

August Wilson's Spectacle Characters

By Jim Shea

August Wilson himself describes his notion of "spectacle characters" in *An Interview with August Wilson* (1993):

"There is something that I call a "spectacle character." It's part of that. [Hambone and Gabriel] are both mentally deficient. One has a war wound, which I think is most important. It would make me mad when I read the reviews and they would refer to Gabriel as an idiot...without reference to the fact that this man had suffered this wound fighting for a country." pp. 552

Wilson defines these two characters as 'spectacles' and does so for a reason. Along with being potentially clownish characters for the audience, Wilson uses the characters effectively within the play. Wilson refers to Gabriel being injured during the war and mocked by the community for fighting for their rights. He then describes Gabriel as one of his most 'self sufficient' characters since he's able to live his life as a hard worker and provider for the house he lives in by collecting fruit and vegetables for his family. Yet the outside world depicts him as a pity case who reliant on his brother, Troy. He then almost contradicts himself by saying there's a correlation between Gabriel and Hambone, but they're very different characters since Hambone "has a much more important part in *Two Trains*." He says Hambone's a character that affects everyone in the play and that he starts out looking like a simpleton, but turns out to be the most important character, "because of his life and death."

In *Fences*, Gabriel is a wounded war veteran who now holds down a stable job but the effects of the war are obvious through his immature speech. He is always singing childish songs and wondering if Troy is mad at him. Gabriel claims to eat breakfast with St. Peter every morning and that he is going to help him open the gates of Heaven one day:

"...every morning me and St. Peter would sit down by the gate and eat some big fat biscuits? Oh, yeah! We had us a good time. We'd sit there and eat us them biscuits and then St. Peter would go off to sleep and tell me to wake him when it's time to wake him up when it's time to open the gates for the judgment." pp. 26

Everyone in the play patronizes Gabriel, humoring his songs and childish dialogue, but at the end of the play he opens up Heaven's gate at Troy's funeral. Although he did not accomplish it by playing the horn as predicted, Gabriel found a way to open the gates of Heaven even though it wasn't in the traditional Christian way. It was, instead, as a dance.

Hambone and Gabriel appear to have some kind of mental disability and are viewed in a pathetic manner by the other main characters due to talk track. Hambone's speech does have subtle premonition though: he complains to Lutz about how Lutz owed him a ham for the painting he did on the fence. Lutz felt that the work he did was only deserving of a

chicken. Hambone walked around for nearly a decade constantly repeating, “I want my ham” and “He’s gonna give me my ham.” At first everyone thinks Hambone is just pathetic, but later the characters sympathize with him because they’ve also been had by white oppression and are able to sympathize with Hambone. Sterling goes as far as to steal a ham to put in Hambone’s casket. In the end, Hambone’s actions foreshadowed not only the physical ham placed in his casket, but also how black society would feel oppressed by life around them.

In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Sylvester also appears to be one of August Wilson’s spectacle characters. Upon Sylvester’s first appearance he is seen as a disruption in the studio and in a scene leading up to his and Ma Rainey’s arrival as well as comic relief as he has a terrible stuttering problem. Sylvester was involved in a car accident before arriving at the studio and disrupts the recording several times since he constantly stutters while trying to not only remember, but properly announce the introduction to a recording track. Although subtle, his interaction with the police officer in the studio does foreshadow actions later in the play. While the Policeman recalling the accident, Sylvester interrupts repetitively pleading his innocence that “I ain’t done nothing” and how the “man ran into me.” The Policeman says he is going to charge Sylvester with assault and battery, but Sylvester said that he didn’t hurt the cabbie and what would have happened had the cabbie followed through on a threat:

“I ain’t done nothing to him! He’s the one talking
about he g-g-gonna get a b-b-baseball bat on me!
I just told him what I’d do with it. But I ain’t done
nothing cause he didn’t get the b-b-bat!” pp. 36

The final action of the play has Levee stabbing Toledo in the back, “I ain’t done nothing to your shoe...look what you done...” pp. 88. Much like Sylvester earlier in the play, Levee is repetitively justifying why he stabbed Toledo. Unlike Sylvester though, Levee had the other person in the conflict actually confront him. Sylvester’s incident did not resort to violence because the cabbie did not resort to violence whereas Toledo not only stepped on Levee’s shoe but then argued with Levee face to face and turned his back. Levee told the band earlier, “Turn your back on me, motherfucker! I’ll cut your heart out!” pp. 78. Levee, like Sylvester, warned the other band members what would happen if they confronted him and turned their back on Levee. Toledo did not take his warning seriously enough and ended up dead.

August Wilson’s spectacle characters share many of the same qualities: nonsensical dialogue, comic relief, disruption within the play, but all the while foreshadowing what is to come within the play. For its part, the audience can easily take these characters for granted as simpletons, but Wilson forces us to realize that they have significant redeeming qualities and serve important roles within the structure of the play.

Works Cited

Shannon, Sandra G. *Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview With August Wilson*. *African American Review*, Vol. 27, St. Louis, 1993

Wilson, August. *Fences*. New York: Penguin Group, 1986.

---. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. New York: Samuel French Inc., 1981

---. *Two Trains Running*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007