

August Wilson

the ground on which i stand

Watch Party Discussion Guide

Thank you for watching *August Wilson: The Ground On Which I Stand*, the definitive story of one of the most prolific playwrights of the 20th century, two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner, August Wilson. The documentary is a co-production of PBS' *American Masters* series and WOED Multimedia. The questions below are designed to facilitate classroom and community conversations about August Wilson's life, work, and impact.

Before viewing the documentary (Note: Some questions are more appropriate for audiences who are already familiar with August Wilson and his work.)

When you hear the name "August Wilson" what comes to mind? (We recommend asking this question before *and* after viewing the documentary.)

What do you hope to learn about August Wilson from the documentary?

What questions do you have about August Wilson?

What's your favorite August Wilson play? Why?

Why do you think August Wilson chose to write a decade-by-decade 10-play cycle, instead of 10 plays set at random times?

What history lessons can be learned from August Wilson's plays?

August Wilson is referred to as "America's Shakespeare." What do Wilson and The Bard--and their plays--have in common?

What lessons and inspirations can be gleaned from Wilson's life?

Through his plays, August Wilson explores the complex lives of ordinary people. What ideas does Wilson put forth about: Race? Fathers and sons? Women? Romantic love? Freedom? Duty? Honor? Justice? Community? Success?

How would you sum up August Wilson's contributions to the American theatre? To American literature? To American culture?

How would you describe August Wilson's legacy?

Where do you see August Wilson's legacy in today's theater, culture, or literature?

Where do you see August Wilson's legacy in your community?

August Wilson wrote one play about African American life for each decade of the 20th century. How do you think August Wilson might depict African American life in a play set in the 21st century? What stories would he tell? Whose stories would he tell?

After viewing the documentary (Note: Some questions are repeated as they are appropriate for before and after the viewing)

Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks observes, "August Wilson reminds us who we are...all of us, as an American people." What do August Wilson's plays tell us about who we are as an American people? Why do you think she added "...all of us"?

In what ways did August Wilson's childhood experiences influence the characters and themes of his plays? Which plays or characters do you think are Wilson's most autobiographical?

Why do you think the voices of the characters from The Hill District began to speak to August Wilson *after* he left Pittsburgh?

Actor Ruben Santiago-Hudson observes, "August Wilson wrote the frustration *and* the glory of being Black in America." What do you think he meant by this? What are some current examples you've observed or experienced of "the frustration" or "the glory" of being Black in America?

How did Wilson's early beginnings as a poet influence his work as a playwright?

Why do you think Wilson included supernatural and spiritual elements in his plays about everyday life?

Through his plays, August Wilson explores the complex lives of ordinary people. What ideas does Wilson put forth about: Race? Fathers and sons? Women? Romantic love? Freedom? Duty? Honor? Justice? Community? Success?

Wilson's plays emphasize African Americans' connections to the past, their ancestors, and Africa. Through his plays, what does Wilson say about the importance and nature of these connections?

What history lessons can be learned from August Wilson's plays?

August Wilson is referred to as "America's Shakespeare." What do Wilson and The Bard--and their plays--have in common?

How did being self-educated influence August Wilson's life and art?

What did you learn from the documentary about August Wilson's creative process as a playwright?

Why do you think that the idea of "place" (in particular The Hill District of Pittsburgh) was so important to August Wilson as a playwright?

How would you describe the roles August Wilson created for women characters in his plays?

Why do you think the monologues in August Wilson's plays are so memorable and compelling?

Actress Phylicia Rashad describes the character of Aunt Ester, who appears or is mentioned in several of Wilson's plays, as an example of a "wise person" in the African American community. Who are the elders and wise persons in your community today? What role do they play? If their role has been marginalized in your community, why do you think this is?

Do you share August Wilson's views about non-traditional casting? Should roles be cast according to race?

Critic Robert Brustein described August Wilson's unapologetic focus on African American culture in his plays as "subsidized separatism." What do you think Brustein meant by "subsidized separatism"? How would you respond to Brustein's criticism?

Why do you think August Wilson chose to write a decade-by-decade 10-play cycle, instead of 10 plays set at random times?

What lessons and inspirations can be gleaned from Wilson's life and work?

What can playwrights and other artists learn from Wilson's life and work?

What's your favorite August Wilson play? Why?

August Wilson wrote one play about African American life for each decade of the 20th century. How do you think August Wilson might depict African American life in a play set in the 21st century? In 2015, specifically? What stories would he tell? Whose stories would he tell?

How would you sum up August Wilson's contributions to the American theatre? To American literature? To American culture?

How would you describe August Wilson's legacy?

Where do you see August Wilson's legacy in today's theater, culture, or literature?

Where do you see August Wilson's legacy in your community?

What were you surprised to learn about August Wilson from the documentary?

What questions do you have about August Wilson after watching the documentary?

In what ways do you think the life and work August Wilson can inspire artists, young people, and others in your community?

When you hear the name "August Wilson" what comes to mind?

This Discussion Guide was created by The August Wilson Education Project at WQED Multimedia. To learn more about August Wilson, visit wqed.org/augustwilson.

