2016 STUDY GUIDE

WILL POWER!

AUGUST WILSON’S
SEVEN GUITARS
DIRECTED BY TIMOTHY DOUGLAS

Yale Repertory Theatre
50TH ANNIVERSARY
WILL POWER!
WELCOME TO WILL POWER!

As part of Yale Repertory Theatre’s WILL POWER! educational initiative, we are pleased to offer this Study Guide to accompany our 2016 production of Seven Guitars.

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It is 1948. The play begins just after Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton’s funeral, as his friends Red Carter, Canewell, Vera, Hedley, and Louise sit in Louise’s backyard in Pittsburgh’s Hill District.

Time quickly slips backward to a few weeks earlier, when Floyd returned from the workhouse. He had just finished serving the 90-day sentence he received just days after returning to Pittsburgh from Chicago, where he recorded a hit record called “It’s All Right.” When he went to Chicago, he left behind his girlfriend Vera, but now he’s trying to convince her to take him back and come to Chicago with him, where he has been invited to record more music. All he needs is enough money to get his guitar out of the pawnshop.

The next morning, Canewell brings Vera a goldenseal plant to grow in the yard. Floyd leaves to get the money the workhouse owes him so he can buy back his guitar. Later that afternoon, Louise tells Vera about her niece who is coming to stay. The niece is pregnant after being involved with two men, one of whom killed the other and was sent to jail. Floyd and Canewell return, frustrated, from the workhouse, where Floyd didn’t have the right documents to get his money. Red Carter comes in celebrating the birth of his son. Hedley joins them, and the men talk in the yard about women and food, traveling and staying in place, guns and knives, and finally music, which starts an impromptu jam session. Floyd remembers how his mother used to sing and vows to buy her a new tombstone. They stop talking when a Joe Louis boxing match comes on the radio. Joe Louis wins the match, and the men celebrate, which almost turns violent but is interrupted by the arrival of Louise’s niece, Ruby.

Act Two begins a few days later, as Hedley makes chicken sandwiches in the yard while Ruby watches. She asks him about the song he always sings, about Buddy Bolden saying “there go the money.” Hedley tells her that Buddy was a famous trumpet player, and about his father, who also played the trumpet. Hedley’s father came to him in a dream and told him that Buddy Bolden would bring him money enough to buy a plantation. Floyd comes back from the pawnshop where he tried again to get his guitar but his pawn ticket expired. Later that day, the women talk about men who are blinded by the idea of possessing a woman, rather than love or desire. Canewell and Floyd return, elated—they have booked a gig at a club called the Blue Goose on Mother’s Day, and they have a date to record more music in Chicago.

But the next day, the man who has been acting as Floyd’s agent, T. L. Hall, disappears with the advance from the Blue Goose, which Floyd needed to get his guitar out of the pawnshop. Canewell tells Floyd to stop letting agents and record companies take all his money. Red Carter tells them that T. L. Hall was arrested for an insurance scam. Floyd vows he will still make it to Chicago and storms off.

The next day, Floyd is missing. Hedley shows everyone the machete he has acquired for protection. Late that night Hedley guards the yard with his machete. He rants about the plight of the black man, and how nobody can hold him down. Ruby finds him, comforts him, and offers herself to him.

Early the next evening, Floyd reappears and buries something in the yard. He calls to Vera and shows her all the new things he’s bought: a guitar, a dress for her, bus tickets to Chicago. He asks her to marry him, and she agrees to go with him.

On Mother’s Day, as everyone gets ready to go to the dance at the Blue Goose, Ruby tells Louise that she’s going to inform Hedley that he’s the father of her unborn baby. Canewell reads to them about a robbery at a loan office. After the successful gig, Canewell notices that the goldenseal plant’s roots are exposed. He starts to rebury them and finds a handkerchief full of money. Floyd wrestles it from him, and Canewell realizes that it was Floyd who robbed the loan office. Floyd counts his money. Hedley enters and thinks Floyd is Buddy Bolden, finally here to give him his father’s money. Floyd won’t give the money to Hedley. As Floyd bends down to rebury his stash, Hedley cuts his throat with the machete.

The play shifts back to the first scene, after Floyd’s funeral. It is clear that nobody knows that Hedley killed Floyd. As Canewell sings the Buddy Bolden song, Hedley shows him his handful of crumpled bills.
Floyd Barton
A musician with a hit record, on the verge of something great.

“See...I’m going to Chicago. If I have to buy me a graveyard and kill everybody I see. I am going to Chicago. I don’t want to live my life without. Everybody I know live without. I don’t want to do that. I want to live with. I don’t know what you all think of yourself but I think I’m supposed to have. Whatever it is. Have something. Have anything.”

Vera
The woman Floyd left behind. Lives on the first floor of Louise’s house, and planted the garden in the yard.

Canewell: I know Vera longer than you have. I know what kind of woman she is. Vera a quiet woman. Chicago’s a noisy city. Anybody can tell you the two don’t fit together.

Red Carter
Floyd’s friend, drummer in Floyd’s band.

“Aint’ nobody walking on my back. I ain’t gonna let nobody walk on my back.”

Canewell
Floyd’s friend, plays harmonica.

“If I could put the music down I would have been a preacher. Many a time I felt God was calling. But the Devil was calling too and it seem like he call louder.”

Hedley
Somewhat older than Floyd and his friends. Hedley rents a room at Louise’s house and sells the meat and eggs from the chickens he keeps in the yard.

“Soon I’m going to be a big man. You watch. Buddy Bolden give me my father’s money I’m going to buy a plantation. Then the white man not going to tell me what to do.”

Louise
The no-nonsense landlady of the house where Vera, she, and Hedley live.

“No thank you I don’t need me no love. I’m forty-eight going on sixty. Hedley’s the closest I want to come to love...and you see how far that is.”

Ruby
Louise’s niece, has come up to stay with Louise because of some trouble in Alabama.

“I tried to tell them Ruby don’t belong to nobody and Ruby ain’t gonna take but so much of anybody.”
Director Timothy Douglas describes Yale Repertory Theatre’s 50th Anniversary production of *Seven Guitars* as a “homecoming.” Timothy first encountered August Wilson and his plays as an acting student at Yale School of Drama. Now, as an established theatre artist, Timothy often works on Wilson’s American Century Cycle plays (*Seven Guitars* is the fifth in the series): he has directed nine of the ten plays in the series at least once, and this is his second time directing *Seven Guitars*. Timothy's experiences as an African American and a theatre director have inspired in him a deep appreciation for Wilson’s message and how it ripples through *Seven Guitars*, Black history, and America. Production dramaturg Catherine María Rodríguez talked to Timothy about this play just a few weeks before rehearsals at Yale Rep began.

**Catherine María Rodríguez:** *Seven Guitars* is set into motion by the return of Floyd, a man who has served time in the workhouse. Some of the characters in *Seven Guitars* seem skeptical about Floyd, but I’ve heard you say you believe Floyd is sincere. What has shaped how you see this character?

**Timothy Douglas:** Floyd is a seeker. Whatever happened to Floyd, whatever came to light for him in the workhouse, seems to be parallel to what transpired for Malcolm X in prison. Hedley is a seer, the one who speaks the voice of the African tradition throughout the story. As soon as Hedley sees Floyd after his stay in the workhouse, he knows that this young man has “shifted.” Though what Hedley extols might seem crazy out of context, it’s actually teaching Floyd. Theirs is a father/son dynamic, and it awakens in Hedley the need for a son.
Floyd absorbs what Hedley's sharing, instead of dismissing him and, increasingly, attempts to interpret for himself, though he doesn’t yet know how to navigate Hedley’s message...Floyd’s death can be seen as a sacrifice in the way that the deaths of Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X can be seen as sacrifices. Viewed in this light, Floyd doesn’t lose his life as just another Black man on the street.

During my early years as a director, I would have allowed Floyd to prevail with Vera with his slick use of language. It would have still been a compelling production of Seven Guitars, because it’s an amazing play, but in these deeply complicated times, I now find myself compelled to look at Floyd, and the journey of the play, through the experience of the women.

CMR: I’ve heard you say the women are essential to the way the play works. How so? And what happens when you look at the play through their eyes?

TD: All the characters—no matter how large or small—are moving into the next level of their respective “being-ness,” and every event in the play gets them one step closer to their self-actualization.

Because I am a Black man in America, I can readily and intuitively understand where the men in this play are coming from. So I had to spend the bulk of my active time thinking about the innately profound and compelling actions of the women and what it would take for the men to earn their favor. While trying to figure out Seven Guitars for the first time, I was compelled to figure out why Vera would agree to give Floyd a second chance. I believe Floyd and Vera have a genuine bond—as deep as Romeo and Juliet’s—and Floyd’s transgression of their bond is what hurts Vera so much. Simply driven by my sense of humanity, it became clear to me that I needed to look at Floyd through Vera’s eyes: the only way Vera will take a chance on Floyd is if he is speaking the truth of his desire for her. Otherwise, one could dismiss Vera as not being in touch with herself. But, of course, August Wilson is a far better writer than that. I kept looking for clues that would fully reveal the woman so that her essence would sit right within me and my understanding of the story; for that to happen, I had to understand Vera’s life’s journey, on her terms, and honor it.

CMR: Often, the male characters dominate productions and interpretations of Wilson’s plays. I love that you’re articulating that the female characters are vital to the storytelling! Why do you think, after all the years you’ve spent directing Wilson’s plays, that characters like Vera and Ruby are revealing new things to you?

TD: I think it has to do with the times we are living in. Between what America has revealed about itself during the Obama presidency, along with the insanity covered in the daily headlines, there is now a compelling and collective awareness of race and gender biases; we’re now able to more effectively and efficiently navigate Wilson’s exposition and get right to the core of the characters. During these last few years, whatever Wilson play I have been directing, I’ve been able to enter right at the core, and each time I do, it’s as if the Wilson women have said, “There you are! We’ve been right here, waiting for you. Thank you; we’ll take it from here.”

CMR: This is a play that opens in a state of mourning—there’s been a funeral. The characters struggle, but they also have a lot of hope. Is here something hopeful about the tragedy of Floyd’s death, too?

TD: Right out of the gate, Wilson has angels take Floyd up to heaven. Some of the characters can see that event, and some can’t. I had a wonderful teacher who would always say, “God is always broadcasting throughout the universe, but only a few of us decide to hear.”

We’re all going to travel that road. At the moment of death—and it doesn’t matter how privileged you may be, whether you had a formal education or not, whether or
not you ever believed in God—we “get” all those things that seemed so mysterious to us, the things that didn’t seem to make sense. So, yes, on the human level, Floyd’s sudden loss of his life is a tragedy. But on the level that is so much bigger than us—on the level of that which beats our heart and grows the trees, that to which we’ll have to someday surrender—on that level, it’s far from a tragedy... it’s a transcendence to the next level, beyond what is human.

It’s also true for audiences. When we allow ourselves to resonate in real-time with what is human and spiritual about the characters traversing the stage—when we really give over and allow ourselves to collectively feel and experience the theatrical journey together—hope is revealed through us and to us.

**CMR:** As a frequent director of August Wilson’s works, where do you locate the “hope”? And what do you hope for your audience?

**TD:** I work consistently in the mainstream American theatre, and as a result, I’m almost always putting work about Black lives in front of predominantly white audiences. What is so profoundly potent about Wilson’s plays is that all of us—no matter our backgrounds or life influences—get to fully resonate with the very core, human challenges, resiliencies, celebrations and philosophies of Black people. When Wilson is performed authentically, it can have a profound healing and leveling impact.

*Seven Guitars* offers all a chance to commune with others in a dark room and experience access to Black lives that matter. It’s in the notions that arise within each audience member and the discussions that these notions engender; that’s where hope-in-action is revealed.
August Wilson’s Gifts: 
A Contemporary Playwright Meditates

Magic. August Wilson was magic. Using language that hypnotizes he made unseen faces glow, unheard voices vibrate across America’s ears, and loosened the jaded notion of a monolithic Black American experience. It’s safe to say that I’m spellbound by Mr. Wilson’s allure. It was his magic that brought me to study playwriting at Yale School of Drama, where now I have the honor introducing the magician to a new generation of students.

Born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Daisy Wilson, a Black cleaning woman and Frederick Kittel, a German baker, August was one of seven children. The family home, located at the bottom of the Hill District, would grant August the palpable sense of neighborhood that he conveys in his plays.

In school August met teachers who harbored low expectations of his intellect and classmates whose overt racism took many forms, not the least of which was a message he found on his desk every day of ninth grade: “Go home, nigger.” Understandably, the brilliant young man chose to elope from traditional schooling, opting instead for the Carnegie Public Library each day. This autonomy granted him access to the midday jubilation of local hot-spots like Pat’s Place and Eddie’s Restaurant. Strolling in, a pencil and pad in hand, August sat for hours listening as the elders of his community discussed news headlines, weather, and sports. While this routine might strike many as mundane at best, for August it was the genesis of his contributions to theatre, leading him to honor the rhythms, hopes, tones, laughter, and musicality of the effervescent Black life surrounding him. He would do what no writer had done before: expose the multifarious harmonies of African American life throughout each decade of the twentieth century while simultaneously transforming Pittsburgh’s Hill District into one of the most theatrical settings the American stage has witnessed.

Mr. Wilson began his career as a poet, and not until he moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, and started a job at Penumbra Theater, did he write and have produced the
western musical *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. Soon after he received a Playwrights’ Center fellowship, *Jitney* was staged, and he began drafting *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, which would be accepted by the National Playwright’s Conference at the O’Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut.

At the O’Neill, August encountered the genius and joy of Lloyd Richards (who was, at the time, the artistic director of the O’Neill, the artistic director of Yale Repertory Theatre, and dean of Yale School of Drama). A powerhouse director who brought Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* to Broadway, Mr. Richards dedicated much of his tenure at Yale (1979–1991) to discovering emerging playwrights and fostering new plays. The pair would have the great fortune of developing a relationship that began with Mr. Richards ushering August into the limelight. All who worked with them saw the duo shine as an example of how playwright/director collaborators can harmonize like well-tuned instruments.

In April 1984, Yale Repertory Theatre premiered *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* to a mesmerized audience. Frank Rich of *The New York Times* wrote, “Mr. Wilson is a major find for the American theater. A poet as well as a playwright, he writes with compassion, raucous humor and penetrating wisdom.” Under the direction of Mr. Richards, Yale Repertory Theatre produced the debuts of four more Wilson plays: *Fences, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, The Piano Lesson*, and *Two Trains Running*, all of which saw their way onto Broadway soon after. In 2005, just months before his death, *Radio Golf*, the last installment of his American Century Cycle had its premiere at Yale Repertory Theatre—this time with James Bundy as the artistic director and Timothy Douglas at the helm as the show’s director. Nearly two decades after his first premiere and months after a diagnosis of liver cancer, August, alongside his wife Constanza, would revel in the completion of his majestic endeavor.

August Wilson was the recipient of over 30 major theatre accolades, including two Tony Awards and two Pulitzer Prizes. However, it is my deepest belief that August Wilson’s soul-penetrating work has gifted the world in immeasurable ways.

*When asked by his daughter, “Daddy why you a writer?” He responded, “To tell the story.” August told his stories. Stories that have created space for Angela Bassett, Viola Davis, Charles Dutton, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Courtney B. Vance, and many more, and in doing so carved out a bigger space for other voices and stories to be heard. That’s the reach of his magic and legacy. August offered us what he knew, what he questioned and what he loved. He gifted me the zeal to tell my stories. With control over his pen-shaped wand, the magician carved out a space for me to be heard and to pay it forward for the next generation of storytellers.*

*For those immeasurable gifts I thank you, Mr. Wilson.*

—TORI SAMPSON, MFA PLAYWRITING STUDENT, YALE SCHOOL OF DRAMA
August Wilson did not set out to write a play for each decade of the 20th century. But, by the time he had written five plays, he recognized a pattern. In a 1984 interview, Wilson noted, “As it turns out, I’ve written plays that take place in 1911, 1927, 1941, 1957, and 1971. Somewhere along the way it dawned on me that I was writing one play for each decade. Once I became conscious of that, I realized I was trying to focus on what I felt were the most important issues confronting black Americans for that decade, so ultimately they could stand as a record of black experience over the past hundred years presented in the form of dramatic literature.” The complete set of ten plays, now called the **American Century Cycle**, stands as one of the most ambitious, and acclaimed, projects in contemporary American theatre.

In the American Century Cycle, Wilson created a collection of plays that gave Black characters a platform to tell their stories and speak their truth. They talk about everything from bread pudding to remembering Black histories. They contemplate Pittsburgh’s swiftly deteriorating Hill District, the avenues in which Black Americans could economically succeed, their inner familial dynamics. They speak of heroes such as Malcolm X, Joe Louis, and Toussaint L’Ouverture. Some characters talk so much that they spill into other plays: Canewell, Ruby, and Ruby’s unborn child from *Seven Guitars* return in *King Hedley II*. Wilson’s characters spin so many stories that they have become the “record of black experience” that can continue to give voice to past generations.

—TAYLOR BARFIELD

### 1904

**Gem of the Ocean**  
**World Premiere:** 2003, Goodman Theatre, Chicago  
Aunt Ester is the 285-year-old spiritual advisor to the Hill District’s residents. She is a living, breathing connection to the entire history of black experience in America. The play follows a young man named Citizen Barlow who visits Aunt Ester’s home at 1839 Wylie Avenue to have his soul washed for his sins.

### 1911

**Joe Turner’s Come and Gone**  
**World Premiere:** 1986, Yale Repertory Theatre  
Herald Loomis and his daughter Zonia arrive at a boardinghouse run by Seth and Bertha Holly. Loomis searches for his wife as the specter of his seven years of forced labor in Joe Turner’s chain gang continues to threaten his sense of self.

### 1927

**Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom**  
**World Premiere:** 1984, Yale Repertory Theatre  
The indomitable Mother of the Blues, Ma Rainey, is in Chicago to cut a record. Caught between an old blues tradition and the coming importance of recorded music, she negotiates her place in an industry that cares less about her than the profits her music produces. Meanwhile, an upstart trumpet player attempts to establish his new sound.

### 1936

**The Piano Lesson**  
**World Premiere:** 1987, Yale Repertory Theatre  
Two siblings, Bernice and Boy Willie Charles, struggle over the fate of their most precious family heirloom: a piano adorned with carvings of their ancestors. Boy Willie, however, has been offered the opportunity to buy the land where his family used to be slaves, and the only way he can get enough money in time is to sell the piano.
1948

*Seven Guitars*
World Premiere: 1995, Goodman Theatre, Chicago
(See synopsis on page 1)

1957

*Fences*
World Premiere: 1985, Yale Repertory Theatre
Troy Maxson, once an aspiring baseball player, has had the potential fruits of his skills and hard work denied him by a world reticent to allow Black Americans economic success and social mobility. Cory, his son, sees the world through a new generation’s eyes and seeks to use football as his ticket to prosperity. The tensions between father and son threaten the stability of the Maxson family.

1969

*Two Trains Running*
World Premiere: 1990, Yale Repertory Theatre
Memphis Lee’s restaurant serves as a gathering spot for an eclectic assortment of Hill District residents. As the revolutionary winds of the late 60s blow outside, the city of Pittsburgh attempts to buy out all of the Hill’s businesses, and each character searches for a spiritual leader to guide them to a better understanding of themselves.

1977

*Jitney*
World Premiere: 1982, Allegheny Repertory Theatre, Pittsburgh
By the late 70s, the city of Pittsburgh has bought large swaths of Hill District businesses and left many buildings in a state of urban decay. In a time when most car services won’t travel to the Hill, Becker offers unofficial taxi service, called “jitneys,” to Pittsburgh’s black communities. Just as Pittsburgh calls to shut down Becker’s business, his son returns from prison.

1985

*King Hedley II*
World Premiere: 1999, Pittsburgh Public Theater, Pittsburgh
In the sequel to Wilson’s *Seven Guitars*, Aunt Ester, the spiritual advisor to the Hill District, has died. The Hill District’s residents grieve the loss of their living link to black memory while simultaneously dealing with worsening poverty and crime in their neighborhood. King Hedley II, Ruby and Hedley’s son, returns from prison looking to rebuild his life, save some money, and start a family.

1997

*Radio Golf*
World Premiere: 2005, Yale Repertory Theatre
The 21st century rapidly approaches. Harmond Wilks is running to be Pittsburgh’s first black mayor. Concurrently, he works to close his real estate firm’s largest redevelopment deal that would level a large portion of the Hill District and replace it with apartment buildings, complete with Whole Foods, Barnes & Noble, and Starbucks. One of the buildings that Harmond’s company is set to destroy is 1839 Wylie Avenue, the ancestral home of Aunt Ester. Two men closely tied to Aunt Ester fight to convince Harmond of the building’s spiritual significance.

Nine out of ten plays in August Wilson’s American Century Cycle take place in a 1.4 square-mile Pittsburgh neighborhood called the Hill District. Although there are only two pairs of direct sequels in the series (Seven Guitars and King Hedley II; Gem of the Ocean and Radio Golf), most of Wilson’s characters are connected through the neighborhood. And like many neighbors, they know each other’s business. (For example, Turnbo from Jitney briefly gossips about Canewell from Seven Guitars.) This neighborhood provides most of Wilson’s plays with a unified environment that allows his audiences to see how a small area can change over the course of a hundred years. Each play in the collection may be a distinct story, but each occurs within the greater narrative of the Hill District over the 20th Century.

Aside from being the primary setting for Wilson’s work, the Hill was also the playwright’s childhood home. From his birth in 1945 to 1957, August Wilson lived at 1727 Bedford Avenue. This means that Wilson grew up in the Hill during the same time that Seven Guitars is set. His youthful eyes likely saw neighborhood folks in the 40s and 50s that resembled characters like Floyd, Vera, and Hedley. Before Wilson was born, Pittsburgh saw a dramatic shift in its racial demographics. Pittsburgh’s black population grew almost 93% between 1910 and 1930 and then another 83% between 1930 and 1970. Pittsburgh, like many cities in the north, was a prominent destination for black folk seeking to escape the blatant racism of the south—the Ku Klux Klan, voter disenfranchisement, and poverty. Pittsburgh offered the promise of a more prosperous life due to opportunities in industrial projects (building of roads, bridges, and tunnels) and in steel mills.

However, economic prosperity was difficult to attain in Pittsburgh for its black residents. In a poem to open his third play, Fences, Wilson wrote, “the city rejected [the descendants of African slaves], and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tar-paper.” Urban poverty coupled with racial segregation meant that the Hill District of Wilson’s youth (and Seven Guitars for that matter) was one of Pittsburgh’s most segregated neighborhoods. According to census data, from 1930-1970, at least two-thirds of Pittsburgh’s African American population lived in one of three neighborhoods during this time: Homewood Brushton, East Liberty, and the Hill District.
n’s Changing Neighborhood

By the 40s, many of the Hill’s residents began building businesses. Corner stores, restaurants, funeral homes, and pharmacies sprang up in the neighborhood. Some of Wilson’s plays, such as *Jitney* and *Two Trains Running*, unfold in the Hill’s neighborhood haunts. Despite the poverty still present in the neighborhood, between the late 30s and late 60s, business in the Hill was booming.

So too was the Hill’s music scene. The 40s was the time of jazz clubs and blues joints, dance clubs and concert halls. The Hurricane Club, located on Centre Avenue, was one of the hottest small jazz clubs in the country. Wilson includes the Hurricane in *Seven Guitars*, even though the club actually didn’t open until 1953, five years after the play is set. But it was the symbol of the role of music in the Hill. Sure there was the Crawford Grill, which at one time hosted Billy Eckstine and Errol Garner, but the Hurricane Club was the big draw of the Hill District jazz scene. Working class fans and celebrities mingled to hear musicians such as Wes Montgomery, Roland Kirk, Kenny Burrell, Roy Eldridge, Sonny Stitt, Nancy Wilson, George Benson, Art Blakey, Max Roach, and Charles Mingus. In the Hill, clubs like the Hurricane and the Crawford Grill were not only windows onto the wider world, but also potential launching pads into more lucrative music circles. Of all the changes that occurred in the Hill in the middle of the 20th century, the popularity of clubs like the Hurricane may have been the most important to Floyd ‘Schoolboy’ Barton who in *Seven Guitars* sees the club as a stepping-stone on his way back to the bright lights of Chicago.

The Hill’s vibrant community and cultural scene during the 40s and 50s didn’t last, however. The construction of the Civic Arena, a basketball and hockey arena, created a surge of jobs between 1958 and 1961 but also displaced eight thousand Hill District residents and destroyed almost four hundred small, Black-owned businesses. The massive disruption to the community was a major catalyst to the Hill’s urban decay in the latter half of the 20th century. *Two Trains Running* (1969), *Jitney* (1977), *King Hedley II* (1985), and *Radio Golf* (1997) largely focus on the neighborhood’s deterioration and its effects on the Hill’s black residents.

—TAYLOR BARFIELD
When actors start to learn their roles, they study the language of the play very carefully, looking at different aspects of the text. For plays set in a specific period, such as August Wilson’s *Seven Guitars*, the actor must uncover historical references and details. Wilson fills his plays with the names of important historical and cultural figures and terms that were important when each play was set. In particular, he peppers his plays with names and places significant to the lives of black Americans. The actor not only defines and locates these references, but she must decide why the playwright chose that detail. For instance, Hedley refers to Marcus Garvey and Toussaint L’Ouverture because those men shape his perspective of America. Here are some passages from Act 1 in *Seven Guitars* that showcase some of the language used in 1948.

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**Act 1, Scene 2**

FLOYD:

I sat down there doing them ninety days, I told myself it’s a good thing I didn’t have that with me when they arrested me. Talking about vagrancy… If I had that thirty-eight they would have tried to dig a hole and put me under the jail… He gave me ninety days for worthlessness. Say Rockefeller worth a million dollars and you ain’t worth two cents. Ninety days in the workhouse.

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**Act 1, Scene 4**

FLOYD:

(singing) “I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say—”

HEDLEY:
What he say?

FLOYD:
He said, “Wake up and give me the money.”

…

RED CARTER:
Red Carter got a baby boy.

HEDLEY:
I hope he grow up and be big and strong like Joe Louis. Maybe one day I too have a son.

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**Rockefeller**: Rockefeller refers to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the only son to John D. Rockefeller, Sr., who founded the Standard Oil Company. The Rockefellers were one of the world’s wealthiest families at the turn of the century. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., is best known for his philanthropic work and creating Rockefeller Center in New York City.

**Workhouse**: A person charged with a petty offense and fined could fulfill his sentence and pay his fine by working labor-intensive jobs here. Prisoners received a small wage for their work after they finished their sentences.

**Buddy Bolden**: A famous African American cornetist (brass instrument like a trumpet) regarded as a key figure in the development of New Orleans-style ragtime music, which later became known as jazz. He was nicknamed “King Bolden” by fans, and he dominated the black music scene at the turn of the 20th century. In *Seven Guitars*, Hedley’s father comes to him in a dream prophesizing that King Bolden will bring Hedley money to purchase a plantation.

**Joe Louis**: An American professional boxer who was the World Heavyweight Champion from 1937–1949. Nicknamed “The Brown Bomber,” Louis is regarded as one of the first African Americans to achieve the reputation of a national hero in the US and is considered one of the greatest heavyweight boxers of all time. Irish American boxer Billy Conn, the World Light Heavyweight Champion of the time, challenged Joe Louis to a fight in 1941, which began a rivalry that would last until 1948. In Act 1, scene 5, the characters of *Seven Guitars* listen to Louis and Conn’s final fight, broadcasted out of Madison Square Garden in New York City.
Nigger: Coined in the 17th century by French and Spanish colonizers, this derogatory and extremely disparaging term referred to a black person or dark-skinned person. During slavery in the United States, the word was used by plantation owners and white Americans to refer to black people as inferior, contemptible, or ignorant. The word is still used today for many different reasons, for example, some black communities have reclaimed the word as a term of endearment between friends, while rappers still use the term in their music. Many Americans of all ethnicities consider it to be one of the most offensive words in the English language for its dehumanization of black people.

Marcus Garvey: A social activist and political leader born in Jamaica. During World War I, his organization the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was the largest black secular organization in African American history. Garvey was an advocate for Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism, social movements that encouraged African Americans to reclaim their ancestral lands in Africa.

Lion of Judea: A symbol of the Israeli tribe of Judah, one of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Toussaint L’Ouverture: A revolutionary who led the Haitian revolution of 1791. Born Toussaint Bréday, the son of a slave, he organized and trained a guerrilla army which liberated the enslaved Haitians from the French. L’Ouverture in French means “opening,” and when he renamed himself, many believe that he was referring to his tactical ability as a military commander. To Hedley, L’Ouverture represents overcoming racial injustice and succeeding despite his skin color.
Production Dramaturg Catherine María Rodríguez asked Black artists, activists, and scholars to reflect on how *Seven Guitars* resonates with them now—in the midst of #BlackLivesMatter, nearing the end of Barack Obama’s presidency, and with all else that’s going on at home and abroad.

Just as in the nine other plays in August Wilson’s American Century Cycle, *Seven Guitars* resonates with today’s familiar and persistent mantra, “Black Lives Matter!” Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton is faced with the same overzealous reach of the law and the same crippling institutional bias that often thwart the aspirations of black men and women. In *Fences*, another August Wilson play, Troy Maxson and his brother bear the emotional and physical scars that come from being shutout, fenced in, and deprived of the possibility of a better life. “They arrest me in Pittsburgh,” Floyd tells Canewell. “I ain’t done nothing but walk down the street. Come home from the cemetery after burying my mama, walking down the street—and they arrested me.” Troy expresses an all too similar sentiment in *Fences*, asking, “Why? Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting?” In the Wilson play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Ma Rainey knows just as well that Black Lives Matter and spends much of the rehearsal session making sure that her white agents (and a few of her band members) realize her worth and appreciate the value of Black culture.

The searing conflict that emerges in *Seven Guitars* and in Wilson’s other plays emanates from the same place of resistance that so defined the playwright’s aesthetic. August Wilson’s testament to “Black Lives Matter” can be seen in his often repeated position: “I wanted to place this culture on stage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us in all areas of human life and endeavor and through profound movements of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves.”

For me, this play highlights the strength of African Americans and the diverse experiences and backgrounds that comprise the culture. For example, you see characters thrive in questionable financial circumstances, take pride in their musical talents, share their hardships and give advice, and find ways to hold onto their faith when things fall apart. To me, this is how we as African Americans (and our allies and advocates) are surviving in these contemporary tough times: sharing pain, finding ways to build a community even when things seem bleak, and fighting the systemic structures that have continued to plague our existence.

MARTINE KEI GREEN-ROGERS, PhD
University of Utah, Dramaturg

Through the struggles that Floyd has with the music industry in *Seven Guitars*, we are able to see Wilson demonstrate the injustice that African Americans faced while trying to achieve their dreams. This is in line with the principles of Black Lives Matters which is dedicated to seeking restorative justice for Black people.

SHONDRIKA MOSS-BOULDIN, PhD
Kennesaw State University, Producer

August Wilson has always given voice and provided testament to the economically and socially marginalized person who, despite the ongoing assaults from society, was able to sustain dignity and complex humanity. *Seven Guitars* is one of those testaments. In fact, it’s seven. I remain enamored and

SANDRA G. SHANNON, PhD
Howard University
in need of August Wilson’s commitment to pumping blood, breath and poetry into those people who are the first accused, policed, jailed, misunderstood...shot dead. August Wilson reminds me that our struggles for racial equity and respect today have not changed much since the era of Seven Guitars. It also reminds us that our music, individual and collective, is our voice, our fight. Perhaps it’s even our revolution.

KEITH JOSEF ADKINS
Playwright & Screenwriter

Historically, the Black community has made demands on several fronts, yet justice still somehow evades us—so much so that it looms as perhaps a song in Black mythology. In Seven Guitars, that elusive song of justice—no matter how scattered the notes or flat the keys—plays for many Black folks and in our collective memory, recalling promises unfulfilled; in turn, it makes “irrational” acts rational and the “crazy,” sane.

SHARRELL D. LUCKETT, PhD
Muhlenberg College, Theatre Director

In Seven Guitars, Floyd’s character represents the fight for survival in a world where second chances are hard to come by, a world where dreams are easily taken away, a world where even when you try to amend your wrongs, your flaws come back to haunt you. His words transcend generations, reflecting experiences that African Americans face today. These representations are unfortunately still active, and we see African Americans stand up for injustices through the Black Lives Matter movement.

DAPHNIE SICRE
Borough of Manhattan Community College

In August Wilson’s poetic drama Seven Guitars, each character has a unique voice that embodies the common struggle of black life in the 1940s. In the seven distinct voices, the rhythm, syncopation, and melody are constrained by exploitation, discrimination, and injustice. Floyd Barton, the major character, is representative of all the other characters in the drama—he encompasses their deep-rooted sensibilities. Barton’s bluesman music is mythologized in the play, but it is his connection with the criminal justice system that will resonate with audiences today. Barton, Canewell, and Red Carter all served time in jail for trumped-up charges that ranged from having too much money to not having enough to general vagrancy. There is a bridge that connects the characters of Seven Guitars to Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Alton Sterling, Eric Garner, and others—none received the racial justice that the Black Lives Matter movement calls for.

NATHANIEL G. NESMITH, PhD
Columbia University

Death and the memory of dead black men haunt Seven Guitars. The play opens and ends with a death. Remembrances of overworked, underappreciated, and long dead fathers inspire the actions of their sons. In Wilson’s Hill District, a life can be taken with ease—by the police or a neighbor. Even Chicago, the city to which folks dream of moving, won’t provide an escape from the violence. Before “Black Lives Matter,” the matters of black life and the precarity of black existence stood at the center of August Wilson’s plays.

HARVEY YOUNG, PhD
Northwestern University
My entry to August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* was atypical. Or maybe not.

Growing up in Miami we barely got a production of the standard bearer of Black theatre *A Raisin in the Sun*, let alone any of the burgeoning canon of work that August Wilson was forging in his mythopoetic fire.

I met Vera before I knew anyone else.

My high school friend Alana Arenas (now my fellow Steppenwolf Theatre Company ensemble member) had to, like all of us on our second day of senior year, perform four monologues in front of the entire department.

The piece she chose from *Seven Guitars* echoes in my mind still:

VERA

*He touched me here... He gave me here. And he ain't here, he ain't here, he ain't here so quit looking for him cause he ain't here...*

I remember being floored. I remember being jealous, thinking, 'who wrote this protest of a lonely black woman?'

Miles away August Wilson was creating the perfect "stand-up and not-gonna-take-it-anymore" monologues for the spectrum of the Black experience, be it Tonya in *King Hedley II* or Citizen in *Gem of the Ocean*.

But it is Vera from *Seven* I always remember, whom I always knew. It would be years before I would read the entire play. Even more before I would see the work live and meet the man creating it.

Vera’s first impression never left me. Her ability to make a space out of no space is what holds true for us today; where the air seems to be stifled with gun-power and lonely mothers, sisters, wives all—remembering places they were once filled, now made empty, now made barren.

My love for *Seven Guitars* is probably atypical but maybe not. Every year since I first heard the speech Vera gives, without fail, at any open call, someone else shows up clearly marked by the same indelible imprint. They come singing the truth of what Mr. Wilson did to our hearts and minds, ‘He touched me here.’

TARELL ALVIN McCRAONEY
Playwright

In the days where the importance and value of Black lives is being demanded and posted about constantly, I find the story of *Seven Guitars* and the devaluation of the Black bluesman to be a poignant contribution to the Black Art Matters dialogue that is a branch of the larger Black Lives Matter movement. So many Black artists, particularly Black men musicians, were struggling to find their importance and value in society through their songs and musicianship. And then to have that musicianship devalued; to create the art and then not be its natural owners because the money that controlled the art remained in the hands of the white male-dominated music industry, was inducing its own kind of madness in Black musicians. And of course, as is much of the case now, when Black men in and out of the art were mis-treated and abused socially and systemically, the Black women that were also a part of their journey were often neglected and bore the double brunt of whatever social injustice their men were experiencing. It is the case of passing on the oppression, and *Seven Guitars*'s beautiful relevance lies in the continuing question of what madness is induced when we are devalued as humans and still begging for recognition that we matter to the outside world and, even more, to ourselves.

DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU
Playwright
Questions

1. Wilson explores the changing character of the Hill District, which is the setting for his American Century Cycle. How would you describe the character or personality of the neighborhood where you live? Have you noticed any changes over time in your neighborhood? If so, what are they? Why do you think these changes have occurred?

2. Hedley loves to talk about Marcus Garvey, Buddy Bolden, and Toussaint L’Ouverture because they are historical figures that have greatly shaped his identity as a black man in America. What cultural figures, philanthropists, revolutionaries, etc. influence who you are? In other words, who would you “name drop” to represent your identity?

3. The title of the play alludes to the seven characters of the play—seven guitars. How does this musical metaphor work throughout the play? After seeing Seven Guitars, what role does music play in both August Wilson’s text and director Timothy Douglas’s production? When you saw it, what did you think of each character’s role as an instrument in a larger piece of music?

4. August Wilson is etched in history as one of the great American playwrights. Consequently, he will be praised for what his work accomplished and criticized for what it didn’t. It will be argued that Wilson underwrote his female characters—creating roles for women dependent on the trajectory of their male counterparts. Or, that his plays are too long or that his work perpetuates the notion of a single Black American experience. However, because Wilson wrote plays, there’s always an element of interpretation to his work. After you’ve seen or read Seven Guitars, what do you think of these criticisms?

5. August Wilson’s works often have a strong sense of realism to them: the characters and their surroundings resemble real people and real places. Many times, the sets for his plays look like very detailed and realistic apartment buildings or building facades. The set for Yale Rep’s production, the model of which can be seen on page 5, is abstracted. After you saw the show, what did the set make you think? What was realistic about the setting and what was not? How did it affect the story that you saw on stage?
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