

## Is August Wilson Racist?

By Dr. Michael Downing

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Dear Dr. Downing:

I am writing an argument paper defending August Wilson from the remarks that he has made and remarks from Robert Brustein. If you think you could help me understand each of their arguments that would be great.

I am trying to defend him from being known as a racist or segregationist.

Best Regards,  
Awais Ahmed

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Dear Awais Ahmed,

Actually, Wilson is, to some degree, racist. But that's not a bad thing in and of itself. Let me explain: If "racist" means that you tend to see critical differentiations between races and that those racial differences have very real economic and social consequences, then Wilson is definitely driven by "racist" or "racial" intentions. After all, he wants to create a mythology for African Americans, not white Americans or Latinos. He wants his plays acted by black actors and directed by black directors. These are race-based considerations, and I can understand his perspective. In my opinion, (white) commercial culture has co-opted so much work by blacks over the years (Blues music, for example) that Wilson is taking a stand, essentially saying, (to paraphrase) "enough is enough.....this is a black project and it will not be adapted and contorted to suit the norms of the dominant culture."

Wilson was also raised during the 1960s, a time when people like Malcolm X were calling for a separatist African American agenda. According to Malcolm, Blacks should own their own businesses, govern their own communities, and teach in their own schools. That's what Black Power and the Nation of Islam was all about. Wilson was definitely influenced by this. Malcolm X once said that if all the Negroes in the US were to go to one area of the country and live there, it would change everything. They would have enough focused power to elect numerous representatives to Congress. Their combined economic strength would force white America to deal with the Black Voice. It essentially would be like a small country within the US.

But back to Wilson....my argument would be that Wilson is definitely driven by "racial ideology," but that in itself, is not a bad thing. For example, he is not, to my knowledge, anti-white. In fact, he is biologically biracial (in this case, half white). He is not calling for the destruction of white culture. He is not saying the black culture is better than white culture. He is not saying that blacks are physiologically superior to whites (although a case could be made), and he is not saying that blacks have a better sense of style, rhythm, or community than whites. In my view, Wilson allows for the fact that white culture has access to all the

mechanisms to promote its own agenda; whereas black culture has not had the same benefits. That's why he presses this agenda.

In a larger sense, I would argue that the politically correct notion of eliminating (or glossing over) the differences between humans has gone too far. While I agree that we are all connected by our humanity and at our core have very similar needs (see Jung and Maslow), it is simplistic to argue that we are all exactly the same and exactly capable of precisely the same things...that we have exactly the same skills and same ideas about how to live life. Different races, like the different genders, have varying ideas about how to express themselves. Embrace the differences and teach the conflicts.

So, I wouldn't necessarily attempt to defend Wilson from being racist; he does explore a world defined by racial boundaries. Instead, I would defend the notion that his world view takes into account important differences between the sensibilities of black and white culture---differences that need to be identified, explored, and valued.

As for Brustein, his critique of Wilson's use of Yale Rep as "McTheater" has validity. Using a non-profit institution such as Yale to workshop for-profit plays written by professional playwrights for production on a Broadway stage is certainly a practice open to critique. However, it can also be argued that the Yale students involved in the project are getting the best education of their lives. I see both sides of this issue, and I do believe the Wilson/Richards angle is defensible.