“I let them start talking”: August Wilson on Writing

“I fell in love with words as concretized thought when I was a kid and knew somehow that I would spend my life involved with them,” August Wilson once said. One of the greatest American writers of any generation, Wilson captured the rhythm and musicality of language—the poetry of everyday speech. He started out as a poet, in fact, and he prized poetry as the highest form of literature. His words, spoken by gifted actors, are at once heightened and bottomless, epic and intimate, soaring and of the earth. In these brief excerpts from an interview he gave to The Paris Review, we quote Wilson as he speaks about his writing process and the language of his plays. To read the full interview, please visit http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/839/the-art-of-theater-no-14-august-wilson.

“My influences have been what I call my four Bs—the primary one being the blues, then Borges, Baraka, and Bearden. From Borges, those wonderful gaucho stories from which I learned that you can be specific as to a time and place and culture and still have the work resonate with the universal themes of love, honor, duty, betrayal, etcetera. From Amiri Baraka I learned that all art is political, though I don’t write political plays. That’s not what I’m about. From Romare Bearden I learned that the fullness and richness of everyday ritual life can be rendered without compromise or sentimentality.

“Being an admirer of Romare Bearden’s collages, I try to make my plays the equal of his canvases. In creating plays I often use the image of a stewing pot in which I toss various things that I’m going to make use of—a black cat, a garden, a bicycle, a man with a scar on his face, a pregnant woman, a man with a gun. Then I assemble the pieces into a cohesive whole guided by history and anthropology and architecture and my own sense of esthetic statement.

“When asked about his work Bearden said, ‘I try and explore, in terms of the life I know best, those things which are common to all cultures.’ Every artist worth his salt has a painting of a woman bathing. So Bearden’s Harlem Woman Bathing in Her Kitchen is no different as a subject than you would find in Degas, but it is informed by African-American culture and aesthetics. The life I know best is black American life and through Bearden I realized that you could arrive at the universal through the specific.

“My early attempts at writing plays, which are very poetic, did not use the language that I work in now. I didn’t recognize the poetry in the everyday language of black America. I thought I had to change it to create art…. Once I learned to value and respect my characters, I could really hear them. I let them start talking.
Ruben Santiago-Hudson, third from left, won a Tony Award for his performance in August Wilson’s Seven Guitars. He is pictured here with Jerome Preston Bates, Albert Hall, & Tommy Hollis in the Goodman Theatre production of the play. Photo Eric Y. Exit.

“The language is defined by those who speak it. There’s a place in Pittsburgh called Pat’s Place, a cigar store, which I read about in Claude McKay’s Home of Harlem. It was where the railroad porters would congregate and tell stories. I thought, Hey, I know Pat’s Place. I literally ran there. I was twenty-one at the time and had no idea I was going to write about it. I wasn’t keeping notes. But I loved listening to them…. They would argue about how far away the moon was. They’d say, ‘Man, the moon a million miles away.’ They called me Youngblood. They’d say, ‘Hey, Youngblood, how far the moon?’ And I’d say, ‘150,000 miles,’ and they’d say, ‘That boy don’t know nothing! The moon’s a million miles.’ I just loved to hang around those old guys—you got philosophy about life, what a man is, what his duties, his responsibilities are. . . . That’s where I learned how black people talk.”