

NINA MOINI: August Wilson is one of America's most produced playwrights. While a lot of his plays are set in Pittsburgh, Wilson began his career as a playwright at Penumbra Theatre in Saint Paul. And one of his earlier works, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, is currently running at Penumbra. Arts Reporter Jacob Aloï spoke with the Director of the production and Penumbra Founder Lou Bellamy about the play and Wilson's legacy in Minnesota.

LOU BELLAMY: *Joe Turner* is one of the plays that August Wilson penned while living in Saint Paul, so it's special in that sort of way. It is also my favorite of the 10 plays in the cycle. It showcases his poetic treatment of language, his fidelity to telling the truth about the Black experience and at a critical time.

It's 1911 and it's at a time when the Great Migration is happening. All these rural Black people are seemingly en masse moving north toward that promise of freedom. And it was a dangerous journey. And there needed to be, as on the Underground Railroad, safe places where they could just stop and catch their breath.

And this play takes place in one of those crossroads or crucibles where these people rest for a second on their journey.

JACOB ALOI: It was once said that Wilson said that one of the past productions here was one of his favorite productions of *Joe Turner's* that he'd ever seen. So tell me a little bit about the history of this show being here. And I know that you've directed it a number of times, both here and also in Portland and elsewhere. So tell me a little bit about that history of this company doing this show.

LOU BELLAMY: There are, I think, four actors who are in this production that are old company members, lifelong Penumbra company members. And they have sort of grown up playing these roles. I've played roles, as well as directed the show.

It speaks to a type of authority that Penumbra has in dealing with this work. We not only know what Wilson wrote down, but we know what he meant because we were there talking with him when he was telling many of these stories.

JACOB ALOI: Do you have any memories of just like you just mentioned, hearing those stories of him talking about, oh, I'm working on this? Or this is something I'm playing with. Or in the larger *Century Cycle*, this is the role that this play plays.

LOU BELLAMY: I remember, for instance, when Wilson was working on *Ma Rainey*. And he was right out here in our hall, acting out and showing us what Levee was going to do. And it's that speech where he's calling down God. And I remember telling him, August, you can't do that.

You can't say stuff like that. And he just-- he'd grin. He'd say, I'm going to do it, man. I'm going to do it. I'm going to do it. So that's the kind of interaction that we've had in dealing with this literature. And it gives you a different sort of insight and in to the work.

It isn't-- it's sacred because he's so talented. He's a genius. He manipulates language like the best poets. But we know the language and the experience in a different kind of way.

JACOB ALOI: Do you have any thoughts about producing the show or just reflections on doing the show that started out in connection with having August Wilson here in those early years, writing and coming into his own as a playwright?

LOU BELLAMY: Yeah. I think that that was a very fortunate meeting between August and Penumbra Theatre. He was at a point where he was making the transition from a poet to a playwright. We were at a point where we were developing a craft but looking for vehicles to show that craft off, to try it out on.

And so we met at a time that was right for both of us. Many of the plays, the ones that were written in Saint Paul especially, were worked with actors that are company members here. As I said, we know all the stories behind all the work.

And August said he became a playwright when he saw that there were men and women who were willing to devote their lives to this work. And it instructed him in a kind of a way. I'm proud to have been part of that.

JACOB ALOI: You received the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act grant back in '76. It's 2026 now. I think about 50 years ago, to have a federal program that sets aside money to be used in various ways. And specifically at Penumbra, it was used to train African American theater makers.

LOU BELLAMY: Yeah, there are parallels, of course, between those CETA programs and the WPA, where it was thought that these neighborhoods, these institutions had a level of experience that, if watered and engendered, would grow and represent the beauty of that community. And it certainly happened in Penumbra's case. We began with a CETA grant of, I think, \$150,000.

I hired 20 actors, tech people. Those were the good old days. [LAUGHS] But we just got together and started doing work. Fortunately, the people who built the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center thought that part of a good life would be a lecture hall.

And they put that lecture hall in this building not having a clue that a Penumbra Theatre would grow out of it, that Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights and talented actors would change the shape of American theater. This is an experience that, if given air and water, grows to be something so beautiful that we're all amazed by it, even the creators of it.

I mean, theater has a way of being more than you intended it to be. You turn on the lights and bring up the sound. And all of a sudden, it jumps to life and surprises the creators.

NINA MOINI: That was director Lou Bellamy speaking to reporter Jacob Aloï about August Wilson's connection to Penumbra Theatre and their current production of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The play runs through June 21. Arts reporting at MPR News is made possible by the Minnesota Legacy Amendments Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.