

Constructing August Wilson: The Writer's Landscape Permanent Exhibit Housed at Pittsburgh's August Wilson African American Cultural Center An Insider's View

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Hats off to the team of visionaries who convened in 2019 to conceptualize and set plans in motion for an ageless tribute to the life and work of Pittsburgh's, America's, and the world's playwright: August Wilson. Despite having to contend with a global pandemic that would eventually upend the project's initial timeline, that meeting has now yielded a sprawling "3,600-square-foot gallery space that features interactive, multi-sensory exhibits, artifacts from Wilson's Estate, and recreations of ephemera from the 1900s to the early 2000s."¹ The appropriately named permanent exhibit, *August Wilson: The Writer's Landscape*, provides a panoramic view of the people, places, and things that informed the celebrated playwright's creative process. Billed as "the first-ever immersive exhibition dedicated to the life and works of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson,"² this expansive exhibit opened on April 15, 2022, at Pittsburgh's August Wilson African American Cultural Center (AWAACC).

In August 2018, AWAACC President and CEO, Janis Burley Wilson, reached out to me in an email with an invitation to serve as a consultant on this ambitious project—a role that landed me on a select team that includes Constanza Romero Wilson, the late August Wilson's wife, who serves as Executor of August Wilson Legacy, LLC, and the exhibit's chief curator; Gerard "Jerry" Eisterhold, founder, president, principal designer and creative director of Eisterhold Associates, Inc., whose work includes the Rosa Parks Museum in Alabama, the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum in Missouri, and the African American Museum in Philadelphia; acclaimed scenic designers David Gallo and Viveca Gardiner; and noted filmmaker Emma Alaquiva. It did not take long for this team of experts to gel and form a formidable community working toward the common goal of memorializing August Wilson in "epic" fashion and doing justice to his "epic" legacy. Although we drew from different wells of knowledge and experience, we were equally invested in the mission of *August Wilson: The Writer's Landscape*.

"I'd like to talk to you about a project we are working on at the Center," Burley-Wilson wrote. "We are working with a tech firm on a digital installation about August Wilson. For

¹ "August Wilson African American Cultural Center Opens August Wilson: the Writer's Landscape Saturday, April 16 First-ever Permanent Exhibition Dedicated to Life of Pulitzer Prize-winning Playwright," The August Wilson African American Cultural Center, last modified February 24, 2022, <https://awaacc.org/news/august-wilson-african-american-cultural-center-opens-august-wilson-the-writers-landscape-saturday-april-16-first-ever-permanent-exhibition-dedicated-to-life-of-pulitzer-prize-winning-playwr/>.

² "August Wilson: The Writer's Landscape," The August Wilson African American Cultural Center, accessed January 21, 2023, <https://awaacc.org/exhibition/august-wilson-the-writers-landscape/>.

historical and literary perspective, I'd like to hire you as a consultant on the project. Are you interested? Let's talk soon, Janis." I am honored that my credentials as the nation's leading scholar on August Wilson combined with my proven expertise in African American literature, Black Theater, and my seminal scholarship on the work of August Wilson³ helped to secure my role as an AWAACC Scholar in Residence and project consultant for this bustling state of the art cultural center in the heart of Pittsburgh that proudly bears Wilson's name. I wasted little time in responding to Burley Wilson's August 16, 2018, email invitation with an emphatic Yes! In the weeks, months, and years that followed, I welcomed the various demands of this role that sometimes required three, four, or up to six-hour zoom sessions to review and approve content that called for significant blocks of time to edit, re-edit, and critique recordings, drawings, costumes, props, written texts, etc., all in our unending quest for absolute accuracy.

As the project's content specialist, I drew heavily upon my years of research, teaching, reading, and writing about Wilson, the playwright, and the man. As such, I was comfortable suggesting a fitting name for the project,⁴ crafting succinct plot summaries for each of his American Century Cycle plays, offering relevant historical and cultural context on Black life in 20th-century America, and identifying major themes that emerge in each of the plays' ten decades. My work also entailed critiquing the exhibit's design and layout with visitors' needs in mind, doing voiceover recordings of select excerpts from my 1991 interview with Wilson⁵ as part of the culminating *How I Learned What I Learned* portion of the exhibit, and offering feedback on original artwork—most notably, on the hauntingly beautiful rendition of *Gem of the Ocean's* City of Bones done by the late Eisterhold Associates design specialist, Victoria Edwards. In addition to all the above ways I worked to bring forth *August Wilson: The Writer's Landscape* exhibit, I suggested language for both "street scripts" and "office scripts,"⁶ identified

³ See <https://works.bepress.com/sandra-shannon/>.

⁴ I insisted that the exhibit's name include the word "landscape" as, in my estimation, it best conveys the extent to which writing was part of a healing process and a means of personal discovery for August Wilson. He often explained, "Writing a play is like walking down this landscape of the self, and you have to be willing to confront whatever you find there. And your baggage that you carry with you, your weapons—or the small imperial truths that you have accumulated over your life—that is all you have, and hopefully, you will emerge from the landscape with a greater truth, a more illuminating truth." See Bill Moyers, *A World of Ideas: Conversations with Thoughtful Men and Women about American Life Today and the Ideas Shaping Our Future* (New York: Doubleday), 178.

⁵ See *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, Howard University Press, 1995, 201-235.

⁶ The Writer's Landscape exhibit is punctuated by three separate sections to be experienced as visitors make their way through the space: the Coffee Shop, the Office, and the Street. The Coffee Shop approximates the bustling Hill District diner where Wilson frequented to write. The Office captures the essence of Wilson's disheveled writing space in the secluded basement area of his Seattle, Washington, home. Among the items featured here are Wilson's iconic desk, balled up and discarded paper, hastily written notes, posters, photographs, and stacks of books. The Street section of the exhibit educates visitors on what went into the making of each of the ten plays that make up the American Century Cycle. Carefully positioned wall placards and motion-detected voiceover recordings educate visitors on each play's conflict, its historical context, its main characters, and the catalyst that inspired Wilson to write.

touchstone lines or particularly resonating dialogue to be highlighted in the exhibit, and offered supplemental readings or helpful links.⁷

I feel particularly fortunate to have played such a key role in bringing this historic project to fruition. Being a part of this venture has not only introduced me to an amazing team of professionals, but it has also given me a front row seat to the fascinating process of reconstructing August Wilson's writing landscape. Being in this mix has also shown me the absolute value that dedicated and sustained scholarship has in documenting and preserving the work of literary giants such as August Wilson. At your earliest opportunity, I encourage all to put on your walking shoes and come prepared for an awesome stroll through *August Wilson: The Writer's Landscape!*

⁷For example, I shared an excellent source on the work of Jorge Luis Borges to enhance our understanding of the techniques in Wilson's writing. Borges is listed as one of the so-called 4 Bs that influenced August Wilson's writing: Edwin Williamson's *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*, edited by Edwin Williamson. I also suggested that my colleagues read my essay on Lloyd Richards in *The Great North American Stage Directors* (Methuen 2021), 178-207.