

## HOW I LEARNED WHAT I LEARNED

Round House program

May 23, 2017

Lights fade up on the sidewalk outside the newly built O'Reilly Theatre in Pittsburgh, December 2, 1999...

### AUGUST WILSON

No Todd, man... We start out the show, I'll come out carrying a bucket of ping pong balls, start throwing them out into the audience...one...two...three...get everybody counting, clapping along till we hit forty-one— Then I'll go, "Forty-one shots... An unarmed black man reaches for his wallet, gets shot at forty-one times by the police in the vestibule of his own home." We'll flip on the audience, demonstrate the scale of forty-one...forty-one bullets, forty-one choices.

Originally titled *I'm Not Spalding Gray*, August's one-man show began to talk itself to life that day outside the Pittsburgh Public Theatre seventeen years ago. I was his assistant on the world premiere of *King Hedley II* and calling him "August" was still new to my mouth. We'd duck out from rehearsal, hang out on Penn Avenue outside the box office where the hours got smoked faster than the cigarettes. There, both a one-man show and a relationship were born.

We no doubt looked an unlikely pair—a distinguished-looking goateed black man, mid-fifties, elegantly dressed, standing outside the theater with a baby-faced white man, thirty years younger, baggy-rumple dressed like a college student. I always stumble when asked, "How exactly did you get the job of hanging out with August Wilson?" First, there was no "job" to be filled, no posting in ArtSearch to apply. As for the "hanging out" part—I'm reminded of August sharing how his mother Daisy lamented him "hanging out" as a twenty-year-old on the corner of Wylie and Kirkpatrick. She never understood August was out there developing and testing his ideas against the raw backdrop of life—talking into life a theater company, a political rally, a new poem—discovering his foundation as both a man and an artist.

Perhaps I got the "job" on November 23, 1999, when "Mr. Wilson" came to *King Hedley* rehearsal, handed me an index card with a handwritten speech, and said, "King says this somewhere in the play but I don't know where. Can

you find a place?” I found three. The first two swings missed but the last— “Yeah! Yeah, Todd man, that fits perfect, like it was always written there.” Then we tore into one of Stool Pigeon’s speeches, “We need to find out why King cares about this machete...” In a wild, heady flurry we moved, cut, added, snatched text till the script page spide-webbed with rewrite arrows and inserts—August looked close at his watch, “Todd man, that only took us fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes... *Three years* and fifteen minutes.”

Perhaps in that fifteen minutes is where my adventure with August began. An adventure that would consume my life for the next five years, ten months, and nine days, lasting until his death on October 2, 2005.

August called precious moments in life *Snapshots of Privilege*—moments he likened to Polaroids, more lasting than Instagram, that you needed to recognize to provide life with its meaning. As I shuffle through my *Snapshots* now...

*A PHONE CALL*, “Todd, man, I’m in trouble... I was talking about the one-man show to the artistic director at Seattle Rep and she offered me a slot to do it and I agreed... So, I need a director. You want to do it?” *A DESK* fully loaded with supplies August set up next to his in the basement, “You need your own space to work.” *AN EMAIL* from Ryan Rilette inviting me to the Round House to direct this production of *How I Learned What I Learned*.

Over the years “hanging out,” the one-man show endured several titles. Among them, *Sambo Takes On the World* and *Move Over, Chris Rock*—the spirit of both still alive in the piece. At one point August said, “If there’s only one man in the show it should at least have a long title.” Most of the stories are about August as a twenty-year-old poet, revealing the foundation of how he became August Wilson. These stories were told to me over and over and over again while I was in my twenties, and they continue to heighten my spirit and enrich my life. These stories help guide me towards meaning. The full, unabridged title of the show speaks my own experience with August Wilson:

*How I Learned What I Learned (and How What I Learned Has Led Me to Places I’ve Wanted to Go. That I Have Sometimes Gone Unwillingly Is the Crucible in Which Many a Work of Art Has Been Fired)*

—Todd Kreidler