

**Arden Theatre Company Presents**

**AUGUST WILSON'S  
KING HEDLEY II**



**Teacher Resource Guide**

**Dear Teachers and Students,**

**Thank you so much for joining us for our production of *King Hedley II* by August Wilson, directed by Pulitzer Prize winner, James Ijames.**

**In the following pages, you will find a collection of resources, discussion questions, activities, ideas, etc. related to our production of *King Hedley II*. Feel free to pick and choose the materials that best help you and your students engage with the show.**

**We can't wait to have you here at the Arden again!**



## Content Warnings

Please note that this production features strong language and depictions of violence, including gunshot sound effects. *King Hedley II* also includes mentions of gun violence, death, and abortion, as well as descriptions of systemic racism and class oppression.

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If you have any further questions about the content of this production, please contact our box office at 215-922-1122.



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# About the Playwright, August Wilson

Born Frederick August Kittel Jr. in **Pittsburgh** in 1945, **August Wilson** grew up in the impoverished **Hill District** area of the city, a neighborhood that became the setting for most of his plays. Together with five siblings, he was raised by his mother, Daisy Wilson, after his father, Frederick August Kittel, left her and their children. Daisy Wilson later remarried, and in 1958 the family moved to a suburb of Pittsburgh.



August Wilson, 2003.  
Photo from The Estate  
of August Wilson

The complexity of Wilson's experience of race while growing up would be expressed in his plays. His mother was Black, his father white, and his stepfather, David Bedford, Black. **The Hill District** was mostly Black, and the suburb, **Hazelwood**, was predominately white. Wilson and his family were the target of racial threats in Hazelwood, and he quit school at age 15 after being accused of having **plagiarized** a paper. He turned to self-education, reading intensively in a public library and returning to the Hill District to learn from residents there. Reading the works of **Langston Hughes** and **Ralph Ellison** embedded a desire within the teenage Wilson to become a writer.

After his father's death in 1965, Frederick Kittel Jr. became **August Wilson**, a decision made to honor his mother. The late sixties saw Wilson become heavily influenced by **Malcolm X** and **the Blues**, and he also embraced the **Black Arts Movement**. In 1968, Wilson set up the **Black Horizon Theater** in Pittsburgh with Rob Penny where some of his first plays were performed.

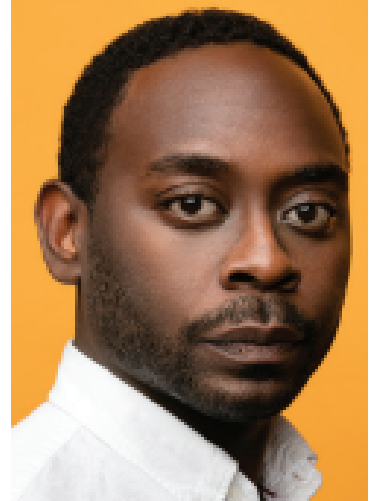
During the early 1970s, he also published poetry in such journals as **Black World** (1971) and **Black Lines** (1972.) In 1978, August Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota where he wrote educational scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota. In the early 1980s, he began to write a series of 10 plays, collectively called **The Pittsburgh Cycle** (or **The Century Cycle**), which chronicle the experiences and heritage of the African-American community in the 20th century. Two of the cycle plays, **Ma Rainey's Black Bottom** (1985) and **Fences** (1987) received Tony Awards for best play.

In Minnesota, Wilson built a strong relationship with the **Penumbra Theatre Company**, which produced many of his plays in the eighties, and in 1987 the city named **May 27th August Wilson day** after his **Pulitzer Prize award** in the same year. Wilson left St. Paul for Seattle in 1990, and while there the **Seattle Repertory Theatre** performed a number of his plays.

In 1995 Wilson received one his many honorary degrees from the **University of Pittsburgh** where he became a **Doctor of Humanities** and was a member of the Board of Trustees. Wilson received numerous honors during his career, including eight **New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards** for best play. He also held **Guggenheim** and **Rockefeller** fellowships. In October of 2005, he passed away. Shortly after his death, the Virginia Theater on Broadway was renamed in his honor. The August Wilson Center for African American Culture opened in Pittsburgh in 2009.

# A Note From the Director, James Ijames

I think a lot about honor. I try to keep my word, I try to be respectful, I try to be honorable. I'm not sure where or when exactly my relationship to honor as a concept first took form but it is as much apart of me as my name or my skin color. *King Hedley II* is a world in which honor is a powerful currency. August Wilson frequently has characters in his plays that are operating outside of the accepted means of commerce. Boy Willie and Lymon selling the watermelons, Becker's Jitney Station and Bertha and Seth's boardinghouse. All of these characters are "trying to make a way out of no way." This is taken to its extreme in *King Hedley II* where King, Elmore, Mister, Tonya, Ruby and Stool Pigeon are all limited in their prospects for a host of reasons from institutional racism and misogyny, to class inequity and political polarization...sound familiar? Wilson shows us a collection of people held together by tragedy and regret hurtling towards an ultimate sacrifice, all for honor.

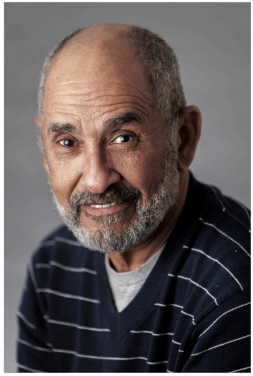


In December Thom Weaver, Lighting and Scenic Designer for *King Hedley II*, and I drove to Pittsburgh Pennsylvania to visit August Wilson's beloved Hill District. Its rugged terrain was astonishing to see in person. It is a difficult terrain to live in. The fact that a vibrant Black community formed there is a kind of perfect example of what Black people have always done, we've taken what the world threw at us, and made community, jazz, soul food, and hip hop among so many other things. The characters in this play are all trying to be good people, they are all bound to the people they are connected to and they are all bound by an intense sense of honor.

The thing I love the most about theater is the potential for catharsis. For legitimate transformation of the audience perception towards releasing of great emotion. This play is run through with sadness but it also pulses with Wilson's use of magic, history and poetry to get to the heart of the human condition. I hope you cry when someone is lost, I hope you laugh when someone is funny and I hope you rejoice when someone chooses life instead of death.

**James Ijames**

# Meet the Actors



**Monroe Barrick** *he/him*  
(Stool Pigeon)



**Taysha Marie Canales** *she/her*  
(Tonya)



**Akeem Davis** *he/him*  
(King Hedley II)



**Kimberly S. Fairbanks** *she/her*  
(Ruby)



**Kash Goins** *he/him*  
(Elmore)



**Dax Richardson** *Dax*  
(Mister)

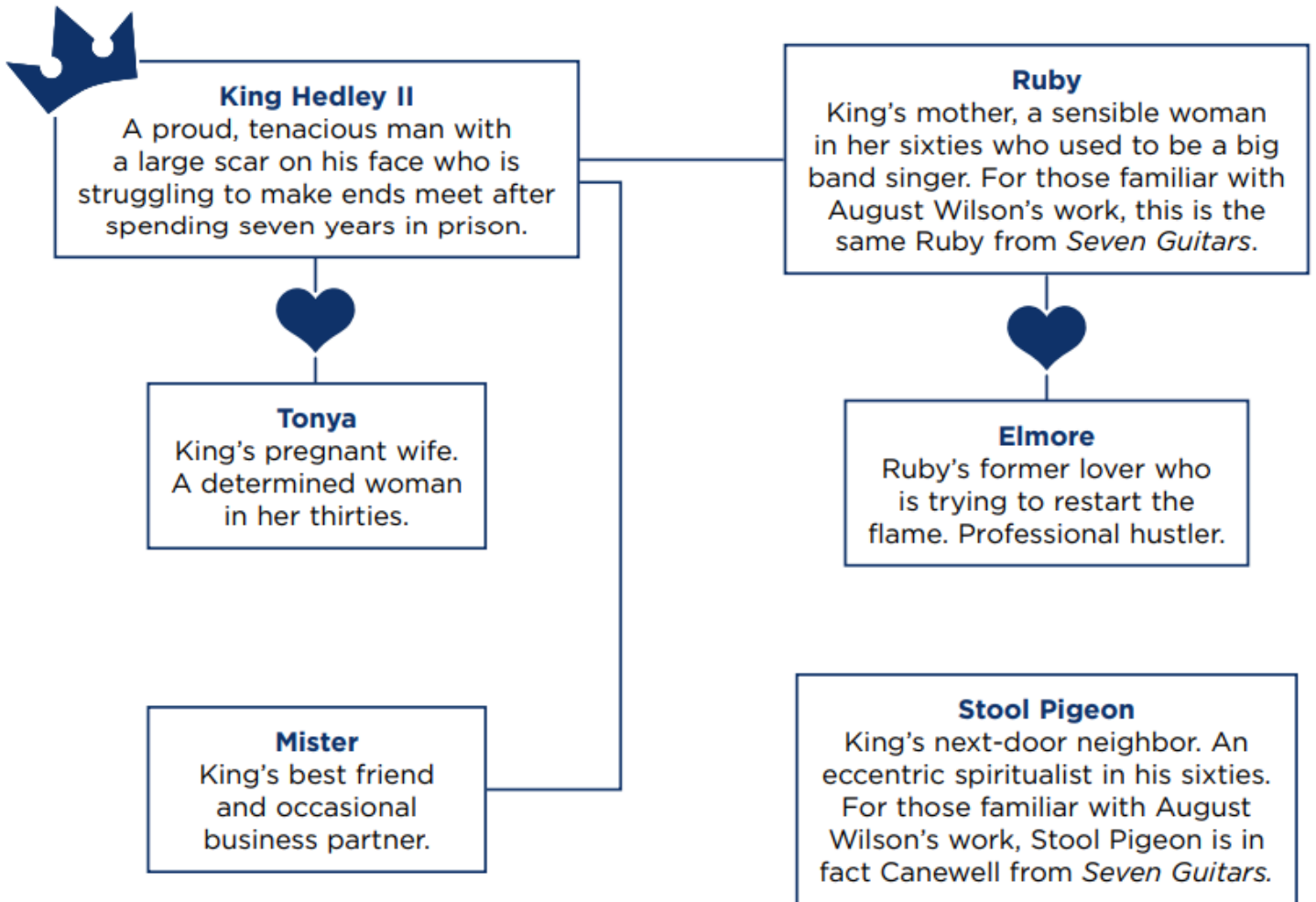
**Understudies**

Robert Gray, Monah Yancy, Tariq Kanu, Rodd Deon,  
Tasha Holmes, Darryl Bell



# Character Map

## CHARACTER MAP



# Play Synopsis

*King Hedley II* begins with a prologue by Stool Pigeon, who talks about spirituality and the past and present of the Hill District in Pittsburgh where the play takes place. Stool Pigeon also speaks about Aunt Ester, a character from a previous cycle play, *Gem of the Ocean*. Aunt Ester is known as a spiritual advisor in the community.

We then meet King Hedley II, an ex-convict who is trying to make money selling refrigerators with his friend and business partner, Mister. King is named for the man he believes is his father, King Hedley from another cycle play, *Seven Guitars*. We also meet King's pregnant wife, Tonya. She and King's mother, Ruby, say that Elmore, a professional hustler and old boyfriend of Ruby's, is returning to town.

It becomes apparent that the refrigerators King and Mister are selling are likely stolen goods. Stool Pigeon returns to tell everyone that Aunt Ester is dead, signifying tragedy and loss in the community. King attempts to plant seeds in some barren dirt. Mister arrives and tells King that the two aren't selling enough refrigerators to buy the video store they would like to own. Tonya and King then argue about her pregnancy, and we learn that Tonya has tried to procure an abortion.

Elmore tells Ruby how much he has always cared for her, and he reveals that King's father is actually Leroy, another past lover of Ruby's, and not King Hedley. Meanwhile, King Hedley II shares that he has not been able to find a job. The act ends with Elmore buying a refrigerator from King as a gift to Ruby.



# Play Synopsis Cont.

When Act II begins, we see that King's seeds still haven't sprouted from the barren soil. Stool Pigeon buries Aunt Ester's cat and gives King a machete. King and Mister plan a robbery because they believe it's the only way they are able to get the money that they need.

King and Mister go through with the robbery and return with money and a ring. King plans to give the ring to Tonya. They find Stool Pigeon, who was robbed and beaten. King and Elmore discuss their past crimes, and we learn a revelation about Elmore's past.

Tonya and Ruby discuss the difficulties in their lives, and Tonya tells King that she will only keep their baby if he gives up criminal activity. King is upset and decides not to give the ring to Tonya, instead giving it to Elmore, who plans to propose to Ruby. Elmore then interrupts a loving mother-son moment between King and Ruby. It is revealed to King that Leroy was his biological father, and he storms away in anger.

In the final scene, King plans to get revenge against Elmore for what he revealed about his biological father. In the process, King destroys the plot of land where he had planted his seeds. The scene between King and Elmore escalates and ends in tragedy. The play ends as it began, with a speech by Stool Pigeon, lamenting sacrifice and loss.



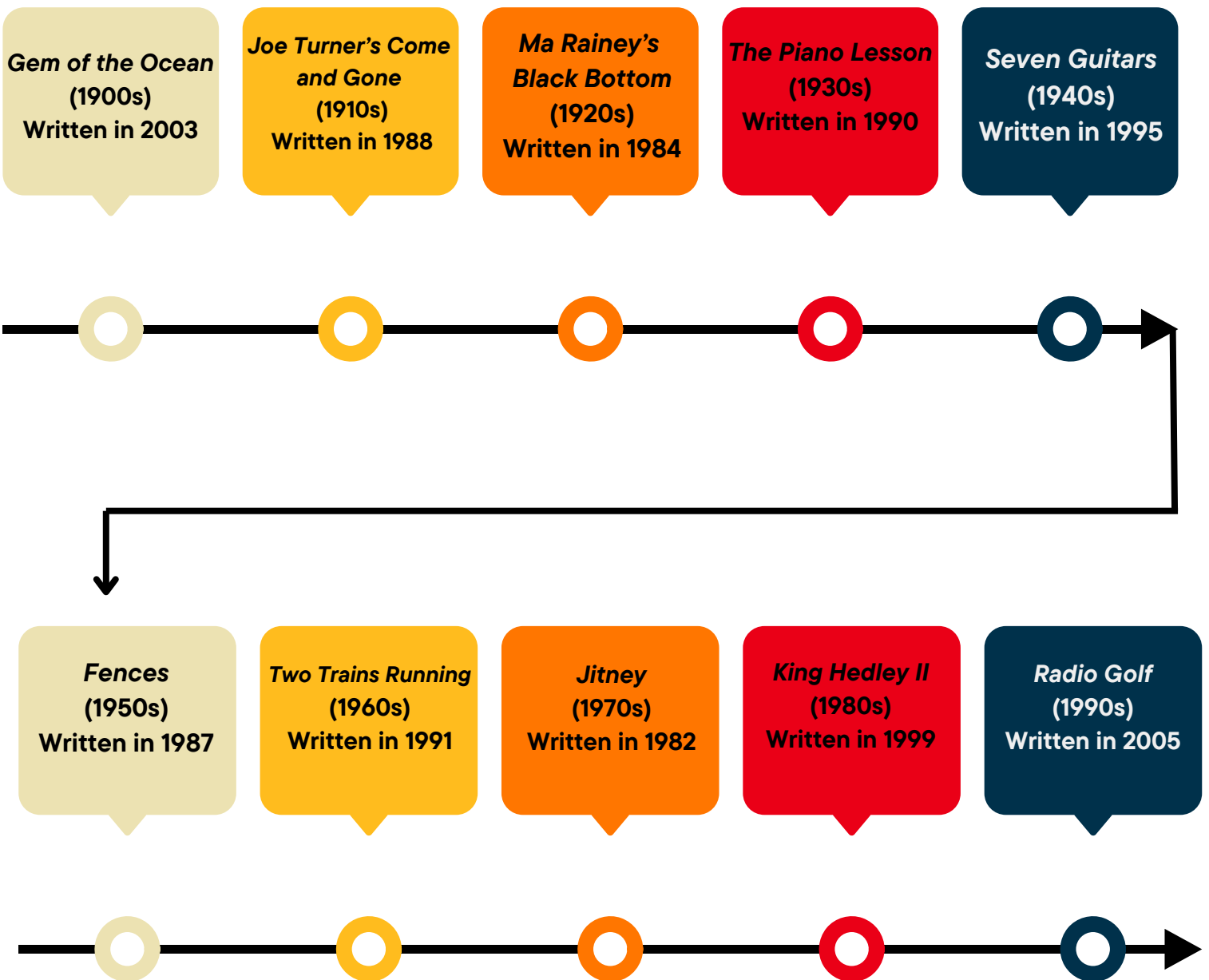
# Discussion Questions

1. Speak on gender roles in *King Hedley II*. In what ways do the characters fulfill the expectations of the time? In what ways do they break away from them?
2. How much of King's sense of self is built on the knowledge of his father? What changes in King when he learns the truth of his parentage?
3. Discuss the role violence plays in *King Hedley II*. Are there different types of violence? What are their motivations?
4. Look further into Wilson's metaphor of the seeds and the barren land. What might they signify in a larger context?
5. What does Aunt Ester's death mean for the characters in the play? For the Hill District? Why do you think Wilson chose to include so many references to her?
6. Discuss dramatic irony, or when the audience or readers knows more about a situation than the characters. How does Wilson use dramatic irony in *King Hedley II*? What effect does it have on the audience?
7. How does August Wilson utilize the setting of 1980s Pittsburgh to highlight the challenges faced by the Black community in *King Hedley II*?
8. Discuss the role of family dynamics in the play, particularly the complex relationship between King and his mother, Ruby. How do family members influence each other in the play?

(Some questions elected from source: [https://www.anoisewithin.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Hedley\\_StudyGuide\\_Spring23\\_r3.pdf](https://www.anoisewithin.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Hedley_StudyGuide_Spring23_r3.pdf))

# The American Century Cycle Timeline

August Wilson's crowning achievement is *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, his series of ten plays that charts the African American experience throughout the twentieth century. All of them are set in Pittsburgh's Hill District except for one, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which is set in Chicago. The cycle is also known as his "Century Cycle." The Arden is committed to producing all 10 plays.



# The American Century Cycle Continued

## THE ARDEN'S COMMITMENT TO THE AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

August Wilson's *The American Century Cycle* is a series of ten plays that explore the African American experience in Pittsburgh's Hill District throughout the 20th century. The Arden has produced seven of Wilson's plays since 2005.\*

**2005 - *Fences***

**2008 - *The Piano Lesson***



Kala Moses Baxter, Harum Ulmer, Jr., and Julian Rozzell, Jr. in *The Piano Lesson* (2008)

**2016 - *Two Trains Running***

**2019 - *Gem of the Ocean***



Kash Goins (Hambone) in *Two Trains Running* (2016)

**2023 - *Radio Golf***

**2025 - *King Hedley II***

### ***How I Learned What I Learned***

\*The Arden also produced *How I Learned What I Learned* in 2019, a one-person theatrical memoir written by August Wilson, not part of *The American Century Cycle*.



Bowman Wright (Caesar) & Akeem Davis (Citizen Barlow) in *Gem of the Ocean* (2019) directed by James Ijames

Photos by Mark Garvin (2008) and Ashley Smith, Wide Eye Studios (2016/2019)

# Classroom Activity

## Secret Allies and Enemies:

This activity will use physicality to help students explore the theme of suspicion seen throughout *King Hedley II*.

1. Have students walk in the space as themselves. As they walk, instruct them to silently pick a person in the group who is their enemy. The students should not let anyone know who their enemy is. As they walk throughout the space, their goal is to stay as far away from their enemy as possible.

2. After a moment, have students silently select a different person in the group to be their ally. Again, students should not let anyone know who their ally is. Their goal now is to keep their ally in between them and their enemy at all times while staying as far away from their enemy as possible, and while not letting anyone know who their enemy is or who their ally is.

3. Advanced level: Have students silently pick a third person in the group to be their role model. Students should follow this person as closely as they can, without letting them know that they are their role model. While following their role model, students should also try to keep their ally in between them and their enemy while staying as far from their enemy as possible.

4. Discussion: How was this activity? Was it easy? Was it difficult? What was easy or difficult about it? Did you feel suspicious of the people around you? Were you successful at keeping who your enemy, ally, and role model secret? How can you connect this activity to your understanding of the characters' experience in *King Hedley II*?

# Monologues From *King Hedley II*

The following pages include monologue and scene selections from *King Hedley II*. You can read through them before the production to give your students a better understanding of the characters and circumstances of the play.

## Act 1; Scene 3

**KING HEDLEY II:** My fifth grade teacher told me I was gonna make a good janitor. Say she can tell that by how good I erased the blackboards. Had me believing it. I come home and told mama Louise I wanted to be a janitor. She told me I could be anything I wanted. I say, “Okay, I’ll be a janitor.” I thought that was what I was supposed to be. I didn’t know no better. That was the first job I got. Cleaning up that bar used to be down on Wylie. Got one job the man told me he was gonna shoot me if he caught me stealing anything. I ain’t worked for him ten minutes. I quit right there. He calling me a thief before I start. Neesi told me I shouldn’t have quit. But I’m a man. I don’t bother nobody. And I know right from wrong. I know what’s right for me. That’s where me and the rest of the people part ways. Tonya ask me say, “When we gonna move?” She want a decent house. One the plaster ain’t falling off the walls. I say, “Okay but I got to wait.” What I’m waiting on? I don’t know. I’m just waiting. I told myself I’m waiting for things to change. That mean I’m gonna be living here forever. Tonya deserve better than that. I go for a job and they say, “What can you do.” I say, “I can do anything. If you give me the tanks and the airplanes I can go out there and win any war that’s out there.”

I can dance all night if the music’s right. Ain’t nothing I can’t do. I could build a railroad if I had the steel and a gang of men to drive the spikes. I ain’t limited to nothing. I can go down there and do Mellon’s job. I know how to count money. I don’t loan money to everybody who ask me. I know how to do business. I’m talking about mayor ... governor, I can do it all. I ain’t got no limits. I know right from wrong. I know which way the wind blow too. It don’t blow my way.



© Ashley Smith, Wide Eyed Studios



# Monologues From *King Hedley II*

## Act 1; Scene 2

**RUBY:** I done tried everything I know. King don't believe I love him. It's a mother's love. It don't never go away. I love me but I love King more. Sometimes I might not love me but there don't never come a time I don't love him. He don't understand that.

King don't know he lucky to be here. I didn't want to have no baby. Seem to me like I got off to a bad start. I wanted to have an abortion. Somebody sent me up there to see Aunt Ester. I thought she did abortions. It didn't take me long to find out I was in the wrong place. She was sitting in a room with a red curtain. A little old woman wearing a stocking cap. I can't say if she had any teeth or not. She was just sitting there. Told me to come closer where she could put her hands on my head. I got real peaceful. Seem like all my problems went away. She told me man can plant the seed but only God can make it grow. Told me God was a good judge. I told her that's what scared me. She just laughed and told me, "God has three hands. Two for that baby and one for the rest of us." That's just the way she said it. "God got three hands. Two for that baby and one for the rest of us. You got your time coming." I never will forget that.

I used to look at King and try and figure it out. But I ain't seen nothing to make her say that. I thought maybe she was just telling me that but she ain't supposed to lie about nothing like that. I just ain't never seen nothing that would make him that special. That's what I'm telling you about that baby you carrying. You never know what God have planned. You can't all the time see it. That's what Louise used to tell me. You can't all the time see it but God can see it good.



© Ashley Smith, Wide Eyed Studios

# Act 1, Scene 1 From *King Hedley II*

AUGUST WILSON

MISTER: I ain't got no money right now. I ain't got paid yet. They got a crowd of people standing out in front of Aunt Ester's house. I started to go up there and find out what was going on. Aunt Ester's cat still watching that hole. Been up there two days now. I don't know how it can sit there that long.

KING: If it want that rat bad enough it will sit there till it come out.

MISTER: What you doing all dressed up? Where you going?

KING: Who said I was dressed up? Why I got to be dressed up?

MISTER: 'Cause you is.

KING: How many of the refrigerators you sold?

MISTER: I ain't sold but one. I need me one of them brochures.

If I had one of them brochures I could sell a whole lot more.

The people want to see what they look like.

KING: I told you I ain't got but one. Here . . . here . . . you take it!

*(He hands Mister the brochure)*

MISTER: What model is it?

KING: Tell them you can get any model. What you care? They ain't gonna know the difference. If they do, just tell them it was a mistake. It ain't like they can take it back to the store.

Don't tell them you can get the model that make ice, though.

That's the only one we ain't got.

RUBY: I done told King . . . you better watch yourself. You all gonna end up in jail.

MISTER: We ain't doing nothing, Miss Ruby. We businessmen.

We salesmen. We appliance salesmen. They might want us to go down to Philadelphia and sell some refrigerators down there. Then we be traveling salesmen.

KING: I might be able to sell some out in East Liberty. I'm taking Tonya to get her picture taken for our anniversary. High school ain't the only one make pictures. Sears make them every day.

MISTER: I always wanted to have my picture taken. You know how you have your picture taken when you pose for it. I thought that would make you somebody. I posed for the police. They told me I wasn't nothing but a sorry-ass crimi-

# Act 1, Scene 1 From *King Hedley II*

## KING HEDLEY II

nal. I say, "Okay, just take my picture." They took my picture and I asked the man could I order some for my family and that was the beginning of all the trouble. They put me in the hole for trying to be smart. He don't know I was serious.

RUBY: What they had you down the jail for. Stealing something?

MISTER: Now, Miss Ruby . . . you ain't never know me to steal nothing.

RUBY: What they have you down there for? That's what most people down there for.

MISTER: They said I stole some TVs. But I didn't do it. Ask King. I knew who done it but I wouldn't tell them. They tried to make it like I did it. The judge threw it out when it come to trial.

RUBY: I know you stole them. I'm just telling you to watch yourself. You and King both.

MISTER: We ain't doing nothing, Miss Ruby.

KING: Hey Mister, do I have a halo around my head?

MISTER: A what?

KING: A halo. Do you see a halo around my head?

MISTER: You ain't got no halo. The devil looking for you and you talking about a halo.

KING: I had this dream last night. I dreamt I had a halo.

MISTER: I dreamt I had a pocketful of money. You see how far that got me. I had so much money I couldn't walk right. They had to put me in a wheelbarrow. I woke up and was still broke.

KING: Naw, I'm serious. I dreamt I had a halo. The police was chasing me and all of a sudden they stopped and just looked at me. I said, "It must be my halo," only I didn't know if it was there or not.

MISTER: I don't know if it's there or not either. Hey Miss Ruby, do you see a halo around King's head?

RUBY: Anybody get their dreams mixed up with real life is headed for Mayview. He gonna beat Stool Pigeon there.

# Video Resources

## Playwright, August Wilson:

- **From the 60 Minutes Archive: Interview with August Wilson**
  - Duration: 13min, 21sec
  - Interview with August Wilson in 2002, with a focus on *King Hedley II*
  - [LINK HERE](#)



- **August Wilson interview on Race and Culture (1998)**
  - Duration: 16min, 20sec
  - A 1998 conversation about race in the cultural arts with August Wilson.
  - [LINK HERE](#)



## Additional Works by Playwright August Wilson

- ***Fences* directed by Denzel Washington (2016)**
  - Where to watch: Peacock, Paramount Plus, Apple TV
- ***Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* directed by George C. Wolfe (2020)**
  - Where to watch: Netflix
- ***The Piano Lesson* directed by Malcom Washington (2024)**
  - Where to watch: Netflix
- **Scene from *King Hedley II* at the 2001 Tony Awards, introduced by August Wilson and featuring Viola Davis & Brian Stokes Mitchell**
  - [LINK HERE](#)



# Video Resources

## Director of *King Hedley II*, James Ijames:

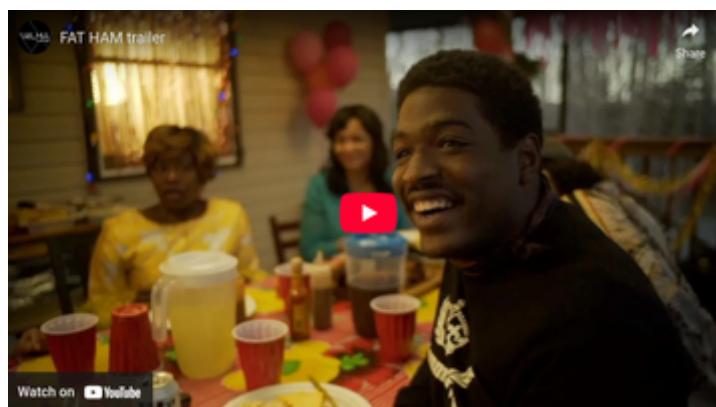
- **NBC News Interview with Pulitzer Prize winning playwright James Ijames about his play, *Fat Ham***
  - Duration: 5min, 37sec
  - In an interview from 2023, James Ijames discusses the importance of sharing stories of Blackness and queerness on an American stage.
  - [LINK HERE](#)



- **PBS Interview with Pulitzer Prize winning playwright James Ijames about his play, *Fat Ham***
  - Duration: 7min, 22sec
  - In an interview from 2022, James Ijames discusses the Shakespeare inspiration, *Hamlet*, for his Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Fat Ham*.
  - [LINK HERE](#)



- **Trailer for *Fat Ham***
  - Duration: 47sec.
  - Trailer for The Wilma Theater's 2021 Digital Production of *FAT HAM*
  - [LINK HERE](#)



# Article Featuring Director, James Ijames

## The Philadelphia Inquirer



James Ijames, director of *King Hedley II*, running at the Arden Theatre from Feb. 27 to March 30.  
© Ashley Smith, Wide Eyed Studios

### James Ijames finds a very Philly attitude in August Wilson's characters

Directing *King Hedley II* at the Arden Theatre this month, the Pulitzer winner reflects on the playwright's enduring relevance.

- Article published Feb. 28, 2025
- Excerpt: “Philadelphia playwright James Ijames could feel the atmosphere shift as the city’s mood brightened thanks to the Eagles Super Bowl victory. He was preparing for his latest project, directing August Wilson’s *King Hedley II* at the Arden Theatre, and seeing signs with the Birds chant, ‘No one likes us, we don’t care.’ ‘I learned that quality in Philly,’ Ijames said in a recent call with The Inquirer. ‘It has helped me survive the world. You don’t like me, I don’t care.’”
- [LINK TO ARTICLE](#)

**Thank You For Joining Us!**

**AUGUST WILSON'S  
KING HEDLEY II**



**Enjoy the show!**