

August Wilson versus Robert Brustein

By Simon Saltzman and Nicole Plett

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Did anyone have a clue last June in Princeton that Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson would deliver the kind of keynote address -- "The Ground on Which I Stand" -- potent and provocative enough to transform a long-smoldering brushfire into a flaming feud. This theatrical feud has now been elevated into a public debate. And we are all invited.

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Wilson's address, in which he called Brustein (the only individual mentioned by name) "a sniper, a naysayer, and a cultural imperialist," was in retaliation (or so Brustein has inferred) to Brustein's earlier, unfavorable reviews of Wilson's widely admired plays. The address, subsequently published in *American Theatre* magazine, triggered a response from Brustein, accompanied by a counter-response from Wilson. The conflict continues to both engage and enrage these two esteemed men of the theater, as it does the public that listens to them.

In this ongoing and emotional dispute, we are asked to choose between Brustein's view that "theater works best as a unifying rather than a segregating medium," and Wilson's view that black theater, like the black experience, is unique and distinct, and "we cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products." At Town Hall in New York on Monday, January 27, at a special, one-night event, "On Cultural Power: The August Wilson / Robert Brustein Discussion" continues and is open to the public. It will be moderated by the lauded docu-dramatist and actor Anna Deavere Smith.

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"We reject any attempt to blot us out, to reinvent history and ignore our presence...", said Wilson. "We want you to see us. We are black and beautiful. We have an honorable history in the world of men... We do not need colorblind casting; we need some theaters to develop our playwrights."

Did Wilson unearth another smoldering issue, that may yet reverberate across the nation, when he lashed out at subscription-based theaters, whose audience, he said, "holds the theater hostage to a mediocrity of tastes"? Is it true, as Wilson contends, that, by including one or more African-

American productions each season, these theaters actually alienate and condescend to black audiences who "suffer no illusion of welcome"?

In his subsequent response to Wilson, Brustein questioned whether there shouldn't be "some kind of statute of limitations on white guilt and white reparations." He further berated Wilson for having "fallen into a monotonous tone of victimization." On the other hand, Wilson blames Brustein for failing to "imagine a theater broad enough and secure enough in its traditions to absorb and make use of all manners and cultures of American life."

Whether to defend the traditional esthetic of Western culture or to pursue the African-American dream through the specificity of its art and culture is the question. This leads us to also ponder the integrity of our nearby (and mostly diversified) professional theaters such as McCarter Theater, George Street Playhouse, and particularly the culturally-exclusive Crossroads Theater Company.

Yet does Wilson truly believe that only black experience inspires black artists? Or that black actors should only perform black roles authored by black playwrights? Will Brustein ever concede that theater in America remains stubbornly addicted to, and formulated to foster, only white values, and the so-called classical values of European theater? The actions taken by the various theaters across America to either propel or impede the development of a truly American theater are worth watching.

Do too many theaters across the nation ignore the contributions made by artists of various ethnic and racial backgrounds? Perhaps. However, can anyone deny that the cultural climate in our area is aggressively diversified? Is it possible that too many whites cannot understand or do not want to understand Wilson when he condemns certain black artists as "crossover artists," comparing them to "house slaves entertaining the white master and his guests."

Although I did not attend Wilson's address, those who did describe it as both stirring and divisive. Wilson was received with standing ovations both before and after speaking. One reason some were disturbed was the subtle but insistent joining of Wilson's vivid evocations of genetic memories of the slave trade with such anti-Semitic code words as "financiers," and a description of black artists as "victims of the counting houses."

As a reporter, stirred enough by what I've heard and read to consider the positions taken by both Wilson and Brustein, I can only try to understand these two equally impassioned views. In the light of my own, presumably biased, perception of either the exclusionary or cross-cultural direction taken or rejected by our own area theaters, I offer this multi-cultured and diversified consideration, gleaned from my own conversations with black artists presenting their work in the area.

When Rutgers professor Harold Scott reflected on his experience directing "Paul Robeson," the play about a true 20th-century Renaissance man and a spokesman for African Americans who were yet to experience real democracy, he expressed the difficulty of keeping the memory of significant African-American artists like Robeson, James Baldwin, and Lorraine Hansbury before the public. If one can assume that he is talking about a predominantly white public, should

we take to heart Wilson's rebuke of the white foundations for failing to create and subsidize more black theater companies that might then have a mandate to foster and preserve black culture?

It is interesting to think about whether Robeson's family ire with the "Paul Robeson" script, and the picketing and the controversy that arose during the run of the 1978 Broadway production, would have been avoided had the dramatized Robeson not appeared to them a victim. There is the implication in Wilson's statement -- "I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters" -- that all black artists are unwittingly turned into victims in a white or even in a multi-cultural theater.

Vernel Bagneris, who played Jelly Roll Morton at Crossroads last January, makes an interesting point regarding people, artists, in particular, of color. Bagneris, like Morton, who was born into New Orleans' Creole society, says that some people of color are not interested in identifying with either black or white society. "They want to be left alone," states Bagneris. Would then Wilson want to see support of a separate and subsidized theater for Creoles? Or would Brustein's contention that minority playwrights "drenched in their own cultural juices . . . and capable of telling stories that include us all," prove again that theater works best as a unifying rather than as a segregating medium?

Emily Mann, artistic director of the McCarter Theater, credits South African playwright and friend Athol Fugard for suggesting that there is a time for writers to act as a dissident voice and a time for writers to be nation builders. "I'm trying to find that balance here," says Mann whose docu-dramas "Greensboro: A Requiem" and "Having Our Say" deal specifically with the black experience in America. Mann, who is both white and liberal, says about her writing, most of which is based on political and social issues: "A lot of wounds need to be healed, truths need to be exposed." Does Wilson then have the authority to challenge her (or other non-black writers') freedom, license, or directive to dramatize black conduct and manners. Would Wilson decry Mann for her vision, because she is not black, and therefore not "fueled by black philosophy, mythology, history, creative motif, social organization, and ethos?"

Playwright Eugene Lee made an interesting observation last March, prior to the Crossroads premiere of his play, "Fear Itself." While he expressed the fact that "for African Americans, there is fear of police brutality, and a sense of some genocidal threat," there is also "the general fear of failure." Is America -- where philosophy, mythology, history, comes out of the strong white Eurocentric ethos -- a more fearsome and tenuous arena for the black artist?

Certainly deep-seated sensitivities are stirred when a prominent black artist's failure is pronounced as such by a white critic. When Brustein says that Wilson's writing is "weakly structured, badly edited, prosaic and overwritten," was this not the cue for Wilson to say and further expound on his theory that black culture "is an experience that cannot be fully absorbed or understood by white people, much less criticized by them?"

I wonder if Wilson might temper his position had he seen "God's Field," at Playwrights Theater of New Jersey last year, written by a white woman playwright who was born in New York but now lives in Nebraska. Her play about a black family that undergoes a tumultuous change when

a minstrel show comes to town is as richly detailed with the realities of black life in turn-of-the-century Nebraska as are Athol Fugard's plays about blacks in South Africa.

Playwright Keith Glover, whose play "Coming of the Hurricane" made a favorable impact this fall at its Crossroads production, might have a problem with Wilson's take on white critics. Glover was still a teenager when his first play was singled out in a competition of the Young Playwrights Festival in New York and awarded a staged reading. Glover recalled the encouragement he received from the Festival's founder Gerald Chapman, and especially by his mentor there, playwright Ruth Goetz, who helped the young Glover hone his craft and his uncertain skill. Would Wilson consign such on-the-job training to the kind of "assimilation that black Americans have been rejecting for the past 300 years?"

In a late-breaking addition to the debate, Crossroads Theater has just announced its spring production of August Wilson's new play, "Jitney." It begins previews on April 13 and plays to May 11. This latest coup for Crossroads could well represent Wilson's courage of his convictions, since Crossroads was singled out in his keynote as the only one of 66 members of the League of Regional Theaters "dedicated to preserving and promoting black culture."

To be thoroughly confused as much by the benefits and pitfalls of multi-culturalism as we are by the celebratory yet exclusionary nature of separatism is most likely a step in the right direction. Whether to be thrown into a cultural melting pot that may unwittingly blur the brilliance of America's diversity, or to be tucked into an isolated environment designed to fragment, nurture, and better define what American culture represents, is a choice. Are we to make the choice, or will others decide for us?

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This is something we have all dreamed of," says Ricardo Khan, co-founder and artistic director of Crossroads Theater, at a press conference on April 2. On Khan's left sits August Wilson, widely regarded as America's most important working playwright, and beyond him director Walter Dallas, and a group of five African-American actors. On Crossroad's agenda is "Jitney," the latest entry in Wilson's grand-scaled play cycle that he has configured to celebrate, decade by decade, the black experience in America.

In his remarks to introduce Wilson to reporters, Khan cannot conceal his pride as he announces that Crossroads, the country's preeminent theater dedicated to black culture (and the only black member of LORT, the League of Resident Theaters), is not only launching its 103rd production and preparing for a 20th anniversary bash, but it is achieving this with a magnificent milestone.

This marks the first time that Crossroads will stage a play by Wilson, an august playwright if ever there was one, before its New York premiere. Following a run at Boston's Huntington Theater, "Jitney" is expected to open at New York's Manhattan Theater Club in the fall. Crossroads produced its first Wilson work, "The Piano Lesson," last season.

When Khan, as newly-elected president of the Theater Communications Group, invited Wilson to contribute a keynote address to its biennial meeting at McCarter Theater last June, he could hardly have imagined the repercussions would be so far-reaching. Now Wilson's "Jitney" has replaced the season's previously announced premiere; Crossroads has garnered a major feature in the New York Times; and some 60 theater critics from

newspapers across the country are scheduled to view "Jitney" as part of their association's New York conference.

Wilson's "Jitney" has been in various stages of development since it was written in 1979, most recently staged last year at the Pittsburgh Public Theater. It was written before the complement of six plays -- "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "The Piano Lesson," "Fences," "Two Trains Running," and "Seven Guitars" -- that constitute Wilson's impressive, Pulitzer Prize-winning theater canon.

The 52-year-old Wilson recalls that he was a poet but not yet a playwright in 1979 when he wrote "Jitney." It wasn't until 1980, when he won a Jerome Fellowship at the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis, and found himself sitting in a room with 16 playwrights, that he told himself, "I must be a playwright." And after completing three more plays, he began to envision his work as unfolding chronicle of African-American thought and experience.

In Pittsburgh, Wilson's hometown, a jitney is the type of car service that is known as a gypsy cab in New York. "Jitney" is set in a jitney station which Wilson describes as a self-created, self-supplied, self-owned, self-run taxi service. Here each man pays monthly dues and uses the jitney's well-known telephone number and location as the station from which to use their own vehicles to make cab runs.

"I was initially intrigued by the idea of creating something from nothing," says Wilson. "These are men who, not having the opportunities for jobs, created jobs. It's about the ability of black people in America to find a ways and means to survive and prosper."

Wilson says that "Jitney," like all his plays, deals with the manners and social intercourse of black people that is uniquely theirs. At the core of the drama is a father-son conflict. It opens as a son who has served 20 years in the penitentiary on a murder conviction, is released from jail, and meets the father who has not visited him once.

While Wilson has been called to task by some critics for over-writing his plays, famous for their long and lyrical monologues, "Jitney" stands, in his opinion, uniquely spare. During rehearsals for last year's Pittsburgh production, he recalls a cast member remarking to him: "Ain't nobody goin' to know this is your play. Ain't got no monologues in it."

Wilson says that "Jitney" represents his first work after he came to "value and respect the way black people talk." He credits a truism he encountered in a political pamphlet -- "Language describes the idea of the one who speaks it" -- as changing his life. Thus Wilson began his creative investigation into the language, the thought processes, and the cultural roots of blacks in America.

"My pipe dream to do a Wilson play prior to New York has come true," says Khan, who doesn't care that "Jitney" is not exactly a new play, certainly not a world premiere, but rather one that Wilson is reworking in house. Kahn feels that Wilson's month-long

residency to develop and shape "Jitney" at Crossroads is a moment of pride for the theater. Wilson, in turn, says he feels at home at Crossroads; he found two pennies on the Livingston Avenue sidewalk that prove it: "I was in the right place at the right time," he says, "but so were the pennies."

Walter Dallas, no stranger to Wilson's work, directs "Jitney." A leader in the black theater movement in America, Dallas directed "The Rabbit Foot" at Crossroads in 1988, and has since become artistic director of the acclaimed Freedom Theater in Philadelphia. "Jitney" reunites Wilson and Dallas, who worked together on the world premiere of "Seven Guitars" at the Goodman Theater in Chicago.

Dallas appears to have a hook on working successfully with Wilson. "I don't ask a lot of questions. I get the answers by just getting to know Wilson better," says Dallas. "The work just evolves daily." Dallas comes directly to Crossroads after receiving kudos for his direction of world premiere of "The Old Settler" by John Henry Redwood at McCarter Theater.

It may be too soon to see a fresh, positive perspective on the opposing views expressed by Wilson and theater critic and author Robert Brustein at their January debate, "On Cultural Power," at New York's Town Hall, an event precipitated by the furor that greeted Wilson's 1996 TCG address. Wilson says he is far from putting that debate behind him: "It's part of who I am."

Wilson's primary concern in his TCG address, and one that he returns to today, was that there was only one black theater among 65 LORT (League of Resident Theaters) theaters in America. He announces here that the ratio has since grown to 1 of 66. Asked then how the theater can impact troubled race relations in America, Wilson makes it clear that he is a playwright, not a sociologist. With prompting from Khan, he offers the same answer he gave during the Town Hall debate: "Art doesn't change society. Art changes people. People change the world."

Wilson was born and raised in Pittsburgh where he spent his first 33 years. A 13-year interlude in St. Paul, Minnesota, followed, before he moved to his present home in Seattle, Washington.

"I came to manhood in Pittsburgh in the '60s. That's still what I know best, and that's what I write about," says Wilson. Although he uses Pittsburgh as the setting for his play cycle, he insists that none of the characters or incidents imitate his life there. He draws his characters from aspects of his own personality.

The son of a white father and an African-American mother, Wilson was raised in the black community by his mother alone. He explains that his "father figures" were those he chose. "Growing up, my idea of manhood came from Charley Burley, a Hall of Fame prize fighter, a tremendous fighter out of Pittsburgh, who was fighting there in the '40s and '50s. I wanted to be like him. And he would get dressed up on a Friday night, real clean, in a Stetson hat, with the Florsheim shoes. And I'd see these men standing on the

corner, and I thought, I can't wait to grow up and get dressed up and go stand on the corner of Fullerton and Wylie.

"Of course by the time I got old enough to go stand on the corner they had torn down Fullerton and Wylie, and I didn't have the money to go buy them Stetson hats and Florsheim shoes. But I did stand on the corner for about 15 years, figuratively speaking. I founded a theater, and fell in with a group of artists, we put out magazines and things, like all young artists do."

Wilson's mother taught her son to read when he was only four, and by the age of five he had his own library card. Wilson recounts how his breakthrough into writing came with his discovery of the word "breakfast" -- that it was a conjunction of the two words "break" and "fast." It was a love affair with language. "I never looked back," he says, "I thought, this is wonderful. I started taking two words and putting them together. I fell in love with the language, and with the whole idea that you could communicate using these symbols."

Is there a parallel between the root of Wilson's jitney cab and his dream of a path for black theater? The jitney cab, after all, represents the only way many American blacks can travel back and forth to their segregated neighborhoods. White cabs will not go there. And now Wilson suggests that the white theater is not able to transport black audiences either. A true black theater would be a vehicle by which black people can get where they need to go.

"It's similar to the old Negro Baseball League," says Wilson. "There you had a league that was self-sufficient, and you had a community of people culturally self-sufficient, and on Sundays they would pay their three dollars, sit in the bleachers and support this league. And Mr. Samuels sold his peanuts, and Mr. Johnson sold his chicken sandwiches, and that gave them income. You had a whole thing going.

"Once that broke down, once they said, 'Okay, you guys can come over here and play in the white league,' all this disappeared. And not only did the Negro league fold, but all the things that the league meant to the people. They've lost a large part of their culture and a large part of themselves."

"There is nothing wrong with integration *per se*, as long as everyone has equal access to resources," he says. "To assimilate is to adopt the values of another culture. I'm opposed to that idea, because blacks have something of value. To assimilate is to erase yourself, and I don't think that's what we want to do." The uniqueness of black culture is something to be valued as well as something to be nurtured independently.

"If you have a theater that exists in a city that's 73 percent black," he says, "I think that should be a black theater. It's as simple as that. Because your theater should serve the community which it is in. I think some of the existing LORT theaters should change their mission statement to preserve and promote black culture."

Although Wilson is indebted to the formal dramatic style that derives from Aristotle's rules of drama, he acknowledges that the African-American theater known as "the Chitlin Circuit" (a misnomer as far as he is concerned), immensely popular traveling productions of contemporary moralistic melodramas, should be credited for creating a new black esthetic. A play like "Beauty Shop" may even offer the esthetic seeds for the black theater of the future.

Is a separate black theater a realistic wish, we ask, in a nation constituted of myriad white, non-white, Hispanic, Asian, African-American, Native American, and other mixed and matched racial groups? This Wilson does not accept. He insists that the legacy of slavery, the number of Americans of African descent, 35 million, and their enforced settlement in America, gives this racial group a unique status.

"The American theater is steered toward the single value system," says Wilson. "Most American theaters are paternalistic and white run. You may be invited, but you still have to take your hat and go home when your visiting pass expires, when they finish doing your play. It still remains a white theater, I don't care how many black plays they do."

Certainly, in Wilson's case, his eminent stature has given him virtual carte blanche to have his plays produced anywhere he chooses. But he does not want black theater artists to continue to play the role of the visitor. One way to accomplish this, he says, is to play the host. But for this to happen "black theaters have to be allowed to access the resources."

Meanwhile Khan's 20-year effort to build and sustain a black theater is paying off, and his long-cherished dream of having Wilson in residence is realized. Now only time will tell if Wilson's dream to identify and promote at least six more black American theaters to LORT status can come true.

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