TOOLKIT

AUGUST WILSON'S

SEVEN GUITARS

DIRECTED BY TIMOTHY DOUGLAS

yale repertory theatre

50th ANNIVERSARY

WILL POWER!
A supplement to Yale Rep’s *Seven Guitars* Study Guide, this TOOLKIT is designed to further engage your students in our production of August Wilson’s play. The following pages include theatre games and exercises to prepare students for seeing live theatre, as well as activities and lessons geared specifically to this production of *Seven Guitars*.

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The following vocal exercises model the preparation an actor might do to get her voice ready for a performance. These activities also work well as ice-breakers to ease students into theatre games and give them a taste of the way that theatre demands an actor to use his voice and body in live performance. These exercises will also give students a chance to hear the human voice in an expanded range of tones beyond everyday conversation.

**Lemon, Lion**
Make as wide a face as possible (wide open mouth, wide eyes). Then scrunch as tightly as possible. Repeat four times.

**Head massage**
Using your hands massage your scalp, forehead, jaw hinges and neck muscles. You can tap your sinuses and make circular rubbing motions over these parts of your face, head and neck. You can rub your hands together quickly to generate heat before massaging, which will help relax the muscles.

**Yawn** on a descending scale.

**Chew** imaginary delicious bubble gum.

**Chew** imaginary disgusting bubble gum.

**Yawn** on an ascending scale.

**Stick your tongue out** and draw a circle with the tip of your tongue. Then draw a square, then write your name in cursive.

**Shake out:**
Count 1–8 while shaking your right hand, then left hand, then right foot, then left foot, head, shoulders, hips, whole body. The count sounds like, “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8” with every body part. Once you have gone through the whole body, repeat again but this time count up to 7. Repeat this, decreasing every time and on the last set of 1 you jump up and shout.
Short Phrases #1: Tongue Twisters
These tongue twisters will help you articulate your words clearly. As you move through them you will notice the muscles in your mouth warm-up so that you can express yourself more effortlessly.

Sally sells sea shells by the sea shore
Unique New York, New York is unique, you know you need unique New York
Red Leather, Yellow Leather
Mitsubishi, Machu Picchu

All I want is a proper cup of coffee made in a proper copper coffee pot.
I may be off my blot but I want a proper coffee in a proper coffee pot.
Iron coffee pots and tin coffee pots they are no use to me
If I can’t have a proper cup of coffee in a proper copper coffee pot I’ll have a cup of tea

We are the music-makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams.

World-losers and world-forsakers,
Upon whom the pale moon gleams;
Yet we are the movers and shakers,
Of the world forever, it seems.

To sit in solemn silence on a dull dark dock, in a pestilential prison with a lifelong lock. Awaiting the sensation of a short sharp shock from a cheap and chippy chopper off a big black block
ACTOR’S TOOLKIT: Articulation and Resonance

Short Phrases #2: Resonators
Resonators are where sound vibrates on your body. The head, nose, neck, chest, and belly are all examples of resonators. Being able to control where your sound resonates allows for advanced character work and a greater ability to express oneself emotionally.

Stand in a circle with your feet rooted into the ground. Start humming into the space, then practice sending the hum into different parts of your body: The top of the head, then the nose, then the mouth. Move the hum to the neck, chest, and finally the belly. Feel how this affects the sound, does it get louder or softer? Does the pitch get higher or lower?

Move around the room, moving the sound through all the different resonators. You can stand in front of walls or doors and notice how the sound changes when it hits other objects. You can release the hum into an “ahh” sound. Choose a whole new body part (your left toe? your eyeballs?) and notice how it feels to resonate from that place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pitch</th>
<th>Resonance</th>
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<tr>
<td>how high or low a note is</td>
<td>a sound or vibration produced in one area of the body that is caused by the sound or vibration of the voice</td>
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</table>

Short Phrases #3: Articulators
Articulators increase your diction and pronouncing words clearly. Strong articulation allows you to cut through words clearly without having to increase the volume of your voice.

Ba da ga da (X4),
Ga da ba da (x4)
Pit a cut a (x4)
Cut a pit a (x4)
ACTOR’S TOOLKIT: Getting the Body Ready

Physical Warm-up: Follow the Leader

a. Have everyone stand in a circle. As a group, go through a sequence of simple repeated gestures. Challenge participants to move exactly as the person next to them, the goal being that the whole group moves as one even when the gesture changes. This will take very careful observing and listening.

b. Once participants feel comfortable moving together, have one person leave the room. Once they have left choose someone in the circle to be the leader of the repeated gestures. When the person who left the room returns, they must guess who the leader is. Repeat this a few times. Encourage everyone to pay close attention to one another.

c. For an extra challenge: Have the students move around the room while still making the repeated gesture.
Human Machine

a. Explain to the group that we will be making a human machine using our bodies and voices. Ask someone to name what the machine does (i.e. ice cream machine, makes puppies, etc.).

b. The facilitator picks a student to come to the playing space and make a repeated gesture and sound as a “cog” in the machine.

c. Facilitator picks one person at a time to add onto the human machine; they must pick one repeated gesture and sound that needs to touch another part of the machine.

d. Encourage participants to choose additions to the machine that have different levels, sounds or speed than the other “cogs” in the machine. Once the machine is complete (6-8 people) have the entire machine change its speed (really slow, really fast) and it’s sound level (really quiet, really loud). The machine ends when the facilitator cues the participants to explode at the same time.

e. Play this game 2–3 times so that everyone participating has a chance to be in the human machine. For an extra challenge, you can have a student take the role of facilitator.

cog: a part of a larger object that has an important use (such as a wheel or gear).
Lesson: Personal Storytelling

OBJECTIVE:
To write a monologue about where you come from.

August Wilson’s characters love to tell stories to one another. In Seven Guitars the characters are considered the guitars themselves, sharing stories about where they come from and what they want to do with their lives. Using one of Hedley’s monologues as inspiration, students will write monologues about their lives to tell a compelling story. They will then rehearse their monologues and perform them for the class.

What is a monologue? A monologue is an extended speech that one character in a play speaks to another character or a group of characters. A playwright writes a monologue if the character has something important to convey about who they are or what they want. Playwrights also create monologues in order to further the plot of the play. A character can speak a speech to themselves, but that would be called a soliloquy (such as Hamlet’s “To be or not to be…”). Have students read Hedley’s monologue to Louise in Act 1, Scene 3. If you have a student who would be comfortable reading it aloud, have the class listen to the monologue read aloud several times. (Note: you can find this monologue and many others on You Tube. High schools have posted full recordings of Seven Guitars, if you’d like to show them other students performing the material. Several theatres also have marketing teasers that include monologues from Seven Guitars by professional actors.) While they are listening, ask them to think about what Hedley wants Louise to know about him. It is important that the students understand that every monologue has a purpose, something important that the character must convey. After they listen to it a few times, ask them to sum up Hedley’s purpose in one sentence. (For example, “Hedley wants to buy a plantation so that he can live a happy life.”)

Questions: Ask students what is a monologue? Do you hear speeches in your everyday life that are like monologues? (Rallies, Morning Announcements, etc.) What is the difference between a monologue and an essay? (You may even make a Venn diagram to show the differences and similarities.)
HEDLEY: The Bible say it all will come to straighten out in the end. Every abomination shall be brought low. Everything will fall to a new place. When I get my plantation I’m gonna walk around it. I am going to walk all the way round to see how big it is. I’m gonna be a big man on that day. That is the day I dress up and go walking through the town. That is the day my father forgive me. I tell you this as God is my witness on that great day when all the people are singing as I go by... and my plantation is full and ripe... and my father is a strong memory... on that day... the white man not going to tell me what to do no more.

HISTORY CONNECTION: To deepen the students’ understanding of this monologue, you can explore the historical background for Hedley saying “the white man not going to tell what to do no more.” This could be a longer conversation about the U.S.’s history of racial oppression and slavery, plantation industry, and how it relates to race dynamics today (i.e. high incarceration rate of black people, segregation in public schools, the Black Lives Matter Movement and police brutality against black Americans, etc.).

Now you will write a monologue similar to Hedley’s about your own life. Like every monologue, there needs to be a purpose for what you are saying. You will also need to decide your audience i.e. who are talking to? Your mother? Your best friend? You could tell a story about your life, or like Hedley share what you hope to do in the future and why it is important to you. Let students know that they will write their monologues and then rehearse them in order to perform them in front of the class. This can be modified depending on your class environment. For example, if students are shy the teacher can adjust performance so that you only share with one partner, or you can have students swap monologues to perform another students’.
Rehearsal: Once students have completed their monologue, they will find an open space in the room to practice performing their monologue. You can have students rehearse individually or in pairs.

Some actor’s tips to keep in mind:

<table>
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<th>ACTOR’S TIPS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>FOCUS</strong></td>
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<td>Pick a focus point over the class where your audience is. Make sure you address your monologue to that focus point.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SPEECH</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Make sure you are loud enough to be heard. Take your time with each word so that you are understood clearly.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BODY</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Every body movement means something. Make sure you know what your body is doing during your monologue and that every movement supports what you are saying.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CREATIVITY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have fun with it! Imagine that what you have to say is extremely important to express. How does it make you feel and how can you convey that with your performance?</td>
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Performance: You may rearrange your classroom to make a “playing space” or just use the front of the room. Remind students what it means to be a good audience member: quietly listening, reacting (like laughter) is great as long as it doesn’t distract the performer, applaud at the end.

Questions for audience members: What images stayed with you from the monologue? What did you like about their performance? What did their monologue make you think of?

Questions for performers: What was the most challenging thing about rehearsal and performance? What is your favorite part of your monologue? Who else would you want to perform this monologue for?
Study Guide Connections
Ideas for connecting the storytelling lesson to the Study Guide

1. The quotes from each Seven Guitars character on page 2 come from monologues by or about those characters.

2. August Wilson wrote primarily about Pittsburgh’s Hill District, as described on pages 10 and 11 of the study guide, because that was where he grew up. How does the geography of your neighborhood color your personal monologue?

3. On page 15, Nathaniel G. Nesmith says, “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.” As you listen to your classmate’s monologues, what common themes emerge? Are you affected by the same social or political forces? Conversely, can you articulate how each voice is unique?

4. One of the questions on page 17 asks “who would you ‘name drop’ to represent your identity?” Do any celebrities, authors, or other historical figures appear in your monologue?
Most writers rely on some form or forms of figurative language to help them articulate and develop their themes and ideas. Two important elements that August Wilson uses in *Seven Guitars* are symbolism and imagery.

**Symbolism** is the use of something concrete, such as an object or an animal, to stand for an abstract idea.

**Imagery** is the use of words or figures of speech to create a vivid mental picture or physical sensation, and often makes reference to the senses: what we can see, hear, smell, taste, or feel.

Some important symbols/images in the play include the rooster, visions and dreams, the number seven, the guitar. You can discuss the significance of these symbols/images before you see the performance and ask the students to listen and look for them.

Look at his passage from the end of Act 1:

**HEDLEY:** (Enters, carrying a rooster.) You want or you don’t want, it don’t matter. God ain’t making no more roosters. It is a thing past. Soon you mark my words when God ain’t making no more niggers. They too be a done thing. This here rooster born in the barnyard. He learn to cock his doodle do. He see the sun, he cry out so the sun don’t catch you with your hand up your ass or your dick stuck in a woman. You hear this rooster you know you alive. You be glad to see the sun cause there come a time sure enough when you see your last day and this rooster don’t hear no more. (He takes out a knife and cuts the rooster’s throat.) That be for the living. Your black ass be dead like the rooster now. You mark what Hedley say. (He sprinkles the blood in a circle.) This rooster too good live for your black asses. (He throws the rooster on the ground.) Now he good and right for you.
LESSON: Figurative Language

In a small group, brainstorm what each of these symbols might suggest. What does each of them make you think about? What connotations do they suggest, and why? How do you imagine each of these symbols might relate to the story of *Seven Guitars* as it is described in the synopsis of the study guide?

In your group, discuss what images or symbols might be appropriate (and why) to represent:

- Your class at school
- Your family
- Your community
- Your country
- Yourself
LESSON: Music

The blues are a form of jazz that evolved in the early part of the 20th century, largely from an African American music tradition. Drawing mainly from work songs and spirituals, blues pieces often express worries or the concerns of dealing with the difficulties of life in the African American community. In form, blues pieces are often cyclical in nature; there is generally a repeated chord progression that is evocative of the call and response found in religious worship.

As in many of August Wilson’s plays, the blues play an important role in Seven Guitars. The main character, Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton, is an aspiring blues musician, recently released from jail and eager to jump-start his career. During the course of the play the characters make reference to popular blues artists from the 1940s such as Muddy Waters, Buddy Bolden, and Willie Dixon.

Listen to some of the music of these and other blues artists from the time period. What do you notice about this music? About its sound and rhythms? What themes or ideas do you hear being expressed in the lyrics? Are those themes and ideas still relevant today? Do any of them show up in any of the music you listen to today? How are the concerns of the music you like similar to or different from the concerns of this music? If you were going to write a blues tune, what might its subject be?

- Brainstorm current issues or concerns of your community. Then create a call and response—two phrases that work together—that might serve as the backbone of a contemporary blues tune.
- Rearrange the lyrics of a contemporary song to mirror the sound and the shape of a 1940’s blues piece.
- Even though Seven Guitars is not a musical, clearly music plays a big part in the story. How do you predict or imagine music will be integrated into the Yale Rep production you are going to see?
ACTIVITY: How to Play Whist

Whist is a card game that is played in Seven Guitars during Act 1, Scene 5. Invented in the 18th century, many say whist is the ancestor of many trick-taking card games such as Hearts or Bridge. The objective is to win the majority of “tricks” in a round.

1. Whist is played with four people, teams of two. You will need a standard deck of 52 cards, with ace as the highest card. Sit with your partner facing you and your opponents on either side.

2. Everyone draws a card from the pile, the lowest draw is the first dealer.

   Dealer shuffles the cards and deals them out to each player, starting with the person to their left and continuing clockwise (dealer gets cards last). Each player should end up with 13 cards. You may look at your cards, but do not show them to anyone else.

3. The last card dealt is turned face-up, which sets the trump card for the game. Every card of its suit becomes a trump. This trump card is placed in the dealer’s hand before the first trick (or round of cards) begins.

   The player to the left of the dealer begins the first trick by setting one of their cards face-up in the middle of the table, this can be any card.
ACTIVITY: How to Play Whist

4. Going clockwise, the next three players play a card of the same suit (dealer last). If you have a card of that suit you must play it. If you do not have a card from that suit you can play any card, including a trump card.

5. Once everyone has placed a card down on that trick, the person with the highest card of that suit wins (Ace is highest). If a trump card is played, that wins the trick. If multiple trump cards are played, the highest trump card wins the trick.

6. The winner of each trick begins the next round. Play until all the cards have been played.

7. Score the tricks of that round by adding the number you won with your partners. The first six tricks won by a pair are not tallied: these six tricks are called book. Every trick after book, or six tricks, count for one point. For example, if you and your partner win 8 tricks, you must subtract the book first so your score for that round would be 2.

8. The first team to reach the game point wins. Before the game begins agree on the game point, which is traditionally 5 or 10 points, depending on how long you want to play.
Study Guides

Below are links to study guides created by other theatres for productions of *Seven Guitars*.

**Denver Center for the Performing Arts**
denvercenter.org/docs/default-source/Show-Study-Guides/all-study-guides/seven-guitars.pdf?sfvrsn=2

**Actors Theatre of Louisville**

**Cygnet Theatre**
zygnettheatre.com/studyguides/CygnetsWilsonRep_AudienceGuide.pdf

Books


*Available in the New Haven Public Library System.

DVD/Online Resources

**American Masters: August Wilson/The Ground on which I Stand** (2015, DVD)


**The August Wilson Website**
www.augustwilson.net

**August Wilson with Bill Moyers** (interview)
youtube.com/watch?v=YctW96OG364

**August Wilson on Charlie Rose** (in 1996, focusing on the premiere of *Seven Guitars*)
youtube.com/watch?v=7vb9Vg_WGi0