



2022 Study Guide

Timeline of Pittsburgh's historic Hill District:

1758: The "Hill District" is formed and becomes a group of historically African American neighborhoods of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

1890's: The neighborhood's Black population reaches 10,000.

1910s: The Hill has an influx of migrants from other US states, specifically the rural American South, and immigrants from abroad such as Italians and Eastern European Jews.

1920: The neighborhood's Black population booms to over 37,000. A housing shortage due to the influx of new residents is further aggravated by a system of segregation that limits housing for Blacks solely to the Hill District.

1920s – 1950s: The Hill develops as a lively entertainment district that becomes Pittsburgh's cultural hub for Black life and a major center for jazz. A large roster of night spots including nightclubs, bars, and gambling dens are established and run by Black entrepreneurs. Famous artists such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington make the Hill District a regular stop on national tours.

Mid 1950s: 95 acres of the Hill District are selected for "redevelopment" and 1,300 structures are demolished, displacing more than 8,000 residents, who are mostly Black.

1960 – 1990: The Hill District suffers a dramatic economic decline due to the redevelopment cutting it off from surrounding neighborhoods. The Hill loses 71% of its residents (more than 38,000 people) and about 400 businesses, leaving the neighborhood virtually barren.

August Wilson's *How I Learned What I Learned*

Co-conceived by Todd Kreidler

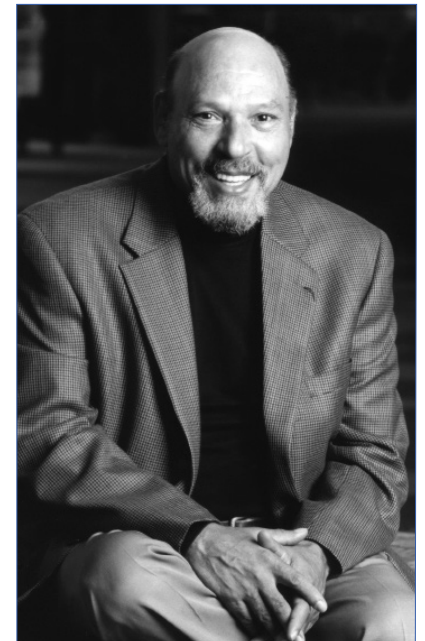


Tim Bond, photo by Hillary Jeannette

Tim Bond

Tim Bond is directing *August Wilson's How I Learned What I Learned* at OSF. Bond has directed 7 of the 10 American Century Cycle plays by August Wilson.

He is currently Artistic Director of TheaterWorks Silicon Valley. He served as OSF's Associate Artistic Director for 11 seasons.



August Wilson

About the Playwright: August Wilson

Born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, to Daisy Wilson, an African-American housekeeper, and Frederick Kittel, a white baker who had emigrated from Germany to Pittsburgh. When August was a young boy, his father abandoned the family, leaving Daisy Wilson to raise the family on her own. He changed his name to August Wilson in 1965. He and his family lived in the Hill District, a Pittsburgh neighborhood that later provided the setting for most of his plays. ►



August Wilson House, HeyYallYo, Wikimedia Commons

► Wilson quit high school as a teenager after a teacher wrongfully accused him of plagiarism. He later educated himself in Pittsburgh's libraries.

Wilson began his writing career as a poet, influenced largely by the writings of political poet and playwright Amiri Baraka. His political interests led him to become involved in theatre in the late 1960s as a co-founder of Black Horizons, a Pittsburgh community theatre.

August Wilson's best-known work was a ten-play series, the American Century Cycle, about the African American experience. The Cycle contained one play for each decade of the 20th century. Wilson died on October 2, 2005, leaving behind a body of work that makes him one of America's greatest playwrights.

About the play's production and development history:

How I Learned What I Learned had its world premiere at the Seattle Repertory Theatre on May 22, 2003, performed by August Wilson and directed by Todd Kreidler. Other premieres include the Signature Theatre in New York (2013), True Colors Theatre Company in Atlanta (2014), Pittsburgh Public Theater in Pittsburgh (2015), Huntington Theatre Company in Boston (2016), and Round House Theatre (2017), all directed by Todd Kreidler.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the Hill District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.pittsburghbeautiful.com/2017/08/07/the-rich-history-of-pittsburghs-hill-district/>
<https://aaregistry.org/story/the-hill-district-pittsburgh/>
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_District_\(Pittsburgh\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_District_(Pittsburgh))
<https://augustwilsonhouse.org/>
2. Research August Wilson's American Century Cycle. These and other websites provide information: <https://www.biography.com/news/august-wilson-pittsburgh-cycle-century-cycle-plays-summary>
<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-scenes-and-synposes-of-august-wilsons-10-play-cycle/3701/>
3. Research the Transatlantic Slave Trade. These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/on-african-american-migrations/>
<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-african-slave-ship-arrives-jamestown-colony>
4. Research the Emancipation Proclamation. These and other websites provide information:
<https://americanhistory.si.edu/changing-america-emancipation-proclamation-1863-and-march-washington-1963/1863/emancipation>
<https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/emancipation-proclamation>
5. Research Jim Crow laws. These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedom-riders-jim-crow-laws/>
<https://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/jim-crow.html>



2022 *How I Learned What I Learned*
set model, designed by Nina Ball

After seeing/reading the play

1. *August Wilson's How I Learned What I Learned* was originally performed by August Wilson. The script specifies that the character in the play is "the Actor." The character played by the Actor is based on August Wilson. How might the performance be different if it is played by August Wilson versus a different actor?
2. Refer to your research on the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Emancipation Proclamation. What historical event in the early 17th century is the Actor referring to that brought his ancestors to America and made sure they "never had a problem finding a job" for 244 years? How and why did the fate of his ancestors change in 1863? Why was migrating north their only option for a better future?
3. Who were the "unwanted" who lived in the Hill District neighborhood in 1963 when the Actor's mother moved there? Why were they considered "unwanted"?
4. Why was it so significant when Fred Rogers from the TV show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* told the Actor "you're always welcome in this neighborhood"? How was the Actor typically received in white neighborhoods like Hazelwood? What were the consequences for the Actor and others who moved to accept Blacks as parishioners at the Catholic Church in the Hill district? How do these events influence the Actor's journey in life?
5. Why was the moment when a man greeted the Actor by saying "Mr. Wilson, you know I don't see color" so problematic? What does this statement say about this man's view of Blacks in America? What does the Actor understand from this encounter?
6. Why does the Actor describe the Hill District in 1965 as a third-world country? What is the impact of a predominantly Black neighborhood having 9 drug stores, 145 bars, but only one supermarket? Why was this supermarket the only business targeted during the riots following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968? What does the Actor learn by living in this configuration?
7. What is the significance of "The Set"? How does the Actor describe it? What opportunities did standing on the corner of The Set provide the Actor and his siblings? How is this different from the opportunities that were available to someone who lived in Squirrel Hill? How do these opportunities define the Actor?
8. Why was it expected that a 20-year-old Black man from the Hill District would go to jail?
9. What does the Actor mean when he says, "I dropped out of school but I didn't drop out of life"?
10. How did Barbara Peterson make her way into art school at Carnegie Mellon when the doors were closed to her? What lesson does the Actor learn from her?
11. Why does the Actor find it impossible to ignore the toy store owner's warning, "If I catch you stealing anything, I'm gonna shoot you"? Why does he quit when Pat, the owner of the grass cutting business, fails to defend him against a client's bigotry? What did the Actor learn from these incidents?
12. Who taught the Actor that "something isn't always better than nothing"? Why? What are some examples in the play of nothing being better than something? How does this shape the way the Actor moves through the world? How does this simple phrase open doors for him?
13. What lands the Actor in jail four months after leaving his mother's house? How does he get out of jail so quickly? Why is he so humbled by his first experience in jail? What does he learn from this experience?
14. What two life-changing experiences teach the Actor early on how to cut his losses? What does he fear will happen if he doesn't cut his losses? How does the ability to move back to his mother's house help him look out for himself?
15. Why is the Actor's friendship with Chawley so important to his future success? What is Chawley's reaction when a friend offers the Actor drugs? Why? What does the Actor learn from Chawley's defense?
16. Why does Cy Morocco leave such an impression on the Actor? What about Cy causes the Actor to describe him as a "John Coltrane in spirit"? How does Cy hold on to his sense of dignity when encountering lack of opportunity? Why does the Actor refer to him as "the original homeless man" and "an African lost in America"? What does the Actor learn from Cy?
17. What causes the Actor to initially disregard jazz music as not important? How does this change dramatically when he joins a crowd outside of Crawford's Grill listening to John Coltrane's music filtering out into the street? What stops the crowd from going inside to listen? Why do the guys outside see Coltrane as their weapon and shield? ►

What does the Actor know by the end of the play? What does he not know?

- ▶ 18. What does it mean for an artist to reach “the limitation of the instrument”? What does the Actor learn about himself and his art from this idea?
- 19. How does the Actor justify Philmore defending the honor of his wife above all else? Why is the victim of Philmore’s rage seen as the one to blame in his own killing? What unspoken rule does all the neighborhood follow? What does the Actor learn from this event?
- 20. Why was it so important for the Actor to keep his mouth shut to survive in the Hill District? What were the immediate consequences he faced for not keeping his mouth shut? According to the unspoken rules of the Hill District, in what ways was Jeanine’s violent reaction toward the Actor justified? What does he learn from this incident?
- 21. What does the Actor learn from his experience with Nancy Ireland and Catherine Moran? How does it influence his meeting his wife, Constanza Romero?
- 22. What does the Actor know by the end of the play? What does he not know? What has he learned from his youth in the Hill District?
- 23. If you are seeing *The Tempest: Both Prospero and the Actor* learn about themselves in the course of the play. Both reflect back on defining events from their youth. Compare and contrast their journeys and what each of them learns.



Costume design for the Actor by Constanza Romero

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