



August Wilson - Playwright, Poet

African American playwright August Wilson won a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award for his play "*Fences*" in 1987 and earned a second Pulitzer Prize for "*The Piano Lesson*" in 1990. August Wilson wrote his first play, *Jitney*, in 1979. Other plays include *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II*, *Gem of the Ocean*.

August was born Frederick August Kittle in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on April 27, 1945. His mother was of African American heritage and his father was a German immigrant.

After his parents divorced, he moved to a poor part of Pittsburgh with his mother and five siblings. His mother remarried. They moved to suburb called Hazelwood that was pre-dominantly white. The family received racial threats in this neighborhood. He faced bigotry as a child by his classmates at Central Catholic High School. He then transferred to a vocational high school and later to Gladstone High School. When he was 15 years old he pursued an independent education at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh where he earned his high school degree. He was an avid reader and often could be found at the library.

In 1965 he adopted his pen name, reportedly as a tribute to his mother, and declared himself a poet. He co-founded the Black Horizon Theatre in Pittsburgh. His first love was poetry. He also published poems in a selection of journals. He finally achieved some success after moving to St. Paul, Minnesota in 1978 where he wrote the play *Jitney*, which earned him a fellowship at the Minneapolis Playwright Center.

In 1980 he wrote *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Now turned into a feature film starring Viola Davis, currently on Netflix) – This play was accepted into the Eugene O'Neill Playwright's Conference. Here he met Lloyd Richards, who went on to direct Wilson's first six Broadway Plays.

Fences, starring Denzel Washington and Viola Davis, is a play that explore themes of the ever-evolving Black experience and race relations in America. It has been turned into a movie directed by Denzel Washington. Prior to the film, it ran on Broadway.

Wilson will be remembered for his great contributions to American Theatre and Film.