Gregory's essay, "The Drama of Negro Life," appeared along with J.A. Rogers' "Jazz at Home," in "The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance," a collection of fiction, poetry, essays, plays and cultural criticism published in 1925. The book was conceived to "document the New Negro culturally and socially," wrote editor Alain Locke, "embodying these ripening forces as culled from the first fruits of the Negro Renaissance." [22] Contributors included some of the most famous and historically significant writers in American history including Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, as well as Du Bois himself. Its perspective drew charges of what one contemporary called "intellectual snobbocracy" as these sophisticated urbanites passed judgment on, and attempted to define, authentic depictions of the lives of Negroes often less worldly than themselves. More recently Princeton's Arnold Rampersad rightly pointed out that Locke's "elitist vision of culture" excluded the important influence of Marcus Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement—a conscious omission that underscored the rift between two major competing schools of Negro thought.[23] Du Boise's Talented Tenth theory of education, advocacy and leadership versus Marcus Garvey as confrontational heir to Booker T. Washington's up-by-the-bootstraps vocational approach to civil rights.

One year later, in the July 1926 issue of *Crisis*, Du Bois wrote the words that would declare a challenge for black theater in ways that resonate to this day.

The plays of a real Negro theatre must be:

1. **About us.** That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is.
2. **By us.** That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today.
3. **For us.** That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval.
4. **Near us.** The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.[24]

Playwright/scholar Paul Carter Harrison, writing in the winter 1997 issue of *African American Review*, found it somewhat paradoxical that “such an uncompromising ethnocentric proposal was being issued by a man who, though he adamantly celebrated black folk expression, measured black progress by white standards of achievement.” Yet Harrison also credits the Harvard-educated Du Bois with attempting “to rescue black images from stereotypical manipulation and commercial institutional control” while promoting “the inception of a theatre experience that would be self-affirming, as opposed to self-negating.”[25] From Bill Dillard’s decades of memories as a traveling performer to Du Bois’ vision for his people’s enrichment there is a body of trial and error that created a solid foundation for the marketing innovations that came out of Harlem, New York, circa 1984.

Vy Higginsen came to view her failure as a blessing. “Who knows what would have happened if we had succeeded on Broadway” she says. The rejection made her refocus on booking *Mama I Want To Sing* into unused theaters in Philadelphia, Washington D.C., St. Louis, Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, San Francisco and Los Angeles. She cast R&B singers who, though past their primes, added name recognition to her productions. (“Just because they lost their record deals don’t mean they forgot how to sing!”)[26] She went into business with Black concert promoters who were struggling through a late eighties music industry slump yet possessed valuable insights and connections into their local markets. “This little play that started in Harlem was playing 2-3-4 thousand seat theaters in neighborhoods that were dying all over urban America,” she says referring to the era of Reaganomics. “The lines were down the street and around the block in every single city we went to.” This is the formula that has since been replicated by producers from former concert promoter Shelley Garrett, who’s *Beauty Shop* grossed millions, through Bishop T.D. Jakes and now Tyler Perry among many others. “We have been credited with introducing this phase of African American theater in America,” she says, “and I think that’s accurate because prior to us that market was invisible.”[27]

Tyler Perry was a 19-year old teenager grappling with feelings of suicide and living in New Orleans with a contractor father he has characterized as cruel and abusive. According to tylerperry.com, Perry, who did not respond to numerous interview requests, wrote a series of letters to himself after an episode of *Oprah* inspired him to



“find catharses for his own childhood pain.” Those letters were the source material for his first play *I Know I've Been Changed*. His subsequent success reads like the script of one of his melodramas. He worked as a bill collector to save the \$12,000 needed to produce, direct and star in a failed 1992 production of *Changed*. He lived, according to the legend, out of his car while compiling enough capital to finance his eventual breakthrough. The 1998 production of *Changed* sold out Atlanta's House of Blues and The Fox Theater but, equally important, was the presence of Bishop T.D Jakes who was among the capacity crowds of enthusiastic ticket holders. Jakes, already a best-selling author, hired Perry to adapt his novel “*Woman, Thou Art Loosed*” to the stage. The collaboration reportedly grossed 5 million dollars in just five months.[28] Less than a decade later Tyler Perry became one of the biggest stars and successful entrepreneurs in American entertainment.

From a commercial standpoint August Wilson's fortunes were not enviable by comparison. According to the League of American Theaters and Producers, Broadway productions of his plays have collectively grossed about 32 million dollars. Yet, in the aggregate, he has lost his investor's money. The Broadway model, it seems, has not been kind to him. *Fences* turned a profit with 525 Broadway performances but, as we've seen, *Joe Turner* was a commercial flop. In 1990 *The Piano Lesson* won his second Pulitzer and made a reasonable profit at 328 performances but it was downhill from there:

- ×*Two Trains Running* (160 performances in 1992)
- ×*Seven Guitars* (188 performances in 1996)
- ×*King Hedley II* (72 performances in 2001)
- × *Gem of the Ocean* (72 performances in 2004)

It cost one million dollars to produce *King Hedley II*. It cost at least 2 million dollars to bring Radio Golf, Wilson's final play, to Broadway in 2007. “It cost a lot of money to have our name on the marquee with his,” Vy Higginsen says, referring to her producer's credit on *Joe Turner*. “It was expensive even back then and we lost what we put in.”[29]

The question begs asking. Where did August Wilson find the confidence—the audacity even—to think he could write ten plays that were commercially and artistically viable enough to make it to Broadway? “I did not start with that idea in mind,” he told Vera Sheppard in 1990. After setting *Jitney!* in 1971, *Fullerton Street* in 1941, and *Ma Rainey* in 1927—he realized he might be on to something. “It gave me an agenda,” he said referring to his decision to set one play in each of the century's decades, “something to hone in on so that I never had to worry about what the next play would be about.”[30]

This claim of accidental genius as antidote to writer's block may have been plausible early in his career but by the time *Ma Rainey* reached Broadway he was acknowledging a higher purpose. “What I want to do,” he said, “is place the culture of Black America on stage to demonstrate that it has the ability to offer sustenance, so that when you leave your parents' house you are not in the world alone.”[31]

“I’m amazed by August’s comfortable acceptance of membership in the fraternity of playwrights from Sophocles, on through Ibsen and Miller,” says actor/educator Stephen McKinley Henderson. “He was a race man writing from his own cultural perspective but using elements of classic structure to house the majesty of ethical struggle within all the characters.” Henderson, a tenured professor of drama at SUNY Buffalo, points out that Wilson did not include black intellectuals in his plays because they did not live in the world he portrayed. “August wanted to make us aware of what he saw,” Henderson says, “and he saw the eloquence and ingenuity of everyday citizens we rarely consider in the sweep of history. He wrote about specific, compelling human experience.”[32]

Henderson has performed in numerous productions of Wilson’s plays—appearing on Broadway—in the premiere *King Hedley II* and a 2003 revival of *Ma Rainey*.

I remember him at rehearsal closing his eyes and tapping his finger. Just like he was listening to music, man! We were running our lines and moving around the stage and he wasn’t even looking. He was listening cause he knew the beats. He knew! How it was supposed to sound. How it was supposed to feel. All the sudden [sic] he stopped tapping and said, “Do I need to work on that?” Something had interrupted the flow. It could have been a phrasing thing or the timing between actors but the first thing that came to his mind was could he write it better. He wanted to make sure his words captured the pace, and the meter, and the dynamics of our language.[33]

Wilson’s early works were shaped under the direction and dramaturgical influence of Lloyd Richards, a theater legend who, in 1958-9, directed Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin In The Sun* on Broadway. Hansberry, who had earlier studied African Culture and History with W.E.B. Du Bois, wrote a play about Negroes and integration that achieved the “depths of our racial experience” standard set by Montgomery Gregory three decades earlier. The production won a New York Drama Critics Award and helped cement Richards’ reputation as a wise, stimulating and sensitive director of playwrights and actors. Richards, a theater institution when he received his copy of *Ma Rainey*, was able to move Wilson into the mainstream of American theater and create a pipeline that ran through a series of regional theaters and ended up on Broadway. “It was an incredible coming together of these two minds that placed August right within a very American traditional theater aesthetic as rich as Arthur Miller and profound as Lorraine Hansberry,” says playwright, dramaturge and director Talvin Wilks.[34]

In 2007 Wilks had just signed on to become programming executive at Pittsburgh’s August Wilson Center for African American Culture and had been spending the last few months thinking about, believe it or not, Tyler Perry. “Many theatrical folks are critical of the quality of Perry’s humor,” he stated. Yet Wilson, in a 2003 interview, told Sandra Shannon and Dana Williams that the urban theater circuit “may in fact

be the future of black theater.” “Much of the black theater establishment feels Perry’s work is sophomoric,” Wilks says, “yet they see the success and want to know why their own work is perceived as elitist by some segments of the black community.”[35]

“It’s the difference between a lower class or working class black religious aesthetic and an upper middle class approach to theater,” says Dr. Todd Boyd, Chair for the Study of Race and Popular Culture at the University of Southern California. “What Tyler Perry does, those are plays—very simple, very blunt, quite overt, very direct. August Wilson does theater. The writing, the subject matter, the execution is of a literary tradition that is usually spoken to people with a different class background than that of Perry.”[36] “The goal,” adds Stephen McKinley Henderson, “is to make sure they all have a wonderful time.”[37]

Other scholars say Perry’s impact is, in and of itself, culturally significant. “I enjoy watching his work. It’s funny,” says Carlton Molette, retired Professor of Dramatic Arts and Senior Fellow of the Institute for African-American Studies at the University of Connecticut, who taught the stage version of “*Madea’s Family Reunion*” alongside works by Wilson and Amiri Baraka. “I oppose the idea that we must avoid laughing at our foibles just because white folks might not get it right. I’m not so sure they get it right with Wilson either. They certainly don’t get it right with Baraka.” According to Molette the class debate is beside the point. “Neither Tyler Perry nor the black intellectuals who demean his work are responsible for the fact that we live in a racist society,” he says, “Perry deserves recognition for his accomplishments.”[38]

Tyler Perry’s signature character is Madea, a pot smoking, gun wielding caricature of what he describes as “every black person’s” favorite diabetic grandmother. His fans suspend disbelief as he appears on stage (or screen) in a ridiculous fat-suit complete with monstrously sagging breasts, a wig and a housedress. The plays are structured like Church—introduction of a character’s moral decline, a mid-tempo Gospel number promises hope, a pop culture reference here, some comic-relief there, a rousing Gospel ensemble number swears allegiance to Jesus, more comic relief, a Gospel plea for forgiveness, a farce ensues, the prodigal child returns and accepts God, more Gospel music—you get the picture. The acting is over the top, the music is predictable, the revelations are obvious and the humor is derivative, yet none of this matters because in Tyler Perry’s world “God is the answer” and “Jesus will make your life brand new.”

Producer Tiffani Gavin says Urban Gospel Theater was designed as another manifestation of the church experience. “Modern parables shared from the pulpit we call the stage,” she says, “and they come complete with the opportunity and the expectation, of call and response, clapping, and singing along.” Gavin was a production executive for *Cover Girl*, another of Bishop Jakes’ books adapted into a play, when “he suggested that his plays and books were extensions of his teachings,” she says.[39] Tyler Perry is not an ordained minister but is proud of being a Born Again Christian. He makes no claims to originality only to knowing his audience—

in much the same way Vy Higginsen knew hers. Perry's willingness to play Madea reveals a self-deprecating confidence that is evangelical in its impact. He doesn't present himself as better, or more informed, or smarter than his fans. He is simply one of them—sharing in their fealty to Jesus. "Madea is not saved," Perry says on his website, "but we're working on her."

"Historically one could say that the black church has been the most powerful institution in the black community socially, politically and economically," says Todd Boyd. "Most often we don't think of evangelical or right wing as applying to African Americans but clearly Perry's success is informed by a social conservatism that defines a great deal of black culture." [40]

The relationship of African Americans and spirituality also figures prominently in Wilson's work but in ways that illuminate rather than proselytize.

You can't play in the chord God ain't wrote. He wrote the beginning and the end. He let you play around in the middle but he got it all written down. It's his creation and he got more right in it than anybody else.

–Stool Pigeon (King Hedley II)

"August made it clear that Stool Pigeon was not delusional," says Stephen McKinley Henderson who originated the role on Broadway. "Stool Pigeon wasn't a preacher but he was a mystic. That's what enabled him to twist and use scripture in whatever way revealed the hidden." [41] Wilson believed the church was one of black America's most stable institutions but questioned whether the "African-ness" has been marginalized. "All over the world, nobody has a God who doesn't resemble them. Except Black Americans," he told Samuel G. Freedman in 1984. "They can't even see they're worshipping someone else's God because they want so badly to assimilate, to get the fruits of society." [42] Wilson is the inquisitive scientist—organizing data, conducting cost/benefit analyses, questioning assumptions and hypothesis. Perry, conversely, is the evangelical believer.

February 5th, 2007

Hey there,

As I was thanking God for all that He had done, I had to say a special thanks for having all of you in my corner. Believe me when I tell you, I know that you don't have to support me, but I'm oh so glad that you do. It has made all the difference in my world. Thank you.

I'll holla next week.

Tyler

The Internet has changed the way people communicate. We welcome strangers into our homes via social media and treat them as family. We hold conversations too personal to conduct face-to-face and crave the flashing screenname signaling a new message from a trusted "friend" whom we may not have ever met in person. Tyler Perry has mastered this new reality. He nurtures hundreds of thousands of fans with e-mail blasts containing well-timed messages that read like personal notes. From

promotional announcements to inspirational stories of Jesus' influence on his daily life, Perry uses his access to proclaim love of God, profess appreciation to fans and preserve the **us** ("board members" who post to his online message board, website subscribers, people who buy official merchandise) **against them** (the media, black intellectuals, the establishment) dynamic. This excerpt is from an e-mail sent on the release day of his motion picture, *Daddy's Girls*:

February 14, 2007

What is being said to me by the insiders and asked of me by the press are things like, "Do you think that your audience will support a movie about a good Black man?" That made me furious but I just smiled and tried to represent as best I could. Now y'all know that the "hood" side of me wanted to show up, right? (SMILE) But really, it is as though we are all so unsophisticated that we won't support a great movie about a good father. We know the truth, so let's show them at the box office.

Are you with me?

God bless!

TP

Perry got a huge collective chuckle after one sold out performance when he jokingly accused an audience member of looking like "you don't have no computer." It was a knowing laugh—an inside joke with a whole lot of truth buried within the jest. If you want to know what time it is—slang for what's going on—you best get online.

"Tyler Perry must be included in any programming that purports to represent contemporary African American culture," said Talvin Wilks explaining his vision for Pittsburgh's August Wilson Center. Wilks envisioned a programming season that might include August Wilson, Amiri Baraka and Tyler Perry among others. "It's when these playwrights are presented in isolation among a series of all white plays that people miss the greater appreciation of the broad spectrum of the culture," he stated.[43] Wilks would even consider something akin to the long-time practice of dance companies programming months of sold out *Nutcracker* performances, which then support the presentation of more challenging works. Under this model the possibility exists of exposing less-adventurous fans to productions they might not otherwise experience.

According to Dena Levitin, executive administrator of Wilson's estate and his long time assistant, there is a constant stream of regional productions of August Wilson's plays. Others say, off the record, that quality levels can be wildly inconsistent in some of the less accomplished companies. Stephen McKinley Henderson has been advocating for an August Wilson Repertory Company to help address what he sees as a serious oversight. "Chekov had Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theater, Brecht had the Berliner Ensemble and there are many companies specializing in Shakespeare," he says. "I've been talking about this with actor/director Ruben Santiago Hudson. Someone needs to be able to teach actors and directors how to wrestle with the complexities of presenting these works in the way August and Lloyd taught us." [44]

Henderson performed the role of Elmore in the 2007 Signature Theater production of *King Hedley II* as opposed to the Stool Pigeon character he brought to life when the play premiered on Broadway in 2001. Wilson's widow and costume designer Constanza Romero and his dramaturge Todd Kreidler were credited as Associate Artists for the Signature Theater production, a development that represents a seal of approval from the Wilson estate and attempts to guarantee a certain level of quality and professionalism. This production was much more earthy than the earlier Broadway run and the audience seemed grittier too. In this intimate setting of 15-dollar tickets, away from the grand stage and lofty expectations of Broadway, the play was transformed. There was plenty of head nodding in the audience and more than a few grunts of approval when Stool Pigeon said "God is a motherfucker." Not quite the audience participation expected with a Tyler Perry play but a clear indication that a first class production of Wilson's message can reach plain folk. Could it be that, for artistic as well as financial reasons, Broadway is not the best place to see an August Wilson play?

One of Wilson's final casting decisions before his death was the hiring of actor John Earl Jelks to play the role of Citizen Barlow in *Gem of the Ocean*. Wilson caught Jelks performing at a small theater in California and was so impressed he waited outside to meet him. "You are a bad motherfucker," Wilson said before extending the invitation serious actors prepare for their entire careers. Jelks, a single parent who was mourning the sudden death of his wife and the mother of his children, was humbled and grateful. He had honed his craft through years of touring in a play called *The Diary of Black Men: How Do You Love A Black Woman*, which ran on the Urban Theater Circuit. His Broadway debut was positively reviewed in *The New York Times* and he began taking meetings with New York agents.

"Augustine who?" The woman who answered the phone at the NAACP's Hollywood branch did not recognize the names August Wilson or Lorraine Hansbury when asked if the Image Awards had ever honored a playwright. "Give me your name and number and someone will get back to you," she said. "We don't have that kind of information readily available." She didn't mention that the Hollywood branch also sponsors the NAACP Theatre Awards, which has a website claiming to have celebrated black theatre since the 1990s,[45] and no one from the Hollywood branch ever returned my call. In the meantime, however, John Earl Jelks was nominated for a "Best Featured Actor" Tony Award for portraying Sterling Johnson in the Broadway production of *Radio Golf*, August Wilson's final play. Jelks was, indeed, "a bad motherfucker."

### Addendum

My informal research began in 1987 when I saw *Fences* on Broadway and fell in love with Wilson's work. I subsequently saw productions of all his plays (many more than once) on Broadway and off. In 1990 I interviewed trumpeter, singer and dancer Bill Dillard, who was performing in a show called *Futher Mo'*, for a feature I produced for National Public Radio's *Crossroads*. In the winter of 2004 I watched a televised New York Knicks game at the apartment of an arts administrator who had worked on a number of Wilson productions. While we shared

barbequed chicken wings and watched basketball, John Earl Jelks told me about his wife's death, the challenges of single parenting and meeting August Wilson.

I began my official research by re-watching videos of Tyler Perry plays and reading or rereading all of August Wilson's plays. I interviewed Marcia Pendleton, President of Walk Tall Girl productions, a marketing consultant who has worked tirelessly to bring black audiences to black theatre both, on and off Broadway. She introduced me to Tiffani Gavin who answered many questions about the origins and goals of the Urban Theater Circuit and told me stories about her working with Bishop TD Jakes and other notables on the circuit. I interviewed Tavin Wilkes, and briefly spoke with Paul Carter Harrison. I spent an hour with Vy Higginsen and made repeated calls and e-mail requests for interviews with Tyler Perry—to his publicist, his website and his production company, all to no avail. I signed up for his online e-mail messages in order to better understand how he communicates with his fans. I interviewed University of Connecticut's Carlton Molette and University of Southern California's Todd Boyd. I spent time with actor Stephen McKinley Henderson and spoke with Dena Levitin and Todd Kriedler. I had many off the record conversations with performers and behind the scenes contributors to August Wilson's plays who gave me insights into his process as well as some of the dynamics that occur in the high stakes world of Broadway.

I have always been interested in class dynamics among African Americans and this was a project with strong personal meaning for me. I remain eternally grateful to Professor Alisa Solomon and Professor Margot Jefferson for their invaluable insights and guidance.

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Joe Turner was